Disrupting the Syllabus:
Why Instructional Designers Make Exceptional Faculty and Academic Leaders

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"Instructional designers don't just support education—they're built to lead it. Blending cognitive science with digital fluency, they're the hidden architects of tomorrow's academic leadership."

Instructional designers, often operating behind the scenes, are increasingly positioned to revolutionize academic leadership and faculty roles. This paper argues that instructional designers with eLearning expertise bring a unique and powerful combination of skills that make them not only exceptional faculty members but also transformative deans and academic leaders. Drawing from scholarly research and firsthand accounts, the paper explores how instructional designers understand the science of learning, leverage educational technology effectively, and facilitate mastery-based progression. It also highlights less obvious advantages, such as autonomous course design and peer mentorship, and addresses concerns about the academic credibility of instructional designers. The paper ultimately positions them as dynamic changemakers who can bridge the gap between instructional theory and practice in ways that elevate institutional quality and student success.

Introduction

In a world where higher education must continuously evolve to meet the needs of diverse learners, the role of the instructional designer is more critical than ever. Yet, their influence is often confined to the background, supporting faculty with course development, technology integration, and instructional strategy. What happens when instructional designers step into the foreground as faculty, department chairs, or even deans of instruction? This paper explores the transformative impact they can have when placed in academic leadership and instructional roles, examining how their skills and perspective enrich curriculum, assessment, faculty development, and student learning.

This article explores how their unique skills transform curriculum, assessment, faculty development, and student learning from the inside out.

The Need for Change: Setting the Stage

In a world where higher education must evolve to meet the needs of diverse learners, the role of the instructional designer has never been more vital. Traditionally, they've supported faculty behind the scenes. But what happens when instructional designers step into the spotlight as faculty, department chairs, or even academic deans?

The Cognitive Edge: Understanding How People Learn

Instructional designers are deeply familiar with cognitive science and adult learning theory, how memory works, how knowledge builds over time, and what motivates learners to keep going. Ambrose et al. (2010) emphasize that effective teaching

depends on understanding how students acquire and retain knowledge. IDs are masters at breaking down complex topics into clear, bite-sized chunks and scaffolding them across time to ensure retention. They also know when and how to reinforce key concepts so learning sticks.

Picture this: a traditional faculty member might build a syllabus week-by-week. An instructional designer-faculty member? They build a learning journey—grounded in outcomes, supported by repetition, and powered by diverse media. The goal? Not just to complete a course, but to internalize it.

Curriculum and Assessment: Powered by Design Thinking
Design thinking is second nature to instructional designers. According to Brown, (2009),

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> *They empathize with learners, define challenges, ideate solutions, prototype experiences, and test them, all while staying aligned with institutional goals.*

They're not just checking boxes; they're engineering learning. Take a recent online certificate program. It was designed by an instructional designer turned faculty member. Learners moved through a self-paced, feedback-rich environment. Scenario-based assessments and flexible support options led to a 92% completion rate—far above the norm for online courses. This isn't accidental. It's intentional design.

Hidden Strengths: The Unexpected Perks of IDs in Faculty Roles
Here's where it gets interesting. Instructional designers who become faculty don't need to rely on others to build their courses. They can do it all, efficiently and effectively.

TRAUMA-INFORMED TEACHING

This cuts delays and raises the standard of quality across the board. Now imagine this: during a casual faculty retreat, an adjunct expresses frustration over student engagement. A former instructional designer shares a strategy, low-stakes formative quizzes with instant feedback. Within an hour, three other faculty members have updated their course shells. These moments of spontaneous peer-to-peer learning referred to as informal faculty development (Beach et al., 2016)—happen naturally when IDs are part of the instructional team.

They also understand things like accessibility compliance, trauma-informed teaching, and LMS analytics. They know what students need and how to deliver it, without sacrificing rigor.

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> *Designers lack deep subject-matter expertise or the research chops expected of faculty*

Pushback and Perspective: Addressing the Doubts
Of course, not everyone's on board. Some worry that instructional designers lack deep subject-matter expertise or the research chops expected of faculty. Others think their design skills might overshadow actual content.

Those concerns aren't baseless but they aren't dealbreakers either. Many IDs hold advanced degrees, sometimes in their content area, and almost always in education or learning science. Their design-first mindset doesn't compete with subject expertise, it enhances it. After all, a brilliant researcher with poor course design still risks losing students. Instructional designers bring balance.

Bridging Two Worlds: The Culture Shift

When instructional designers lead, they unite two essential worlds: academic theory and instructional practice. They're not only excellent teachers, they're institutional catalysts. At one college, an instructional designer-turned-dean launched a new onboarding model. Faculty were partnered with IDs for course development sprints. Within a year, course evaluations jumped 27%. Faculty reported higher confidence in their teaching.

CREATING A CULTURE OF SHARED EXPERTISE

This culture of shared expertise, where cross-functional learning happens naturally without being forced, is what creates dynamic, future-ready institutions. Instructional designers are built for this kind of leadership.

Final Thoughts: The Future Starts Here

Instructional designers have the skills, knowledge, and mindset to be powerful faculty and academic leaders. They understand how students learn, how to build accessible courses, and how to use technology to improve learning outcomes. While concerns about traditional academic roles are valid, they don't outweigh the overwhelming benefits instructional designers bring to the table.

The future of higher education lies in collaboration—where pedagogy meets innovation, and where faculty are as fluent in design as they are in content. Instructional designers are the bridge.

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