Reflection:

Learning, Assessment, and Needs Assessment

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Winter: ED 208B
The interesting part of taking this course while being in the Learning, Design, and Technology program is that we spent a whole summer and subsequent quarters trying to define what learning is. Maybe the impetus for defining what learning is helps us to figure out how to assess that learning. What learning is and how it can be assessed is always a subconscious thought as I think about audience definition and perform needs assessments. The needs assessment guides all other definitions.

Since this curriculum is outside of the traditional educational setting, the target user does not fit in the target mold. I could naively think that designing curriculum for a classroom could be “easy.” After all, the setting is controlled (as much as it can be, having been in a classroom), and the learners fall within a common range of ages, skills, and backgrounds. A third grade class usually has seven-, eight-, or nine-year-old boys and girls. They should be able to read, but the fluency level may vary, and their skills probably have been assessed but at least can be documented. The children should be single and without children. Some of the students will have emotional, psychological, developmental, or physical challenges, but classrooms have support systems outside of the class or the implementer can be trained.

Now, let’s contrast this scenario with a public, voluntary setting in a local community. A member parent of the Boys and Girls Club can be anywhere between the ages of 17- 50 or older. They can be single or part of a couple, or even be a guardian raising the child. The parent’s educational level may range from high school to college or professional school, but our community has many
parents that are immigrants from a country where high school is not a requirement. Since the population is mixed native and immigrant, there is a large language challenge coupled with the educational dynamic. These students might also have emotional, psychological, developmental, or physical challenges, but we have no methods for pre-assessment, and we certainly lack the training and support. (This could be a disaster! Can I just hope that everybody that shows up for the pilot who can’t speak English has somebody with them? My Spanish is quite rusty.)

So the question that lingers with me is how to do comprehensive needs assessment in a nontraditional setting with nontraditional learners? The setting that we chose is one that is quite arbitrary. It could have been a church, a bank, or even somebody’s house in a neighborhood. The Boys and Girls Club just gives us access to a population who might have an educational need. The setting does not tell us a whole lot about the learner except where they live and the culture surrounding it, and it only highlights certain commonalities, one of them being a guardian or a parent. That is information, but it isn’t the level of detail that gives me comfort. A few of the classes I have taken talk a little bit about the user experience, but that focuses on the interaction with the product or treatment. We talked about KWL, and we used that to guide us, but we don’t know what they know. We learned about doing task analyses, and research on the skill set or standards. I can do all of that, but I think I really need to understand the user experience on a daily basis so that I can create something that will teach how to avoid difficult situations or maneuver through them.
We went through a list of the necessities for living and where money is spent to create our goals and outline, yet I feel like I’m writing based on a looking glass. Personally, I have financial challenges, and I’m still a little young in the tooth on big purchases. I haven’t worked very long, I have lots of educational debt, and I shop for apartments rather than houses. (I do think that if I was rich, I wouldn’t have to worry, but it remains to be seen what my management skills truly are.) I have done research to buy a car, but I didn’t actually pay for it. (Thanks, Dad.) I do have to deal with health, renter’s and car insurance, though.

My apologies for the tangent, but I do feel like I’m creating from a looking glass. I don’t know how easy it is to go get a bank account as a non-citizen, and my only budget responsibility is to me. I’m not sure that the plans we adapt from experts are actually doable and useful. They are experts, but I haven’t done most of them yet. Should the developer test the curriculum activities when some of the goals are to teach behavioral and attitudinal changes? I realize that this was a process to take me through the stages. How much time do developers have to do anthropological research? For instance, can I follow a parent around through daily activities, and how long should I do that to get a full picture? Is that proper or ineffective? How do I pick learners representative of the group? What do developers do?

Most of my design coursework tells me to design for eighty percent of the population, and let the other twenty percent figure it out. I don’t know if we have an eighty percent majority for the class since we don’t dictate who is eligible or who can come. We did not decide to split the classes into Spanish and English
speakers, and we did not decide on any type of prescreening or adaptive lessons. Given more time, I think I might suggest that because as much as we tried to make the activities flexible, the burden still lies on the implementer or a translator before its gets used in bilingual communities. Are we dropping the ball and shirking the load to let them worry about it? Now that we are deep into development, it is easier to keep going the way that we chose, but if I had to do this again…I would want more needs assessment time. I am confident in what the curriculum will look like, but it could be perfect for other people. Is there a perfect solution? Where do I get the balance of comfort and confidence?