MY PERSONAL JOURNEY
Teacher to Instructional Designer to Course Creator

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By Tom Gardner   **3/24/2024**

INTRODUCTION

Picture this. You roll out of bed around 8:30 a.m., shuffle to the kitchen to grab your favorite beverage, and venture over to your home office a few steps away. While your neighbor pulls out of their garage to fight traffic, battle offensive co-workers, and embrace the cubicle life for a company that tries to make them think that they actually care about them, you're caught up in creating something meaningful, doing what you love, and giving back to society. All from the comfort of your home (or anywhere in the world, for that matter). Oh, and did I mention you're earning six figures and can retire early? Sound too good to be true? Well, read on, because I'm living proof that you can have your cake, and eat it, too.

A History Lesson

It wasn't really all that long ago that the internet, a web browser, and learning online were a thing. One only has to go back to the late 1990s when search engine start up, Google, and the now defunct Netscape Navigator web browser, were all the rage. We're talking phone dial-up connection speeds that maxed out at 56 kilobits/sec. You read that right. It took several seconds for a text page to load, from top to bottom, pushing data bytes through phone lines. Throw in an image or two and load time might take a minute or two. It's staggering when you think about how far technology has come in just a few decades.

The Road to Instructional Designer

I started my career in education in the late-1990s as a middle school science teacher in a small town in eastern Nebraska. I commanded a whopping annual salary of $20,500 per year and took on some coaching gigs that paid below minimum wage. I can honestly say it felt good to help make a difference in kids' lives, but between the stress of a first year teacher, poor pay, dealing with discipline, and a few unruly parents, I decided to exit the profession, after just one year. It felt like I was giving up. But after some soul-searching I realized that there still were some aspects of teaching I enjoyed. Because the school had no textbooks beyond the 1960s and early 70s (I kid you not) I literally was forced to build all of my science lessons from scratch (for 6th, 7th, AND 8th grade students!) I remember thinking how much I enjoyed sequencing the content, aligning it to the Nebraska school standards, and creatively weaving in hands-on activities. The actual delivery wasn't my strong suit.

Malcolm, Nebraska Source: Wikimedia

Desperately hoping that perhaps not all was lost, I stumbled onto a *Lincoln Journal Star* newspaper ad for an instructional designer position at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, home of the Cornhuskers! The job description wasn't that far off from what I did as a teacher. With nothing to lose I applied and was pleasantly surprised when I landed the instructional designer job. Maybe my bachelor's degree wasn't completely wasted.

UNLs Division of Continuing Studies welcomed me to the CLASS project in the Fall of 1999. As one of the first correspondence schools in the country–think rural and military children (they had to go to school somewhere)–the grant funded project set out to build 54 NCA-accredited, fully online high school courses. I landed on the science and math team where I got to design and develop several courses. Duties included creating outlines and course templates, storyboarding content, and building activities and assessments with rich feedback. Students were assigned virtual instructors, whom we worked with as subject matter experts (SMEs), as we designed and developed the courses. Some of the cool things we did included:

1. **Virtual Microscope**

    With learning software programs like Adobe Flash 1.0 and some home grown systems we built what was probably the country's first virtual microscope. Learners could drag various slides onto the stage, change magnification, use fine and coarse adjustments–just as if it were a real microscope. For its day, pretty cutting edge.
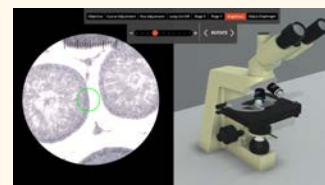
2. Wheel of Misfortune

Again, with Flash in its infancy, as part of a life skills course we developed a wheel learners could spin that randomly landed on a tragic life event that then forced students to make financial decisions, using a series of branched learning.

3. Famous Celebrities

Although our leaders tried to keep it on the down low, rumors revealed some of our learners were famous celebrities, like Britney Spears and LeAnn Rimes. It was odd when an 11-year-old non-celebrity graduate showed up to an in-person graduation ceremony. I wasn't sure what to think of that one.

Expansion of Online Learning

As is the American way, once the online high school had a full curriculum and some success, a for-profit company, CLASS.com, swooped in to monetize the courses and make a quick buck. So in 2001, I continued my instructional designer journey by getting promoted to another instructional designer position within UNL, leaving the dot com opportunity behind. Looking back, I'm glad I made that decision.

My new role had me working directly with college professors to help them get their face-to-face courses online, or at least a portion of the content. I was ecstatic to receive a raise that had me making $27,000 per year. I basically helped support faculty in putting a portion of their courses

online–think online syllabi, library ebooks and article resource links, discussion boards, and even some structured content. At the time, Blackboard.com was the licensed Learning Management System (LMS) owned by UNL. It's where all of the course content was housed, available only to enrolled students.

During this time, the majority of faculty still fell in the camp that students just don't learn online. But with a slow and steady push around the country, it was either stay relevant and embrace the online learning push, or lose enrollments and fall behind. I had my work cut out for me, but was encouraged by some early adopters who had the vision to use technology in the classroom. I found it interesting that it wasn't always the younger generation of faculty who were eager to embrace technology in the classroom.

With faculty looking to me as the "expert", I found myself holding regular brown bag sessions, to demonstrate some of the possibilities of what could be done virtually. Things like:

- Strategies to make discussion boards successful and meaningful
- Embedding recorded video and graphics to enhance text-based content
- Branding a course for a consistent learner experience

Back to School

I wasn't planning on it, but because the university offered tuition reimbursement, it was a no-brainer to take advantage of UNLs master's degree program in curriculum and instruction with an instructional technology emphasis. Picture how crazy my life was at the time: leading UNL faculty in adopting learning technology for my day job, while at the same time being a student with some of these same professors, covering many of the same topics.

I wanted to share several lessons learned while in the classroom. First, technology was clearly enjoying an accelerated run, whether for online learning, social media, ecommerce, blogging, or the many gadgets helping us to do our jobs better and faster. The iPhone was still several years out. The battle behind HTML standards was well underway. Online advertisements were a shadow of what they would later become. Clearly our reliance on tech to function as a society was a thing. It was an exciting time to see all of these changes. However, it was still a world where it was rare to see someone staring at a cell phone!

Because the industry was so new, there wasn't much academic research on whether web-based learning was truly as impactful as more traditional ways of learning. Several studies done by Richard Mayer helped support his cognitive theory of multimedia learning. Ruth Colvin Clark, a world renowned specialist in instructional design and technical training, helped guide evidence-based training methods. Regarding graphics, I still regard Edward Tufte's *Envisioning Information* (1990) as one of the most eye-opening practical pieces of literature for explaining complex material in a visual way. And a couple of statements my academic advisor made still stick with me, to this day:

- By far the most effective instruction is one-on-one, teacher to student.
- Our preferred way of learning isn't necessarily how we learn best.

By the summer of 2003, I had graduated and was having a pretty lucrative career as an instructional designer. After a couple of raises, my salary had eclipsed the $32,000 per year range. But all would soon be changing with the decision to get married and move to Arizona.

eLearning in Higher Ed, Government, and the Corporate World

When I moved to Phoenix during the summer of 2003 to be closer to family and because my fiance hated Nebraska winters, I wasn't really sure if it was a good idea to battle triple digit temps on a day-to-day basis. I also didn't have a job lined up, so I looked at what was booming. One such industry was online universities.

With my background in education, I quickly got hired by the University of Phoenix Online as an instructional designer. At the time, they were only about one-third of the way to their peak student enrollment of nearly a half a million students (both online and on campus) in 2010.

Source: Wikipedia

I earned $40,000 per year getting hired as a contractor. I soon learned their top recruiters were earning 2-3 times that amount, which told me something about their commitment to academic excellence. Still, it was a great opportunity to experience how other universities were creating curriculum. The one thing that stood out is they had more of an assembly line approach to online course building. One team focused more on high level design stuff, like course objectives, structure, and content. The team I was on actually designed and developed the content, and then a smaller supporting team did more of the creative look and feel stuff, as well as more complex interactive elements. The University of Phoenix environment felt closer to that of a corporation, so once my contract ended, I decided to dive into my first truly corporate gig at American Express.

When I got hired by Operations Training at AmEx in early 2005, I joined a 10-person "Simulation Team". I was a late-comer to the team, but was truly impressed at the level of complexity they were striving for. The entire team had one goal in mind: immerse the call center representatives into a realistic environment that simulated a real call experience.

The concept of virtual reality was still in its infancy, so we created an online experience that simulated an actual call, including:

- Voice dialog from humans, including angry and rude customers

- Response options using HTML screens that mimicked the operators actual call center screen
- Pneumonic devices that gave the first letter of each word of the representative's script, then slowly filled in the full text with time
- Gamified ratings scales and overall scores, based on the learner's performance.

Learning through simulations allowed learners to fail safely, get real-time feedback, and they weren't able to receive live calls until they passed several simulation events, with a minimum level of mastery. As technology has progressed, today's companies can opt for truly immersive virtual and augmented reality to learn complex tasks. And the technology keeps getting more realistic and affordable.

Then Came Baby and Contracting Work

Just as the simulation project ended in mid-2006, my wife and I decided to have a child. Stay at home jobs were pretty hard to come by at that time, so I opted to try my hand at a virtual, adjunct faculty position part-time at Axia College. This bought me about six months, but I felt more like a paper grader and it didn't pay very well. So I landed another instructional designer position at Countrywide Financial and worked there as a contractor during all of 2007. By the end of 2007, they had offered me a full-time instructional designer position, with an $80,000 per year salary (double my salary just three years prior), but I decided I was ready for something different. Interestingly, the company went bankrupt a few months later thanks to the housing market crash and some poor lending decisions, so I likely made a good decision. Up next: My first stint doing government work.

Government Work

A random conversation with a friend of a friend and I suddenly landed a state of Arizona government job with Arizona's version of Medicaid (called the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System–or AHCCCS). Best thing about this ID position? It was grant-funded with $2 million dollars to spend to improve healthcare training for low income families across Arizona. It's not very often you get to work in an environment where you get crazy good funding and are asked to prototype the best online health educational modules possible. But that's exactly what I did.

For the next two years, I worked with a small, creative team to do some pretty amazing things. First off, we conceptualized a telenovela approach using real actors. Learners followed the Perez family, using a series of short video vignettes interspersed among training modules. This storytelling approach allowed us to hit on the healthcare topics of diabetes diagnoses and prevention, among other chronic disease health topics. The courses were visually stunning, interactive, and the professional acting and quality of videos told a powerful story. We were able to hit on multi-generation themes, using drama and humor, to make the stories come alive. By using pre- and post-training questionnaires, we saw a 20% improvement in learners' literacy around the concepts covered. One of the training videos ended up winning the Health Education Media Makers Yearly (HEMMY) video of the year award.

Once grant-funding dried up in mid-2009, our entire team moved over to Arizona's Department of Health Services to embark on some transformational training opportunities. Covering topics from the WIC program to rabies education, our team continued the storytelling and video production concept. We hired actors to portray superheroes and even temporarily shut down a Whole Foods Market for a video shoot in the store. The greatest lessons learned with my four years in government were:

- Storytelling is THE most powerful learning approach
- Creative brainstorming prior to designing and developing leads to a superior product
- Strategic use of video can enhance a storyline and is most effective when interspersed throughout a training module, versus 100% of the training
- Video production with professional actors gives training believability, but takes a lot of time and money

The Leap to Entrepreneur

Several of my state of Arizona team members were so inspired by the work we were doing together, it was proposed that we take our talents to the next level and start our own LLC. Since I'm about as risk intolerant as anybody I know, it was really hard for me to make the commitment to dive in head first. I mean, sure, we had some amazing, award winning work samples in our portfolio. But with no real clients, there was no guarantee of success. You hear the statistics about start-ups and suddenly realize you're up against the odds.

Despite the odds, me and three other colleagues went all in. We knocked on doors, booked booths at learning conferences, and leveraged any contacts we had, especially in the healthcare

industry. We finally got our first gig–a small contract with Banner Health. And soon after we landed a contract with our former state employer at DHS. Things were looking up.

One point I failed to mention is that just prior to the decision to start a business in 2010, my personal life had taken a turn for the worse. I had gotten a divorce. And with a toddler dependent on me half of the time and plenty of financial obligations, I quickly began getting cold feet, despite some promising opportunities. I just didn't feel ready for the commitment it would take to start a new business. When one of my business partners decided to bail, I also exited the business. This left two business partners who went on to have a successful nine-year run.

One of my favorite stories is that this small company went on to produce some really successful videos and eLearning content. They became so successful that eventually eLearning Brothers made them a buyout offer. They were willing to pay two million dollars. The owners countered with a significantly higher price and the deal fell apart. And just a few months later, the LLC started unraveling. It's easy to look back and say "woulda, coulda, shoulda", but one thing to realize in the eLearning business is the market can get pretty volatile, depending on the economy and other factors.

This and That

With my four year run in government ending in April 2011, I spent a year as an instructional developer with a food services company, designing and developing interactive, web-based courses companywide. Additional duties I took on included being the lead audio and video producer for the team–shooting and editing mostly promotional sales videos. I used Adobe Premiere and Flash, developed courses in Lectora, managed an LMS, and hosted several webinars. I can't say I was as excited about the job as my previous positions, but I was making more money than ever–hovering around $75,000 per year. I'm not quite sure why I decided to leave the company, but a unique opportunity came up with a well known publishing company, Pearson Education, so I took the leap in May 2012.

BILL & MELINDA
GATES *foundation*

Despite a $10,000 per year pay cut, Pearson hired me as a senior instructional designer. With funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, I worked with a small team to pilot competency-based learning at various colleges and universities nationwide. The concept was to look at dividing up the typical three credit hour system for college credits into smaller, more bite-sized chunks called learning competencies. It was quite the buzzword at the time. So for over two years I worked with various higher education entities to build lesson plans and assessments. I enjoyed getting back to where I started and working with professors and being a part of a research study, to see if this model might take off. By the time I left, it was clear competency-based learning was more hype than reality. Changing a system that had been around for well over 100 years was just not going to happen. And with grant funds ending, I turned my attention back to corporations and got hired by Arizona's largest electric utility provider: Arizona Public Service.

The Long Run

I got hired by APS in late 2014 and continued a long, nine-year run with this company as an instructional designer facilitator and later, learning architect. I got hired making $85,000 per year and left the company in late 2023, right at $100,000–finally, a six-figure income! The company paid out sizable bonuses, offered a pension plan, and had incredible health benefits and 401k matching. So it was truly a lucrative experience financially. And the company culture was amazing, which helped.

One highlight at APS included doing a lot more facilitation than I'd ever done. I revamped the company's onboarding program and was able to incorporate branched learning scenarios and gamification into several courses. The majority of work involved online, virtual, and in-person course building. I worked on a variety of projects and managed a few programs, which kept things interesting. For eight years I hosted monthly instructional design user group sessions with trainers, instructors, and designers from across the company. We made decisions on learning standardization, evaluated learning technology tools, shared templates and resources, and discussed design best practices. With my previous background, I became the team's point person for in-house audio and video production. I even started dabbling in podcasting and virtual reality, not to mention keeping an eye on the many new AI products that began popping up everywhere.

Shortly after the pandemic, our small team had to pivot quickly as our typical in-person, open enrollment courses had to be shut down or converted into a virtual format. With most of the company converting to remote work, it was quite an adjustment. On top of this, our CEO had just retired and his replacement called for a company culture transformation. So our team was

tasked with partnering with the Neurological Institute to roll out a companywide culture transformation initiative. We got buy-in from our company officers and used a storytelling approach to launch a series of communications, online modules, and virtual info sessions. We tasked leaders with educating their teams and provided them with learning journeys and other amazing resources. It ended up being some of the best ID work I'd ever done.

One big decision we made during the culture transformation rollout was to make all learning optional. Our thought was making it a "pull" versus a "push" might lead to better adoption. Looking back, we never reach beyond 50% completion rates (for the online module content), so one might argue that the non-required approach wasn't the best decision for something so important. But much of this lack of adoption came from our folks in the field, who were often so busy keeping the lights on, they didn't always have time to complete another training.

During one of our team meetings shortly after the pandemic, I almost jokingly told my leader, "Our titles should be 'learning architect', as we do so much more than design instruction and facilitate." She must have taken my comment seriously because just a few months later, each team member was given the opportunity to apply for a new role on the team: learning architect. It was a grade level up in pay and so just like that, i was promoted. Lesson learned: The squeaky wheel gets the grease. And let's be honest "learning architect" does have a pretty nice ring to it. But after three years in this role, I decided to end my run with APS and become a learning consultant in late-2023.

You're probably wondering why a guy would leave such a great job with amazing pay, co-workers, and culture. Oh, and did I mention APS still allows their non-essential workers to work 100% remotely? The reason I left really came down to reaching a point in my career

where I was ready for a new challenge. My son will be a high school graduate soon and I've got a good 5-10 years before I'm ready to retire. I feel like I've reached the pinnacle of my career and have so much to give back to the learning community. So that's exactly what I'm doing. If I can be successful creating content in the comfort of my own home (or anywhere in the world, for that matter), then so can you. If you're at a point in your life where you want to turn your expertise and passions into a source of income, read on to find out ways YOU can transform your life, just by learning a few tips and tricks to make you a successful content creator. And no, you don't have to be a great writer or a creative artist, or have a degree in instructional design to create amazing content. You just need to apply the formula outlined next.

START SMALL

Not ready to pull the plug on your day job? Good. To begin your career as a content creator, it's actually best to *not* do what I did. As mentioned earlier, I walked away from a six-figure income with an electric utility company with the somewhat naive confidence that I'd be replacing my salary within no time. Weeks went by as I applied for and bid on countless short-term gigs with Fivver and Upwork, as well as federal, state and local government. My problem? Nobody had heard of me, my business had no brand, I had a weak portfolio, I had virtually zero presence on social media, and I had no strategy for my business. So I spent my first couple of months spinning my wheels and getting a bit discouraged. Then I did my research…

The Secret to My Success

With my bank account plummeting and maybe a bit of desperation setting in, I began reaching out to my circle of friends and colleagues–especially those who had had some success in online selling and marketing businesses. I began scouring the internet to learn about what was

working for other content creators. There were so many ads popping up in my social media feeds from my searching it became overwhelming. It seemed like everyone had their own five-step method for guaranteeing one would be making $50,000/month in no time. Yeah, right, I thought.

A business colleague and friend suggested I dive into creating a course on how to be a great instructional designer and see how it goes. This idea actually made some sense as I was sure there had to be a market out there for that type of thing. And I'd been in the learning and development field for a quarter of a century. So that's exactly where I started. After doing my research it appeared content creation was a highly saturated market, so I had to figure out what would set my course idea apart from every other "make money quick" scheme out there.

I developed a five module microlearning course that advocated the learner find a high demand topic he or she was passionate about and had expertise in, apply instructional design principles to craft a highly engaging course (from learning objectives to course completion), and then market and sell the course for maximum profit. As I write this, I'm on the last part of that plan—marketing and selling the course. This was really the only area I had almost no experience with. I was initially worried that my lack of social media presence was a game stopper. But I wasn't ready to just give up. I looked at all of the potential ways to market and sell my course and soon realized there were a LOT of ways in which one could do this.

I turned the corner on my dream by doing several things. First, as a perfectionist by nature, I abandoned the concept of having a perfect course as there isn't such a thing. Second, I designed and developed a solid 90-minute microlearning course, heavily leveraging artificial

intelligence for the audio and video portion. I did this mainly to speed up the course building process, but also so I could quickly make updates to the content, as needed. While AI audio and video isn't as good as the real thing, it's getting close enough that I can finally embrace the technology. It's like maybe 80% as good as a traditional video. Third, I found a relatively inexpensive site to house my course. The one I chose–Thinkific–falls somewhere in the middle, as far as bells and whistles go. This site also helped considerably with offering a free marketing funnel and other sales widgets to help me in my vastly underwhelming arsenal of sales and marketing knowledge.

I actually began promoting my course with only three of the five modules built. This allowed me to test the waters by offering the first module for free and pre-selling the entire course. I set a goal of receiving between 100 sales by May 1st, 2024. The final step was to decide on a price for my course. This was no easy feat. All one has to do is to go out to the multitude of online course marketplaces out there–like LinkedIn Learning, Coursera, and Udemy–to realize just how cheap fairly sizable courses are. Most are in the $10-25 per course range. At those prices, I would have to sell thousands of courses, not hundreds, to make a decent profit. But I'd read articles from several credible sources who implored content creators to not undersell their products. Setting a price tag of $100 or more for a 90-minute course like mine was not out of the realm of possibilities.

While this blog isn't complete (I still have the marketing and selling part to finish), I plan on heavily leveraging the following: building my brand, search engine optimization, paid Google and social media ads, email marketing, and leaning on any and all influencers and complementary businesses. I'm not sure about affiliate marketing yet, but am considering it down the road. Sales and marketing is not my forte, but I'm approaching it with a growth mindset and know I'll figure out a system that works.

I hope you'll check back later and see how my story ends. Until then, all the best and happy course creating! If you're willing to take a journey with me, I'd be honored to help kickstart your career as a content creator. Just click on the "Courses" tab on my website and sign up for the first module of my "Passion to Profit" course. It's free! Tom

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