Introduction

These past two years of my graduate program have been more than just taking classes and working through the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction (IBSTPI) competencies. As I am approaching the end of my second career and looking at retirement, I chose to take on a graduate program for self-fulfillment as opposed to career development. My journey through this graduate program has proven to be a transformational learning experience.

My journey has been one of building confidence in my academic skills while grappling with inner demons whispering in my ear "you can't do this." At the start of each semester I had to convince myself, again, that I could complete this program, one class at a time. Some classes were more difficult than others. But each class I completed left me with a feeling of accomplishment and quiet pride, and each success gave me more confidence that made the next class just a little easier.

My professional background includes a twenty-two-year Navy career working with electronics equipment, followed by twenty-four years working in military logistics and government consulting. I have performed some training and training programs development work over the past thirty-five years, and plan to perform part-time training work after I retire. My discussion of IBSTPI competencies should be considered in the context that I am not presently working in the training or instructional design field, and only expect to work in this field on a part-time basis in the future.

Professional Foundations

My very first assignment, in one of my two first-semester classes, provided a solid foundation for the rest of my graduate program. I was forced to confront my inner demons through writing my "educational autobiography," reflecting on my history of learning, good and bad, including social, historical, and technological context. As I was then age sixty-three, I had fifty-eight years of learning history to write about and too much was bad. A combination of learning issues, being constantly bullied, and too many uncaring teachers made my final years of K-12 education wretched. After being told by a guidance counselor during my senior year of High School that I was destined for failure, I was ready to drop out. I only chose to graduate because I needed a diploma to join the Navy. I only chose to graduate because I needed a diploma to join the Navy.

The mere act of writing about my educational history dredged up memories I would just as soon keep buried. But writing out my history also revealed lifelong learning successes. Dredging up those old memories, and putting them in proper context, helped me isolate my demons and deal with them throughout the rest of the program.

The "educational autobiography" writing assignment also included the requirement for presentation in an online format. I developed a new-to-me web-based presentation format of

"pull" information; allowing my readers to actively select how much they wanted to read and skip what they wanted. I like this format and have since used it in other writing projects both personal and other class assignments.

I felt this program provided an excellent grounding in communications. At its essence, training is all about communications: "*a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior*."[i] The foundations of communications covered during this program included web-based formats, infographics, research papers and multimedia instructional programs.

One communications format I particularly enjoyed was infographics, another new-to-me concept I worked with in two classes. I see infographics as another approach to web-based communications and have incorporated this concept in my present website work. One example is in this current iteration of my portfolio; I have attempted to make all graphics convey meaningful information.

Other projects led me into the world of interactive multimedia presentations and the tools to create them. I developed two presentations using Adobe Captivate and several presentations using TechSmith Camtasia. Although learning to use these tools was often frustrating, and I continue to face a steep learning curve in mastering them, I feel exhilarated by the scope of creative possibilities they offer.

As an example of how this program has helped me develop professionally; I am currently managing documentation workflows for a major government acquisition program using Microsoft SharePoint. We have had a major turnover of personnel in the past year, and as a result I have identified training needs for new SharePoint users. Camtasia offers the perfect media for building these presentations and I see myself soon creating training materials as part of my expanded job functions.

This program also introduced me to APA-format citations in my writing. Knowing I would have to provide proper citations in my research writeups forced me to improve my notetaking techniques. I have discovered that being meticulous in creating research notes improves my analytical abilities.

Planning and Analysis

Planning has never been one of my strong points. I normally tend to jump into projects and figure out what needs to be done as I go along. I recognize this is not always an effective approach, even though it usually does work out in the end. One trait this graduate program has instilled in me is using a formal process for effectively planning out large projects.

One of this program's strong points that I observed throughout class assignments was a common structure of formal project development in class assignments. Each major project used a step-by-step process of building one piece of the project, employing peer and instructor review, then moving on to the next piece. I felt this process was particularly effective in guiding

students as it provided us with plenty of room to be creative and experiment with new techniques, while still providing a safety net minimizing our risks of failure.

Two projects in particular stressed needs assessment, identification of target populations, and matching our technology to the users' needs. One was developing a training program, the second was a two-semester User Experience (UX) website development project. Both projects were team projects, so part of the planning and analysis involved coordinating efforts among team members. Working in a team of peers was another new-to-me skill, as my career work has typically revolved around hierarchically structured teams where one person gives out assignments and sets deadlines. In these two team projects we had to self-organize and come to mutually agreeable consensus on assigning tasks and setting deadlines. I did enjoy the teamwork of these projects, especially the two UX classes that ran sequentially and kept our team together for two full semesters.

The mechanics of conducting a needs assessment and identifying target populations were a pleasant expansion of the work I had done during my undergraduate program in Business Administration, concentration in Marketing. I see a lot of overlap between needs assessment for instructional design and business-orientated marketing research. It was the research aspects of marketing that first inspired me to pursue my undergraduate degree in that concentration, and I enjoyed the chance to engage in similar work during this program.

Design and Development

Having the opportunity to express creativity with new projects each class, each semester, was exhilarating. I enjoy creative challenges, but regrettably my present occupation managing documentation workflows does not always sanction a wide range of creative solutions. The class projects formed the heart of my learning experiences. I found that during the program, as I worked on different projects, my end goals for future instructional design work evolved into a focus on adult vocational training. My individual projects reflect this evolution, with the endpoint being my final class project of an e-Learning training module.

Early in the program I identified the pedagogical models of communities of practice, cognitive apprenticeship, and synergistic self-directed learning as the models I had utilized during my Navy career. I started focusing on these models in my writing assignments and class projects. During my Advanced Instructional Design class, I wrote a research paper on cognitive apprenticeship. Through my research for that paper I discovered this model was already being explored in a variety of academic areas.

My initial foray into design and development projects with a focus on adult vocational training was an e-Learning module developed in the Advanced Instructional Design class. In this project I prototyped a learning module using the cognitive apprenticeship model for training "Blue Collar" workers newly promoted into a supervisory position. My inspiration for this learning topic was my own experiences in the Navy when I was promoted from "First Class" (E-6) to "Chief" (E-7); this was a migration from worker to supervisor. A migration literally from "Blue

Collar" worker to supervisor as my working uniforms changed from blue dungarees and blue chambray shirts to the khaki-colored uniforms also worn by Commissioned Navy Officers.

One of my design projects, working with Adobe Captivate, incorporated maritime learning material in a vocational training format. My accessibility (Section 508) design project used the backwards design[ii] learning model as the website topic. Working with this design model, not otherwise covered in any of the classwork, was a revelation to me in understanding how to design vocational training classes.

For my final three-credit class, Learning Management Systems, I prototyped a learning system that models an e-Learning VOTECH program as my class project. This project offered me a channel to explore web-based learning platforms. I was able to conceptualize how and where e-Learning could fit into vocation programs that almost by definition need to incorporate hands-on training. I feel this vocational e-Learning model became my capstone project, tying together several channels of thought developed during my class work.

Evaluation and Implementation

Evaluation and implementation were extensively covered during the second part of my two-semester UX classes. While the first class focused on the design of a prototype website, in the second class the team project focused on two rounds of prototype testing by outside agents. The first round was a structured, monitored test for quantitative information. My team developed a test plan that scripted what we wanted the test agents to do. We located volunteers, provided them with the scripts, and set up testing sessions that allowed us to monitor the test agents. We recorded their feedback as test results, quantified it, and modified our prototype website.

With our prototype modified, we organized a second test session looking for qualitative feedback. Once again, we located volunteers who conducted the tests in accordance with our scripts. After the second-round testing, we collated the results, evaluated them, and modified our prototype a second time. The final actions for this class were to present all findings and demo the final version of our prototype website.

I have been building and operating websites as a hobby for the past twenty years. Yet these two classes introduced me to an entirely new world of UX concepts. My team was fortunate in attracting professional UX designers as volunteers to perform our testing. The issues they identified were some I had never previously considered in building my websites. Combined with the rigorous design process during the first UX class, my website design abilities soared in just a few months.

This portfolio is just one example of my growth in UX design, a result of my evaluation and implementation competencies gained during the UX classes. This website is the second implementation of my portfolio. My first implementation was delivered about one year ago with artifacts developed up to that point in my program. When it came time to update my

portfolio with second-year artifacts I knew I needed to completely rebuild it. I think this second portfolio is a far superior design and utilizes concepts learned during my UX courses.

Management

The business aspects of instructional design were extensively covered in the Business of Learning Design and Technologies class. This class was structured around developing a business case study related to a training issue. My business case study ultimately modelled a medium-size retail chain looking for a preventive solution to organized retail theft. This was an enjoyable project that offered the opportunity to do the type of analysis I too-rarely utilize in my professional work, but thoroughly enjoy. One aspect of this class I felt was particularly well-developed was the structure of progressing through distinct steps of the business case development process mixed with peer reviews and instructor feedback. I felt this process added to the intellectual enjoyment of developing my case study.

Another aspect of management competency that all my classwork included was peer collaboration in forum discussions. I initially felt uncomfortable sharing my thoughts in forum discussions as I worried about posting comments that were simultaneously too superficial and too cynical. I also worried that my comments would not offer anything of value to the discussions. I did become more comfortable participating in forum discussions as I gained confidence during the program. My forum comments seemed to be accepted by classmates and added value to discussions. I now feel much more capable of collaboration through online discussions within my peer groups.

Conclusion

Achieving this academic degree is one of my life goals. I started this graduate program extremely self-conscious of my age and checkered academic past, unsure if I could even finish. I have ended with a grade point average much higher than I expected, leaving me with feelings of vindication and accomplishment. Along the way I have been stretched into learning new skills while meeting and working with wonderful people. While I am not going to miss the pressures of weekly class deadlines, I am going to miss the experience of constant creative challenges.

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[1] Editor, E. E. (Ed.). Dictionary by Merriam-Webster: America's most-trusted online dictionary. (n.d.). Retrieved November 25, 2020, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/

[ii] Wiggins, Grant, and Jay McTighe. (2005) Understanding by Design (2nd ed.). Alexandria, Virginia, USA. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)