

My Approach and a Non-IT Approach
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Reflecting on my ITMA Experiences

The ITMA program has allowed me to fulfill a dream that began during my high school years in the late 1990s. Although I had an excellent high school record and plenty of potential as a college student, I elected not to go off to college after I graduated. For whatever reason, the timing just did not seem quite right. It was only in 2005 that I decided to pursue higher education. Having completed my undergraduate studies at Colorado Tech in 2007, an excellent employment opportunity arose for a position of Instructional Designer at my current employer. I had no prior experience in the field, but my undergraduate studies in business and information technology, along with my work experience, landed me the position. I quickly fell in love with the discipline of instructional design and found myself wanting to learn and grow in that direction – which led me to seek out opportunities for graduate studies in the field. After researching a number of programs, I found that Virginia Tech – the school of my choice for years – offered the ITMA program, completely online, and after reviewing the program, I felt it was the perfect fit for me. Virginia Tech is an acclaimed school across the region and in the country and I considered it an honor to become part of the community. Even though I became a “virtual Hokie,” I felt (and continue to feel) like a part of the school and will be proud to be a VT alumnus.

Since my undergraduate studies at Colorado Technical University (CTU) were also completely online, I had already developed the self-discipline and independence required of online students. At CTU, every class required a significant amount of interaction between the instructors and other students, in the form of group projects, discussion forums, and online chats. Although ITMA provided a few similar opportunities, it brought about additional personal growth as it required even more self-discipline and independence, with relatively limited interactions with others over the course of the program. While I feel that my undergraduate experiences lay the foundation for my success in this area, I feel the ITMA program has taught me what it means to be a responsible learner, holding myself accountable for my own learning and development. As I am the only remote member of my professional team (the rest of my department is located in Chicago), I feel that the focus and discipline required for success in the ITMA program have also transferred to my professional practice and have made me stronger in my current role and in potential future work situations involving remote work.

ITMA has taught me a great deal about online learning. By its very nature as an online program, it has shown me additional approaches to online learning beyond those that I saw in my online undergraduate studies. When taking the online approaches of both CTU and ITMA into consideration, I can see there are numerous ways to form a virtual classroom, including the guided discovery approach employed by ITMA, the interactive lectures and multimedia content used at CTU, and the varying levels and weight of group work, discussions, and peer reviews used by both schools. Furthermore, the content of the ITMA program provided insights into how these approaches can be used to best meet the needs of the audience, the subject matter, and the technology available for delivering and receiving the instructional experience.

Prior to ITMA, I had not considered the feasibility or value of allowing students to resubmit assignments. I found that this helped offset the limited interactivity between students and instructors because it allowed assignment feedback to serve as a form of asynchronous conversation. Perhaps more importantly, I found this to place more emphasis on my learning outcomes than on scores. This type of approach gives students the freedom to learn from their mistakes and improve upon them without having to worry about lower scores than they would like. As simple as the concept seems now that I have gone through the ITMA program, this has taught me that I can employ a similar approach with my learners in my professional setting. It is okay for my learners to make mistakes in the classroom or in the online instructional situation – these are the opportunities that help make the learners stronger and more productive in the end.

When I first became an Instructional Designer at my organization, the position had less to do with true instructional design than process documentation and maintenance of an intranet site used by the call centers. A couple of years later, when my position was made an official part of the corporate training organization, the focus shifted toward the design and development of instruction. While my on-the-job experience helped me with many of the skills needed for success in this position, the ITMA program has provided me with the knowledge and skills necessary to be a true instructional designer. The instructional design course helped me better understand all the components of the design process and how it should guide the entire development. Multimedia Authoring and the Project & Report courses helped me apply these concepts not only in the form of creating the design, but using the design as the roadmap for developing finished instructional products. Through the Learning Theories course I found myself intrigued with how people learn and how I can use what we know about this to influence my design and development work. I even enhanced my technical skills by learning how to script, plan, shoot, edit, and implement digital video, as well as how to create multimedia learning programs using ActionScript 3.0. I've learned about key principles of graphic and multimedia design – concepts which I have applied in my coursework and on the job.

Am I an Instructional Technologist?

I answer this question with a resounding “Yes!” There are a number of reasons why I make this claim. First, my role is to help people learn. I do this by applying a systematic approach to teaching and learning – one in which I analyze the needs and the learners and design, develop, implement, and evaluate the instruction. Second, I attempt to solve instructional problems through a variety of means, including analyzing the problem and related contexts, researching potential solutions, and applying theories throughout the process. Third, I employ a variety of tools in my approach to teaching and learning. These tools include instructional systems design and other processes; knowledge about ways people learn; and principles of design and utilization. These tools also include things such as computers, audio, video, Internet technologies, and multimedia. Fourth, I am an instructional technologist because I begin with the end in mind, ensuring I have a specific destination in mind, a clear roadmap of how to get there, and a means of determining when I've arrived and how well the journey went. Fifth, I am an instructional technologist because I attempt to see things from the perspective of my learners.

I am thoroughly pleased with my experiences in the ITMA program. It has been an incredible journey of growth and inspiration. It is truly hard to believe I'm nearing the end of the program so quickly. This has been a rewarding experience personally, academically, and professionally. I am proud to be an ITMA graduate and proud to be a Hokie!