My thoughts on instructional and learning design…so far

I truly believe all parties involved in a learning activity need to feel satisfied:

- **<u>The Learner</u>** - training should not be a waste of time; training should be relevant, current, and memorable
- **<u>The Stakeholder</u>** - training should not be a waste of money or time; expected outcomes are impactful, measurable, and tied to a business need or academic requirement
- **<u>The Instructional Designer</u>** - design of the course should be tailored to promote desired outcomes; course should be innovative and engaging to help increase knowledge retention; product delivered should meet the needs of both the learner and stakeholder

It is my job as an instructional designer to <u>marry creativity with solid learning principles to drive expected outcomes</u>. My primary audience are adult learners who often struggle with competing priorities. My challenge is to <u>keep an adult learner motivated, interested, and focused</u> on the learning.

A second challenge is to influence the stakeholder appetite for innovative solutions. In the business world, time is money; any time spent away from work may be perceived as a drain on productivity.   I see it differently. If the <u>training meets or exceeds expected outcomes</u> for all parties, time "lost" may be recouped via <u>improved performance, increased motivation, or employee satisfaction</u>.

Third, in our modern technological world, the <u>training delivery mechanism should factor </u>into the overall learning design. It may not be feasible to devote several days for in-person training; virtual, asynchronous, or mobile just-in-time training might be required:

A few guiding learning principles that I believe are essential regardless of delivery method, budget, or time constraints include:

<u>Learner Motivation:</u>

Key Principle: *Students' motivation generates, directs, and sustains what they do and learn* (Ambrose, 2010, p.69)

While I need buy-in from stakeholders, I like buy-in from the target audience. Each individual approaches a learning opportunity (or directive) with different motivating factors. Regardless of the delivery method, I strive to:

- Connect course material to the training need (Ambrose, 2010, p.83) – done in the design stage via stakeholder conversations and/or focus group discussions. I would support including the target audience on content development strategy; this increases the likelihood of their buy-in and provides a sense of ownership in the course – great motivating factors
- Show the relevance to the target learner (Ambrose, 2010, p.84) – providing context to the learner upfront with the course objectives provides opportunities to relate the learning topic to real-world challenges before the course begins. Concluding the lesson with benefits to them and to the business, I circle back to the course objectives to reinforce

Practice and Feedback:

Key Principle: *Goal-directed practice coupled with targeted feedback are critical to learning* (Ambrose, 2010, p.125)

Except for mobile, just-in-time training, all delivery methods including eLearning can incorporate opportunities for the learner to practice and receive feedback. Depending on the course topic(s), I like to include:
- Sequential or concurrent practice (Ambrose, 2010, p.131) – works for technical subjects where introductory lessons are built upon via a series of activities (sequential) or for tools training where the learner gains hands-on experience (concurrent). Both methods offer opportunities for practice in a safe environment thereby increasing retention
- Feedback at the right time and of the right nature (Ambrose, 2010, p.138) – the learner should always be aware of their progress relative to the stated objectives and be afforded time to remedy knowledge gaps before the course concludes. Intermittent check-ins via polling, debriefs, or practice exams reassure the learner; final feedback should be targeted and identify additional learning opportunities (Ambrose, 2010, p.143)

Organizing Knowledge:

Key Principle: *How students organize knowledge influences how they learn and apply what they know* (Ambrose, 2010, p.44)

How knowledge is organized within the mind may be based on personal experiences to build associations that make sense. To strive for content-specific retention, and to sift through pre-conceived understanding by the learner, I like to:
- Embed the organizational structure of the course up front (Ambrose, 2010, p.60) – the context, objectives, benefits, and timeline are typically stated at the beginning of a course in a concise manner; whatever the learner "thought" they were going to learn is addressed at the start to reset (or confirm) expectations
- Highlight relationships where and when it makes sense; make connections among concepts (Ambrose, 2010, p.62) – when introducing a new topic within a series, I design the course with look backs or refreshers. At the end of the course, a comprehensive chronology of topics is used as a final debrief.   For extremely technical courses, a summary job aid may be provided

Self-Directed Learners:

Key Principle: *To become self-directed learners, students must learn to assess the demands of the task, evaluate their own knowledge and skills, plan their approach, monitor their progress, and adjust their strategies as needed* (Ambrose, 2010, p.191)

Lastly, an overall goal is to develop and allow learners opportunities to reflect and evaluate their own performance.   This is not always included or taught but is an essential skill that can have benefits beyond a classroom. I incorporate:

- <u>Self-assessment or reflection opportunities</u> (Ambrose, 2010, p.206) – this can be in the form of a final course self-assessment with leading prompts such as: what did I learn, what can I continue to improve on, where do I need additional help. I have also utilized postcards; the students write to themselves either a key take-away or something to build upon and I mail them
<u>Peer review</u> (Ambrose, 2010, p.209) – in group work, I often incorporate exercises where the learners review each other's work against a defined set of criteria and then the class discusses the outcomes. In a safe environment, experiencing and seeing how others respond to both the learning activity and peer feedback provides additional reflection opportunities

I started my musings on instructional and learning design with the tag line "…so far".   I consider myself a lifelong learner and I expect my own beliefs and musings to change quite frequently as new thoughts and research emerge in my field.   I think this is a pretty good start.

Reference: Ambrose, S. A. (2010). *How learning works: seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. John Wiley & Sons