Internship at FACT

The Faculty Assistance Center for Teaching

Utah State University

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Internship at FACT

It is a rare and beautiful privilege to apply the things you learn almost immediately. My opportunity to work at the FACT Center, or Faculty Assistance Center for Teaching was just that. All of the classes for learning theories and the tools of education came into sharp focus working with the instructional designers of Utah State University. Through creation of real courses, projects, and creations, the world of instructional technology came to life.

This internship serves several purposes. First, it is instructional design in an academic format, and direct application to all that I have learned. My background is in education, and most of my experiences are also in education. This gave me direct experience with professional designers. I was able also to see the distinctions between the theory and the practice as well. Another purpose was for the FACT department to employ an experienced graduate student to assist the building of courses. I had a year experience previous to my application for this Internship, and built courses in html. I was grateful for this opportunity to work within my field.

Physical Facilities and Resources

The FACT Center is located on the second floor of the Merrill-Cazier Library, and it is furnished with a wide variety of software, computers, equipment, and resources reserved for the faculty at Utah State. There is a walk-in lab for instructors. It is very open, with receptionists willing to help with projects. There are machines to scan

Photo 1: FACT reception area

photographs, documents, and slides, both Macintosh and personal computers, and an expansive list of software. No reservations are needed to use these computers, but if help is required, appointments are strongly suggested.

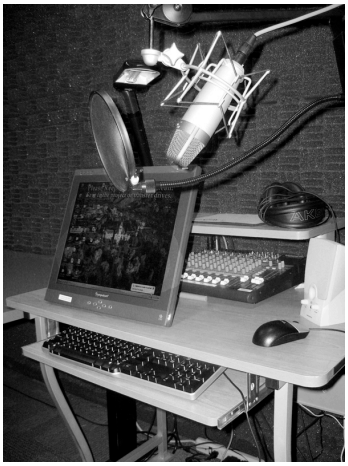


Photo 2: FACT sound room

Faculty may also request an appointment for the sound room, located in the heart of FACT. The area is walled, with sound-absorbing foam on the interior. While not perfectly soundproofed, this room is more than sufficient for most audio and video recording the patrons may desire. A good-quality camera is wired into the computer, as well as a professional microphone. The computer is equipped with a smart screen and smart pens. This allows instructors to "draw" on the screen while recording a podcast. Software includes all of the standard software found in the lab, including all frequently requested Microsoft and Adobe products. Screen captures use the software "Camtasia." This allows the whole screen, or only part of the screen to be captured. With this combination of tools, instructors may capture themselves on video, or the desktop of the computer. Powerpoint presentations with audio are frequently created. Camtasia can also be used to edit video, so that delays, mistakes, and problems can be deleted, or other materials may be added to the video.

Most of the facility consists of the cubicles of the instructional design team. Each designer has a separate space, complete with a multi-screened computer and all of the required software, a white board, and chairs sufficient for the designer and subject-matter expert to talk. The cubicles are open enough that there is ample opportunity for spontaneous dialogue between designers.

Starting the Internship

I was hired at FACT because I had past experience working with html, style sheets, and distance education courses at another university. One of my first assignments was the conversion of the old CD-

ROM courses into web-based courses. There were approximately fifty of these that needed conversion, and I couldn't have asked for a more perfect assignment. This was a simple, repetitive, and yet very unique way to become familiar with Blackboard and the new web template created by the FACT team. I had to glean materials from the discs and then transform these materials into the new format. I was not working directly with any SME (subject-matter expert), but with materials alone. I was given leeway as to how it was done, but final verification was with my supervisor John Louviere. He gave me initial guidance, and then all of the work was my responsibility. I thrive under these conditions, and enjoyed the challenge. At the time I finished this project, I started my official internship hours, and was already familiar with how things are done at the FACT Center. Many of the regular instructional designers were already treating me as one of the regular group.

Photo 3: Transferring from CD-ROMs

Because I had been working most closely with John Louviere, I started assisting him on his course list. He is in charge of one of the largest clients of the FACT Center, which is the Communication Disorders department. This includes courses covering both auditory and visual impairments, as well as work for the Hadley School for the Blind. Because many people in the courses have communication disorders of their own, these must be accessible, clean, and simple to navigate. Much of my internship was working with the COMD (Communication Disorders) courses at various stages. My tasks may be to build courses from scratch, update existing courses, retro-fit courses to the new template, design graphics, edit videos, and pretty much whatever needed to be done. The full-time instructional designers would have the final responsibilities, but I would be an asset to their teams.

First Quarter

My first quarter of internship started late in the summer of 2009. This is a busy time at FACT, because the bulk of new courses must be up by fall. My work took place after the initial phases of the design process. First, the instructional designer met with the SME to determine teaching philosophy, style, and desired outcomes for the course. I was able to overhear many of these interviews, and learned just how important they are. Many instructors, especially those first teaching, had no idea what their philosophy was. They were hired for their research abilities, and not necessarily for their mastery of teaching skills. For some instructors, the teaching was merely an afterthought, and they needed an instructional designer to help them consider their teaching methods. Our IDs (instructional designers) recognize that all the technology and design in the world will not help an instructor teach if this does not fit into the instructor's methods and philosophies. Also, even if the instructor is a master teacher, without the resources and ability to use those, that teaching may be for naught. One role of the ID is to match the desires and philosophies of the instructor to the tools needed to make instruction work. This could be considered a major part of the analysis step of the ADDIE model of instruction.

After the initial interviews, the course is planned out jointly between the designer and SME. This is usually summarized in the syllabus, and may be divided into weeks, units, or subjects. This is reflected in the design layout considered by the ID. Plans are made to build assignments, quizzes and tests, reading materials, and overall layout. At this point, course tools are selected within the Blackboard framework, and materials are gathered. This is where I usually entered the scene.

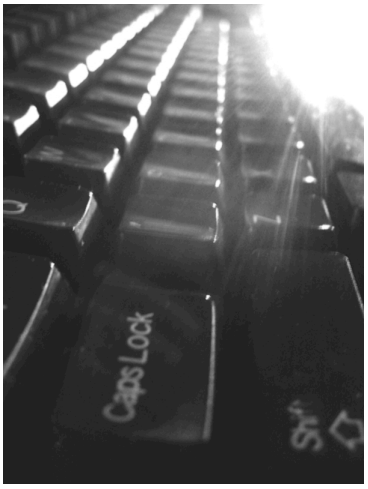


Photo 4: A technology perspective

Using the step-by-step guide I developed while working on the CD-ROM courses, I was able to transfer my older skills to the "live"

courses that needed to be created. My preliminary stages of building consisted of gathering materials, such as pdf documents, presentations, pictures, and other materials. Occasionally I was able to participate in the design processes, but mostly I was a developer. My main tools were Dreamweaver and Blackboard, and I was able to build several COMD courses. For a few, I was able to use my graphic design skills for banners and images. Also, I was asked to create a large XML document for an unrelated course. While I had a small amount of experience with XML, I felt much more confident after the assignment.

Second Quarter

The second quarter of the internship took place late into the summer through August. My responsibilities with the COMD courses continued. The more I worked on the courses, the more adept I was at redesigns using he style sheets. I was able to do a bit more designing as I worked longer at the center. For example, I was given a blog built by an instructor and was asked to turn it into a course. After the earlier projects, this was not difficult, and began with the overall look and feel of the course.

I was able to lay out the whole course in the planning stages, and then put it up into Blackboard. I found the designing stages very easy, and a natural step.

Photo 5: Newswriting banner designed in internship

My responsibilities started to include video processing. I was able to help with the hundreds of video files for the American Sign Language courses. Because all vocabulary must be given visually, the only answer that would work for both instructor and students was short video clips. The quiz for this course must show a video, and the student would then type a translation. Questions must be selected

from a bank of questions for the quiz to be effective. This became a slight logistic challenge, but with some guidance from the design team, the videos were linked correctly and the quizzes created.

In connection with posting the videos, I was asked to create a tutorial for video creation. The program of choice is called Seesmic, and videos there may be posted in threaded-link format. My desire for tutorials is to make them as brief and easy to follow as possible, and so I learned how to navigate the Seesmic site, and created a tutorial in conjunction with this assignment. This tutorial was created so students using the course could create their own accounts and post responses to questions in sign language. This was a requirement for the class.

Photo 6: From seesmic.tv

One other type of video assignment was given during this quarter, and that was video editing using Camtasia. After an instructor has created a presentation with audio, it must often be edited for errors. For videos that demand exactness, this may take a good deal of time. For an hour of video, it may easily take half again as long to edit. The second quarter of my internship saw a dramatic increase in the time spent editing video.

Third Quarter

In conjunction with my other classes, I took upon an interesting task. Dr. Lowanto is a professor that teaches electrical engineering, and he has a theory that the note-taking process in his class is not as effective as it could be. He believes that if he creates a set of guided notes, students would better be able to determine what is most important. Also, as diagrams may be difficult for students to draw at a moment's notice, if parts of it are pre-drawn, the students can fill in the rest, focusing on the concept rather than the drawing alone. I have thought about this concept before, and have used worksheets as guided notes when I taught. I was interested to see how this would influence higher education.

Dr. Lowanto requested a set of guided notes for his class. Unfortunately, all of his notes are hand-written and drawn. There are detailed schematics and equations that are also hand-written. While these notes could be photocopied and uploaded as they are, they did look less professional, and Dr. Lowanto wanted these notes to look more polished. My task became to create these notes using photo programs and Microsoft Word.

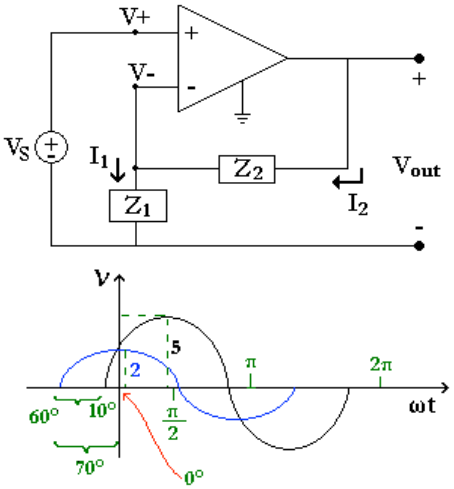


Photo 7: Sample diagrams from electronics notes

I created an overall look and style for the notes, a stylized heading, consistent formatting, and clean, simple graphics. This was a very time-intensive project. Every line and every graphic had Greek characters, and every graphic was original. There were sixteen sets of notes, each taking more than an hour, and the complex three or four hours to create. Dr. Lowanto was very pleased with these after they were done,

In addition to all this, I was fulfilling all of my old tasks in the FACT office. I edited videos, performed many small tasks, proof-edited courses, and started on a few re-designs. There is nearly nothing new to do, and the work is a bit repetitive. We moved into the slower season in the FACT Center as many of the courses are built. During this time, less important tasks are performed, especially video editing and graphic design. Both these tasks are lower priorities than the building of the courses themselves.

I did have one new task, and this of my own invention. I took a class with a professor in the family science department. We got into a conversation about his classes, and he was very interested in more interaction and constructivist techniques. While this would be a challenge in a university setting, this professor was excited about the opportunity.

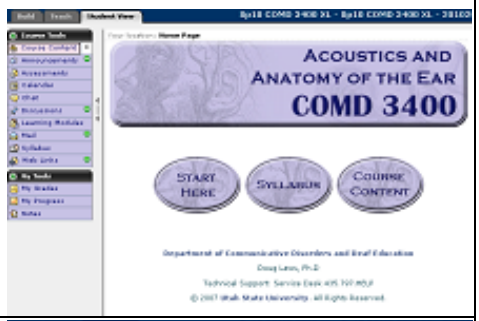
I conducted an informal SME-Pre, or a preliminary interview about intent and teaching styles. This instructor was very tired of lecturing without feedback from his students. He wanted more interaction between students, but did not know how to institute this in a reasonably large class. We discussed class size, content, and desired outcomes. Because this was a family science class, the idea of small groups came naturally. By creating discussion "families" within the class, the students could become specialists within their groups, and have opportunity to express themselves. The instructor then could go between groups and monitor the conversations. In brief, these are some of the things we discussed. The instructor came away excited about implementing a few changes this semester, but more in the future.

Photo 8: Blending theory, education, and technology

Fourth Quarter

Although the workload at the FACT Center does increase toward spring semester, it is not nearly as much as the fall quantity. Word has started to spread about budget cuts within the department, and designers are a bit nervous. To graduate students, the less-essential tasks are being sent. I was assigned two "facelifts" for COMD courses. This was entirely cosmetic, as the courses needed no other updates.

The instructor did not like the look of the courses. They were designed with black as a basic color, and the instructor is a fan of pastels, especially purples. The instructor was also tired of the buttons and looks of the banners, especially the series of ears. I was assigned the re-vamp, and worked within the requirements of the instructor. Here are the results:

Old Design	New Design
	
	

While I cannot answer whether the redesign was essential, or even a grand improvement, I do know that it's much closer to the tastes of the instructor.

Another task I was assigned during this time was more video editing. There were human sexuality videos, more COMD videos, and other edits. Video editing is a bit boring. There are hours spent in the editing room listening for coughs, pauses, mistakes, and strange noises. There are hours and hours of lectures to listen to, and it is a bit isolating. Getting done with a whole set is an accomplishment, although not one with much glory.

Another task I have been assigned is transcript uploads. After building whole courses, this is child's play. These are tasks I can do while listening to videos or doing most anything else. For the COMD courses that need transcripts uploaded, some need to be uploaded and launched from a web page, and others are accessed through a menu. It only takes a few short steps before this is completed.

The work at FACT continues. After the spring semester uploads were completed, more small, odd tasks were assigned. Work rose again before new semesters, but everything was pretty constant and steady. There have been follow-ups with several instructors. The family-science professor still contacts me occasionally with updates from his class, and that is going well.

Conclusion and Evaluation

In ways I'm only starting to consider, this internship has been exceptionally valuable. Most important to me was the opportunity to work with professional instructional designers in an educational setting. The full-time designers each had a different approach to course development, and I learned from each of them. Some focus on theory, some on publishing, some on product, and others on customer service. There are specialists in every realm. These designers keep much of the university functioning, and are occasionally unsung heroes of education.

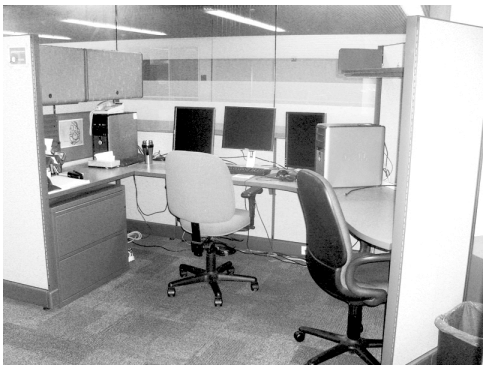


Photo 9: FACT cubicle

I learned how to balance many tasks at FACT, and learned how and why resources are prioritized in education. I've been able to see the difference between well-constructed courses and poor courses, high-intensity and low-intensity instructor involvement. I was able to use many tools of the professional field I would have not known. In a small way, I was able to help individual instructors do their jobs better.

I have also learned of many facets of instructional design at FACT I didn't like as much. After a while, it became tedious to do video editing. That's probably why it was assigned to the graduate students. When the workload became lighter, there were fewer challenges and interesting tasks to perform. I have learned that I really need a challenge to thrive. I have also learned that I work best when I work with others in some way. When I am isolated, I am not as happy with my work. I find

direct contact with others most rewarding. I would occasionally envy the instructional designers that spent an hour helping a professor with a course while I uploaded files or edited video. I believe teaching is in my blood, and truthfully, I missed it at times.

Photo 10: Tools of the trade

Overall, I wouldn't have traded my time at FACT for anything. I believe that, although there were moments of tedium, the value of my experience is great. The practical experience I've gained would have been virtually impossible to obtain anywhere else. I would wish an internship like this for every student of instructional technology.

As an afterword, the FACT center has announced that they will no longer be employing students at the desk, nor graduate student employees. This is due entirely to budget cuts. Many of us will be sad to leave, and I am grateful for my time there. I believe that this will be a great loss to both the students and the FACT center. I know the Center will someday reconsider, especially if there is a change from Blackboard Vista to a more updated content management system, but for now, the loss is palpable.

Recommendations

I am very sorry that FACT will no longer hire students. However, for students who want to volunteer at the FACT Center, there may still be an opportunity for work. There is always something to do, and a wonderful group of professionals to work with. I would strongly recommend that students take an opportunity to work with this under-appreciated department.

For the FACT Center, I would hope that once financial constraints ease, that more interns could be accepted. I felt very welcomed and guided by the professionals there, I loved having real responsibilities and real consequences. I do wonder what the experience would have been like for those with less experience and background. I found the transition fairly easy and rewarding, but I wonder how

others would have found it. I know several students from the ITLS department have used the FACT center from time to time, and I have not heard anything negative. It is a great resource.

I would love to see more connection between the ITLS department and the FACT Center. I believe that if students could actually build courses, see the efficiency with which professionals work, and see the application of their theory classes. It would also improve the FACT center by increasing awareness and therefore demand. The more demand on the FACT center, the more funding it receives. It is an on-campus resource and laboratory. The instructors could teach the students true application of models such as ADDIE, and teach them how to be better designers.

I will miss working at FACT, and will surely use the skills obtained there over and over again.