



Perspective / Opinion

Thoughts from a Millennial Instructional Designer

By Johnathon Neist, MLIS – Instructional Designer in the Office of Educational Improvement

The perspective of being a graduate student not that long ago influences many of the instructional design choices at MCW. Here is the thought process of a Millennial instructional designer...

If you are a student reading this, know that a lot of the new instructional experiences that have come to fruition in the past few years have, at a minimum, come across my desk. And when they do, I try my very best to look at the concept from a student's perspective.

Faculty often come to me with grand ideas to improve their courses. In my consultations, we typically go over (1) what problem is trying to be solved, (2) what outcome is desirable, and (3) how students will adapt to the idea. I must say MCW teaching faculty are often quick to solve the first two of these problems and, sometimes, just looking for an edge in implementation. But I get *a lot* of questions about the possible student attitudes and approaches. "Will they hate this?" "Is it going to rate low in course evaluations?" Our faculty want to keep the curriculum fresh and, while they are often inspired by student feedback, one can never be guaranteed that a new idea will be received well.

Crafting experiences to ensure they'll be useful to students and well received

A big part of my job is to ensure students have the freedom and autonomy to accomplish their educational goals and to make sure that the structure of information is not prohibiting them in that quest. Instructions need to be clear. Goals ought to be explicit. In practice, this means we will put the instructions and outcomes in the Learning Management System right next to where students can submit their work. It also means a syllabus and gradebook are in agreement. It

means that if we ask students to try out some new technology, they have documentation nearby to ensure the tech is not an impediment.

Outside of the instructional parameters, are we ensuring that the course goals are connecting to the student ambitions? Medical students are smart enough to be proficient at almost anything provided they have a destination they can set their sights on. So, when we add content, we must ask, what is there for students to gain? Students have plenty of long-term goals in hand, so what is it about this experience that is special enough to give them a new short-term goal? Does the short-term goal connect to a mid-term goal (acing the unit exam)? If so, let's make that connection clear, in hopes of removing any doubt for the student and encouraging that they try the new experience out with high effort.

While I have yet to pass any of the unit exams that we distribute to students at MCW after years of being involved with some of these courses, I still log-in to Exemplify and try them out. While I don't fret about the science failing to take hold in my brain, I can at least try my hardest to catch any design or technical flaws in the exam set-up. And what better way to empathize with our learners than to feel the burn of a humiliatingly low test score?

I earned my Master's in Library and Information Sciences in the last decade and, while library school is drastically different from medical school, there are overlaps in how the information explosion affects the modern student learning process. Being a student in the 21st Century with access to near-unlimited information means you have all the tools to solve the problems put in front of you, but it also requires greater efficiency and rationalization in utilizing them. For medical students, this dilemma is present in both pre-clinical coursework and once in the clinic. Yes, you can access your smartphone to remind you of that one drug, but looking for it on naturalnews.com is going to end up in a worse result than if you were back in the 1980s flicking through a library card catalog blindfolded. (Millennials will get this reference but Gen-Z, not so much).

Although the tools I used to finish my graduate work differ in name from what MCW students use, it is still that blend of physical space and digital access that create so much of the right workflow. Instructional experiences always need to consider what places the learners could be in: virtual, physical, as well as the students' headspace. We have excellent regional campuses, so this can mean that trying a new educational approach can require three (or more) implementation plans.

The more I get to learn about our students, the more I can implement tools to help them thrive. Feedback loops from students are critical for cleaning up my own blind spots and biases. I may know the pain of having high-stakes exams conflicting with personal life, but I use that raw experience to ensure we open more pathways for student success—not doubling down on the cognitive overload and using past tradition or old educational experiences as an excuse for poor design.

The time is quickly arriving where I won't be able to pass for a student's older sibling. Being twenty years older than an incoming student is *not* the same as ten years. I recognize that I will need to lean even more on adult learning theory as well as ensuring I can *hear* the student voice more than I did in my nascent days of instructional design.

But I like to think that being a lifelong learner will help in this regard. Keeping up with new instructional methodologies via professional communities and online coursework is a fun and interesting part of the job that imparts wisdom but, more importantly, keeps me focused on what it means to be a student. And when I cannot put that student hat on anymore, I'll know its time to move on.

In the meantime, I will be behind the scenes at MCW, feverishly working on getting things right for our students...and trying to get a Satisfactory grade on any of the exams.

Johnathon Neist, MLIS, is an Instructional Designer in the Office of Educational Improvement at MCW.