



Strength-Based Learning: An Autoethnography of an Introductory Instructional Design Graduate Course

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to investigate how to use a strengths-based lens that is highly contextualized, in an ecology (i.e., online graduate course) that shows the value of the socio-emotional interactions or climate. I used an autoethnographic approach to problematize myself so that I could ask contemplative questions as a result of reflection. My data collection process drew upon personal narrative, reflection, and anecdotes, which I analyzed in a graduate-level online learning context with a strengths-based lens to shed light on broader U.S. higher education online learning cultural and theoretical concepts such as organizational justice theory, connectivism, digital learning ecosystems, inclusive design, design justice, and strengths-based learning approaches. Three key cultural phenomena are revealed in this autoethnography. Finally, I discuss this study's limitations, some implications for faculty, IDs, and SMEs, and suggest areas for further research.

Keywords Strengths-based approaches · Learning design · Inclusive design · Organizational justice theory · Connectivism learning theory · Digital learning ecosystems · Design justice · Online learning · Higher education · Autoethnography

The aim of this autoethnographic study is to investigate how both my positionality and relevant professional experiences working across cultures have influenced my approach to developing emerging and advancing instructional designers in a highly contextualized graduate-level 100 percent online asynchronous course. I use a strengths-based lens that is highly contextualized, in an ecology (i.e., online graduate course) that shows the value of the socio-emotional interactions or climate. I fundamentally revised an introductory instructional design (ID) course design in 2019 in collaboration with a colleague. In 2022, I began co-authoring a textbook manuscript that describes a novel model, framework, and evidence-based approaches to creating just, culturally relevant, and inclusive, performance-based learning and development interventions, to support the course. In 2023, I updated components of the course design and integrated a prototype of this manuscript into my instructional design (ID) course, for which the manuscript now serves as the primary assigned course reading material. Co-authoring

the book and then integrating it into my ID course prompted me to re-examine my approach to teaching emerging and developing instructional designers (IDs) because I saw an opportunity to improve support for socio-emotional interactions and climate. The outcome was to evolve more equitable and strengths-based approaches to inclusive course design and teaching. In this article I will critically interrogate the current state of my strengths-based approach to setting up a networked learning ecosystem to scaffold real client ID project work in an organizational performance and workplace learning graduate course and healthy collaborative learning climate.

Purpose of this Study

As mentioned in the previous Section, I use a strengths-based lens in this autoethnographic study to analyze the findings of an online graduate course ecology. This course ecology is built upon a conceptual framework that demonstrates an application of organizational justice theory, connectivism learning theory, digital learning ecosystems, and inclusive design processes. I implement this framework because it aligns with many of my professional values, the ecological context, and my research agenda.

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I use a qualitative research method because qualitative research provides valuable insights and a deep understanding of complex phenomena, offering a rich and nuanced perspective. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research allows readers to become familiar with how others interpret and make sense of the complexities of human behavior, attitudes, and experiences, within specific contexts, providing a more holistic view of the subject under study (Hatch, 2023). It is well-suited for naturalistic inquiry, allowing researchers to study phenomena in real-world settings (Hatch, 2023). This naturalistic approach enhances the ecological validity of the findings (Al-Shehri, 2013; Reeves et al., 2005). Thus, qualitative research can have practical implications for policy development and practice. It provides insights that can inform decision-making, program development, and interventions by offering a deep understanding of the lived experiences of individuals and communities.

Mao et al., (2023) note that autoethnography is one qualitative research method. It embraces authenticity, subjectivity, and cultural sensitivity, as integral components of the research process (Mao et al., 2023). As researchers incorporate their feelings, reactions, and personal narratives into the study, readers encounter a more holistic and authentic representation of the phenomenon under investigation (Mao et al., 2023). Autoethnography is a powerful tool for giving voice to individuals and communities whose perspectives may be marginalized or underrepresented (Mao et al., 2023). It allows researchers to share personal narratives that contribute to a more diverse and inclusive understanding of social issues. This method enriches existing literature with personal and subjective perspectives that offer *unique insights* that can complement and challenge conventional research approaches (Mao et al., 2023). Also, Hayano, (1979) reminds us that transparently sharing one's positionality as a component of reflexive autoethnography is a common paradigm choice and that there's no one correct approach to doing this type of research.

Researchers have been describing how instructional designers make design decisions for decades (Kerr, 1983; Leonard, 1975). In fact, there have been thousands of research studies published on this topic (Kwende, 2023). However, the author conducted a literature search that revealed only five autoethnographic studies published on this topic in total.

All of these studies investigated design decisions in learning interventions for higher educational contexts, two by instructional designer-researchers (Ren, 2022; Kushkiev, 2022), and three by faculty researchers (Bowers et al., 2022; McDonald et al., 2022; Romero-Hall, 2022). Bowers et al., (2022) focused on "how faculty use reflection as a tool in learning design to recognize problems, devise solutions and constructively process emotions" across a wide variety of course design projects and domains (p.1). McDonald et al.,

(2022) studied "how advanced ID instructors: (a) helped students reflect on design; (b) helped students recognize and adapt to design challenges; and (c) balanced direct instruction with guidance and coaching" in an exploratory study to begin building evidence for advanced ID pedagogical approaches (p1). Romero-Hall, (2022), studied how intersectional feminism influenced her and her instructional systems design (ISD) teaching and research, specifically to challenge some of the common oppressive experiences of women of color who work in academia. Further, researchers suggest that more research is needed to understand how similar or different instructional design faculty experiences are at different types of higher education settings (McDonald et al., 2022).

This study fills a gap by describing my positionality and experiences as a neurodivergent woman, who is responsible for the design and teaching of an introductory ID course that is primarily focused on preparing IDs to enter corporate jobs, outside of P-20 education. I endeavor to enlighten both my affective and technical responses to teaching, as my disposition as an educator is important to further understanding of how design decisions are made (Thornton, 2006). Thus, I use autoethnography to situate my decisions and describe approaches that will challenge and expand upon common practices in introductory instructional design courses as they arise from the central research question.

Research Question

How does my positionality influence my instructor practices in the upskilling of emerging and developing instructional designers through an introductory ID graduate course?

Conceptual Course Design and Instructional Framework

Organizational Justice Theory

Organizational justice theory, which encompasses distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice, can be a valuable framework for designing learning systems and processes within an organization (Giacumo, 2024; Giacumo et al., 2024). Sackey, (2021) notes that an organization can be defined as a group of people engaging in continued interpersonal interactions that are stable, develop closure, and include specific relationship-based roles amongst different positions, such as a group of individuals enrolled in a course who are working together and with an instructor. Hence, one can apply an organizational justice theory approach to the design of learning systems and processes involves focusing on ensuring that all members of the learning community perceive fair and equitable policies,

Table 1 Organizational justice theory applications in designing learning systems and processes

Application of organizational justice in the course community	Rationale
Procedural Justice: Create transparent, consistent procedures and processes for learning activities	To increase perceptions of fairness and engagement across members of a group
Interactional Justice: Treat all learners with dignity and respect in communications and during interactions	To facilitate a sense of belonging and a more inclusive environment
Distributive Justice—Provide equitable access to learning resources, technologies, and support services	Towards fairness of resource distribution across members of a group can improve satisfaction
Participative Justice—Allow learner participation in decision-making for issues that affect them to model participative justice	To facilitate a sense of belonging. It can also enable a sense of shared responsibility and commitment across members of a group. This form of feminist justice expands from developmental state organizations (Rai, 2005) to include learning organizations.
Informational Justice—Inform learners about policies, changes, and performance feedback	This transparency aids understanding and goal clarity across members of a group

procedures, processes, and access to resources as well as communications that are dignified and respectful. Table 1 shows select applications and rationale for incorporating organizational justice theory in designing learning systems and processes.

Giacumo (2024) notes that as perceptions of organizational justice increase, there is mounting empirical evidence that learning is facilitated. For example, Oh (2019) describes how knowledge transfer can increase as a result of both instructional and non-instructional learning interventions. Li et al., (2022) showed that as university students' perceptions of justice increased, so did their self-efficacy (e.g., confidence, metacognition, reflection). One study showed that measures of student achievement were mediated by increased discretionary behaviors that correlated with increased perceptions of organizational justice (Burns & DiPaola, 2013). Further, researchers are linking perceived levels of organizational justice with performance outcomes after learners engage with different interventions (Raduazo, 2021; Sarfraz et al., 2021; Wardana et al., 2023; Zeb et al., 2021).

Connectivism Learning Theory

Siemens (2004) first described connectivism learning theory in his seminal paper and presented eight principles:

1. “Learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions.
2. Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources.
3. Learning may reside in non-human appliances.
4. Capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known.
5. Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning.
6. Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill.
7. Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivism learning activities.

8. Decision-making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information climate affecting the decision” (p5).

This theory is important because it advances understanding of learning to extend beyond what happens within a person and through their own social interactions with other people. In addition, this theory enables us to consider learning that happens externally to individuals through their interactions with technology and within organizations. This acknowledges that performance can be possible even when a thorough personal understanding of a context is lacking. In other words, our ability to “synthesize and recognize connections and patterns” that are accessed through the collection of knowledge sources (i.e., networks of people and/or technology) is a potential solution and method of learning (Corbett and Spinello, 2020; Siemens, 2004, p 3).

Digital Learning Ecosystems

A digital learning ecosystem refers to the interconnected network of people, tools, content, and technologies that facilitate learning within an organization and educational context such as a learning management system (Youjing & Wujing, 2011). It represents a holistic approach to learning that goes beyond traditional classroom settings and recognizes the diverse ways individuals acquire knowledge and skills. Learning ecosystems are dynamic, adaptable, and responsive to the evolving needs of learners. Ecosystems are comprised of components with some structure while other components “act or interact with their own agency” (Bannon et al., 2020, p70). Bannon et al., (2020) also provide five principles to guide the integration of learning in ecosystems, which include:

1. Provide scaffolding that helps learners assess what they can do, reflect on their prior knowledge, identify goals, give individualized support, feedback, and facilitate transfer learning to future opportunities.
2. Model how to do something and explain why one would do it that way.
3. Provide coaching and mentoring that helps learners perform more like experts.
4. Introduce learners to complex, highly contextualized, authentic work.
5. Provide opportunities to engage in teamwork that's cooperative, collaborative, and requires ample conversation.

Inclusive Design Processes

Inclusive design processes involve creating learning interventions, environments, and experiences that consider the diversity of users and strive to accommodate a broad range of needs, abilities, and preferences (Giacumo, 2024). The goal is to ensure that everyone, regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, abilities, etc., can access and use a product or service effectively. Inclusive design goes beyond accommodating people with disabilities; it aims to consider all learners. Giacumo et al. (2024) suggest that some of the key practices of inclusive design processes include: identifying the relevant characteristics of all intended learners, empathizing with those learners, creating representative personas to inform design decisions, including diverse stakeholders throughout the design process by offering them opportunities to provide input as well as feedback, adopting universal design principles, integrating prototyping and testing cycles that start early and continue throughout development and implementation, using participatory or co-creation approaches whenever possible, offering flexibility in learning ecosystems, and consider ethical implications of all learning designs.

Methods

This is an autoethnographic case study of one university faculty member who designs and teaches an introductory instructional design graduate-level course. As Flyvbjerg, (2001) noted, case studies often provide a great deal of information on a phenomenon, which gives new insights into common situations. When the researcher is also a participant, as is the case in this autoethnography, new perspectives and knowledge creation are possible because no intermediary researcher is trying to interpret various data (e.g. interviews, observations) or the participants' authentic intent or lived experience (Chang, 2013; Mardis et al., 2014; McDonald et al., 2022).

Mao et al., (2023) suggest two essential steps to engaging in autoethnography. These include: 1) Problematizing

oneself in a scholarly context so that a researcher can ask contemplative questions as a result of reflection. 2) Identifying data collection techniques. Edwards, (2021) notes autoethnographic research as both "process and product" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273), which is useful for considering how cultural dimensions and interpersonal relations interplay within a community or organization context. Thus, I will begin with the cultural context of the case, describe my positionality, identify the data sources, and analyze the data as it connects to my positionality and reflexive responsibility to engage in self-examination, questioning, be open to critique, and commit to continuous learning.

The Introductory Instructional Design Course

I, the author of this paper, regularly teach the required introductory instructional design course for a human resource development (HRD) master's program. This graduate program was started as an educational technology master's degree program in 1989 by a grant from the US Coast Guard. It is situated in the College of Engineering at a metropolitan research university, according to the Carnegie classification system, in the United States. Learners apply instructional design principles, frameworks, and approaches, while working on projects in virtual teams within both a simulation context at first and then later a real client context, during one 15-week semester. The clients are either identified by the instructor or the students and originate within a range of organizations (e.g., nonprofit, for-profit, NGO, military, startup, and multinational). All students collaborate to manage the projects, empathize with and analyze intended learners, ideate, prototype, design, develop, engage in some formative evaluation, and reflection. Their projects might incorporate a combination of formal and informal learning solutions, as long as they address a worthy performance gap where the root cause of the gap is the absence of an organizational intervention to support decision-making in job tasks (i.e., knowledge, skills, feedback). Additionally, all students reflect on their learning experiences individually and as a team throughout the course. In light of the complexity of the novice to emerging ID population, complex 100 percent online course context, virtual teams, and live client projects, this introductory course ecology was selected because it provided a rich source and unique setting for a research project.

Author's Positionality

Positionality refers to an individual's background and identity within a specific context (Mao et al., 2023). It's important for researchers to share relevant aspects of their positionality transparently because it influences their perspectives, experiences, biases, and how they interact with others (Hayano, 1979). This self-awareness is particularly important when dealing with topics related to social justice,

equity, and diversity, where acknowledging and understanding one's positionality contributes to a more nuanced and respectful engagement with different perspectives (Secules et al., 2021).

A strengths-based positionality statement allows a researcher's standpoint without implying that certain positions are inherently better or worse. It recognizes that the researcher's identity and background can be assets, allowing for a richer and more nuanced exploration of the research subject (Hayano, 1979). Thus, I will start with relevant aspects of my social identity, cultural background, educational and professional background, political orientation, and geographic orientation, from a strengths-based lens.

I am a Gen-X, over 45-year-old, white, cisgender, neurodivergent, American woman, wife, and mother. I grew up in the rural northeastern US with two parents who valued family time, going to church, education, and very hard work. The geolocation where I grew up was comprised of a community that had deep roots, most people tended to have multiple, strong, and long family ties to the region. My parents were not from the area, I had no cousins in school or local grandparents. These experiences mean that I also empathize with and understand the experiences of people who feel like they are outsiders, not part of the "in-crowd," or "usual suspects." They also mean that I work hard to include people so they don't feel left out.

My mother, who came from a rural farming family and a cross-cultural immigrant community, was raised catholic. She had two first-generation-US parents, and four bilingual immigrant grandparents (i.e., one set from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, one set from Yugoslavia). She is a democrat and a first-generation college student. She retired as a high school biology teacher. My father's background was episcopalian, he was very musical, athletic, multilingual (i.e., English, German, Spanish, French, Russian), and republican. He also came from a cross-cultural family, with four bilingual immigrant grandparents (i.e., one set from Italy, one from Germany, one from Canada), a bilingual father, and a community that was city-based. He worked full-time in a shipping and receiving department and part-time in the Army National Guard. After retirement he got certified to teach high school German and history; he substituted for middle school teachers. Thus, I learned to appreciate diverse cultures and group identities from a young age. I am curious about people, their culture, languages, identities, political affiliations, traditions, perceptions, origin stories, perspectives, and ways of doing things.

I've continued to be drawn to experience and explore other cultures. To my parents' delight, at 16 I left my family and lived with a French family for one year in high school as an international student. I lived and worked in the UK for a year and a half. I've also lived in the southwest US for six years, and Pacific Northwest for nine years. I've traveled extensively, through 49 states in the US, to over 20 countries across five continents, mostly for pleasure but also some work. For 10 years, I have

been in a cross-cultural, second marriage, to a Dutchman, who has lived in four countries (i.e., Netherlands, Mali, England, US). Therefore, I empathize with and understand the experience of people who live far from their community and cultural origins, far from their families and support systems, people who have to learn how to navigate new languages, cultures, ways of life, working contexts, build new support systems, and seek out new communities. This background also means that I have at times occupied spaces that are less valued and validated. They also mean that I work hard to validate others' feelings and experiences, even though I don't always get it right.

I have 21 years of experience teaching college-level courses, 16 years of experience as an instructional designer, 10 years of experience teaching aquatics, health, and safety community-level courses, nine years of experience as a full-time university faculty member, and approximately three years of experience directing different aquatic department operations. From these diverse work contexts, roles, and experiences, over time I have learned to become a better collaborator as I earned mounting practice, feedback, and observed the benefits of work in healthy, high-performing teams. Since 2009, I have contributed to hundreds of different project teams as a member, leader, or manager, with individuals who have different subject matter expertise and formal training from different disciplines. Hence, most of my major work products and outcomes resulted from transdisciplinary teamwork in co-designing, co-evaluating, co-producing, and cooperating, to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. From these experiences, I have learned to empathize with the challenges people face personally, professionally, across and within different industries, in different organizations, at different levels, in different roles, and who have different responsibilities. Also, I learned that different strengths are required to move projects forward at different times, in different contexts. Additionally, I learned that self-awareness is required to know how to contribute one's efforts and also can be leveraged to identify learning opportunities.

While I have experienced a fantastic education, persevered to earn advanced and terminal degrees, built a strong personal learning network, and held professional positions, that provide me with some privilege in relation to others' situations, I have also experienced certain challenges associated with my identity and body. During my PhD studies, I was told that I would be much better suited to working with children or adolescents instead of adults while I was never observed working with young people by this man. I was told I should wait to apply for a promotion because of my common female-related health status by a superior, who didn't mention my productivity as a reason to wait. I have been told by a single-blind reviewer that I don't know anything about systemic oppression, I assume due to my skin color because it wouldn't be due to my lived work experience within an organization with a mission to fight inequality to end poverty and injustice. I rejected this deficit-based feedback and continued on in pursuit of my goals. These experiences

mean that I also empathize with and understand the experiences of people who are systemically discouraged or systematically discriminated against due to characteristics that are not choices they made, or have any way to change, and have no relationship with their professional skillsets, abilities, or accomplishments.

Strengths-based approaches to the design of learning systems and processes involve focusing on individuals' strengths, talents, and positive attributes to enhance their learning experience and outcomes (Swartz et al., 2016). Rather than primarily addressing weaknesses or deficits, this approach rejects a deficit orientation. Instead, a strengths-based approach leverages the unique assets that each individual brings to a learning community to be successful (Lopez & Louis, 2009). The key is keeping the focus on harnessing strengths as the channel for growth rather than primarily trying to "fix" weaknesses in highly contextualized ecologies. Accordingly, Hurlock's, (1925) seminal work found that when learners are praised, their performance improves more than it would with repute. This empowers students' self-confidence and helps reveal their potential. Table 2 connects my positionality statement to a strengths-based lens. In the analysis Section, I will link my positionality attributes to my approach to the preparation of emerging and developing instructional designers in an introductory ID graduate course.

Data Sources

The data I used consisted of these data sources: Table 2, personal reflections about the course, personal narratives that I included in the course, and instructional artifacts that are embedded into the course shell. The personal reflections consisted of detailed accounts of retroactive descriptions of my teaching practices and responses to students in the course during the fall 2023 semester. Data collected from students during discourse and Zoom sessions helped inform my personal reflections by confirming, extending, or challenging my own accounts (Ellis et al., 2011). The personal narratives were the stories that I told about my

experiences working as an instructional designer or educator of instructional designers during the fall 2023 semester. Relevant instructional artifacts included the following: my syllabus, my new co-authored prototype book manuscript, the templates I use to guide students' work, the learning activities I provided to students, deliverable instructions and guidelines, assessments, and announcements. These were all found in the learning management system course shell during the fall 2023 semester.

Analysis

In this Section, I will analyze the presented data, connecting my personal experiences to broader cultural, social, or theoretical concepts. Also, I will reflect on the meaning and implications of their experiences in light of the research question. The question was: **How does my positionality influence my instructor practices in the upskilling of emerging and developing instructional designers through an introductory ID graduate course?**

Table 3 shows the framework that I used to design and teach the course, the characteristics of each element of the framework, and select applied examples of the framework in the course.

The appendix shows a strengths-based analysis of the relationship between my positionality and the applied examples from my course design and teaching framework.

Results

Themes and Patterns

I identified three themes in this study. In this Section I name the themes and include descriptions for each theme. Also, I describe my instructor-related experiences with student interactions and my reflections. These provide a deeper exploration of the key concepts that were revealed.

Table 2 A view of my positionality through a strengths-based lens

Strengths-based learning principles	My positionality attributes
Measurement of strengths, achievement, and determinants of positive outcomes	Self-assessment of abilities, competencies, perseverance, and accomplishments
Individualization of learning to align with needs and interests	Integration of novel perspectives, co-evaluation processes, and co-design thinking processes, actively rejecting focused feedback that's based on weaknesses
Networking with those who affirm strengths	Trusting, respectful, collaborative, and cooperative relationships, feedback builds on strengths
Deliberate application of strengths in and out of the classroom	Combined formal and informal learning, reflexive practice, cultural sensitivity, and deliberate inclusive practices
Intentional development of strengths through sustained efforts	Showing up, taking responsibility for learning, continued effort in practice, and focused reflection on dynamic qualities emerging over time

Note: Strengths-based learning principles and positionality framework are based on Lopez and Louis (2009)

Table 3 Course design and teaching framework component, characteristics, and applied examples

Framework component	Characteristics	Applied examples
Organizational Justice Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having transparent, consistent procedures and processes for learning activities • Treating all learners with dignity and respect • Equitable access to learning resources, technologies, and support services • Allowing learner-participation in decision-making for issues that affect them • Keeping learners informed about policies, changes and performance feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer all students flexible, personalized, alternatives to set learning activities, deliverables, and deadlines • Offer assistance to all students who request flexibility and help to identify a more personalized learning journey • Validate students' diverse human assets and needs by communicating my priorities to center all individuals in process and procedure decisions by integrating their input, allocating resources and opportunities fairly to everyone • Send out announcements, feedback, and share changes, promptly
Connectivism Learning Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions • Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources • Learning may reside in non-human appliances • Capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known • Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning • Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill • Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivism learning activities • Decision-making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information climate affecting the decision" (Siemens, 2005, p. 20 – 21) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set expectations that all individuals bring different assets to the table and can provide valued contributions • Create opportunities for learners to work in groups • Teach methods and processes for acquiring new information • Teach heuristics for decision-making • Teach methods for nurturing relationships in coursework • Share stories to illustrate my own struggles and learning experiences • Teach technology tool uses for accessing learning • Build on prior knowledge through reflection and sharing narratives
Digital Learning Ecosystems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goes beyond traditional classroom settings • Dynamic, adaptable, and responsive to the evolving needs of learners • Provide scaffolding that helps learners assess what they can do, reflect on their prior knowledge, identify goals, give individualized support, feedback, and facilitate transfer learning to future opportunities • Model how to do something and explaining why one would do it that way • Provide coaching and mentoring that helps learners perform more like experts • Introduce learners to complex, highly contextualized, authentic work • Provide opportunities to engage in teamwork that's cooperative, collaborative, and requires ample conversation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate learning through real client projects and authentic performance-based learning activities • Iterate course structure as the semester unfolds to respond to learner needs, inputs, and experiences • Provide examples of past projects and deliverables • Provide templates that facilitate the transfer of learning to future opportunities • Provide individual and group coaching and mentoring as needed • Provide timely feedback with rational • Encourage virtual teams to meet together and with project stakeholders synchronously via video conferencing • Share examples of cases and outcomes that show rationale for choices • Encourage learners to negotiate for what they need to be successful
Inclusive Design Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify intended learner audience characteristics • Empathize with diverse intended learners • Include diverse stakeholders throughout the design process adopting universal design principle, • Integrate prototyping and testing cycles that start early and continue throughout development and implementation • Using participatory or co-creation approaches whenever possible • Consider the ethical implications of all learning designs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure materials and experiences are accessible to diverse learners • Ask all learners individually and in groups for input relevant to problem identification, ideation, and instructional design strategies during various stages of planning • Ask all learners to provide feedback and evaluate their experiences and competencies, during and after implementation • Provide all learners opportunities to produce mostly authentic deliverables that they can use, modify, and adapt after the course is over • Avoid long discussion forum posts that won't be relevant after the course is over

Confidence and Flexibility in Newness

The first theme I identified was: *Helping students gain confidence and remain flexible as new data emerge*. This theme can be described as: The instructor modeled ID work, gathered input and feedback multiple times, made adjustments as new data emerged during the semester, and described plans for future design iterations. The instructor also offered learners opportunities to gather input and feedback multiple times from diverse stakeholders during the project timeline. The instructor then confirmed students' epiphanies, encouraging their evolving understanding of the authentic contexts and iteration of alternate design solutions.

Akondy and Murthy (2015) note that while IDs benefit from practice in ill-structured real-world problem-solving, they benefit from observing an expert in solving real-world problems with a combination of observation, coaching, and practice. In the introductory instructional design course, I model solving real-world problems and demonstrate expert approaches to doing so in a variety of ways. These include: giving students access to past completed projects, sharing videos of experienced IDs conducting client and subject matter expert interviews, offering learners a chance to practice making decisions about ID concepts and processes in a simulation before beginning a real client ID project, affirming and highlighting similarities between the decisions, reflections, and experiences of other individuals', groups', and my own ID experiences', and facilitating coaching sessions when students experience new challenges in their real ID projects, that they didn't encounter in the first simulation practice project.

Svilha, (2021) reminds us that emerging and developing IDs need intentional support to remain both flexible and embrace their own experience with being uncomfortable, as they learn how to solve design problems iteratively. Thus, I let students know up front that they will have an opportunity to try out new ways of working, experience new ideas, and that mistakes are a welcomed part of the learning process in the syllabus and as we start the course. I ask them to be compassionate with themselves and others as they experience challenges and reach out for additional support whenever desired. I let them know that their success is my first priority and that we will work together to find solutions to any situation they encounter, as they arise during the semester.

I set up a process whereby students seek input and feedback from the client, SMEs, and intended learners. I advise student teams to ask for input before and feedback after each deliverable is created during their ID process. Many teams solicit my input before completing deliverables and they all receive feedback after they complete each set of deliverables, from both their colleagues in the course as well as from the instructor. This kind of process offers many opportunities for iterations and changes in approaches as new information becomes available over time.

I model this process to seek input and feedback by conducting an anonymous mid-course evaluation survey, and a

dedicated after-action review open discussion forum at the end of the course. In both instances, students are invited to provide feedback on how things have been going and input on potential improvements. In the mid-course survey, I aggregate all anonymous comments, reflect on them, invite additional input, make changes to the course as necessary, and share all of that information back out with all of the students. The after-action review discussion is open for all students to participate in and I invite them to discuss the ideas presented with each other, while I respond to every single bit of feedback they choose to share. From this process, learners can observe how a designer and instructor can remain confident and flexible as new data emerge.

Also, I also ask students to reflect on their ID process, project components, learning experiences in the course, and accomplishments, both individually and as part of their ID project team at multiple points during the course. The teams share project status updates during weeks where no deliverables are due for instructor review and they reflect on their demonstration of the program learning outcomes after the project is over, at the end of the course. Individuals reflect on their competencies, at the start and end of the course through a self-assessment survey scale tool and the creation of a portfolio webpage for their ID project.

When I started teaching the introductory ID course in the fall semester of 2019, I asked students to rate their confidence in doing different components of real-world ID work at the start of the semester and again at the end of the semester. Every semester, the average ratings increased from a one or two out of five to a three or four out of five and this happened again in the fall 2023 semester. Each semester, all students report their confidence levels increase by the end of the semester. Some students even ask me to point them to alternative approaches to doing ID.

Empathy for Diverse Stakeholders

The second theme I identified was: *Helping students develop empathy for, negotiate, cooperate, and collaborate with diverse project stakeholders*. This theme can be described as: The instructor demonstrated empathy in all interactions, took time to emphasize successes, cooperated when students made asks for support, and collaborated on intervention designs to honor shared goals.

Svilha, (2021) suggests that as we focus on understanding human needs to solve design problems, we should pay attention to power dynamics and inclusivity, diversity, and participant safety (Giacumo et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2012; Romero-Hall, 2022). What was qualitatively different at the end of the fall 2023 semester was students' comments on my attention to power dynamics. I believe these comments arose because of a change to the instructional materials that I integrated in the course. This was the first semester I shared an ID process framework that centered performance-based learning and development, inclusive design, design justice, organizational justice, and

culturally relevant interventions (Giacumo et al., 2024). While I had always expected that all learners would bring different assets into the learning community, this was the first semester that I explicitly: 1) stated this expectation, 2) noted that I valued their unique assets, and 3) repeatedly expressed these ideas throughout the course materials. The statements that I received from students regarding the “safe space” I facilitated for their project work, the welcomed “DEI undertone,” the “empathy” and “compassion” which I “demonstrated as a leader,” allowing them to “be compassionate towards themselves,” and then able “pass on to their team members,” was a very pleasant surprise.

This semester I also added a new official course outcome, related to authentic ID work. I shared my explicit expectation that given their goals, *learners should negotiate for what they need to succeed in the course*. While I had always expected that all learners would negotiate with me as an instructor, their clients, and other colleagues enrolled in the course, this was the first semester that I was explicit with this expectation. I noted this multiple times in the syllabus (i.e., selected readings, assessments, schedule), throughout the course materials (e.g., deliverable instructions, rubrics, announcements), and in my responses to students’ communications. None of the teams pulled me in to mediate any internal conflicts this semester, which was a pleasant change.

Further, I repeatedly asked students to refrain from doing work only because I asked them to do it, and to focus on finding opportunities to do work that they valued in my communications with them. What struck me with this change was how I submitted more “A” final grades to the registrar than ever before, the final percentages were higher, and I didn’t personalize the selected readings, assessments, or schedule, and more than I have done in prior semesters. From this, I would hypothesize that because I put the students in charge of their personalization needs more explicitly, they took more ownership of their learning, and worked harder to be successful than ever before.

As you might imagine, there were some instances where things didn’t work perfectly. For example, one student let me know in the anonymous mid-semester survey that I added a superficial DEI twist to a standard process. After the course was over, a couple of students asked for different reading assignments and a few asked for a slightly adjusted schedule. Of course, I am happy to keep learning how I can better support their success so I followed up with their input to the best of my abilities.

Strengths, Authenticity, and Reflection

The third theme I identified was: *Helping students acquire opportunities to build on their strengths, get authentic practice, take responsibility for their learning, and reflect on their growing competencies*. This theme can be described as: The instructor provided input and feedback to center students’ strengths in authentic projects, and allowed students to self-assess

competencies, reflect on their accomplishments, and negotiate for learning opportunities they valued.

Students taking introductory instructional design courses can be learning: new vocabulary, new concepts, and how to make decisions related to common on-the-job tasks (McDonald et al., 2022). Rosenberg, (2012) would call these learners novice IDs, those who are new to their ID jobs or changing careers. However, every semester I also always have a small group (e.g., approximately 25%) of learners, with some instructional design experience competence, who can perform to basic standards (Rosenberg, 2012).

Further, I see groups of students who are also building off of very different prior knowledge, work experience, life experience, and coursework expectations. Some students in my course are coming straight out of undergraduate programs with little or no work experience while others have been working for a decade or more. Some students in my course already have a master’s degree or terminal degree. Some individuals with significant work experience have operated in them only independently while others have been working in team environments already. Some students have ample time to soak up new information, or perspectives, or ways of working, while others struggle to fit time for learning into their schedules. Each student brings unique strengths and assets no matter which group they belong to or how much space they make to learn. So, then as an instructor, I work hard to meet each student where they are and help them maximize the value of their course experience for their personal context and goals.

Every student gets access to the same self-assessments, instructional activities, authentic projects with a real client and virtual ID team, networking opportunities, and reflection activities. However, it’s up to them to decide how they engage with the course community and their personal learning opportunities. I provide input and feedback to highlight the strengths that I see them developing. And, I invite them to take responsibility for their learning by providing options, including alternative instructional activities, deliverables, deadlines, project roles including leadership activities, and stretch assignments. I remind them of these opportunities throughout the course, I offer support with planning a more personalized experience at the start of the course, during the course upon request, and again at the end of the course.

Discussion

There’s a body of research describing widely accepted methods to prepare emerging and developing instructional designers. These methods include providing learners in instructional design courses with case studies or project-based learning (Hardré & Kollmann, 2013), after they have had “a course in basic terminology, procedures, and models” (Bannan-Ritland, 2001, p. 45), the value of learning through peer review (Brill, 2016; McDonald et al., 2022), and how to facilitate building identity

(Hutchinson & Tracy, 2015). However, these methods are often derived from studies where researchers served as intermediaries interpreting others' experiences through their observations, interviews, or some other data collection method and then making recommendations. This study fills an important gap by combining the researcher and participant roles, which allows for the creation of data that can add new perspectives (Mardis et al., 2014; McDonald et al., 2022).

Further, this study adds to the growing body of strengths-based scholarship in instructional systems design and online learning course design in higher education. While much has been written about in terms of the investigation and application of a strengths-based lens in development work (Agdal et al., 2019; Mathie and Cunningham, 2005) and compulsory education (Lopez & Louis, 2009; Swartz et al., 2016), this is a newer line of inquiry in our field. Below, Table 4 shows a summary of select strengths-based applied course design and teaching strategies that instructors can consider adopting. Table 5 shows examples of these processes in action.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this research study, even though the method provided an opportunity to gain unique insights into the research question. First, the evidence reflects what I attend to, which is based on my prior experiences and perceptions. Other researchers would provide different insights given their unique prior experiences and perceptions and thus there is a need for more research in this area. Further, different student populations may also yield different kinds of narratives. This additional research would also provide valuable insights. As these accounts become more available in future publications, the potential for new patterns and understandings also

increases. Yet still, the detailed descriptions of this study do provide valuable insights that would otherwise be inaccessible.

Areas For Further Research

Future opportunities for research could investigate patterns in ethnographic methods used for studying instructional design decision-making, ID course design, and findings related to learner outcomes. This will provide more insight into the importance of further ethnographic research in this area to be conducted by diverse researchers. Other future research might include empirical evidence of the learners' experiences with the ID course design and teaching methods that I described in this article. Research questions might focus on equitable and inclusive (i.e. just) instructional design processes, ID identity development, motivation for the transfer of learning to workplace performance, and perceptions of organizational justice in course communities, to name a few.

Conclusion

This research study shed new light on ways to organize and facilitate graduate students'

learning in an introductory instructional design course. The design decisions I made and the teaching experiences that I shared add a novel case study example of the possibilities that others might consider adopting. The novel ethnographic contribution of this work shares my own new perspectives and novel methods, which have not yet appeared in the literature. This exploratory work can serve as a foundation for future research and novel ID course design approaches.

Table 4 Select strengths-based learning approaches, applied course design and teaching strategies

Learning systems	Processes
1. Design opportunities for learners to use their strengths as a foundation for building competence in weaker areas	1. Assess students' talents, strengths and interests early on through surveys, interviews, or observation. Then, structure the curriculum and assignments to allow students to apply their strengths
2. Design opportunities for learners to find purpose and motivation by applying their strengths to meaningful goals or projects	2. Customize teaching methods to align with strengths. Facilitate big-picture conceptual exploration to develop "context" strengths while doing hands-on authentic projects to develop "empirical" strengths
3. Foster collaborative learning environments where individuals can share and leverage each other's strengths. Group activities and projects can capitalize on the diverse strengths within a learning community	3. Personalize feedback and recommendations so they are focused on strengths and help learners direct that strength toward further growth opportunities
4. Design opportunities for personalized learning paths that allow individuals to explore and develop their capabilities in areas where they excel	4. Support learners in discovering new areas of strength in reflection activities
5. Design learning activities and exercises that help individuals further develop and apply their strengths. This could involve projects, simulations, or real-world applications that align with their natural abilities	5. Acknowledge and celebrate successes, fostering a positive learning environment that reinforces the value of individual strengths
6. Establish feedback loops that allow for continuous improvement based on strengths. Regularly solicit feedback from learners about how the learning experience can better align with their strengths and preferences	6. Offer coaching and mentoring that is centered around individuals' strengths. Encourage mentors to guide learners in aligning their strengths with their personal and professional goals

Table 5 Applied strengths-based learning processes in action

Strengths-based learning processes	Select examples
Assess students' talents, strengths and interests early on through surveys, interviews, or observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompts for learner introductions that include qualitative descriptions of past experiences, interests, and goals • Entry knowledge assessment survey to rate confidence of learners' ability to demonstrate course outcomes in an interview setting • Ice breakers for live meetings that make space for learners to share their relevant tips, lessons learned, favorite resources, etc., that map to the immediate module topics and deliverables
Structure the curriculum and assignments to allow students to apply their strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team charters allow students to frame project roles and responsibilities uniquely and make assignments themselves on their teams • Team charters allow students to develop team-specific communication and risk mitigation strategies • Statements of Work allow students to negotiate specific instructional material deliverable types that align with their strengths • The textbook includes a framework to support high-performing teams so that learners can practice that frame of mind • The textbook integrates many analogies to link commonly known concepts (e.g., hospitals, cooking) to new technical knowledge • The textbook integrates case studies so that learners can think about the implications for the principles covered in each chapter • Weekly deadlines are flexible, noted as Saturday or Sunday • Modules span several weeks to allow for even more flexibility with students' schedules so that students feel comfortable using in their strengths to deliver quality • Deliverables are negotiable and templates are modifiable to allow for students' unique strengths • Instruction on how to use collaborative tools is provided so that students can take on different components of deliverables that show off their strengths
Customize teaching methods to align with strengths. Facilitate big-picture conceptual exploration to develop "context" strengths while doing hands-on authentic projects to develop "empirical" strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online discussion forums and live meetings are structured similarly to a community of practice discussion where students can respond to others' questions with their strengths • Instruction is provided to ask questions to seek understanding whenever others share ideas that are new, unexpected, or different • Students get to meet with their clients and SMEs as well as their teams weekly to explore the organizational context for their workplace learning project
Personalize feedback and recommendations so they are focused on strengths and help learners direct that strength toward further growth opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written and video feedback is provided to highlight the individual strengths each student brings to discussion forums and individual deliverables • At times I make suggestions for project decisions when teams approach me as well, based on their strengths
Support learners in discovering new areas of strength in reflection activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners must reflect individually on how their project demonstrates what they've learned in the course in a final portfolio web page • Learners also reflect individually on what they are learning that's helping them to build new knowledge, skills, and abilities • Teams must reflect together on their progress, what's going well, what's challenging, and how they are going to resolve the challenges periodically during the course
Acknowledge and celebrate successes, fostering a positive learning environment that reinforces the value of individual strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written and video feedback is provided to highlight the individual strengths each student brings to discussion forums and individual deliverables • Weekly announcements celebrate the successes the community has achieved together • I emphasize learners' strengths when they post messages in the online discussion forums publically
Offer coaching and mentoring that is centered around individuals' strengths. Encourage mentors to guide learners in aligning their strengths with their personal and professional goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengths-based personalized coaching and mentoring is provided to individuals upon request and those opportunities are advertised each week • I only agree to make adjustments to assigned readings, deliverables, and deadlines, that align with students' personal learning goals, career development goals, and personal contexts

Appendix

Table 6 Positionality attributes mapped to applied examples of course design and teaching framework

Positionality attributes	
Applied examples of course design and teaching framework	Self-assessment of abilities, competencies, perseverance, and accomplishments
Offer all students flexible, personalized, alternatives to set learning activities, deliverables, and deadlines	x
Offer assistance to all students who request flexibility and help to identify a more personalized learning journey	x
Validate students' diverse human assets and needs by communicating my priorities to center all individuals in process and procedure decisions by integrating their input, and allocating resources and opportunities fairly to everyone	x
Send out announcements, and feedback, and share changes, promptly	x
Set expectations that all individuals bring different assets to the table and can provide valued contributions	x
Create opportunities for learners to work in groups	x
Teach methods and processes for acquiring new information	x
Teach heuristics for decision-making	x
Teach methods for nurturing relationships in coursework	x
Share stories to illustrate my own struggles and learning experiences	x
	Integration of novel perspectives, co-evaluation processes, and co-design thinking processes, actively rejecting focused work based on weaknesses
	Trusting, respectful, collaborative, and cooperative relationships, feedback builds on strengths
	Combined formal and informal learning, reflexive practice, cultural sensitivity, and deliberate inclusive practices
	Showing up, taking responsibility for learning, continued effort in practice, and focused reflection of dynamic qualities emerging over time

Table 6 (continued)

Positionality attributes	
Applied examples of course design and teaching framework	Self-assessment of abilities, competencies, perseverance, and accomplishments
Teach technology tool uses for accessing learning	x
Build on prior knowledge through reflection and sharing narratives	x
Facilitate learning through real client projects and authentic performance-based learning activities	x
Iterate course structure as the semester unfolds to respond to learner needs, inputs, and experiences	x
Provide examples of past projects and deliverables	x
Provide templates that facilitate the transfer of learning to future opportunities	x
Provide individual and group coaching and mentoring as needed	x
Provide timely feedback with rationale	x
Encourage virtual teams to meet together and with project stakeholders synchronously via video conferencing	x
Share examples of cases and outcomes that show the rationale for choices	x
Encourage learners to negotiate for what they need to be successful	x
Ensure materials and experiences are accessible to diverse learners	x

Showing up, taking responsibility for learning, continued effort in practice, and focused reflection of dynamic qualities emerging over time

Combined formal and informal learning, reflexive practice, cultural sensitivity, and deliberate inclusive practices

Trusting, respectful, collaborative, and cooperative relationships, feedback builds on strengths

Integration of novel perspectives, co-evaluation processes, and co-design thinking processes, actively rejecting focused work based on weaknesses

Table 6 (continued)

		Positionality attributes			
Applied examples of course design and teaching framework	Self-assessment of abilities, competencies, perseverance, and accomplishments	Integration of novel perspectives, co-evaluation processes, and co-design thinking processes, actively rejecting focused work based on weaknesses	Trusting, respectful, collaborative, and cooperative relationships, feedback builds on strengths	Combined formal and informal learning, reflexive practice, cultural sensitivity, and deliberate inclusive practices	Showing up, taking responsibility for learning, continued effort in practice, and focused reflection of dynamic qualities emerging over time
Ask learners individually and in groups for input relevant to problem identification, ideation, and instructional design strategies during various stages of planning		x		x	x
Ask learners to provide feedback and evaluate their experiences and competencies, during and after implementation	x	x	x	x	x
Provide learners opportunities to produce mostly authentic deliverables that they can use, modify, and adapt after the course is over	x		x	x	x
Avoid long discussion forum posts that won't be relevant after the course is over	x				

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