The Art and Craft of Course Design

Tony Earl
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110 pages, illustrations, index, bibliography

If I may judge by this compact resource for actual and aspiring instructional designers, brevity could have few better servants than Tony Earl. Nor could dispatch. In fact, the cover and the first page convey exactly where *The Art and Craft of Course Design* is going and how it proposes to get there. And within 110 pages it actually arrives.

The Art and Craft of Course Design is true to the promise of its title: it discusses course design not as a technical occupation (the definitions of both "art" and "craft" use the se words). The contents also adhere to the implications of the cover slogan. The words of the slogan are "Think intuitively...Think creatively...Think logically," and Tony Earl underlines them when he opens the Foreword with "One of the greatest gifts each of us has is our intuition." He neither defends nor broadens this statement. Rather he offers it as a touchstone: if you agree or would like to agree, then you are probably a fellow toiler in the art and craft, and this book is for you. He quickly gets down to business. The business is, of course, excellent design.

Earl's definition of design is "The plan, structure, and strategy of instruction used, conceived so as to produce learning experiences that lead to pre-specified learning goals." This is an operational definition: a design is USED. But first it is CONCEIVED in a particular way. Earl provides an abundance of prompts and checks for the practitioner's mental processes through the entire task of design: thinking up, working out, installing, testing, revising, and evaluating.

The hallmark of this book is the metaphorical flair with which Earl describes those mental processes, and he defines the stages of instructional design convincingly because of the imagery that he uses to convey how a particular stage feels. Consider this criterion for a good design: "The design respects but outwits constraints." It suggests an attitude that Earl takes throughout his volume—the attitude that an instructional design acquires a personality. He does not actually say this, but the metaphor is hard to miss in such statements as "If the thought-up design in your think tank is a good one,

it will be vibrating with energy and wanting to be worked out. You will like working for it!"

Such evocative writing is rare outside classics like Sylvia Ashton Warner's *Teacher*, James Herndon's *The Way It Spozed to Be*, or Don Sawyer's *Tomorrow Is School and I'm Sick to the Heart Thinking About It*. But the impact of Earl's work is similar, and its resemblances to such professional biographies merits some reflection. Teachers are like instructional designers in that they work at what Earl calls the micro level of course design, "meso" being the curriculum level and "macro" being the policy level. And inevitably, gifted teachers demonstrate the criteria of good instruction that Tony Earl codifies as Lmax, Emax, Vmax, E´max: maximally liked, effective, valued and efficient. Master classroom teachers tend to differ from Earl in that they rarely supply names for their criteria but instead convey the quality they are seeking by contrasting it with their students' previous experience.

The diversity of learners served by instructional designers means that we cannot rely on such intuitive models but must build a theory that applies broadly. The difficulty with our efforts at doing this task is the aridity of our accounts when we write about what we do. Earl returns often to the theme that "each of us has four quadrants in our make-up...a design touches the intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical in us" (p. 85). None of these quadrants is ignored in *The Art and Craft of Course Design* because Earl ties his evocative descriptions to the idea that instructional designers create a "learning response environment." Without espousing a narrow behaviorist model of learning, he defends well the thesis that, at the micro level, stimulus and response is the language of design. And he gives clear, thoughtful examples of such concepts as the "response environment organizer."

For all its color and conciseness, Tony Earl's volume is not a quick study. His conceptual models achieve a rigorous level of consistency, yet one cannot step from one to the other as if they were stepping stones. The nature of the ideas requires one to linger over the examples, do the "think" exercises, and summon similar cases from memory. But as I did this, I saw that the volume provides all the ingredients for structuring a first-class course design critique. My advice is, "Wherever two course designers are gathered together, let them do a workshop on *The Art and Craft of Course Design*."

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