Why Use Instructional Systems Design?
by Adele Sommers, Ph.D.

Clients and subject matter experts (SMEs) often ask me why I recommend a structured process, instructional systems design (ISD), to chart a course through a learning design project. I usually respond by sharing the insights below — a short, plain-language overview of ISD.

What is ISD and why does it matter? There are several formal definitions, but they boil down to a few simple premises: ISD is the process of designing learning to be as performance-focused, realistic, and engaging as possible. When ISD occurs meaningfully, it accelerates the time people would need to master new knowledge and skills and apply them correctly in real-world situations, such as on the job. It removes the burden that learners would face if they had to individually sort through, interpret, and work with unfamiliar content on their own. ISD thereby reduces much of the "heavy lifting" that often accompanies unstructured learning, making learning more efficient. An overarching purpose is ensuring that trainees consistently, effectively, and safely transfer new learning back to the job, recognizing the consequences of both ideal and non-ideal performance.

How does ISD work? Instructional design specialists receive formal training in a multi-stage process that includes analysis, design, prototyping, development, testing, implementation, and evaluation. At the beginning of each project, instructional designers typically partner with SMEs to discuss and document the key aspects of each critical job skill; the facts, concepts, principles, processes, and procedures involved; as well as the standards to which people must perform.

Although this route may seem complex, ISD seeks the most direct path through the maze. After analyzing exactly what people must do to meet the organization's goals, and how well they need to do it — with what tools and supporting knowledge, and under what conditions — ISD distills the skill sets down to their fundamentals. ISD maps the learning objectives to real-world performance criteria to be measured by practice and evaluation activities. It also culls, refines, and organizes the content for maximum clarity. Following the analysis stage, ISD iteratively designs, develops, reviews, tests, revises, evaluates, and improves the resulting classroom or online training.

ISD is particularly crucial for *self-paced eLearning,* which presents special challenges for learners. Since learners usually interact with eLearning in a solo mode, the ISD process must incorporate all motivational relevance, engagement, practice, and feedback into it. Newer authoring tools simplify many aspects of eLearning production, but without ISD, may not produce ideal learning outcomes.

Are there alternatives? If we did *not* use ISD in the design of training, and simply left learners to their own devices, might they be able to combine informal research, observation, and trial and error to learn the ropes? After all, most of us acquire countless life skills that way, so why not let everyone learn informally on the job? Are there any downsides to that approach?

Informal learning is a useful and important part of skill acquisition. But if it's the *only* resource to which workers have access, the results can vary significantly from person to person. Some may be unable or unlikely to cobble together their own strategies for success. Others may be unable to identify the best work practices to use. Assessments of work performance may be inconsistent, and organizational results can suffer. Another goal of ISD, then, is to structure vital information, frame the experience, and help learners derive meaning and greater expertise in the process.