

How Instructional Designers Can Overcome Faculty Resistance

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As an instructional technologist at the University of Washington's School of Social Work, Tom Baer is no stranger to working with faculty who struggle to understand the role of instructional designers. It's not unusual for him to encounter instructors reluctant to give up their go-to lecture or PowerPoint Presentation, unsure of online learning's effectiveness or resistant to a change in teaching style.

Enrollment in online courses at colleges and universities [continues to grow](#), along with the need for IDs who help design curriculum and implement digital tools. IDs work closely with faculty members and subject experts to create measurable learning objectives, produce course content and craft engaging activities. But during the process, faculty may give IDs the cold shoulder for fear of having to give up control or appearing less knowledgeable in front of their students.

Getting Faculty on Board

As any seasoned ID knows, faculty buy-in is essential to doing an effective job. Since both faculty and designer rely on one another, it's important to begin the instructional design process with a mutually respectful relationship.

"Faculty are the experts, and it's my job to see how we can achieve the goal of better student performance together," explains Colin J. Hahn, senior instructional designer with Leadership Ecademy.

Guiding faculty through the process one step at a time helps to build a strong relationship. As a former high school English teacher, Baer would help students struggling with essays concentrate on a few areas where they could improve significantly, rather than returning a paper full of red marks. He sees parallels with his current work.

"It's the same thing with professors in higher education," he says. "You don't want to overwhelm them by trying to change everything at once." Instead, Baer suggests prioritizing areas where IDs can make the most improvement before moving on to the next task.

Tackling the Source of Faculty Resistance

According to [a recent study](#) from Intentional Futures, faculty resistance to change is the number one barrier to success that IDs face.

"Higher education tends to be very protective about what happens in the classroom—the domain of the professor," Hahn says. "Professors are protective of their classroom as their space, and trust issues can stem from concerns about academic freedom, or anxiety towards new ways of teaching," he explains.

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Tom Baer, instructional technologist at the University of Washington

It's important for IDs to provide the right type of support to help faculty feel confident in the instructional design process. IDs can help faculty by breaking learning topics into concrete, teachable skills, providing [facts and research](#) about learning methodologies, or enlisting early adopters to help faculty struggling to use a new technology or

learning platform.

Improving Faculty Relationships

A strong faculty-ID relationship boils down to trust. If faculty feel an ID is telling them how to teach a class or is simply pushing their methodologies, the relationship will be strained.

“The most important thing I can establish in an instructional design role is that the other person believes I am committed to their success,” Hahn affirms.

In addition to trust, a [key part of an ID's job](#) is to make sure faculty are comfortable with the chosen technology tool and to vet any new type of learning or teaching.

Reformatting a PowerPoint Presentation or showing examples of restructured courses are useful ways to help faculty visualize the end product. It's also important for IDs to keep in mind that what is obvious to them might not be as clear to faculty. Baer describes a time when he suggested using scenarios to make a course about union contracts more interactive. It may have sounded like a simple suggestion, he recalls, but for the subject matter expert with whom he was working it was a completely new perspective.

The Road Ahead

Continuing support is an often-overlooked part of the instructional design process.

“Follow-up work needs to happen in any sort of change management endeavor—and that is just as true with classroom instructional experience,” Hahn says.

Administration plays a crucial role when it comes to planning for support and follow-through. Faculty teaching a new course for the first time will need time to practice, receive feedback and ask questions in order for a course to be successful.

“People think of instructional design as a set of instructional skills, but really that's just a small part of it,” Hahn says. “Building a strong relationship with faculty, and having a follow-up process in place is just as important.”