

Preface

“The first was never to accept anything for true which I did not clearly know to be such; that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitancy and prejudice, and to comprise nothing more in my judgement than what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly as to exclude all ground of doubt.”

Excerpt from *Discours sur la méthode* by René Descartes

I first read the *Discours sur la méthode* when I was a community college student and I have to admit that, at the time, it did not have much of an effect. But over time, in the way a constant drip can erode even the hardest granite, it came to permeate my thinking. What Descartes said, in just a few words, seems to me to be the core of the scientific method, as it is based on the surest of foundations, the personal observation of phenomena. To my mind, Descartes lays the responsibility of seeing with our own eyes and hearing with our own ears, each and every one of us. To doubt is a reflex, the lack of which would imperil any scientific pursuit. Of course this does not mean that one should automatically reject what someone is telling us. Certainly not. But it does not mean we should accept it at face value either. A state of wariness is, I believe, permanently

warranted, the duty to question one's understanding of a phenomenon, as well as that of others, is a ceaseless task.

Now that I have brazenly attempted to associate myself with one of science's brightest lights, please allow me to explain how this modest manuscript has the least to do with the monumental work of our august predecessor. When I began the research study on developing an appropriate dual-mode design model documented in the present log, I thought I had the world by the tail. I had over 12 years' experience in the field of instructional design in higher education, plus excellent instruction during my studies toward a Master's degree, as well as all the resources I thought I needed to complete the project at hand. I really could not see any difficulty, not a cloud on my horizon. It was thus, head-first and with a mind full of misplaced certitude, I undertook this journey of designing courses, first for distance education and subsequently for online learning.

It was not long before I started to see that all was not right with my world. Actually applying the instructional design theories I had diligently learned in graduate school when I began working with subject matter experts (SMEs) was harder than I could have imagined. In the field, I was confronted with design challenges of the like I had never before experienced. I found myself asking "What (on earth) can I base this or that design-related decision on?" The illustrious ADDIE approach, upon which is based a huge segment of design literature (Gustafson & Branch, 1997) was, surprisingly, of little or no use to me. I felt like I had just landed on a new planet without a map and without knowing the language of the inhabitants. Man, what a surprise! It was precisely then that Descartes' famous words started ringing in my ears and it seemed that I truly understood them for the first time: "*de ne recevoir jamais aucune chose pour vraie que je ne la connusse évidemment être telle*" (never to accept anything for true which I did not clearly know to be such).

Another author, more of a contemporary, came to mind to console me: Donald Schön. In a passage from his celebrated book *Educating the Reflexive Practitioner* quoted below, "The Crisis of Confidence in Professional Knowledge," he uses the analogy of solid versus swampy ground, that is, ground where we feel confident in what is under our feet in contrast to ground where we feel decidedly queasy.

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern. The practitioner must choose. Shall he remain on the high ground where he can solve relatively unimportant problems according to the prevailing standards of rigor, or shall he descend to the swamp of important problems and nonrigorous inquiry?

He is, of course, alluding to the comfort of our carefully-nursed certitudes and well-ensconced traditions, as opposed to the swamp where problems are hard to define but oh so important for society. Then, he asks the million-dollar question: should a practitioner remain on the safe “high ground” or dare to venture below? That choice really hit me. During my research study, I felt rather lonely in the swamp. In a field of practice where there was little lighting and few guideposts, the idea of this book began to come together. Without the time needed for a thorough job, I felt I should at least attempt to chart a course for others to follow, without being overly self-critical of my accuracy in drawing the map. I consoled myself by thinking that, for anyone starting out on a journey, a rough map is better than no map at all.

Contrary to my preconceptions, there was not much in the literature to guide me in developing an appropriate design model for faculty moving from an on-campus teaching paradigm to an online learning paradigm. Anne-Marie Armstrong’s thoroughly enjoyable edited collection about the experiences of designers in the corporate world wasn’t yet available when I started this project. So that is how this book got started, as a real-life response to a problem I was experiencing. In essence, it is composed of notes I took while I working with subject matter experts who were intent on offering their courses at a distance and/or online.

Finally, I wish to recognize Valerie Clifford (2004) for an inspiring book review in which she addresses the question “Why should we keep a logbook?” She explains the necessity of documenting our life experiences

as a guide to others: “When we tell stories, we express ourselves and learn from discussing our experience with others who may raise alternative views, suggest imaginative possibilities, and ask stimulating questions” (p. 63).

It is my sincere hope that my story as an ID (instructional designer) coming to terms with new and difficult problems and seeking solutions for them through a process of reflection, induction and deduction will be useful to other instructional designers, educational developers, faculty and administrators who are involved in distance education and online learning.

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