

Revisiting the professional status of instructional design and technology and the specializations within

Gayle V. Davidson-Shivers
Michael E. Barrington
University of South Alabama

Abstract

The purpose of this presentation is to continue the dialogue on the professional status of and the specialization within the instructional design and technology (IDT) field. This presentation highlights the similarities and differences among the various classification systems, which are used for ranking occupational fields, and discusses the most appropriate system for categorizing the professional status for IDT. A second purpose is to discuss the delineation of specialization within the IDT field.

Introduction

The IDT literature is replete with information on the field's historical roots and its current state (Dempsey & Van Eck, 2002; Ely, 1998; Reiser, 2002; Saettler, 1990; Torkelson, 1998) since the inception of AECT in 1977. Although it is often discussed as a profession (Bratton, 1981; Davidson, 1985, 1987), the IDT field does not have a clearly defined professional status based on any formal classification system or a comparison of occupations, which are considered full status professions.

Depending on the type of categorization or approach used, any field or occupation varies in its ranking, or status. Hence, determining the professional status of the IDT field has remained elusive due, in part, to no single authoritative classification system appearing to fit well with it. Consequently, the fundamental question remains, is IDT a profession? If so, how is the professional status characterized? In order to determine whether IDT is a profession several considerations must be made. First and foremost is to define the term, profession.

What Do We Mean by Profession?

The term, profession, is often bandied about by practitioners and is used in common language. For instance, the descriptor *professional* can be seen on delivery vehicles, in advertisements, and self-proclaimed in proprietary literature. Often, "profession" is simply used to refer to the work that an individual does for a living. Furthermore, an individual is called a "professional" to convey a level of dignity and prestige. Additionally, the professional craftsman, such as an electrician or plumber is differentiated from the amateur by the term of profession, again, with the expectation that the professional has experience, competence, and is often licensed (Pavalko, 1971).

Even a dictionary derived definition, which states that a profession is "an occupation requiring considerable training and specialized study: *medicine, law, engineering*" (The American Heritage Dictionary, 1996, p. 1446) does not provide a clear conception of what it is to be a profession. Hence, there have been attempts within the sociology of work to define profession, but definitions have remained ambiguous at best (Freidson, 1986; Pavalko, 1971). For instance, Cogan (cited in Vollmer & Mills 1966, p. vii) offers this definition:

"A profession is a vocation whose practice is founded upon an understanding of the theoretical structure of some department of learning or science, and upon the abilities accompanying such understanding. This understanding and these abilities are applied to the vital practical affairs of man. The practices of the profession are modified by knowledge of a generalized nature and by the accumulated wisdom and experience of mankind, which serve to correct the errors of specialism. The profession, serving the vital needs of man, considers its first ethical imperative to be altruistic service to the client."

Cogan's definition focuses on expert knowledge or abilities of an occupation and those individuals associated with it. His definition embodies the concepts of the linkage of theory to practice, how empirical research informs theory and practice, the client-service focus, and the importance of the

service to society. Others would identify specialized knowledge and abilities as part of a profession (Friedson, 1994; Metzger, 1976).

Basing her definitions on a review of literature, Davidson (1985, 1987) distinguishes profession from occupation by stating that a "profession is an acknowledged vocation requiring extensive education in science or liberal arts; a calling" whereas an occupation is "considered to be a means of fillings one's time with regular employment." This definition uses the conceptualization of comparing work along a broad stratum according to Freidson (1994), which is similar to Flexner's system (as cited in Metzger).

More simply put, Abbott (1988, p. 8) defines profession as "... exclusive occupational groups applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases" and have jurisdiction over the body of specialized knowledge, skill, and work activity. Abbott's definition again refers to specialized knowledge related to work or occupation along with some governance over that knowledge, but does not necessarily set up a comparison among work or occupations. The key to Abbott's definition is the occupational group's exclusive jurisdiction over the special body of knowledge and work as a result of competition and negotiation with similar groups of challengers.

Furthermore, Abbott's definition provides a more external system orientation toward professions. Another author less concerned with individual traits, Freidson (1994, p.10), refers to a profession as "an occupation that controls its own work, organized by a special set of institutions sustained in part by a particular ideology of expertise and service."

Although there is no definitive statement as to what a profession is, examining the various definitions may facilitate a better understanding of the term and its varying use. One particular use of the definitions has been to classify work or occupations as professional or having professional status. For instance, a definition, found in the Flexner report, is based on a profession having a number of attributes and, according to Metzger (1976), formed a checklist approach to the definition of profession (p. 43). Furthermore, in order for an occupation to qualify as a profession under Flexner's approach, all attributes had to be exhibited by the occupation. In turn, Flexner's definition is considered as one of the classification systems for determining the professional status or professionalization of work or an occupation; there are other systems.

Caplow (cited in Vollmer & Mills, 1966, p. 20-21) contends that there is a definite sequence of professionalization, the process by which an occupation becomes a profession. Deduced from his case studies, each occupation that has achieved professional status has gone through a particular sequence of events. This sequence includes: establishing of a professional organization, changing of the name of the occupation by which a monopoly of work can be secured, developing a code of ethics, and concurrently both lobbying for political power to maintain the new work monopoly and establishing training or education facilities. One could question as to whether we should look at these as milestones to be addressed or merely a report of what has happened in the past, but what may not be a viable course of action in today's political-economic ecology.

What are the Models of Professions?

To understand the application of the term, profession, to any occupation, we may ask ourselves, who is it that ascribes this term?

Economic Skill-based Model

The Department of Labor's skill-based Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system (2000) is an economic model and provides one method of classification of all occupations. This system examines the nature of the work activity in combination with the skills, formal preparation, and credentials required for that work activity. This classification system is used to facilitate statistical analysis for informational, policy, and program purposes. Eight hundred occupations are included under the 23 major groupings. One major group is titled "Professional and related occupations." Under antecedent, census-based classification schemes this group was known as "professional and semiprofessional workers (1940)" and later "professional, technical, and kindred" occupations (1950). Though the SOC system does not specifically define the term "profession," its earlier manifestations stated that this group "performs advisory, administrative, or research work which is based upon the established principles of a profession or science...and requires...training equivalent to that represented by graduation for a college or university...or extensive practical experience" (p. 116). This major, heterogeneous grouping includes such diverse fields as medicine, law, the clergy, engineering, architecture, computer and math occupations, scientists of all stripes, education and training, the media, and entertainment. We now turn to the sociological literature of the study of professions to gain some understanding of how the term is applied and what constitutes a profession.

Models from Sociology

When considering the various models of professionalism developed over the last century and a half, it is critically important to keep in mind the social, political, and economic history of this period (Larson, 1990). America grew from an agrarian society to an industrial, post-industrial, and informational society. Some occupations were created and others were superseded by technology, the growth of scientific knowledge, and changes in market demand. According to Kerr (1983), there are two broad classification systems alternatively called “trait models” and “power models.”

Trait Models

Metzger (1976) noted that early in the twentieth century, Flexner evaluated the fledgling medical profession and suggested that certain characteristics or traits were required for medicine or any other occupation, to become considered a profession. Metzger suggested that Flexner's model required that an occupation must possess seven traits in order to be a profession and it formed the bases of trait-based models. Metzger further noted that Flexner had a profound effect on social scientists studying the emergence of professionalism in society. As the number of proclaimed professions grew, so did the field of sociology in the study of professions. Consensus was limited and the list of requirements grew or shrank as dictated by the analyst's perspective as new occupations were examined. Several of Flexner's criteria were elaborated or re-articulated adding the requirement for being a life-long, full-time occupation, a calling with a service orientation, with limits to entry, autonomy, employment of discretionary practices, and codes of ethics.

Millerson (1964) conducted a meta-analysis of twenty-one lists of professional traits and concluded that the essential elements of a profession were the six most frequently listed. They are as follows: (a) a profession involves a skill based on theoretical knowledge, (b) the skill requires training and education, (c) the professional must demonstrate competence by passing a test, (d) integrity is maintained by adherence to a code of conduct, (e) the service is for the public good, and (f) the profession is organized (p. 4).

Pavalko's (1971) model of the “occupation-profession continuum” is representative of contemporary trait-based models and has eight dimensions. These dimensions include: (1) theory or intellectual technique, (2) relevance to basic social values, (3) training period, (4) motivation, (5) autonomy, (6) sense of commitment, (7) sense of community, and (8) code of ethics. Pavalko, among others, argues that occupations lie somewhere along a continuum in the professionalization process and that this process is neither unilinear nor static (Parelius & Parelius, 1987). Similarly, Moore (1970), using a “scale” perspective, considers some criteria of a higher order than other. He also recognizes that none of the profession's/quasi-, near-profession's practitioners are homogeneous and their individual position lies on points of the scale perhaps differently than that of the field overall.

Additionally, Pavalko introduces the idea-“marginalization” where some occupations may hold a position toward the professional end of the continuum in several of his model's dimensions, but are on the opposite end in others. For example, Pavalko cites the limited autonomy of nurses, teachers, engineers, etc. in that they generally operate in bureaucratic institutions that limit the degree of discretion in their work.

The term marginalization is a less strident term than what some sociologists use to differentiate occupations, that is, full and semi-professions, in which semi-professions (e.g., nursing, teaching) possess several characteristics of the full professions (modeled by medicine and law), but fall short in that they are employed by bureaucracies, are often not life-long pursuits, and their knowledge base is short on complexity (Abbott, 1998).

Power or Market Models

The second type of classifications is one based on power relationships of an occupation collectively with society, individual clients, government, and other occupations. Generally, it is the characteristics and functions of the occupations within the context of the political economy that empowers occupations with professionalism. Freidson (2001), Larson (1977), and Abbott (1988) promote this power model of professionalism albeit with individual variances.

Freidson (1986, 1994, 2001) develops his model of the “third logic.” He proposes three different ways to theorize about the division of labor in society. His “first logic” is associated with the consumerism of the free market and, therefore, it is the consumer who controls the division of labor through competitive market forces. His “second logic” theorizes how management or bureaucratic institutions control the division of labor through regulation and planning. His “third logic” suggests that specialized skills and knowledge enables the profession to more effectively control the division of labor. Although none of the “logics” is found in their pure forms in

reality, they do provide a theory-based tool for analyzing an occupation. His model has several elements of occupational control and those occupations that can exercise these controls are professions.

Larson (1977) emphasizes the relationship of professions to the market and class systems. Her historical analysis focuses on how occupations in England and the U.S. organized to capture a monopoly in the market place in order to secure an elevated position and influence in society. She posits that organized bodies of specialized practitioners influence governmental bodies in order to restrict the practice in a field of knowledge and skill through legislation.

Abbott (1988) believes that the traditional, trait-based models are deficient in that they emphasize individual traits and overlook the actual professional activities of these occupations within society. Though also a power theorist, Abbott considers his theory not one of professionalization with its more sequential perspective. Abbott's *system of professions* is more specific in that it focuses on the interrelationships of occupational groups, their defining professional activities, and particularly the competition between similar groups for jurisdiction over a specialized body of knowledge and practice. The end result of this competition over time results in exclusion of all but those with the jurisdiction of the specialized skill and knowledge.

What are some of the Recognized Professions?

Changes in society, technology, and bureaucratic policies influence the status of occupations on a continuum. Pavalko (1971, p.16) explains that occupations and professions are not dichotomous concepts. It is not whether a kind of work is either an occupation or a profession, rather it is the "degree" or "extent" to which a work activity is a profession. In the final analysis, most sociologists consider the attribution of "profession" as an ideal-type (Vollmer & Mills, 1966, Freidson, 2001) with occupations undergoing the dynamic process of professionalization (and in some cases, de-professionalization).

Recognized Professions

Freidson (1986, p. 32) argues that "profession" is a changing historical concept. As an outgrowth of the medieval universities, the "learned professions" were accorded special status and included medicine, law, and the clergy (including university professors). Due to the patronage of royalty, governments, and the aristocracy, the military was also considered a profession. However, with the coming of capitalist industrialization, the emerging middle-class occupations began to vie for the privilege and status of "profession." Accountancy, engineering, nursing, school teaching, and social work (among many others) were subjected to analyses and case studies. In varying degrees and through various processes of professionalization these work activities became to be considered "occupational professions." Elliot (1972, p 14, 32) differentiated the "status" professions of medicine, law, and clergy from the newer "occupational professions" that resulted from industrialization.

Does IDT Fit within Any of the Professional Classification Systems?

Studying the sociological literature on the professions can be, at times, somewhat confusing. The different permutations used to analyze types of work, the positions of occupations in society, and the bureaucracies that regulate and perhaps protect occupations, leaves us searching for an appropriate model to analyze IDT field. Both trait- and power-model proponents look to medicine and law as ideal-typical "full" professions. By inference, then, those occupations, which do not exhibit all of the traits of these "recognized" professions, fall somewhat short of the mark. However, more contemporary views (i.e. Abbott, 1998) argue that the characteristics that in the past set law and medicine apart - "fee for service, internally enforced codes, and independent practice" - have changed with time (p.431). It is necessary to point out that even with the venerable "full" professions (i.e. medicine, law, etc.) would be considered as de-professionalizing in certain aspects of their fields based on strict trait and power models as guides. For instance, some doctors have unionized or now work for HMOs, which eliminates the dimension of autonomy for that particular profession. Therefore, the models of medicine and law may be inappropriate analogs for IDT.

Additionally, we mentioned the skill-based, economic model of occupations employed by the Department of Labor. Using terms with which our field identifies itself (ID, ISD, IT, ET) to search the Standard Occupational Classification system database, which resulted in no matches for our query. Therefore, the U.S. government's skill-based model is of little use to us in determining our professional status. We are uncertain what to make of this finding. It may be that the population of IDT professionals is so comparatively small that it fails to register on a national scale analysis.

If we to look at the common elements of the trait models, we find that IDT measures favorably in many of

the characteristics, which is based on Pavalko's model.

Theory and intellectual technique:

Theory and research form the basis of IDT practice. This is evidenced by the robust content of IDT graduate programs of study.

Relevance to social issues:

The improvement of learning, instruction, and performance represents the focus of IDT in the most socially relevant venues, education and industry.

Training period:

IDT training, to this point, has been the province of the graduate schools (Gustafson, 2001). Rigorous programs of studies at the Masters and Doctoral levels predominate. Training might also include the concept of credentialism (e.g., licensure or certification). Many recognized professions and "emerging" professions already have licensure or certification processes to recognize proven competence to work in the field. IDT has yet to establish a certification program. Movement has been made to identify competencies of IDT practitioners, but proof of attaining competence through certification has not arrived. Does IDT need certification? Two organizations, ISPI and ASTD are developing certification programs for instructional design and performance technology that will be recognized by industry and the government sector. Will there be a certification for IDT developed suitable for the educational field? Conflicting opinions exist, but the dialogue is clearly active.

Motivation:

Not self-serving, rather IDT is altruistic. An examination of the AECT code of ethics illustrates the principal concern of IDT is for the client learner. This is exemplified by Yeaman's (2004a, p. 7) comment in a recent issue of *TechTrends*, "...how a profession cares for those who it serves is what counts for its professional ethics."

Autonomy:

IDT practitioners are normally employed by bureaucracies. Therefore, autonomy is limited. However, at the work level, the level of creativity required of the IDT practitioner is autonomous by nature.

Sense of commitment:

Many enter the IDT field from other, perhaps related, occupations. However, once the one has completed the extensive educational and training program, a lifelong commitment to the field generally exists.

Sense of community:

IDT professionals can find a home in at least three international organizations, AECT, ISPI, and ASTD. These organizations serve as advocates of the field and foster research and practice. A professional community shares developed knowledge and acculturates its members through periodic conferences and publication of journals like *ETR&D* and *Tech Trends*.

Code of Ethics:

IDT has a well-developed code of ethics that recognizes that as technology changes and presents unforeseen challenges to our ethical practice, that code must be similarly dynamic (Yeaman, 2004b).

Regarding the power models, IDT has an interesting position with regard to the division of labor, the labor market place, and "social closure." It is a profession that is dependent upon other professions (teachers and trainers) to convey the products and processes of its industry (with perhaps e-learning as an exception). IDT is a profession that requires mutual respect and value of and by other professions (if considered idiosyncratic from education in general (i.e., is IDT a "specialization" within the larger profession of education?). It can neither dominate (i.e., be superordinate) as in a hierarchy nor subordinate to teaching/training in its function as consultant (internal to the education process) (Kerr, 1983). Perhaps, it may be that our professional organizations are not sufficiently powerful enough to control access to the IDT market. Furthermore, they make no attempt to regulate entry into the profession and have only tangential influence on IDT programs. Finally,

although certification has long been an issue with the IDT professionals within these organizations, it is only now that some process for certification is available; however, it is only available for a specialty of performance technology (Davidson-Shivers & Rasmussen, in press).

Are There Specializations within the IDT Field?

We are uncertain as to why either the trait or power model theorists did not include specialization as one of their criteria for professional status. As Parelius and Parelius (1987, p.203) explain “ . . . there can be little doubt that specialization is conducive to the development of expertise and that expertise is central to the professional standing of an occupation.” Although the classification systems vary, a common factor among professions is that of specialization. A survey of the most traditionally recognized professions (i.e., medicine, law, accountancy, and engineering) reveals that the differentiation of skills occurs commensurate with the increase in that field’s body of knowledge and historically as the occupations professional status strengthened (Abbott, 1988). The field of IDT is no less complex; this complexity is based on its broad application as well as the technological advances that are associated with IDT work.

Richey, Fields, and Foxon (2001) discuss the nature of IDT specialization and suggest three general areas: analysis and evaluation, e-learning, and project management. Other areas, including those of designing and developing, might also be included. For instance, Davidson (1987) suggested that designers may focus not only on different aspects of the design process (e. g, analysis, design, development, implementation—training and instruction, and evaluation), but could also specialize by a particular technology or delivery (e.g., videography, platform training, computers, etc.), or be oriented toward a particular setting (e.g., business and industry, military, health care, education, etc.).

Even though specialization has been discussed in the IDT literature over the years, once again there is no process in place for recognizing or ordering specializations within our field and no organization to monitor this process. By contrast, with recognized traditional professions, an overarching organization typically controls and monitors the maturation of the subspecialties.

Summary

There are several equally supported perspectives on what identifies professions. Even though there is disagreement as to what determines the professional status of a field, it is important to not disregard these perspectives, especially in considering the IDT field as a profession. By most trait or power/market models, the IDT field as a whole is a profession.

The degree to which an occupation is considered a profession is very subjective. Consequently, the appropriateness of ascribing a descriptor or adjective to the term “profession” to assign status seems, at this point in the discourse, less productive than an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the field in each of the characteristics of a profession and its relationship with other professions and its clients. Of more importance, IDT professionals should concentrate on refining the definition of the field, seeking consensus as to its identity and the names by which it is called, and continue strengthening the knowledge base. However, these tasks cannot be accomplished by the individual practitioners; instead they must be accomplished by the collective efforts of organizations, which represent the field (i.e., AECT, IBSTPI, ISPI, etc.). Hopefully, this paper will help trigger such efforts to begin, once again.

References

- Abbot, A. (1981). Status and status strain in the profession. *American Journal of Sociology*, 86(4), 819-835.
- Abbott, A. (1988). *The system of professions: An essay on the division of expert labor*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Abbott, A. (1998). Professionalism and the future of librarianship. *Library Trends*, 46 (3), 430-443.
- Bratton, B. (1981). Task force on ID certification: Competencies for the instructional/training development profession. *Journal of Instructional Development*, 5(1), 14-15.
- Davidson, G. V. (1985, February). Specialization within the instructional design field. Paper presented at the AECT Convention, Anaheim, CA.
- Davidson, G. V. (1987, February). Seven requirements to be a profession: What happens if the instructional design field doesn't make it? Paper presented at the AECT Convention, Atlanta, GA.
- Davidson-Shivers, G. V., & Rasmussen, K. L. (in press). *Web-based learning: Design, implementation, and evaluation*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.
- Dempsey, J. V. & Van Eck, R. (2002.) Instructional design online: Evolving expectations. In R. A. Reiser & J.

- V. Dempsey (Eds.). *Trends and issues in instructional design and technology*. (pp. 281-294). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill-Prentice Hall.
- Elliott, P. (1972). *The sociology of the professions*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Ely, D. P. (1998). Professional education in educational media and technology: A 75-year perspective. *TechTrends*, 42(1), 17-22.
- Freidson, E. (1986). *Professional powers: A study of institutionalization of formal knowledge*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Freidson, E. (1994). *Professionalism reborn: Theory, prophecy, and policy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Freidson, E. (2001). *Professionalism: The third logic*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gustafson, K. L. (2001). Undergraduate degree programs in instructional design and technology: Do they make sense? *Educational Technology*, 41 (3), 61-63.
- Kerr, S. T. (1983). Teacher specialization and growth of a bureaucratic profession. *Teachers College Record*, 84(3), 629-651.
- Larson, M. S. (1977). *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Larson, M. S. (1990). In the matter of experts and professionals, or how impossible it is to leave nothing unsaid. In R. Torstendahl, & M. Burrage (Eds.), *The formation of professions: Knowledge, state, and strategy* (pp. 24-50). London: Sage.
- Metzger, W. P. (1976). What is a profession? *College and University*, 52(1), 42-55.
- Millerson, G. (1964). *The qualifying associations*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Moore, W. E. (1970). *The professions: Roles and rules*. New York: Sage.
- Parelius, R. J., & Parelius, A. P. (1987). *The Sociology of Education* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Pavalko, R. M. (1971). *Sociology of occupations and professions*. Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock Publishers, Inc.
- Reiser, R. A. (2002). A history of instructional design and technology. In R. A. Reiser & J. V. Dempsey (Eds.). *Trends and issues in instructional design and technology*. (pp. 26-54). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill-Prentice Hall.
- Richey, R. C., Fields, D. C., & Foxon, M. (2001). *Instructional design competencies: The standards* (3rd ed.). Syracuse, NY: ERIC Clearinghouse on Information and Technology.
- Saettler, P. (1990). *The evolution of American educational technology*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.
- Torkelson, G. M. (1998). A history of AECT: From a personal perspective. *TechTrends*, 42(1), 47-50.
- The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (3rd ed.). (1996). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2000). *Report on the American workforce*. Retrieved July 7, 2004, from <http://www.bls.gov/opub/rtaw/rtawhome.htm>
- Vollmer, H. M., & Mills, D. L. (Eds.). (1966). *Professionalization*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Yeaman, A. R. J. (2004a). Professional ethics. *TechTrends*, 48(1), 7-9.
- Yeaman, A. R. J. (2004b). Professional ethics. *TechTrends*, 48(2), 11-15.