Instructional design is kind of like an onion: as you peel back a layer of what you think covers instructional design, you discover another layer that *also* covers instructional design. This is why Berger and Kam (1996) discuss instructional design as having at least four different layers: instructional design as a process, a discipline, a science, and reality. The definition of instructional design as a process that an educator should work through in order to optimize the learning of their students is probably the most widely recognized definition, and there are several instructional design models that educators have developed to aid a designer in that process. However, it is still important to remember that instructional design is also a science that is always searching for ways to facilitate the most learning, a discipline that has been built over time by research into instructional strategies, and the day-to-day reality of every educator who knows from experience the best way to engage their students. To reduce instructional design down to simply a process diminishes the immense impact that instructional design has on what goes on in a classroom, whether it’s a traditional classroom in a school building or a digital classroom built by a company to train their employees.

At the same time, a four-part definition of a term will always be challenging to explain to others (Wagner 2018). Given that asking after someone’s occupation is an extremely common form of small talk in the United States, it’s natural for instructional designers to want a shorter definition that more easily explains what it is that they do to others. The Association of Educational Communications and Technology, an academic and professional organization for instructional designers, has a somewhat shorter definition of what instructional design is: “Educational technology is the study and ethical practice of facilitating learning and improving performance by creating, using, and managing appropriate technological processes and resources” (Januszewski and Persichitte, 2007, p. 280). Although this definition is shorter, it is clear that its elements align closely with Berger and Kam’s four-part definition; AECT’s definition includes instructional design as a process (practice), instructional design as a science (study), and instructional design as reality (appropriate technological processes and resources). It doesn’t explicitly mention instructional design as a discipline, but this could definitely be assumed given that the definition is emanating from a professional organization and these rarely exist without a discipline to support them. It does include a mention of ethics, which is an important consideration that Berger and Kam omit.

As I begin to take my first steps in joining the instructional design community, I am thinking about these definitions and my own conceptions of the field. Ethical practice is important to me- especially making sure that I am considering my own biases and assumptions- so I want to include that in my definition. I also think that Berger and Kam were smart to include instructional design as reality in their definition, because it reflects my own experience of learning how to teach by trying new things and seeing what worked/didn’t even though I had no idea what instructional models even were at the time. Lastly, it is evident from both of the aforementioned definitions that instructional design nearly always involves going through a process that aligns instructional strategies with desired learning outcomes. Therefore any definition that lacks some mention of process or systemization would not capture the core of an instructional designer’s work.

My personal definition of learning, design, and technology is thus: Instructional design is the systematic planning, implementation, and evaluation of teaching and learning using technology, experience, and ethical considerations as appropriate.

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