THE Learning Curve

CAREER GUIDE · NOVEMBER 2026

A LEARNING CURVE CAREER GUIDE

From classroom to instructional design

How teachers get hired: what employers actually ask for, what already transfers from your classroom, and a plan to close the gaps.

FREE · 20 PAGES · 3 WORKSHEETS

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THE OPPORTUNITY

You already do most of the work. Employers can't see it yet.

Teaching gives you more of an instructional designer's toolkit than most job ads let on, and less than many career-change courses promise. This guide shows you which is which.

Every term, you analyse a mixed group of learners, write learning intentions, design assessment, sequence content and change course when something isn't working. Those are the core tasks of instructional design. The trouble is vocabulary: a hiring manager in a corporate learning team may not recognise "unit planning" as course design, or "differentiation" as learner analysis.

There are real gaps too. In most design roles you are neither the content expert nor the person who delivers the course. You work through someone else's expertise, to deadlines set by people who change their minds, in tools you may never have opened.

Search for this switch and you'll mostly find job boards, forum threads and course sales pages. The job boards list vacancies without saying what employers value. The threads are honest but anecdotal. The sales pages promise a smooth path into a well-paid role.

This guide starts somewhere else: with what employers write in their job ads, what research says about people who have made the move, and what hiring managers say they look for in a portfolio. Then it turns that into a plan.

> *"Your teaching experience matters less as teaching and more as evidence that you can analyse learners, write objectives, design assessment and sequence content."*
>
> The Learning Curve view

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

1

Read the evidence. Pages 3–4 show what job ads ask for and where the jobs are.

2

Translate yourself. Pages 6–7 turn teaching duties into design evidence.

3

Close the gaps. Pages 8–13 cover the gaps, the plan and your portfolio piece.

4

Do the worksheets. Pages 13, 17 and 18 are built to print and fill in.

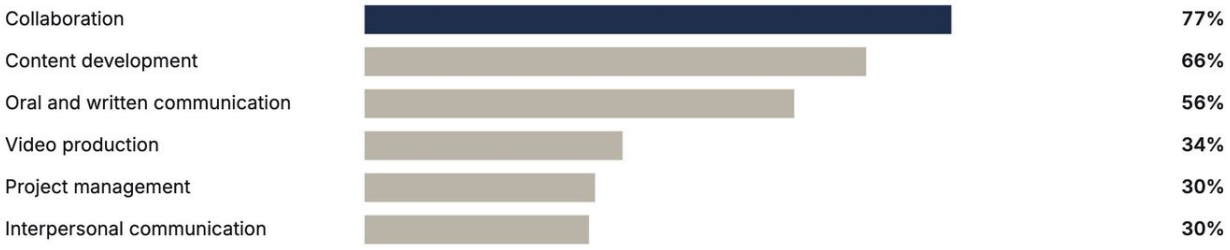
THE EVIDENCE

What 1,030 job ads ask for

The best evidence on what employers want comes from a study that read the ads themselves. Its findings are kinder to teachers than you might expect, and clearer about the gaps.

Collaboration was named in 77% of instructional design job ads, more than any other skill

Share of 1,030 US job announcements naming each skill, collected September to October 2019



Source: Wang, Chen, Ritzhaupt & Martin (2021), International Journal of Training and Development, Table B. doi:10.1111/ijtd.12209

READING THE NUMBERS

Wang and colleagues collected instructional design job announcements from Glassdoor, Indeed and Monster over one month in 2019, removed duplicates, and coded the 1,030 that remained for 185 kinds of knowledge, skill and ability.

Beyond the skills above, abilities that came up often include developing course materials (81 per cent of ads), consulting subject matter experts (57 per cent), needs analysis (41 per cent) and evaluating learning programmes (41 per cent). Design models such as ADDIE were named in 59 per cent, and authoring software in 33 per cent.

What the ads rarely ask for is classroom teaching. Teaching face-to-face appeared in 10 per cent of announcements and teaching in virtual environments in 4 per cent.

RESEARCH

"About 27 per cent of postings in this analysis did not mention an educational requirement, more than sixty percent of the postings only required a bachelor's degree for the job postings advertised and less than eight percent required a master's degree."

Wang, X., Chen, Y., Ritzhaupt, A. D., & Martin, F. (2021). Examining competencies for the instructional design professional. International Journal of Training and Development, p. 14.

Limits. US ads from one month in 2019, before generative AI tools arrived in most design teams; LinkedIn listings weren't included. The ratios are a fair guide to what employers value. The tool names will have moved on.

THE LANDSCAPE

Where the jobs are, and what gets you in

A newer study of 130 US job ads tells the same story. Most roles are in workplaces, not schools, and most ask for a degree in any field plus evidence of design work.

Six in ten instructional design jobs were corporate; 2.3% were in schools

Sector of 130 US instructional design job ads, May 2023 (corporate includes healthcare)



Source: Weber, McCarthy, Campbell & Bauer (2024), Contemporary Educational Technology 16(3), ep510. doi:10.30935/cedtech/14606. Remaining ads were in other sectors.

73.8%

of the 130 ads set a bachelor's degree as the minimum

Weber et al., 2024

57.7%

accepted a bachelor's degree in any field

Weber et al., 2024

71.5%

named written communication, more than any design model or tool; 66.2% named oral communication

Weber et al., 2024

EXPERIENCE IS THE REAL FILTER

In a 2016 analysis of 93 postings, 96.8 per cent mentioned experience, and the most common range requested was one to two years (Raynis, 2018). Employers surveyed about entry-level designers expected them to handle tasks across every phase of a design project, and typically said new hires couldn't yet do so without help (Villachica, Marker & Taylor, 2010).

That is why a portfolio matters so much: it is how you show experience you can't yet list as a job title.

JOB TITLES TO SEARCH

Instructional designer · learning designer · learning experience designer · eLearning developer · curriculum developer · training specialist.

In Australian and New Zealand universities the role is often called **educational designer** or **learning designer**, and the career paths into it are known to be varied (Nichols & Meuleman, 2017).

THE LEARNING CURVE VIEW

Read the duties, not the title. One company's instructional designer is another's eLearning developer. The duties tell you whether a job is mainly design, building or delivery.



FROM THE FIELD

“Teaching is a creative profession. Teaching, properly conceived, is not a delivery system.”

Sir Ken Robinson · educator and author · “How to escape education’s death valley”, TED Talks Education, April 2013

Photo: Mikhail Nilov, Pexels

TRANSLATE YOURSELF

Say it in their language

Most of your core work maps onto what job ads ask for. Rename it in the employer's terms, and back every claim with something you can show.

WHAT YOU DID AS A TEACHER	WHAT AN INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGNER CALLS IT	WHAT TO SHOW
Planned units and sequences of lessons	**Course mapping and sequencing**	A course map for one unit, rebuilt for adult learners
Wrote learning intentions and success criteria	**Measurable learning objectives**	Five objectives, each with the task that tests it
Designed tests, tasks and rubrics	**Assessment design**	One assessment and its rubric, with a sample answer
Differentiated for a mixed class	**Learner analysis**	A one-page learner brief
Gave written and verbal feedback	**Feedback design**	Quiz feedback that explains each wrong answer
Changed a lesson when it wasn't working	**Formative evaluation and iteration**	A short revision log from a pilot
Worked with colleagues on a shared program	**Stakeholder collaboration**	A brief you agreed with someone else, and what changed after their review
Ran a faculty or year-level project to a deadline	**Project management**	A timeline with milestones, owners and a sign-off point

WHY IT WORKS

Every row corresponds to an ability the job ads ask for: needs analysis, developing course materials, developing assessments, evaluating programmes, collaboration and project management (Wang et al., 2021).

THE FRAMEWORK THEY'LL EXPECT

Design models were named in 59 per cent of ads. ADDIE (analyse, design, develop, implement, evaluate) is the one most employers will expect you to know, and each phase maps onto work you've already done.

TRY THIS

Pick the three rows where your evidence is strongest. Those are the three claims to lead your CV, your LinkedIn summary and your first interview answer with.

TRANSLATE YOURSELF

Rewrite your CV around what you designed

Employers read "twelve years in the classroom" as delivery experience. Lead with what you designed, what it was for and what happened.

BEFORE: A TEACHING CV	AFTER: A DESIGN CV
Taught Year 10 chemistry to classes of up to 28 students.	Redesigned a ten-week chemistry unit around weekly low-stakes quizzes and a practical assessment with a published rubric.
Responsible for differentiating lessons for students with diverse needs.	Wrote learner profiles for three ability groups and built tiered tasks and supports for each, reviewed with the learning support team.
Led professional development sessions for staff.	Designed and ran a three-session staff module on formative assessment for 40 teachers; revised it after a post-session survey.
Created resources on the school learning management system.	Built a self-paced revision course in the school LMS, with branching practice questions and feedback on each wrong answer.
Coordinated the Year 9 science curriculum.	Mapped a year-level curriculum to outcomes, agreed the brief with five colleagues, and delivered it to a fixed deadline.

Illustrative examples written by The Learning Curve. Only claim what you did, and keep evidence for each line.

FOUR RULES FOR EVERY LINE

- ☐ **Start with a design verb:** designed, mapped, wrote, built, evaluated, revised.
- ☐ **Name the learners as adults where you can:** staff, parents, new teachers.
- ☐ **Show collaboration:** who you agreed the brief with and who reviewed it.
- ☐ **Say what changed:** a revision, a result, a decision you made from evidence.

WHAT TO CUT

Classroom management, extracurricular duties and anything that's only about delivery. They're real achievements, but they don't answer the questions a design hiring manager is asking.

YOUR STRONGEST EVIDENCE

Work you designed for adults, such as staff training, parent sessions or new-teacher induction, reads closest to a design role. Put it first.

BE HONEST ABOUT THE DISTANCE

The four gaps that stop teachers getting hired

The gaps are rarely about learning. They're about working through other people's expertise, running projects and building in the tools employers name.

01 Working through someone else's expertise

In a classroom you're the content expert and the person who delivers. In most design roles you're neither: a subject matter expert owns the content and someone else runs the course. Your job is to ask the questions that turn their knowledge into something learners can practise. Consulting experts was named in 57 per cent of job ads.

02 Projects with deadlines, budgets and sign-off

Project management appeared in 30 per cent of ads and managing multiple projects in 26 per cent. A school term has a rhythm; a design project has stakeholders who change their minds.

03 Authoring and media tools

Authoring software, video and presentation tools each appeared in roughly a third of ads. You don't need all of them. You need one well enough to build a sample.

04 Explaining your decisions

Teachers make good design decisions by instinct. Designers are asked to defend them to people who don't share that instinct, which means naming the principle behind each choice.

RESEARCH

"Accompanying this need to learn on the job was increased mental stress due to a sense of inadequacy."

Xia, Y., & Brown, Z. (2025). Novice instructional design professionals' transition to their new roles. The Journal of Applied Instructional Design, 14(2).

WHAT PEOPLE WHO MADE THE MOVE REPORT

Xia and Brown interviewed seven graduates in their first design roles, four of them former teachers. They described learning tools on the job, unclear client needs and different professional norms. A 2026 study of eight former K–12 teachers found the move was as much a change of professional identity as of job (Adante, 2026).

Both studies are small: treat them as common experiences, not a measure of how often they happen.

THE PLAN

Six steps from classroom to first design role

To keep it concrete, follow one invented but typical example: a secondary science teacher with eight years' experience who wants to move into a corporate learning team.

01 Choose a sector before you build anything

Corporate learning teams, universities, edtech companies, government and not-for-profits each value different things. Higher education and edtech may count your teaching more; corporate teams care more about business outcomes and turnaround times. Pick one sector for your first applications and read twenty of its job ads (worksheet, page 17).

OUR SCIENCE TEACHER

Corporate ads in her city keep naming compliance training, SME interviews and one particular authoring tool, so that's what she builds towards.

02 Rewrite your CV in the employer's language

Turn each teaching duty into a design outcome with evidence, using the table on page 6 and the examples on page 7. Cut anything that's only about classroom management.

OUR SCIENCE TEACHER

"Taught Year 10 chemistry" becomes "Redesigned a ten-week chemistry unit around weekly low-stakes quizzes and a practical assessment with a published rubric."

03 Build one portfolio piece that shows your whole process

Hiring managers see plenty of polished sample screens. What they see less often is the thinking: the learner brief, the objectives, the assessment, one built module, what happened when real people tried it, and what changed. Pick a topic outside school, close to your chosen sector (pages 12–13).

OUR SCIENCE TEACHER

She builds a short module on laboratory chemical safety for new staff at a research facility: close to her expertise, but aimed at adults at work.

Close the gaps a portfolio can't

04 Learn one authoring tool well enough to build your sample

Choose the tool that recurs in the ads you read in step 1, and learn it by building your portfolio piece in it rather than by working through a course on every feature. Depth in one tool, shown in real work, reads better than a list of six tools you've opened once.

05 Get real experience working with a subject expert

This is the gap a portfolio alone can't close. Find a small project where someone else owns the content: induction training for a local not-for-profit, a short course for a professional association, or a staff module at your school built for adults. Run it like a design project, with a kick-off meeting, a written brief, a review round and sign-off. Then you can describe the experience truthfully in an interview.

06 Apply where your background counts most

For a first role, look where teaching experience is a plus rather than a translation exercise: education-focused companies, university learning design teams, and training roles in sectors close to your subject. A second move into a corporate team is easier once you have a design job on your CV.

THE MOVE THAT MATTERS MOST

Write a one-paragraph design rationale for every major choice in your portfolio piece: why this sequence, why this assessment, why this much practice.

It answers the question employers ask most often in interviews, and it turns a teacher's instinct into a designer's argument.

A REALISTIC TIMELINE

Research ongoing. We haven't found reliable data on how long the switch takes. Plan for steps 1 to 5 to run alongside your teaching, and judge progress by finished evidence, not weeks.

IF YOU'RE IN AUSTRALIA OR NEW ZEALAND

University learning design teams are a natural first step: the roles are usually called educational or learning designer, and teaching backgrounds are common among the people doing them.



FROM THE FIELD

“As I fully embraced the architect’s mindset, I found that my approach to designing learning experiences became more strategic, innovative, and learner-centric. I was able to analyze the needs of various stakeholders, identify gaps in knowledge or skills, and design solutions that addressed those gaps effectively.”

Samantha DiNoto Nally · former classroom teacher turned instructional designer · “Embracing the architect’s mindset”, 24/7 Teach blog, 15 May 2023

Photo: Anthony Shkraba, Pexels

YOUR PORTFOLIO PIECE

Hiring managers look at portfolios. They look for problem-solving.

A finished module on its own shows that you can build. The write-up around it, the problem, your decisions and what happened, is what shows design.

72.3%

of 101 hiring managers ranked the portfolio among their top three hiring considerations

Peck, 2023 hiring manager survey

6.9%

said they don't look at an applicant's portfolio

Peck, 2023

43 of 101

ranked "ability to solve real-world problems" first, more than any other portfolio quality; user experience came second

Peck, 2023

The survey was run by a course provider and recruited through its own channels; its author says 101 responses are likely not enough to generalise. Treat it as a strong signal, not a census.

WRITE EVERY PROJECT UP AS A SHORT CASE, IN SIX PARTS

PART	WHAT TO WRITE	LENGTH
1. The problem	What people couldn't do, and why it mattered to the organisation	2–3 sentences
2. The learners	Who they were, what they already knew, where and when they'd learn	2–3 sentences
3. Your role	What you did, what others did, and whose content it was	1–2 sentences
4. Decisions and why	Three key choices, each with the principle behind it	One short paragraph each
5. The built sample	A link or screens from the module, with one interaction people can try	Link and 3–4 screens
6. What happened	Pilot feedback or results, and what you changed because of it	2–3 sentences

HOW MANY PROJECTS

Two to four, written up as cases. Mix the types, such as a scenario, a job aid and an assessment, so one portfolio shows different solutions for different needs.

UNDER CONFIDENTIALITY

Rebuild the capability with fictional content and say so, rather than showing a client's or employer's work. Build accessibly: captions, readable contrast and keyboard access.

WORKSHEET 1

Your portfolio project brief

Fill this in before you build anything. If you can't answer a question, that's the next thing to find out.

THE SECTOR YOU'RE AIMING AT

THE PROBLEM

What can't people do yet, and what does it cost the organisation?

THE LEARNERS

Who are they, what do they already know, and where will they learn?

WHO OWNS THE CONTENT?

Name a real person who will review it: a colleague, a contact in your sector, a not-for-profit.

THREE MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES

Each starts with an observable verb, and each has a task that tests it.

THE ASSESSMENT

THE TOOL YOU'LL BUILD IT IN

WHO WILL PILOT IT, AND HOW YOU'LL GATHER FEEDBACK

YOUR THREE KEY DESIGN DECISIONS, AND THE PRINCIPLE BEHIND EACH

WHAT THE JOB PAYS

The pay data, and its limits

There is no reliable public figure for "instructional designer" as such. Here is what the best available data says, and how to read it.

US GOVERNMENT DATA, MAY 2025	MEDIAN ANNUAL PAY	TYPICAL ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION
Training and development specialists Design and run training in organisations	US$69,280	Bachelor's degree
Instructional coordinators Mostly in schools and education systems	US$77,440	Master's degree

Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook. The BLS doesn't track instructional designers as a separate occupation; these are its two closest categories.

US$83,347

average reported by 518 US full-time instructional designers

Peck, 2023 salary survey

US$85–87k

average for corporate roles; the report gives US$85,452 in its summary and US$87,384 in its sector table

Peck, 2023

US$68,474

average for higher education roles

Peck, 2023

THE SPREAD MATTERS MORE THAN THE MIDDLE

The lowest-paid 10 per cent of training and development specialists earned under US$38,760 in May 2025, and the top 10 per cent over US$123,250. Industry makes a difference: specialists in professional and technical services had a median of US$82,110 (BLS).

In the 2023 survey, designers with up to three years' experience averaged US$77,856, but respondents chose to take part and may skew towards higher earners.

OUTSIDE THE US

RESEARCH ONGOING

We haven't yet found a reliable, dated salary dataset for instructional designers in Australia or New Zealand. Until we do, use the advertised ranges in current job ads for the sector and city you're targeting, and treat salary-site averages with caution: most are undated and self-reported, with no sample size.

STRAIGHT ANSWERS

Degrees, certificates and tools

Three questions every career-changing teacher asks, answered from the evidence rather than from course sales pages.

Q Do I need a master's degree?

Usually not. In the analysis of 1,030 US job ads, more than 60 per cent asked only for a bachelor's degree and fewer than 8 per cent asked for a master's (Wang et al., 2021). A master's is more often preferred than required, and is more expected in universities and for senior roles. In government data, instructional coordinator roles typically ask for one.

Q Is an instructional design certificate worth it?

It can be, for structure, feedback and a deadline. But hiring managers expect experience to be shown, and almost every job ad mentions it. If you take a certificate, choose one that ends with a portfolio project you can write up as a case. Two or three real projects, documented from brief to result, do more for a first application than another credential.

The Learning Curve view, based on the job-ad and hiring-manager evidence in this guide. We haven't found studies that compare certificate holders' hiring outcomes directly.

Q Which tools should I learn?

Where ads name tools, a learning management system is the most common, and authoring software appeared in a third of the 1,030 ads. Learn the authoring tool that recurs in the twenty ads you read for worksheet 2, by building your portfolio piece in it. Then learn to use general AI assistants well for briefs, outlines and critique, while keeping the design judgement yourself.

ALSO FROM THE LEARNING CURVE

25 AI tools for learning design, and how to use them well

Our free field guide: which AI tool for which design job, a prompt to try for each, and what to watch for.
thelearningcurve.net/reports/ai-tools-for-learning-design

AVOID THESE

Five mistakes that slow the switch

01 Leading with years of teaching

Employers read "twelve years in the classroom" as delivery experience. Lead with what you designed.

02 Building a portfolio of school lessons

A Year 7 lesson reminds hiring managers of the gap. Build for adults at work, even if the topic is close to your subject.

03 Collecting tools instead of finishing work

One finished, piloted module beats certificates in five tools.

04 Treating the subject expert as an obstacle

In design roles, getting good material out of busy experts is the job. Show that you can do it.

05 Showing screens without the thinking

Ten projects with no write-ups show output. Three cases show judgement.

DO THIS THIS WEEK

Open twenty job ads in the sector you want, copy every duty and tool into worksheet 2, and mark each one you could already show evidence for.

The unmarked items are your plan.

WORKSHEET 2

The twenty-ad audit

List every duty and tool that recurs across twenty ads in your target sector. Tally how often each appears, then mark whether you can already show evidence.

DUTY, SKILL OR TOOL FROM THE ADS	TIMES SEEN	EVIDENCE NOW?	WHERE I'LL GET IT

EXPECT TO SEE

Collaboration, communication, course development, consulting subject experts, needs analysis, an LMS and at least one authoring tool. If your list looks very different, check you're reading design roles, not delivery roles.

THEN

The three most frequent items you can't yet evidence become the brief for your portfolio piece (worksheet 1) and your SME project (step 5).

WORKSHEET 3

Translate your own experience

Write down six things you designed as a teacher. Rename each in design terms, and note the evidence you could show today.

WHAT I DID	WHAT A DESIGNER CALLS IT	EVIDENCE I CAN SHOW

MY THREE STRONGEST CLAIMS, REWRITTEN AS CV LINES

Design verb, adult learners where possible, who you worked with, and what changed.

REFERENCES

Sources and further reading

Every figure in this guide comes from a source below. Statistics and pay data were checked in November 2026; pay figures change, so confirm before you rely on them.

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