# Book Review: The Accidental Instructional Designer:
## Learning Design for the Digital Age by Cammy Bean (2014)

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Master's programs in Library and Information Studies are notorious for offering less than robust options in terms of library instruction education. Considering that, it is not likely the average librarian took a class on online instructional design in library school. Yet librarians increasingly find themselves doubling as instructional designers, or at least creating online instructional content. In a 2013 article in *College and Research Libraries*, Russell Hall found that 87% academic library directors and department heads deemed instruction skills important for librarians, and 72% thought these skills were important in new hires (p. 28). However, as Brecher and Klipfel (among others) have reported, the importance of instruction is not yet reflected in library school curricula (p. 44). If Master's programs don't provide enough coursework on face-to-face instruction, they certainly don't address the full range of online instructional design duties a librarian might have. With this background in mind, Cammy Bean's *The Accidental Instructional Designer* will resonate with many librarians who design online instructional content with little or no formal training. Though Bean's context as a corporate instructional designer at the e-learning company Kineo may not be directly analogous to online instruction in a library, good e-learning is good e-learning, regardless of content. Whether accidental instructional designers or not, librarians can learn from Bean's experience and apply strategies and tools from the book to their own work.

The book contains twelve chapters, each of which delve into ways of making intentional choices about e-learning design, from visual elements to storytelling. Bean gives an overview of each topic and illustrates her points with examples and scenarios. She takes an informal, almost conversational, approach to the material that draws heavily on her personal experience; readers who want to engage fully with teaching and learning theory should look elsewhere. Chapter 11 does list some of the most well-known learning theories, such as scaffolding, and the zone of proximal development, but the descriptions are general, and readers must look beyond this book for in-depth information (p. 177). In addition to touching upon some of the major theorists and theories, Bean has peppered the book with suggestions for how to learn more, including blogs, companies and conferences which readers can investigate for further information. As Bean herself says, the book is not meant to be comprehensive. Rather, she aims to turn "happy accidents" into intentional practitioners of e-learning design.

Since the book is aimed at busy professionals, readers will find practical tips throughout. These range from familiar reminders, such as using the active voice and avoiding jargon when writing (p. 126), to less familiar strategies, such as "treat your learners like grown-ups" by building free choice into e-

learning, or not telling the user they must click "next" on every screen (p. 127). Bean addresses the reader directly throughout, which makes the book seem welcoming and human. While she mainly highlights her successes as an instructional designer, she also tells the reader about times when she has failed. By doing so, Bean empowers readers to embrace failure as part of the process of learning to be a better, intentional instructional designer.

What is an "intentional" designer? To start, intentional designers don't design learning that is "seductive and distracting" rather than substantive (p. 107). As the book outlines, it's easy to fall into the trap of "clicky-clicky bling bling": e-learning objects that look flashy, but lack thought or context. An example of this might be a multiple-choice quiz dressed up as a nine-hole golf game (p.105). The game doesn't connect with the learner's job or coursework, and likely only serves to disguise a poorly-designed multiple choice quiz. Instead of adding flashy elements for their own sake, Bean urges an intentional approach, connecting the form and design of the e-learning directly to the learning outcomes. An example of well-contextualized learning from the library world is the tutorial building tool "Guide on the Side" from the University of Arizona Libraries. Since it integrates quizzes into the actual environment where the student is learning (the catalog, a database), it helps students place their learning within the larger structure of the library.

Bean's ideal instructional designer emphasizes delivering content effectively. Instead of just dropping information into a module, which often leads to dull and text-heavy e-learning, she encourages designers to pare down information to the bare minimum, and humanize content through the use of stories (p. 134). As with visual design, stories should support the material, and help learners connect with it. An irrelevant story might be just as distracting as a superfluous animation, so designers should choose wisely. Connecting the learning to the learner's context helps create transferrable skills. In the nine-hole golf example above, the content is completely separate from the learner's environment. The more the content relates to the learner's context, the more likely the learner will be able to remember and use what she has learned. In other words, to teach students how to navigate the library, I might tell the story of how I was confused by call numbers as a first-year student. Stories can help frame the content in a way that makes it relatable, and allow the learner to transfer the learning into practice.

I have found this book helpful in my own work as a designer of online learning materials for my library. The most useful section of the book for framing my own job is Chapter 4,

in which Bean discusses "design models" for e-learning. Design models are like flexible templates for e-learning; they give the designer a basic framework for thinking about how she wants to deliver content without dictating content. Learning needs and outcomes determine what design model is appropriate, so it's important to determine outcomes first. For example, if I want students to know that interlibrary loan exists, and some basics of how to use the service, I don't need an immersive, branching module where patrons explore multiple paths and scenarios. Instead, a short, infomercial-style video will meet the intended outcomes much better. Another design model which I would like to try is the "guided story," which uses the experiences of a character to add context to the learning (p. 72). I also liked the "investigate and decide" model, which gives the learner a goal, a series of decisions to reach the goal, and supporting material to make informed choices (p. 80). I could see this model being an effective framework for teaching source evaluation or citations. It was useful for me to refine my thinking about what output fits which instructional context, and begin creating my own e-learning models.

The principles of good instructional design don't just apply in the corporate context for which Bean writes. Librarians might find that they share many of the same concerns Bean outlines: catching and holding the learner's attention amidst a sea of distractions, helping the learner perform their job, or do a task more effectively, and making e-learning that sticks. While the subject of a librarian's e-learning module will be very different, many of the tools, theories and guidelines in the book can help librarians design intentionally. Librarians who have a heavy e-learning workload, or who design modules for others might find Bean's design models useful as a starting point, as they can be adapted to fit various contexts. Librarians can also learn from what the corporate world does well, such as creating cohesive branding across lessons in order to create greater name recognition among students who may be unfamiliar with the library.

*The Accidental Instructional Designer* will be of most interest to those new to online instructional design, or who are acclimating themselves to the modern e-learning landscape. Though some content also applies to face-to-face settings, it will be most relevant for librarians working with online learning. It's a short and easy read (fewer than 200 pages), so those who are interested should read the entire book. For those with less time, Chapter 1 and Chapter 10 focus most heavily on the corporate sector, and can be easily skipped. My only caveat is that Bean does not discuss accessibility for e-learning, an important topic that forms a large part of my instructional technology responsibilities. However, the book is not a complete guide to designing online instruction, so those who are new to the topic may want to use the book as a jumping-off point to explore the field further, and can invest any amount of time following-up on Bean's resources and suggested reading.

## References

Brecher, D., & Klipfel, K. M. (2014). Education training for instruction librarians: A shared perspective. *Communications in Information Literacy, 8*(1), 43-49.

Hall, R. A. (2013). Beyond the job ad: Employers and library instruction. *College & Research Libraries, 74*(1), 24-38.

lenges. I still needed to know if students were meeting learning outcomes and taking away something of substance—were they "getting it?" I refined my improvisational approach by including more visible goals and concepts at the outset of the sessions, adding brief in-class feedback and assessment techniques, and providing a structure for final student-led summary. During sessions, I more intentionally drew upon effective "ready-mades," such as activities, techniques, and handouts. All of this gave me solid information that my new approach to teaching was making a difference in what students were learning, in addition to the fact I felt better about my teaching and preparation.

Finally, for Step 8, "Get Your Ideas Into the World," I have shared my ideas about using an improv-based approach to teaching with colleagues inside and outside the library, and in conference presentations and workshops, along with journal articles and interviews. In fact, you are participating in Step 8 right now by reading this article!

And remember: this process wasn't "creative" because it involved improv; creativity is a whole process. It can involve not just so-called creative arts (like improv) but also technology, education anthropology, etc, along with all the other tasks and ways of thinking described earlier. Anyone can be creative in their teaching.

## Conclusion

Good teachers are creative teachers. Creative teaching is not simply a matter of "having fun" in class or bringing in the latest game, gadget, or social media. It is about seeing and thinking differently. It is about identifying problems, making connections, and improvising to improve teaching. Most importantly, it's about student learning. And one final note: Sometimes, your creativity, including in teaching, may be met with suspicion or derision by colleagues or others entrenched in more conventional thinking and practice, or who assume they have things figured out already. Have confidence and be willing to take the risk; it will be worth it to you and your students.

## References

For references, see here http://bit.ly/413_Stam