

John Tong Autobiographical Statement

As I look back over my Graduate career here at UGA, I am humbled by the progress and the journey it has been. I was not a 'typical' CoE applicant. I graduated from Georgia Tech with a Bachelors in Computer Science, then spent 20 years as a developer and consultant, specifically in Higher Education. In all of my jobs, in addition to being highly technical, I see another common thread, in that I always took great efforts to mentor and raise up the next generation of my peers. I naturally gravitated towards training and teaching roles both internally and externally to clients. That echoed from my first position of authority through to today here working at UGA in the EITS department.

Though successful, my efforts took a great deal of effort and was often the result of trial and error. I stated in my application that joining the program would benefit me and my Communities of Practice (both professional and personal) in two very specific ways. First, that having a more formal grounding and understanding of education and learning would make me a more effective teacher and mentor. The second was developing a more current skillset for creation of effective educational materials. I am thankful for the opportunity to learn here and feel that both goals have been thoroughly successful.

In addition to a solid foundational understanding of learning theories, I have also had the opportunity to hear about the trajectory that learning is taking. This knowledge has given me a perspective for understanding various models and how they 'fit' both in history, and practice. It has allowed me to speak and make decisions on approaches to my projects with greater confidence that they are not coming purely from anecdotal experience (and after 20 years one certainly develops a few of those). It helped me put my experiences in the context of a broader and deeper perspective, and that allows for better reflection on the question of, "Am I being dogmatic, or pragmatic?" I want to express my thanks to Dr. Hill and Dr. Rieber for foundational classes and Dr. Knapp for an extremely impactful review on my educational theory related classes. Their differing perspectives and personalities contributed greatly to the learning.

Where that puts me now from a personal educational philosophy standpoint is that I feel that there are situations and client expectations that call for different educational approaches. Different tasks and constraints will dictate in context what models might work best to meet those needs. Humans are diverse and brains are wonderful mechanisms, but one size certainly doesn't fit all. If my last few major projects have taught me anything, it is that in the PRACTICE of Instructional Design, plans are one thing, but client and project constraints are an entirely different thing. For example, it would be lovely for an employee to have a deep understanding of the desired culture and approaching learning tasks with a nuanced constructivist or social constructivist approach for their job, but if it's the holiday rush, and you have a real world requirement for 10 new employees to be able to help on day 2 after orientation, the order of the day might be closer to behavioral and come up with a plan that meets immediate as well as long term goals within the constraints given.

My second goal related back to having a more current toolkit with which to approach my work. This would allow me to approach creating educational materials with a wider variety, richness and effectiveness than just an in-person lecture with PowerPoints and handouts that are the standard in technical trainings. I include status reports, meeting presentations, and data analytics that I create in my

day to day professional work in my definition of “educational material.” The program has certainly delivered on this front as well. I started expanding my tool kit with Dr. Clinton and Mr. Braxley and those courses have paid immeasurable dividends. In my foundational tools course, I learned about courseware and course creation along with how to create the various assets that are needed in support of my materials, images, video, audio, as well as Articulate. I dove deeper into video creation in anticipation of creating informal learning resources that I had enjoyed the benefits of in so many of my personal and professional projects and believe that I have developed a significant level of proficiency in the creation of educational videos as you may see in my example artifacts.

My professional goals remain to be able to improve the understanding and use of data here at UGA and in Higher Education in general. Thanks to the foundational understanding, tools, and skills I have worked on in the course of my degree, I feel that I am better positioned to create formal as well as informal materials to support that learning. The courses and the flexibility they have offered have allowed me to reach out to find needs and make professional connections to address real world needs. My Human Performance Technology class work with Dr. Stefaniak for Educause for instance, has left me with happy clients as well as valuable professional contacts. That was challenging, and strongly a case of best intents and practices must be balanced against Client ‘requests,’ and I appreciate the perspective Dr. Stefaniak had on this front. My personal archery community has benefitted from a redesign of our ‘Intro classes’, as well as from video PSAs, with the most recent volunteer contribution to the SCA Youth and Family Achievement program, an ambitious draft of a longer ‘course’ on the creation of wooden arrows. I have started the framework of a web site to help ‘brand’ and present my learning material in the ‘DataNinja’ site. One last highlight of my academic career I wish to share was with Dr. Woods and Dr. Hill in my Research Methods class. I was initially highly intimidated by the process of research, but I took the opportunity to go through the process, from literature review, to data gathering (including contact with the IRB) to writeup of a final research paper, and relevant to my personal goals, took it one step further with interviews with personal contacts and actually created a magazine ‘pitch’ packet for publication. You will see this as one of the thematic artifacts under “Luck of the Draw.”

In closing, I want to express my gratitude to the professors of the program. I know that I am not a ‘typical’ student, and am a life long learner, but the program really has a lot to offer and how much a student gets out is how much they put ‘in’ and how they approach their assignments, not just as check list items, but as learning opportunities, or even as ‘excuses’ and reasons to look into areas of interest. Much like Dr. Rieber said in a reading that I saw, sadly later in my academic career, that was titled, “The Proper Way to Become an Instructional Technologist.” There is no one approach to being an Instructional Designer. Learning is multifaceted, as are people, and we have to wear a lot of hats. I will end here with a list similar how he ended it there. Here is what the practice of ID means to me:

- DO the work. Work with the people, take an interest in the projects.
- Study. Learn about learning. What’s new on research? Are there holes in the current research? Is it in the proper context you have?
- Improve. There’s always room for improvement. It’s often incremental and often only comes from stretching yourself.
- Play. (I stole this one directly because I love this one.)