LEARNER DESIGN FOR BEHAVIOR CHANGE

In Stimulearning's Summerclass on Tuesday July 10th, we will introduce Julie Dirksen: a learning strategy consultant, learning designer and author of 'Design for how people learn, Second Edition'. In her workshop, she will dive deeper into Instructional Design for Behavior Change. This is the perfect opportunity for an interview with Julie Dirksen on her approach to Instructional Design en lessons learned for those who are new to the field.

EXPLICATING THE TACIT SKILLS OF THE DESIGNER

You started your presentation at Learning Technologies 2014 with something that was very recognizable to me: the field of Instructional Design has a tendency to be very relied on the different process steps to designing learning experiences, but when it comes to the actual design, there aren't many tools and strategies on how to do so. Why is that?

We as a field have kind of felt our way into designing learning experiences. For example, I was talking to some experts and I asked them: you all do an analysis prior to your design, but when do you know when to stop? And they said: you just 'kinda know' when it's a good time to stop…. But when are you done designing a website? When are you done with coaching your employees? When do you have a good design solution? These are things that experts learn through pattern recognition. They've seen so many examples and they start to recognize a pattern to determine when they've reached a good stopping point of something. The issue is that we don't have enough guidelines or tactics for learning design for tacit topics, that makes it difficult for new people entering our field. We need to bring these tacit skills back into the explicit place if you want to be able to actually improve them.

What does this imply for those who are new in the field of learner design?

What that should mean, logically, in terms of a learning design experience for a new person is that that person is going to need to see a lot of examples too before 'they get it'. If you have a topic where somebody says to you: you just know it when you're done, then that means that that's something you learn through tacit experience and that means that your learning experience has to have multiple examples in it. So one case study will not be enough, you have to offer many case studies to that person. I don't think that anyone can be a good instructional designer without any practice. But hopefully if we can distil out better guidelines and support their learning process.

GUIDELINES TO LEARNER DESIGN

What lessons can be drawn from these guidelines?

I've been looking at what do I feel like is solid advice around those kinds of things: so if I find out this in the analysis, I know they'll need this kind of learning experience. Those kind of things are never written down as a guideline before and that's what I've been trying to do: explicate what experienced people know and turn that into guidelines that new people can use to design instruction and better learning experiences. This is important because I don't think new instructional designers or

subject matter experts (SME's) are getting enough of these guidelines. For example, I have a simple rule of recognizing whether or not you're dealing with a skill. Just ask the question: 'is it reasonable to think that people can be proficient without practice?' 'Could somebody do this right without any practice?' So if it's a basic procedure, then probably 'yes'. But if it's hitting a golf ball, or doing a complex cognitive skill, then probably 'no'. As an Instructional Designer, I know that practicing a skill has to be a part of the learning experience and I'll have to build practice in it.

CO-DESIGN FOR BEHAVIOR CHANGE

When we are designing for a company, we are always co-designing with the company. That means that we invite all the stakeholders around the table such as subject matters experts, L&D, team leaders, etc. However, the learners themselves are not often involved. Whenever I ask about the learners, I often get a strange look because 'we are still in the designing phase, aren't we'? Do you see that often?

Absolutely. Too many learning experiences are designed, without involvement of the users. I often teach 'User experience for learning' about the process of designing learning experiences. Generally the designing starts with the stakeholders saying that they want training. Then the Instructional Designer creates a learning experience for the SME's, and they either approve or disapprove. When it's approved, it goes back to the stakeholders and that's it. However, the person who's not in the flow chart anywhere is the user. One of the questions I have been thinking about a lot lately is 'How do we fix that?' Co-design with users, is in my opinion not a practical solution in a lot of projects, but I think it's very useful. It is especially an interesting possibility in facilitating behavioral change. There are many ways to involve the learners in the designing process.

What have you found to be valuable ways to involve learners in the design process?
One of the ways to involve the learners is user testing. You have an idea or a prototype and you test it to see the reactions of the users. As a designer, you often have a tunnel vision where you do not see the problems of the user anymore. User testing can allow you to see a lot of issues in the beginning phases of design to better adapt the design to the needs of the users. Another way to involve learners is simply by talking to them before designing.

My personal favorite is job shadowing. You can do interviews, surveys, focus groups, etc. but what works best for me is following some users around and asking them some questions while they are doing their job. It is the most time efficient and provides the best results because you actually see the environment in which they operate. In just one day, you can learn more by job shadowing than you can from surveys and other kinds of user analysis.

INCREASING THE VALUE OF THE LEARNING DESIGNER

We do not have a lot of 'instructional designers' in Belgium. The term is not very well known in companies. Do you think that companies need a learning designer in their team?
That's an interesting problem. The answer is 'yes – they probably do'. However, the challenge that I've seen with a lot of clients is determining who should be the designer. The question is: are you better off with someone who knows the subject and teaching them how to design learning experiences or are you better off with a learning designer who has to learn the subject? I think the answer is: it depends. Sometimes one is better than the other. For highly technical subjects, it's hard to get your learning designer up to the level you need. We're always going to have a push-pull on that matter I think. I think that we are good in what we do as a learning designer but our field has trouble establishing our value within companies because we cannot provide enough feedback from what we are doing. Too often training programs are created without a measurable result and the reason is that it is hard to measure. For example: 'Oh I created sales training and sales went up, but we also introduced a new product at the same time, so maybe that's why the sales went up?' That's difficult to measure…

How can we as learning designers better establish our value within companies?
We have a hard time showing our value within organisations but I also think we are not getting enough feedback as an instructional designer on our efforts to be able to guide our practice. One thing we could be better at is doing more qualitative evaluation. This can be done by talking to some users after they completed a training or by calling them

after a few months to gather input from them. The lack of feedback is illustrative with learning management systems (LMS). I sometimes ask trainers: do you ever not change a classroom training between the first time you deliver it and the second time you deliver it? Even if it's just how you explain activities or examples that you use. The answer is 'I always change', 'I always learn from the first class what I have to do differently'. In e-learning, we upload a training to the LMS and that's it. At least in classroom training you have your feedback in class whereas in e-learning, we don't have feedback from users unless we do user testing. Most of the time we simply don't know what's working and what's not which means that the next time we design e-learning we don't have feedback that we can incorporate into the next design. These are things that are causing our field to be sort of stunted and also make it hard for us to show our value in organizations.

CREATING CHANGE THROUGH DIRECT FEEDBACK

What do you find is the key element to create behavioral change through learning activities?
To distinguish between behavioral change or motivational issues, I ask one question: 'do people know the right thing to do, but are they still not doing it?' In case it is not a knowledge gap, there is something else going on. When that's the case, a bunch of reasons can make that happen: fear, anxiety, discomfort, absent of feedback, etc. For most of the behaviors we struggle with, there is no immediate feedback. This is the same for exercise. One of the problems with exercise is that you don't see the benefits of exercising immediately. When there's a big delay between the action and the result, it is difficult for people to maintain their behavior. The likelihood of direct feedback is too small nowadays but it is a key element in behavioral change.

DESIGN FOR HOW PEOPLE LEARN

What do you think about this quote 'If you feel the urgency to know something, you will invest the energy required to learn it?' Is creating a sense of urgency the key to behavioral change?

Immediacy is part of it. If you have an immediate use for knowledge, it's not hard for allocate attention to it. So the question is when can someone use the knowledge, because that's the reward for learning: getting to apply it in practice. You are discounting the value of learning when you know you can only use your knowledge in about six months for example, making it harder to allocate attention to something. I have to force myself to pay attention to it because I can't use it right away. That means that in your learning experience you should try to let people use their knowledge immediately.

How do you deal with people who do not want to learn at the moment they are in your classroom?
Never forget starting with why you teach them something. Are you forcing people to learn things they don't need? Then they are right that they don't want to sit in your class. Sometimes it's legal compliance,
in which case: how do I make these learning experience as pleasant as possible for these learners? I often refer to the self-determination theory, by making sure that autonomy, sense of mastery and social belongingness are incorporated in the training.

You wrote the book "Design for how people learn, Second Edition". Why should we read it?
A lot of people become official or unofficial instructional designers because they know a lot about their topic and they teach it to someone else. I found that there wasn't a good first book to give to that kind of person. So this book is intended to be the first book for someone who needs to teach what they know to someone else, but they lack the background to do so effectively. The book is also written very conversationally with a lot of pictures and visuals, kind of underlying the why of what we do and how to do better learning. ■

L&D consultant and founder of "De Opleidingscoach", **Els Minner** provides advice and support to both organisations and individuals to increase the impact of learning activities. Through co-creation and learning networks, she inspires others to think differently about the design of learning activities.