The Everydayness of Instructional Design and the Pursuit of Quality in Online Courses

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Abstract

This article reports research into the everydayness of instructional design (meaning designers' daily routines, run-of-the-mill interactions with colleagues, and other, prosaic forms of social contact), and how everydayness relates to their pursuit of quality in online course design. These issues were investigated through an ethnographic case study, centered on a team of instructional designers at a university in the United States, and using the dimensions of everydayness articulated by Troubé (2021) as an interpretive framework. Designers were observed spending significant amounts of time engaged in repetitive practices of course refinement, meaning mundane, workaday tasks like revising, updating, fine-tuning, or fixing the courses to which they were assigned. Refining practices were interrelated with, but also experienced as distinct from, the specialized processes of instructional design or innovation that the designers also applied, largely because of their adjustable nature and the background of neutrality they provided (or the way they faded out of designers' explicit awareness and attention). Refinement also contributed towards the normative structures of meaning designers shared around their work (both positive and negative). Refining played a meaningful role in designers' pursuit of course quality, both to help them achieve quality, as well as to understand what the ideal of quality meant in specific instances. The article concludes by exploring what implications these findings have for the study and practice of pursuing quality in the context of online course development.

Keywords: Instructional design; online course design; higher education; everydayness; qualitative research; ethnography; case study

How do instructional designers pursue quality in online course design? Typically, prior research has investigated this from the perspective of the specialized processes and course design strategies that designers employ. Zimmerman et al. (2020) represented this body of research when they asserted that, "the impact of faculty practice, intentional online course design, and the relationship of institutionally supported quality processes are vital to explore" (p. 148). However, in their review of the literature related to instructional designers' roles, Pollard and Kumar (2022) reminded that "instructional designers do more than engaging [*sic*] in systematic processes to design instruction." By implication, therefore, understanding other practices in which designer engage, along with how those practices connect with their pursuit of quality, are also important issues.

There is value in better understanding the "everydayness" of instructional design, or "the day-to-day affairs of life" (Yanchar & South, 2008, p. 93) that can significantly occupy designers' time—their daily routines, run-of-the-mill interactions with colleagues, and other, prosaic forms of social contact. Studies of performance in other fields (Arndt, 1992; Wacquant, 2004)—including design (Boudeau, 2013), and teaching (Mælan et al., 2020)—have demonstrated that the ordinary details that make up the day-to-day realities of people's practical experience are a crucial aspect of how they pursue excellence in a craft. Hyysalo and Hyysalo (2018) expressed this in their study of what they called the "mundane work" of design:

> By mundane work . . . we refer to the variety of actions that range from coordinating space for workshops, to seeking participants, to sorting output, to guesstimating what the participants can get done in a given time-frame. Such actions might be seen as low-level design activities or as part of "silent design" by non-designers in organizations, but some actions could just as validly be seen as janitorial work, recruiting, secretarial work, or qualitative data analysis that just happen to be related to design. We draw attention to how these kinds of mundane work permeate . . . design and play an important role in its outcomes. (p 44)

While prior research in the field of instructional design has acknowledged the existence of everyday, routine tasks associated with course design (Chittur, 2018; Schwier & Wilson, 2010), it has not made such everydayness the direct object of study. This paper reports research into the everydayness of instructional design, drawn from an ethnographic study of online course design at a university in the United States and using the dimensions of everydayness articulated by Troubé (2021) as an interpretive framework, to provide insights into the relationship between such routine practices and designers' pursuit of quality. The specific questions studied were: What kinds of everyday, routine practices do instructional designers engage in during online course design? And, how did those forms of everydayness fit into designers' pursuit of quality in online courses?

Literature Review

Understanding Online Course Quality

Prior literature in the field of online learning has suggested that course quality is a multi-dimensional construct. In part, this is due to the multiple stakeholders involved, "learners, instructors, employers, and society" (Esfijani, 2018, p. 58). Each has different perspectives and concerns that affect what standards of excellence they prioritize. As one example, since students manage their learning differently than faculty manage their teaching, students tend to value techniques like "posting due date checklists" more highly than do faculty (Bolliger & Martin, 2018, p. 580). More broadly, Lenert and Janes (2017) identified a variety of differing standards that scholars have used to measure online course quality. These included students' satisfaction, how well course designers followed the proper processes of course design, whether courses exemplified certain properties considered to be high quality, and the forms of interaction that instructors employed with their students. As a whole, existing literature indicated that course quality is a somewhat flexible construct, defined in a variety of ways depending on the interests of individual researchers, or the situational concerns of the contexts they studied. Interestingly, despite the seeming logic that course quality should also include some measure of how well students achieved desired learning outcomes, Esfijani (2018) found that this has not been the case in much of the existing research: "The literature showed that researchers and practitioners tend to more readily consider the easily measurable aspects, that is, inputs and resources, rather than the outputs and outcomes" of online courses (p. 64).

Prior literature has also addressed how to design for quality in online courses. A frequent theme has been collaboration, "designing a high-quality online course requires various sources of expertise not usually possessed by one person" (Chao et al., 2010, p. 107; see also Y. Chen & Carliner, 2021; Davey et al., 2019; Halupa, 2019; Zimmerman et al., 2020). Another theme has been whether designers adhere to the guidelines specified in course design rubrics (L.-L. Chen, 2016; Lenert & Janes, 2017; Martin et al., 2021; Martin & Bolliger, 2022). Providing faculty and other staff the proper training has also been identified as important to achieving quality (Regan et al., 2012; Scoppio & Luyt, 2017). Further, some researchers have highlighted the value of iterative design processes in creating quality course designs (Bawa & Watson, 2017; Bowers et al., 2021; Chartier, 2021; Moore, 2016). Iteration typically connotes either returning to a previous phase of a design process, or repeating the same phase, based on one's monitoring of the results one achieves during a current phase (Adams, 2002; Verstegen et al., 2006). Although the value of iteration for improving quality seems logical, Verstegen et al. (2006) questioned whether this was always the case. In their experimental study of design iterations, they found that while all their subjects iterated (corroborating the conclusion that there is an "inherent nature" of iterating in instructional design, see Stefaniak & Hwang, 2021, p. 3351), "the number of iterations [did] not correlate with the quality of the results" (p. 506). There is reason to temper their assessment, however, given the nature of their experiment that placed student designers in a highly controlled, artificial situation. Empirical research in other settings has concluded iterations are often important for achieving high levels of design quality (Adams, 2002).

Understanding Everyday Practices and Everydayness

A common assumption underlying much of the prior literature is that formal design processes, along with the related, specialized strategies that instructional designers are trained to employ, are the proper unit of analysis when studying how they pursue the creation of high-quality online courses (however so defined). Chen and Carliner (2021) summarized this in their

systematic review of literature concerning designer-faculty relationships in higher education: "Instructional designers play an essential role in ensuring the quality of the online courses by effectively employing technology, designing pedagogically sound learning materials, and managing the flow of the course-design process" (p. 472). However, research in design studies more broadly provides grounds for questioning this assumption (Campbell et al., 2019; Heinemann et al., 2012; Matthews, 2009; Matthews & Heinemann, 2012; McDonald et al., 2021; Sharrock & Anderson, 1994). As Matthews (2009) concluded, "the very idea that good design work is, or can be, the straightforward outcome of the application of a method was not something ever vindicated by the results of methods-based design [research] programmes" (p. 65). This is not to say that designers' application of formal processes is unimportant. Rather, this research has recognized that design cannot be reduced to method or strategy alone (Fleming, 1998). Researchers have found that studying design as a rule system that designers apply, or a set of strategies that translates a body of theory into practice, fails to capture the richness of exactly how designers draw "upon a range of social resources, and in a real way make design out of whatever interactions are available to them in a particular moment of a particular circumstance" (McDonald et al., 2021, p. 4). A fuller picture of design practice is provided when one also studies the everyday routines, interactions, and other forms of social contact in which designers engage (Boudeau, 2013; Hyysalo & Hyysalo, 2018).

Similar issues have been observed in other fields. Scholars from fields as diverse as athletics (Arndt, 1992; Wacquant, 2004), teaching (Mælan et al., 2020), psychiatry (Troubé, 2021), ethics (Horton, 2008), and philosophy (Lefebvre & Levich, 1987) have drawn comparable conclusions, namely that to fully understand human practices one must attend to "the (too-easily and too-often overlooked) philosophical and empirical importance of ostensibly banal, *everyday* happenings" of the participants (Horton, 2008, p. 265; emphasis in original). Often, the study of everydayness has taken an informal shape, typically cataloging the quotidian events and activities in which people participate as part of their everyday experience within a domain of practice.

However, Troubé (2021) recently developed a more formal framework of everydayness. By summarizing and codifying prior work in the area into a model of the dimensions of everydayness, her framework is meant to "guide" study of people's experience "with the everyday," and provide a rigorous basis to "examine the function" of discrete events and activities to assess how they actually fit into people's immersion in the everyday (p. 20). These dimensions are:

Repetition. Everydayness is a composition of common, frequent, repeating, and regular activities and events.

Adjustability. Everyday activities are experienced in a fluid flow in which people move in and out, constantly refining or adapting their actions to fit the shape of the circumstances they encounter.

Neutrality. Discrete activities and events of which everydayness is composed rarely draw peoples' explicit attention, nor do people typically deliberate about which everyday events in which to engage. Instead, everydayness forms a neutral field against which the rest of the events in which people participate stand out. So, in this context *neutral* does not mean people do not have affective responses to everyday practices (see the dimension of normativity), but that such practices themselves are usually not the object of intentional thought.

Normativity. People are not indifferent to the everyday. Everydayness fits into the normative structures of shared meaning people experience within a practice, and so contributes towards what they view as desirable and undesirable, better and worse, and so on.

Although Troubé (2021) brought these dimensions together into a formal framework, she did not develop them originally. Prior research supports each dimension as an aspect of what makes up everyday existence, along with the value of studying that everydayness through scholarly means. Of course, the dimension of repetition has a certain self-evidence to it. If the definition of everydayness encompasses "the day-to-day affairs of life," as Yanchar and South stated (2008, p. 93), then one would expect it to include the recurring events that comprise so much of the day-to-day (Stern, 2000; Suchman et al., 2019). The dimension of adjustability can be found in the work of researchers like Dunne (1997), and Stanley and Williamson (2017). In particular, Stanley and Williamson discussed how the adjustability of the everyday differs from similar constructs such as iteratively cycling through the steps of a process, noting that people's everyday adjustability is, "faster and more flexible" than process iteration, as well as evidences a greater sensitivity "to the subtleties of novel situations" that allows for more seamless adaptation (p. 719). The dimension of neutrality has been articulated in a number of research traditions, notably in philosophy by scholars such as Dreyfus (2014) and Wrathall and Londen (2019), and empirically by researchers like Garfinkel (1968) and Liberman (2013). Wrathall summarized much of the dimension of normativity by referring to Heidegger's (1962) well-known example of hammering: "When hammering, we understand and encounter a hammer without having to have any reflective thoughts about it at all. Indeed, we hammer best when we are not deliberately trying to do so" (Wrathall, 2006, p. 35). Finally, the dimension of normativity has also been articulated by scholars such as Dreyfus (2005), and Yanchar and Slife (2017). Summarizing how normativity fits into everyday practices, Yanchar and Slife stated that

> The [normative] reference points entailed within those shared practices are *part of* the publicness of practices; they are the primary means by which practices provide a basis for meaningful interaction among people, even when individual persons' actual ways of participating in practices differ in significant respects or evince varying degrees of competence. In short, [normative] reference points are ontologically real aspects of practices that make it possible for there to be anything like adequate and coherent, or even excellent, involvement in the world. (p. 149; emphasis in original)

These dimensions of everydayness provide a foundation for the current study. Instructional designers engage in many activities that their methods and models do not encompass (Cox & Osguthorpe, 2003; Pollard & Kumar, 2022), and all of their practices should be legitimate objects of research to understand how such interactions contribution to quality design outcomes. In this study, instead of examining specialized processes that instructional designers apply, I focused on their everyday, quotidian activities—those that have typically escaped scholars' attention in prior research—to understand the part such practices play in achieving quality in online course design. I used the dimensions of everydayness, as articulated by Troubé (2021), as an interpretive frame to both define designers' everyday practices and explore how they fit into the overall structure of their experience of the pursuit of quality. Given the importance of everydayness in other fields, this research promises to reveal aspects of how

instructional designers pursue online course quality that are easy to overlook when one focuses on the formal design practices that have typically been investigated through prior research.

Method

This was a single case study of the pursuit of quality in online course design. The scope of the case was a department tasked to develop online courses at a high research activity university (R2) in the United States, that I will refer to as the Online Course Office (OCO).

Site and Participants

The OCO was established as a centralized resource to help departments and individual instructors design and maintain the online courses they offered. It provided instructional design support, media production services, academic support for teaching (e.g., student success managers, teaching assistants), and other administrative functions (e.g., copyright clearance, learning management system (LMS) support). At the time of the study, the OCO employed eight full-time instructional designers, supported by a staff of 15-20 part-time and student employees (a number that frequently fluctuated). At any given time, approximately 20 other full-time employees, and hundreds of part-time and student employees, worked in related support areas. The full research project studied the entire organization, along with some of the faculty members with whom the designers worked; however, the scope of this paper only included the full-time instructional designers (Table 1). All eight designers made themselves available for observations and informal conversations. Five made themselves available for formal interviews (for more on observations, conversations, and interviews, see the next section: Data Sources).

Table 1

Summary of OCO Instructional Designer Backgrounds

Designer (pseudonym)	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Education level	Years of ID experience	Instructional design expertise	Other background experience	Formally interview?
Andy	Male	White	MS	3.5	Instructional design leadership; learner engagement	High school teaching	Yes
Britney	Female	White	MS	24	Cognitive apprenticeship	Hi-tech industry	No
Carrie	Female	White	PhD	3.5	Holistic educational models	Non-profit audience research	Yes
Daniel	Male	White	MS	12	Human performance improvement	K-12 teaching; Hi-tech industry	Yes
Ethan	Male	Polynesian	PhD	2	Gamification; language acquisition	College teaching	No
Frank	Male	White	MS	21	Student-student interactions	Software development	Yes

| Gina | Female | Hispanic | MA, TESOL | 12 | Language acquisition | TESOL administration | Yes |
| Harris | Female | White | MA, Second Language Teaching | 3 | Language acquisition | College teaching | No |

Scoping the research to a single case allowed for in-depth exploration of the instructional designers' everyday practices—practices that are presumed to be so self-evident they do not rise to the level of interest of most researchers—providing insight into the pursuit of quality as the designers experienced it (Packer, 2018). However, case studies do not test a hypothesis about effective means of designing better online courses, nor can one generate generalizable guidelines for what defines quality in an online course. Therefore, this research was not designed to establish the importance of any particular instructional design method in the pursuit of course quality, nor was it a study to find evidence of particular techniques in designers' work. Neither was this research an evaluation of the OCO designers' effectiveness in their course design practices. The activities in which they engaged were studied as their attempts to *pursue* quality; whether they actually achieved it remained out of scope. But even without providing these types of findings, case studies are still a valuable form of scholarship. Case study researchers assume that the depths of the world are inexhaustible, and that "every existing human community must have grasped something essential about the way the world is" (Packer, 2018, p. 300), meaning cases can reveal aspects of phenomena that remain hidden when studying issues from more analytic perspectives (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Stake, 1995). These perspectives are valuable, even if they are uncommon or challenge common views, if a community of practitioners are to learn all that they can about accomplishing the outcomes they desire (cf. McDonald & Yanchar, 2020).

Data Sources

The data for the case were drawn from an ongoing, ethnographic study of online course design in higher education. Ethnography is the study of a form of life by coming into direct contact with those who experience it, and observing and participating with them over time. It often focuses on a community's "least known and least spectacular" practices, "the drab and obsessive routine[s]" that are frequently overlooked when research is conducted to test abstract, theoretical constructs (Wacquant, as quoted in Packer, 2018, p. 491). The full corpus of ethnographic data for this study included (a) observations of work as it happened at the OCO; (b) innumerable, short conversations with designers and others throughout the workday as course design events occurred; (c) formal interviews; (d) artifacts generated to support, or produced during, the course design process; and my own participation as I immersed myself in work at the OCO (Schensul et al., 1999). Procedures for gathering each of these data types are described below.

Observations were primarily conducted on-site in the OCO offices. However, at times instructional designers met with faculty members or other staff through video conference, and in such instances, I also joined the event remotely. Early observations were open-ended, where I gathered the types of information specified by Schensul et al. (1999): the settings where work took place; events and event sequences; counting, census-taking, and mapping the relevant environment; and noting indicators of social or other differences (cf. pp. 96-97). Later in the study I targeted specific events, such as observing course kickoff meetings, or media planning

meetings. As the study progressed, OCO employees also invited me to activities they thought were relevant, such as meetings with a faculty member about a course challenge. In these cases, the information I gathered was customized to each event, to record details pertinent to the event's purpose, or details related to the reason for which I sought out the activity (e.g., when I observed a designer setting up a course in the LMS, I gathered information on what the designer was attempting to accomplish, difficulties faced along the way, and how he explained his actions to the faculty member with whom he was working). When an invitation to an event was extended at the last minute, I relied on Emerson et al.'s (2011) protocol for what to record: descriptions, dialogue, and characterization (cf. pp. 58-73).

During most weeks of the study, I was at the OCO offices for either two or three days. The organization provided me with a workstation, allowing me to be present for spontaneous events that arose, as well as planned activities. Observations ranged from less than an hour to a full workday. All observations were documented through jottings in-the-moment, expanded out to full field notes as soon as possible after events were complete (Emerson et al, 2011). Early in the study, select observations were also video-recorded and transcribed for analysis to gather sample transcripts of common event types (e.g., an administrative meeting, or a course kickoff meeting).

Short, informal conversations with OCO employees were usually associated with each observation. Some conversations happened during the observation, where I would ask a question to clarify what I was observing, ask how common that activity was in the OCO's work, or to gather other information related to my purpose in the observation. These conversations were rarely based on pre-written questions; my purpose for the observation served to guide me in what topics to discuss. At other times, the people I was with initiated conversations in which I engaged as long as they were interested. If the event itself did not allow for conversation, as it concluded I asked those from whom I was interested in gathering information if they could talk for a few minutes. In some cases, I also emailed individuals to ask follow-up questions if they were not available for further conversation. Follow-up conversations or emails were intentionally brief to avoid interfering with my informants' work. All informal conversations were jotted in the moment and transcribed later, as described above. Emails were included in the project record verbatim.

Formal interviews were carried out beginning at the study's half-way point and continued until it concluded. Five of the eight instructional designers made themselves available for interviews. I also interviewed five faculty member the OCO worked with, purposefully sampled to gather a range of backgrounds, experience, and employment status at the university (e.g., both full-time and adjunct faculty). Each person was interviewed twice. First interviews started with a standard, semi-structured protocol, asking about prior experience with course design, the person's personal definition of quality, and notable instances where they both achieved and failed to achieve quality. Follow-up questions were then asked to clarify or solicit more information. Interviews were structured so that people were allowed to fully recount their stories even if that meant not all questions in the interview protocol could be asked (Brinkmann, 2013). Based on interviewees' responses in the first interview, as well as events in which I observed them participating, a custom interview protocol was crafted for each person and a second interview was conducted between three and six weeks after the first. Interviews ranged from 40 – 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. I conducted all first interviews alone, with a colleague joining me during all second interviews.

The OCO also made numerous artifacts available to me throughout the study. I was given unrestricted access to their training materials, administrative documents such as organization charts, instructional design models, and course standard rubrics. On a case-by-case request I was given access to institutional data, such as student evaluations of online courses, enrollment rates by semester, and course budgets. At times, OCO employees included me in email conversations with their colleagues. If everyone in the email had consented to be part of the study, I also included these as part of the project record.

Finally, my own participation in work at the OCO formed a part of the project record. As a researcher-practitioner, I have over 20 years of experience with online course design. Based on this, OCO administrators allowed me to engage in certain activities specified in their course design process, such as regularly scheduled course evaluations, to experience first-hand some of the factors involved in how the organization assessed course quality. As individual instructional designers gained confidence in me, they also allowed me to participate with them in selected design activities, such as advising faculty members on course design options, or completing reviews of faculty-submitted course materials. I recorded my own participation through in-the-moment jottings, later expanded out to field notes, as described above. While I did not base any conclusions on data solely gathered through my own participation, such events were nevertheless valuable as part of the study methodology. Participation sensitized me towards issues to discuss with employees as I observed them throughout the day or informed the development of future observation guidelines. My own participation also built credibility with those I interacted with, which, in turn, tended to lead to more openness on their part when I approached them for information.

From this full corpus, the specific data used in this article were observations that took place during the first quarter of 2022, supplemented by formal interviews and informal conversations with instructional designers during the same period.

The ethnographic fieldwork, and later data analysis, were conducted from a perspective that viewed people and their involvement in a world of practice as found in writings of scholars such as Dreyfus (2014), Packer (2018), and Wrathall (2006). Central to this was the assumption that people's "practical activities constitute [both] mind and world" (Packer, 2018, p. 315). These scholars have persuasively argued that "humans are fully embodied, engaged agents . . . situated in a lived world of significance," which means that study of human activity does not need to rely on "a more fundamental reality of causal forces assumed to control . . . human participation" (Yanchar & Slife, 2017, pp. 147–148). This contrasts with other views common in social science, that either abstract cultural forces outside of people's control determine how they experience the world, or that their subjective perceptions construct their views of reality. Therefore, issues related to this study such as what counted as course quality, or what counted as the pursuit of quality, were taken to be best revealed through study of the local, practical work of specific instructional designers, without appeal to either systems of social rules or internal mental states.

Data Analysis

My data analysis was guided by the dimensions of everydayness as articulated by Troubé (2021) and described earlier. The model served as an *interpretive* framework, meaning that rather than attempting to prove that the OCO's practices aligned with the model, or, alternatively, studying the model itself using the OCO as a convenient site, it instead helped me elucidate and clarify aspects of the core phenomenon under study—the practices that

instructional designers used to pursue online course quality. As Liberman (2018) observed, research models are too blunt an instrument to fully express the reality of a social situation, but they can still be useful to the extent that they help researchers pay attention to aspects of a group's "local work of . . . coordinating their actions" that might otherwise be missed. Similarly, Horton (2008) emphasized that when studying the more messy and ephemeral aspects of human existence, like everydayness, attempting to reduce them to a model or formal set of principles could in large measure conceal the very aspects of them that make them interesting and important objects of study in the first place. He said that by its very nature, everydayness exists "*in excess* of most extant Social Scientific assumptions, accounts and understandings and – relatedly – [is] significantly *messier* than the kinds of assumptions, accounts and understandings which are predominant in Social Scientific disciplines" (p. 366; emphasis in original). Therefore, in my analysis I sought to use the everydayness framework to draw my attention to dimensions of the phenomena under study that I might otherwise miss, instead of attempting to reduce everydayness to a simple expression of the four dimensions.

Data analysis proceeded using principles described by Packer (2018). The goal was not to summarize designers' experience into a set of codes or otherwise abstract expressions, but to develop a composite account of the structure of their experiences, built from analysis of their lived activities. This consisted of (a) detailed readings of all interview and observation transcripts, and observation field notes from the specified period; (b) identifying instances where designers' pursuit of quality in course design became explicit; this often occurred when participants experienced a breakdown in an activity that allowed for direct examination and questioning about what, functionally, was occurring. This included myself as a researcher, where my own assumptions about designers' pursuit of quality were challenged, and so I directly questioned them about events when, or shortly after, they occurred; (c) crafting an initial thematic structure of salient topics related to designers' pursuit of quality consisting of short statements that summarized aspects of their experiences; (d) refining this structure using part-whole analysis (Vagle, 2018), where themes were compared against the whole of the original data, as well as comparing the whole to the details of the thematic structure; this resulted in clarifying, combining, eliminating, or adding themes; (e) writing a narrative account of the thematic structure to address my research questions.

Creating a narrative report of the thematic structure allowed me to craft a coherent account that highlighted situational details most relevant to my research questions (Newkirk, 1992). Yet drawing attention to these factors meant that other important issues were, of necessity, placed into the background. The lack of discussion about other matters should not be taken as evidence of their absence, but rather that they were out of scope of this paper's research questions. Further, the narrative reports a composite account developed both from participants' quotes as well as summaries and paraphrases out of my field notes. Such a rich narrative allowed me to highlight how everyday practices fit into designers' pursuit of quality, without translating their experiences into abstract concepts that artificially harmonized their character (Packer, 2018). I refer to individual designers using pseudonyms in extended examples or when directly quoting them, where tying an account to specific designers' backgrounds may be useful in interpreting their actions. But in other cases, typically those where a certain action or activity was observed multiple times in the work of multiple designers, I refrained from naming individuals to avoid a misperception that the event under discussion was isolated to one person only. I have also made minor adjustments to quoted comments to eliminate phrases that could

compromise anonymity, or to ensure they can be understood when excerpted from the full transcript.

Study Limitations

While this method allowed for detailed study of how instructional designers experienced the pursuit of quality, it did come with some limitations. The OCO was formed to address specific concerns in a particular context at a single university. The OCO's practices were not static; the OCO was an ever-evolving organization, and this research was only a snapshot of their practices at a specific time. While it is reasonable to conclude their practice of instructional design resembled that of designers elsewhere, they also customized their approach for their situational needs. It could be that instructional designers in other organizations experience the pursuit of quality in a different manner. Consequently, the details reported through this research may not generalize to every situation. Yet as Packer (2001) argued, "while big generalizations may appear more powerful, details are more informative, especially in the long run" (p. 9). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide numerous details, hoping to encourage readers' reflection on how they experience everydayness in the pursuit of quality themselves. Further, given the richness of practice at the OCO, this report can only provide a partial view of designers' pursuit of quality. So rather than aiming for a comprehensive account, I aspired to one that could sensitize readers to the forms of instructional design that the designers at the OCO experienced. By this I mean an account where readers are given a view into how the participating designers "see and feel" issues related to the pursuit of quality, in the hope that similar issues will "become more see-able and feel-able to [readers] on their own" (McDonald, 2022).

Findings

I present my findings in three parts (Table 2). First, to provide background and context for my core findings I briefly discuss how online course quality was defined at the OCO. Second, I offer an account of the everyday practices in which designers engaged during online course design, that I will refer to as practices of refinement. This includes describing how refinement was both associated with, but distinct from, the formal, specialized processes that are often considered definitive of online course design. As part of this analysis, I used the framework of everydayness as articulated by Troubé (2021)—repetition, adjustment, neutrality, and normativity—to help define refinement and distinguish it from the formal processes with which it contrasts. Third, I explore how everyday practices of refinement fit into designers' pursuit of quality in online course design at the OCO. This part of the analysis drew again on the everydayness dimensions to help highlight the fit.

Table 2

Summary of Everydayness at the OCO

Issue	Description
Instructional designers' definitions of quality	• Explicit definitions were broad and interconnected, and consistent with prior research. • In practice, however, designers tended to operationalize quality standards that were most easily definable and quantifiable.
The structure of everydayness	• Everydayness was characterized by the frequent and repetitive practices of refinement. • Refinement practices were interrelated with specialized practices of creativity as well as processes of instructional design. • Designers experienced refinement differently than they did the processes they applied; refining was more adjustable than their use of design processes, and during much of their day-to-day work they did not look to design procedures for instructions on what they should do to achieve their goals (e.g., refining was neutral). • Designers' positive and negative responses to refinement (both of which influenced their style of participation in course design) revealed some of the normativity associated with the sense of meaning designers shared about their work.
Course refinement and the pursuit of quality	• The frequency (repetition) of refinement practices meant they often became a primary mechanism through which designers' pursued course quality. • At times, instructional designers employed refinement practices to align emerging work with a known vision, fluidly adjusting the activities they deployed as necessary to achieve the goal they were pursuing. • Sometimes, designers did not have an articulated vision of quality, in which cases refinement practices helped them both explore what quality meant in that instance, at the same time they attempted to pursue it. • Pursuing quality through refinement also reflected a dimension of neutrality; designers usually refined ideas that occurred to them in-the-moment, taking little, if any, time for reflection before making changes, and rarely employing formal problem-solving methods to align a course with measures of quality. • Some evidence suggested that for at least some designers, refinement was desirable (it played a different normative role) because it opened possibilities for pursuing novel course innovations, where routine requests drew attention to opportunities for inventive, creative designs.

Defining Online Course Quality at the OCO

When the topic of course quality arose in settings such as OCO staff meetings, it was common for instructional designers to offer multiple definitions (consistent with what was found in prior literature). A sampling of how they described a quality course included indicators like: (a) promoting high levels of engagement between students and instructors; (b) its ability to engage students' attention; (c) how well it promoted experiential learning; (d) how well it adhered to the OCO's style guide; (e) if it was free of typos or other production mistakes; or (f) whether it was well organized and simple for students to navigate. Further, in these discussions the designers typically assumed that forms of quality were mutually reinforcing. For example, they thought it was easier for students to meaningfully engage with instructors in a course that was well organized than in one that was poorly structured.

In practice, however, designers' operationalization of course quality was more complex. A complete description of how is beyond the scope of this paper, so for my purposes I only note that in contrast to the interconnected character of their explicit definitions of quality, in concrete cases designers tended to prioritize some measures of quality over others. Often, what counted as quality was a factor of how well a course complied with the university's myriad, detailed policies and standards, or other criteria that could be definitively and quantitatively measured. Yet for purposes of interpreting the research that follows, it is sufficient to recognize that while designers may have meant any of several kinds of measures when they referred to quality, their practices in the pursuit of that quality were similar regardless of their aim in any instance.

Everydayness at the OCO
The Repetitive Practices of Course Refinement

Exploring instructional designers' experiences of everydayness at the OCO began by identifying the most frequent, routine, and regular activities in which they engaged (the dimension of repetition). These were what I will call the instructional designers' practices of course refinement. Refinement practices did not exist in isolation, however. They were found in an interrelated structure with designers' application of specialized methods of creativity and innovation, along with formal processes of instructional design. Therefore, practices of refinement are best understood by articulating their relationship to the other, more formal, activities to which they were related.

Formal Practices of Creativity, Innovation, and Instructional Design. Least frequently seen in designers' work were activities commonly associated with creativity and innovation: framing design challenges, employing ideation processes (such as brainstorming) to generate large numbers of ideas, formal cycles of prototyping, and so on. With one exception (to be discussed in a later section), instructional designers reported these kinds of activities as occupying the smallest percentage of their course design work, depending on the designer between 1% and 20%. And the OCO program administrator estimated that across the organization such events comprised no more than 10–15% of designers' course-related workload, overall.

More common, but still in the minority, were activities identified in instructional design processes, such as writing learning outcomes, selecting instructional strategies, or generating requirements for course assets. Also included were production activities where course components were initially fashioned, like developing an interactive unit in eLearning authoring software, filming an instructional video, or even jotting down a quick draft of assignment instructions. Much of the OCO's instructional design work was templatized. Designers

completed a standard course design document, consisting of prompts that guided them through the major phases of their instructional design process. And they followed a style guide and course template for their LMS that governed the look and feel of elements like course navigation, branding, and the display of learning materials. Designers' estimates of how often they participated in formal instructional design practices varied widely; depending on where their courses were in the product lifecycle, in any given month they may have engaged in nearly no instructional design activities, or up to 60% of course-related work could have been spent so occupied. However, the program administrator estimated on average, conventional instructional design practices made up approximately 30% of designers' workload.

Everyday Practices of Course Refinement. Designers' most frequent course-related activities were mundane, workaday tasks associated with refining the courses in their portfolios: revising, updating, expanding, extending, elaborating, completing, modifying, editing, calibrating, clarifying, fine-tuning, adjusting, fixing. If designers did not perform these tasks themselves, they supervised student employees who did, which included giving instructions, showing students how to complete tasks and correcting work if necessary—all activities with an equally mundane character. While some refinement tasks were quick and easy to complete on their own, the cumulative effect of all of them was that most designers found themselves engaged in this kind of work most of the time. Except for Andy, who had unique supervisory duties, designers reported that anywhere from 40% to over 90% of a typical week could be spent refining courses they were developing or maintaining. And the program administrator estimated that across the organization, designers were regularly devoting half of their course-related worktime, or more, to such tasks.

This is not a claim that refinement was categorically distinct from designers' other practices. Instead of such practices possessing inherent properties that distinguished them from alternatives in an essential sense, it was rather that refinement fit into their experience as instructional designers differently than did their application of specialized processes. To help avoid misunderstanding, I recognize two interrelations between the varying kinds of practice I have described. First, there were obvious connections between creating an initial version of a course component—a learning activity, or a first draft of learning outcomes—and the revisions necessary to polish them (to be discussed in a later section). Second, there could be fluid boundaries when designers considered their application of a process to have ended, and their activities of refining to begin. For instance, Carrie told me about her work to design an interactive quiz. She clearly contrasted major phases of her work as being different, describing the relatively simple process of initially populating a quiz template (what she called, "just trying to get content in,") as separate from the rounds of fine-tuning she completed later, referring to these as "clicking around in the program to look for solutions," or "looking for more efficient ways of doing what I originally did." Yet she did not identify a defining moment when she unambiguously considered the "content [to be] in," and so her "clicking around" had begun.

Distinguishing Course Refinement from Other Practices: Adjustability and Neutrality

But even with such interrelations, considering refinement as simply being an obvious follow-up to designers' application of a process that was so insignificant as to not be worth mentioning or exploring, seemed to distort aspects of their experience as instructional designers. For instance, refinement practices tended to afford high levels of adjustability, meaning that designers fluidly and seamlessly deployed them to fit the shape of emerging needs. This was

typified by the difference between what Daniel called using a process to "start from scratch," compared to what Frank called "tweaking." In the first, designers tended to focus on reaching a certain milestone, or concluding a distinct event, like how they talked about being "done" with the learning outcomes phase when they had written 2-5 outcomes per module (the OCO's standard), even though they freely acknowledged that they would continue to modify the outcomes throughout the project. Being done may have required more effort for some phases than others, implying a spectrum of completion criteria and completion effort. But designers typically could predict, at least conceptually, what it would mean for them to conclude various phases of their formal processes. But, as implied by the term "tweaking," they typically considered refinement to be much more open-ended than their application of a formal method. Instead of focusing on a milestone's conceptual conclusion state, they did not consider themselves done until they had achieved a certain standard of quality—which could be somewhat relative based on situational factors like an instructor's taste—or external events prevented them from doing so (like running out of time). Designers usually did not experience these rounds of revision as backtracking, or returning to a previous process phase, except in rare cases where they completely abandoned their work and formally conceded they were starting again.

Conflating refinement with specialized practices also implies that designers consciously and straightforwardly applied steps from their formal processes when refining, which was usually not the case. Instead, refinement practices tended to reflect an element of neutrality, where what stood out to designers were the motivations for which they engaged in an activity, rather than the steps of those activities directly. This was often apparent through the language designers used when discussing their work. When engaged in tasks like revising, fixing, or updating, designers tended to talk about what they were doing at the artifact level—double-checking the overview page, or editing a rubric—rather than how such work contributed towards the macro steps of a process. This was different from when they perceived themselves as intentionally applying instructional design practices, where they often talked about their work in process-centric terminology (e.g., documenting learning outcomes). Frequently, neither the language nor logic of design processes provided designers guidance for completing tasks of refinement, or at least the connection was very indirect. For example, common refinement activities could include editing a draft lesson page (taking it from rough notes to polished prose), or updating assignment point values to better reflect the effort students were expected to invest. Both examples typified a more granular type of work, and sometimes even different skillsets than are usually articulated in the phases of instructional design models. So, describing designers' practices of refinement as being different from instances where they perceived themselves as applying formal methods is partially meant to emphasize how much of their experience as instructional designers was not expressed, or explicitly guided, by the theoretical definitions of either innovation or instructional design practices.

Further, how designers practiced what I am calling refinement differs from how their formal processes could be considered adjustable, such as in the iterative cycles sometimes included in instructional design processes. Design iterations at the OCO usually fit into designers' practice in the manner implied by prior research—as deliberately returning to a previous design step or phase based on a judgment that returning to that step was necessary to make progress. An example might be intentionally returning to an ideation phase to brainstorm new assignment types based on evaluative data that suggested current assignments were repetitive. But, as has been discussed, even though this type of iteration could be described as

adjustable, it was not always how designers at the OCO navigated course refinements, where a fluid, open-ended adjustability, along with the neutrality of their activities, were more of the norm. Designers could be found adding a new video to the LMS, in the process of which they might field a call from an instructor, asking for an update to one of the course's learning outcomes. So, they would immediately open the design document and adjust some wording there. As they completed this, they would straightaway return to the course and begin another task, which might have been completely different from their previous work, such as fixing a typo in a page header.

Such fast-paced, frequently changing work was common at the OCO. Designers were often found task switching (cf. Mark et al., 2005), and it took intentional effort for them to arrange their schedules to focus on a discrete process or event uninterrupted. As they so rapidly moved from activity to activity, it was rare for designers to associate what they had done with a demarcated phase of a design process, nor did they perceive themselves as recursively moving backwards or forwards through a process. Improvements occurred in a more fluid manner, where they changed individual elements of a course bit-by-bit, page-by-page, and section-by-section. It was true that they did sometimes intentionally iterate through process phases, and when this happened, practices of refinement were often aspects of their iterations. So, iteration may have been one way designers refined their courses, but it did not exhaust the possibilities. Equating them somewhat distorts designers' mode of engagement with course design.

In fact, when I observed designers refining, what phase of a process they were in was not usually of significance. What mattered was the immediate issue before them, and to address it they drew on ordinary, run-of-the-mill tasks, without concern about how, or even if, what they were doing counted as a design process step. For instance, I watched Andy calibrate settings in an LMS feature, toggling options on and off to see if he could make it behave in a way that accomplished what a professor wanted. Gina told me she would regularly read course pages and adjust "sentence length . . . [for] clarity." And it was common at the beginning of a semester to find designers performing mundane updates to course details, to reflect new assignment due dates, and changes to instructors and teaching assistants. While it is possible, from a theoretical standpoint, to fit these examples into design process phases, broadly speaking, doing so conceals at least some of the ways such activities fit into designers' experience *qua* designers. When refining, they did not ordinarily perceive themselves as deliberately applying design procedures, in the sense of looking to such procedures for instructions on what they should do to achieve their goals (neutrality). What seemed to matter more was keeping their attention on the situation itself, fluidly and flexibly navigating the terrain by using the contours of the circumstances they encountered to determine what task to complete next (adjustability). Designers addressed needs as they arose, using whatever skills were appropriate regardless of whether they were recognizable as design steps or not, and without apparent regard for whether what they did could be justified by a process.

The Normativity of Instructional Designers' Practices of Refinement

Instructional designers also experienced varying affective responses to practices of refinement, that oriented them towards different styles of participation in course design. Such responses revealed some of the "implicit normativity" (Troubé, 2021, p. 20) associated with how refinement contributed towards the sense of meaning designers shared about their work, or what they considered to be desirable and undesirable about it.

The most frequent response I heard was that refining could be tedious. Most designers told me they enjoyed the glamorous, visible aspects of their job, represented by the innovation or creative methods that actually constituted the lesser portion of their work. And so, they often perceived refining—especially pedestrian tasks like adding captions to images or checking links to ensure they went to the right source—as pulling them away from activities they preferred. Carrie described this by saying, "I like being creative in my work, and I felt like [in] most of the stuff I've been able to do so far I wasn't." By "creative," she was referring to discrete practices of creativity that provided her a sense of professional satisfaction, as she clarified at another time by describing how much she enjoyed activities like "brainstorming . . . and putting all of our ideas on Post-It notes." While their repetitive and routine tasks could impact designers' personal satisfaction with their jobs (e.g., it was not uncommon to hear that such work made their jobs "boring," or "dull," despite designers' simultaneous recognition of how necessary those tasks were), it also had an effect on the quality issues at the center of this study. In particular, at times designers reacted to the tedium by delaying activities of refinement, which could be somewhat detrimental to their courses. As Carrie further described, "I spent about a week procrastinating. . . . Instead [of completing my tedious assignments], I opted to look for other, simpler (and maybe less urgent?) tasks."

At other times, however, designers seemed appreciative of the chance to engage in work they could perceive as less demanding. In these cases, tedium may have had an ironically favorable outcome. Interestingly, despite her preference for what she described as the creative work of instructional design, Carrie was also the most articulate in describing some of the advantageous conditions tedious refinements could provide. She said, "I actually appreciate having tedious things to do [sometimes] so most of my mental energy can go to learning new things." By "new things," Carrie seemed to mean both personal enrichment—she specifically mentioned "listening to lecture videos from other . . . courses so I can learn new ideas from fields I didn't study"—and to the possibility that monotonous tasks left her with enough mental energy to learn new course design strategies, particularly to help her "move some of the [student experience] from passive to active." While the OCO expected designers to remain current in their understanding of instructional design, the organization did not take into account that when designers were spending time in professional development, they would have less time for other course design activities (e.g., designers were not assigned fewer courses so they had time for on-the-job learning). This meant most designers had to find ways of remaining current by fitting professional development around their expected workload, a task that could be emotionally and mentally taxing. So, Carrie seemed to suggest that periodic tedium helped her by placing her in "a mental state where I feel up to trying something new," as she attempted to balance both the demands of her required work, while also devoting at least some time to the professional development that would help her better pursue quality in current and future assignments.

At still other times, designers sometimes found practices of refinement to be actively satisfying, especially refinements that required them to apply mental effort. Ethan explained by saying, "balancing all the pieces, it's a fun puzzle piece I enjoy making fit," implying that he could find refining to be stimulating and intellectually challenging. But such a sense of satisfaction did not wholly eliminate other possible reactions that designers had to routine work. They could simultaneously experience the same refinements as both satisfying and monotonous, a possibility expressed by Carrie (which further reaction, in addition to those described earlier, serves as additional evidence of how complex designers' responses to refinement could be). She illustrated the dichotomy by describing her multiple cycles of creating interactive hotspots when

building a learning activity, "I had to do that 40 times on each of these, so that becomes kind of tedious. . . . [but] I think it'll be entertaining for the students, and that makes me excited."

But despite this satisfaction that refining could bring, it was not an unambiguous good in designers' overall experience. At times designers encountered diminishing returns, when the effort they put into refinements did not seem commensurate with the resulting improvements to course quality. Further, they also described how refining could create entanglements that affected their, or their students', experience. For instance, they could tinker with a course so much that the cumulative effect of their changes resulted in a complicated course that students had difficulty using. Andy described a course where his and the instructor's excitement about an idea led to "scope creep," where they continually added features that did not contribute to the intended student experience, "there's just too much going on, and so many methods that students are trying to do. . . . We ended up getting too much in the weeds and we made a course that's just overly complex." Frank described a related problem, where he noticed how designers' disproportionate focus on refining one or two courses about which they were excited could lead to them to neglect other courses that might need just as much work, albeit work in which they were not as personally interested.

Course Refinement and the Pursuit of Quality

Practices of refinement were an important factor in instructional designers' pursuit of quality at the OCO. One reason for this was simply the amount of time they occupied (the dimension of repetition). While applying specialized processes often, but not always, provided designers with an initial shape and direction for their course designs, ultimately most of what they considered a quality course was the result of refinement in some fashion. Activities like editing, modifying, or updating were how designers shaped course components into forms that more closely approached an ideal of quality. In fact, sometimes it even seemed as if designers considered formal processes as a means of "just getting something on the page," as Britney once suggested, meaning something concrete no matter how imperfect, knowing that they would refine it more carefully over time. In this sense, specialized creativity or design processes were sometimes seen as valuable for the starting points they provided, more than any innovative or quality solutions they directly offered.

Designers engaged in refining differently, however, depending on how they perceived the position from which they started. When they had a vision for what course quality meant in a particular instance, the adjustable and neutral practices of refinement fit into their work as the means through which they shaped a component's concrete structure and form so that it eventually aligned with that vision. In other cases, however, designers might have perceived that an aspect of a course was of inferior quality, but they could not articulate exactly why. When this happened, refinement became both how they attempted to improve, as well as how they explored what quality should actually mean for the artifact they were in the process of revising. Often, such improvement was not the result of designers' applying methods of problem solving to decide what refinements to make. Instead, it reflected a dimension of neutrality, where designers frequently made cycles of changes that occurred to them in-the-moment, with little, if any, reflection before they accepted an idea, until they found a configuration with which they were pleased. Further, some evidence suggested that instructional designers could sometimes use refining to pursue novel course innovations, where routine requests to update a course became more desirable (played a different normative role) because they drew attention towards inventive

possibilities for improvement, without needing to apply any specialized methods for generating creative ideas. All these possibilities are illustrated, in turn, in the report that follows.

Refining to Align with a Vision of Quality

At times, instructional designers started an assignment with a vision for what it would mean to achieve a high level of quality. This could have been at a large scale, such as a concept for an overarching course strategy, or at a smaller scale, like concepts for individual course components. Their visions of quality had a variety of sources. Sometimes, an instructor came to the project with an idea in mind, and the designer agreed it was worth developing. Occasionally, designers may have generated a possibility in a specialized ideation or brainstorming meeting. Often, their vision of quality was based on precedent, such as the guidelines provided by OCO policies, or common patterns found in existing courses.

But whatever an idea's source, at some point it had to be translated from imagination to reality. A concept remained only that until someone—if not the designer personally, then an individual or group the designer worked with closely—gave it a tangible structure and form that students could experience, whether that was an interactive element students manipulated in the course interface, or a set of instructions prompting reflection on a course topic. And because their initial iterations rarely, if ever, fully achieved their vision, designers frequently found themselves refining their work, particularly through step-by-step, fluid, adjustable routines described earlier (editing, tweaking, improvising solutions incrementally, and so on). When asked, designers could usually explicate a connection between many (though not all) of these refinements and how they were at least supposed to contribute towards the realization of a quality idea. Yet rarely was improving quality mentioned as the explicit aim when any refinement began. If a purpose was stated (which was not always the case) it was generally more targeted and tactical (as is typically expected because of the neutrality of everyday practices). For example, in a review meeting for a set of course videos I heard Harris suggest that they should modify the actors' dialogue so students will get the point quicker. Or Gina often wondered whether blocks of text in a course could be shortened.

Designers thought that the more careful they were in carrying out such refinements, the better the resulting course tended to be; as Gina told me, "It's sometimes those details that make a course shine." Regardless of how inventive or impressive were the ideas from which they started, until those ideas had been fine-tuned it was rare for designers to consider a course or an individual component as having achieved a high level of quality. So not only were many tasks associated with the pursuit of quality prosaic and undramatic in nature (as described earlier), designers often found that they also had to be meticulous, thorough, and show an exacting attention to detail, to make sure that what they were designing turned out just right.

An example was when I observed Ethan working on an educational game for students to practice language skills. His tasks included: (a) creating a flowchart of dozens of choices students could make, outlining the consequences of each on their future options; (b) working with a student employee to create in-game characters that students could encounter, and writing multiple dialogues between players and characters to advance the story; (c) designing a grocery store environment for students to explore, choosing specific foods and other goods to include on the shelves, where they would practice a language by shopping for items relevant to the game's storyline; (d) specifying a set of options (clothing, skin tone, etc.) from which students could customize their in-game avatar; and (e) directing the work of student developers who produced the actual, playable interactions, which in some cases consisted of giving detailed instructions

like, "make the music fade in at this point a little more slowly." All this work spanned multiple hours over multiple days to refine each feature to a level with which Ethan was satisfied. And it culminated in a short, conceptual walk-through of the game, representing only a few minutes of the eventual student experience, not the entire game itself.

Refining to Understand Quality

At other times, instructional designers were dissatisfied with an existing version of a course component, but they were not sure what was needed to align it with a quality standard, or what about it was, in fact, misaligned. Such evaluations could sometimes be expressed affectively; instead of saying "I know what's wrong here," a response might have been, "I feel like something's wrong." This does not mean designers never had a basis other than their feelings upon which they made such judgments (although it was true that at times all they experienced was personal discontent with a course's current state). For instance, they could have received feedback from students that suggested there was a problem they did not notice on their own. But even when external evidence may have drawn their attention to an issue, designers could still have been unclear on exactly what the problem was, or how to address it.

In such cases, designers' refinement activities became mechanisms for them to both explore what quality meant *in that instance*, at the same time they attempted to improve the course itself. These types of revisions can be contrasted with those that were intended to align a course with designers' articulated visions of quality. In the latter, designers perceived their work as bringing an already-understood idea to life. Their efforts were intended to ensure that what was produced matched what they or an instructor wanted. But in the former, all designers were aware that when they started, they thought some artifact, material, or interaction was less-than-ideal. And so, refinements allowed them to experiment with different ideas for what they wanted, at the same time they were trying to give what they wanted, or thought they wanted, a concrete structure and form. Daniel described this as, "the struggle of trying to make something work when it isn't working shows me there's a different thing I need to do." He illustrated by describing a complex set of readings and interactions he was trying to refine in one of his courses, meant to help students understand a certain topic:

> As I wrestled with this thing it suddenly occurred to me – all students really need to do is answer these two questions. They don't need a complex thing to understand a bunch of stuff; all that stuff didn't matter. Once I figured that out, it was easy to come up with a pretty simple way to get there.

Practices of Refinement and Problem Solving

Another way practices of refinement fit into instructional designers' pursuit of quality was the role they played during problem-solving. If designers encountered a difficulty or challenge, they rarely employed rational problem-solving processes or other forms of deliberative reasoning to address the issue, such as defining a problem, identifying root causes, specifying success criteria, deliberating on alternative solutions, or selecting an option that maximized relevant outputs. While procedures like these were certainly used at times, more often I observed designers responding immediately, proposing a refinement that occurred to them in-the-moment, and taking little, if any, time for reflection. This approach further illustrated the neutrality of practices of refinement at the OCO, where designers typically did not deliberate

on the range of theoretically possible choices they could make, instead pursuing options that were most visible to their attention.

Examples help illustrate. Perhaps designers suggested a technique they recently used in another course, or a method they learned in a professional development seminar. Often, they asked for input from an instructor or another designer, accepting with little hesitation the responses they received. Sometimes, modifications were based on designers' intuitive sense; a salient feature in the environment drew their attention, and without being able to articulate why, they simply "felt" that something about it stood out as a possible solution. Designers could even be observed in what has been called "noodling," or a form of "absent-minded improvisation" where they seemed to aimlessly tinker with various ideas until something struck them as potentially useful (cf. Claxton, 2006, p. 352). If they tried an idea but thought it was not quite right, they would continue to refine by chipping away at perceived deficiencies one-by-one. Usually, designers did not abandon an idea completely unless they encountered stiff resistance from a colleague or instructor, or if, despite their efforts, they could not develop a version that they thought "worked" sufficiently well. If such false starts happened, they would backtrack, look for another plausible option, and start the process afresh. This continued until the designer, often in collaboration with the instructor, judged that they had a solution they thought was "right." The process could take minutes, or continue over days, or even weeks.

I observed this in Daniel's work as he met with a professor (who I will refer to as Rachel) during a regular review of a course that was then in its pilot semester. Early in the meeting Rachel asked a question. Her students were assigned to research a topic, then present it to the rest of the class. Was there a way she could have students post their materials to a corresponding lesson page in the LMS, in advance of their presentation, for other students to review? It seemed Daniel and Rachel had an earlier misunderstanding about this assignment; apparently he had assumed that Rachel, her TA, or he, himself, would add the material to the LMS on students' behalf. When Daniel relayed this, Rachel was obviously disappointed. Her preference was for the students to share their materials without her, or anyone else, having to be part of the process; "in the [in-person] class we can do that," she responded to Daniel's explanation of why students in the online course did not have edit rights to update the page. Immediately after she expressed her disappointment, however, an idea occurred to Daniel:

> **Daniel**: You know, within the People section. Trying to think of how this could work, because in the course module project groups, each group has a site. Uhm, see you can click on the three dots and say visit Group Home Page.
> **Rachel:** Yeah. Yeah
> **Daniel**: And on that home page they have the ability to edit that and put stuff in there.
> **Rachel:** Um hum.
> **Daniel**: I don't know, I've never tried, I don't know that other students can access that group's homepage.
> **Rachel**: That's a good question. Uhm, so yeah. They have, they had access, of course, to sign up for the groups. And then I see the homepage. You get to that by clicking the little dots? Right?
> **Daniel**: Uhm, you know what we could do is we could create a new group in here called, like, Course Module Assignments, or something. Put everybody into one group.

Rachel: Yeah

Daniel: And then on that home page I could just put headings that say, Assignments for Course Module 1, Assignments for Course Module 3, and so forth. And you can just tell your students, "go into that homepage, edit the page, and add your stuff under the heading for your presentation."

Rachel: I like that. I like that because it takes the middleman out of the process. And it's also, you know, it's also something that is great for the students to learn how to do.

In this example, Daniel proposed a solution based on the Rachel's expressed desire to have students add their own material to the LMS. Throughout their discussion, he refined his proposal, figuring out how to modify his idea to fit observed constraints in the same moments the idea was actually occurring to him. As he thought of a possible obstacle, he did not give up the concept or consider whether another possibility might be more effective; instead, he proposed a slight adjustment to how he could configure the LMS to make it work. He continued to fine tune until he had articulated all the steps he thought were needed to develop his solution. Even though what took place could retrospectively be mapped to different problem-solving steps, doing so distorts the emergent quality of the conversation by recasting it in more deliberative, rational terms. Further, neither Daniel nor Rachel questioned whether this was an ideal solution or not. It was as if there were an unstated assumption that if Daniel's proposal allowed students to add material to the LMS, then it was worth implementing and there was no need to explore other options.

For these reasons, Daniel's approach typified the neutrality of practices of refinement. To question whether the idea was appropriate for the need, to evaluate whether he was skillful in presenting and discussing it with Rachel, or whether a different designer may have generated a more novel solution, are all issues beyond the scope of this paper. And certainly, it is possible to wonder what in the situation prompted Daniel to think of this solution. But even with such questions left unanswered, what the example illustrated was the commonality of problem-solving *through* practices of refinement, instead of disengaging from an issue to apply a discrete problem-solving or design process. Indeed, the pattern of solving problems that Daniel exemplified was not unique to this instance. Countless course refinements at the OCO were the result of similar, spontaneous approaches of making small corrections, adjustments, and modifications to solve an observed difficulty, rather than applying discrete problem-solving methods when issues arose.

Course Refinements, Innovation, and the Pursuit of Quality

Earlier I described how with one exception, creativity and innovation methods were the least frequently observed practices at the OCO. The exceptional case offers a suggestive insight into how practices of refinement could sometimes play a different normative role in designers' pursuit of quality than was typically the case. This example also concerned Daniel, who was generally considered one of the OCO's thought leaders, and who had some of the most well-articulated ideas about course quality, including how to use pedestrian acts of refinement as opportunities to explore novel improvements he thought would improve quality. This became evident as I talked to him about how often he engaged innovation or creativity practices. His response was, "I'm driven by that sort of thing. . . . I probably spend, like, half my time on that kind of stuff." This was so much more than other designers I asked him to elaborate further. As

Daniel recounted his style of practice, he did not refer to distinct events where he would brainstorm imaginative ideas, nor did he otherwise describe the use of specialized creativity methods. Instead, he talked about how instructors' requests for even minor, run-of-the-mill course refinements provided him with chances to propose improvements he considered more innovative. In fact, he did not seem to consider innovation as differing from the routines of course refinement at all; in one conversation where the topic of both came up, he chuckled and called them, "the same thing." He elaborated:

> If [instructors] contact me and say, "Hey, we need to clarify these instructions, or we're having an issue with this," I don't go in and just, like, go, "Okay, let's change this word and change this word." . . . I'll throw something out to them, and say, "Hey, what if we totally change this instruction to make it look more like this, instead of what you have now?" And so, I feel like it's continually moving in that higher quality direction because I don't typically go in and just say, "Oh, let's fix a few typos or whatever."

The core of Daniel's approach was to find opportunities to innovate *through* his attentiveness to routine requests for course refinements. While at times he tended to operationalize quality as policy compliance (as did all OCO designers, as described earlier), of all those observed in this study he seemed most consistently able to imagine and articulate how course quality could be connected to a better student experience. He viewed the ordinary event of updating or revising materials as an opportunity to try something new. He seemed to approach his work from the perspective that when an issue was raised, it might be a symptom of a more fundamental problem. More than some of the other OCO designers, Daniel was familiar with the affordances and capabilities of the technologies the organization provided and tended to experiment with them as part of even simple requests to find a creative solution, or, as he put it, "jumping into it and figuring [it] out."

This suggested that, at least at times, practices of refinement mattered to Daniel (or he found them desirable to engage in; they played a different normative role) for different reasons than why they mattered to his colleagues. Certainly, he also talked about them being intellectually challenging, or tedious, so recognizing their expanded value in his experience should not negate other possibilities. But in addition, he also found that refining practices allowed him to create possibilities for improvement beyond the prosaic request a faculty member may have originally approached him about. This contrasts with some of his colleagues, who seemed to distinguish their mundane tasks more sharply from events specifically dedicated to creative exploration, like Carrie, described earlier, who said she wanted to be "creative in my work," but, "most of the stuff I've been able to do so far . . . wasn't" (referring to the amount of time she spent in refining instead of being involved in activities like brainstorming). Instead, Daniel attempted to integrate the routine with the innovative, because doing so offered him a means for improving quality beyond what he was originally asked. This was suggested by a view he expressed in one conversation, "It's like, you know, as long as we're messing with this let's fix all the issues with it. Let's just make this a great experience for everybody."

Discussion

The findings of this study offer three contributions to the field. First, by interpreting designers' practices of refinement from the perspective of the dimensions of everydayness, it becomes clear how understanding these practices is crucial for developing a holistic perspective on what is involved in the pursuit of online course quality. Second, recognizing this broadened perspective in the practices of one organization suggests that practices of refinement, along with everydayness more generally, should be studied in other organizations to gain additional insights into how everydayness might be manifest during course design. And third, the pervasiveness and importance of refinement at the OCO suggests that there is likely value in orienting instructional design students to practices of refinement, and their role in course design, during design education.

Practices of Refinement Provide an Enriched View of Instructional Design Practice

As has been recognized by scholars (Gibbons & Yanchar, 2010; Schwier & Wilson, 2010; Smith & Boling, 2009), limiting one's view of the field to what is specified in the formal models that instructional designers are taught provides an impoverished view of what is involved in being a designer. Yet whereas prior research often focused on what could be called high-profile elaborations to design practice (e.g., highlighting designers' skills in diplomacy and negotiation, their application of project management techniques, or how they often provide faculty with professional development), one contribution this study provides is how tightly woven together designers' everyday routines can be with their pursuit of quality. Recognizing the roles of refinement practices in instructional designers' pursuit of quality provides an enriched perspective on online course design, compared to that provided by considering their specialized processes alone.

First, considering the amount of time designers at the OCO spent refining, along with the affective affordances refining offered (the dimension of repetition), suggested that these forms of practice played a predominate role in their experience as pursuers of course quality. Instead of the everyday tasks of revising, updating, fixing, and so on being a footnote to their design processes, my observations suggested almost the opposite. Intentional use of specialized design or innovation methods represented the lesser portion of designers' work, usually providing them a starting point for the refinements that both engaged them most of the time, and that were what they frequently credited as being what enabled them to create quality course designs. These findings are consistent with research from other fields, where the mundane routines of everyday life have been found to contribute to quality outcomes in ways often overlooked in scholarly research (Boudeau, 2013; Chambliss, 1989). As this literature has suggested, excellence in a craft is often simply a matter of being persistent—not stopping until the details are right—more than it is choosing the proper methodology.

The dimensions of adjustability and neutrality evident in designers' practices also contributes to a richer perspective on course design. Quality at the OCO was often the result of the fluidity in which designers engaged in their refining practices, in addition to the frequency. Rather than iteration through the phases of a process being how designers accounted for unexpected events and the constant flow of change, they instead attended to the shape of the circumstances directly, responding however seemed appropriate regardless of how (or if) that response could be justified by a design model. Further, designers usually did not rely on specialized techniques to address challenges that arose, but, in contrast, pursued options that were most saliently significant in the situation. A possible objection to these observations is that they represent a deficient or substandard view of design practice, and that the OCO's designers

should be critiqued for their reliance on refining practices instead of taking the effort to apply processes more intentionally. In response, I note the conclusions of other scholars who have studied similar issues (Matthews & Heinemann, 2012; McDonald et al., 2021). Given the lack of evidence that "good design work is . . . the straightforward outcome of the application of a method" (Matthews, 2009, p. 65), asserting the necessity of design processes *a priori* assumes their primacy over the everyday, and so any claim that the OCO's designers showed a lack of skill because they relied on the everyday ends up being a circular argument. Similarly, as Lave (2019) stated, research "designed to explore evidence of 'ideal' [process-oriented] activity. . . . [simply] creates and confirms a conception of the inferior other and thus affirms the ideal model" (p. 23).

Finally, the normativity associated with refining practices contributes a different, but still useful, perspective on designers' pursuit of course quality. Designers did not approach their work dispassionately, applying calculative reasoning about what actions to take in what circumstances. Sometimes, like Carrie, they put off refinements they thought they should make because they were boring. At other times, however, refining could be deeply satisfying, as we heard from Ethan. Both cases suggest the difficulty of reducing the pursuit of quality in instructional design to a process model. Pursuing quality was meaningful to the designers in this study for reasons beyond only the organizational goals of completing course projects. In addition, refinement fit into their "life story" (Yanchar, 2015, p. 119) in deeply personal ways, ways that cannot be ignored if one is to understand the pursuit of quality in a holistic sense. Yet such dimensions only become clear, along with the way they fit into the broader phenomena with which researchers are typically concerned, when considered from a perspective sensitive to such issues, as is provided by the study of everydayness.

Studying Other Refining Practices and Other Forms of Everydayness

The results of this study raise the question as to the role refinement practices play in the work of instructional designers from other organizations, along with other forms of everydayness in general. While there may have been specific refining activities that were unique to the OCO, or their specific proportion of refining compared to other practices may have been distinct, it is unlikely that practices of refinement or other forms of everydayness are absent from instructional designers' experience elsewhere. Yet other than passing mentions in prior literature (e.g., Chittur, 2018; Schwier & Wilson, 2010), how these fit into instructional design, broadly speaking, has not been addressed. This presents an opportunity for additional research to understand both refining and other, everyday practices of instructional design more comprehensively. Given the conclusion of prior research that understanding design is as much about understanding designers' deployment of ordinary forms of social interaction, as it is about understanding their formal processes (e.g., Button & Sharrock, 2000; Fleming, 1998; Matthews & Heinemann, 2012), further study of the everydayness of instructional design—of which refinement is surely only a part—promises to provide considerable insight.

Orienting Instructional Design Students to Refining Practices

Yet even with these unknowns, the findings here suggest that refining is consequential enough that instructional design educators should consider how to orient students to these important practices. As was noted earlier, refining is related to, but not the same as, iterating through a design process. This distinction can be explored with students, and it is likely that

educational time can be profitably spent teaching novice designers how to intentionally engage in meaningful forms of refinement to achieve high levels of course quality.

A suggestive example is provided by the account of Daniel's use of run-of-the-mill requests as opportunities to explore more innovative course designs. Rather than disengaging from the immediate situation to apply a distinct process for generating creative ideas, he remained deeply engaged, satisfying both the prosaic demands of the situation while also searching for more novel approaches of improving a course. The value of this for design students might be in how the example accentuates how quality can come *through* everydayness, and so if designers fully commit to whatever assignments are before them—even those that may be tedious—they are in a position to pursue forms of quality that may remain closed if they only focus on the more glamorous and alluring parts of the job. An analogy can be found in the field of nursing, that has also turned towards understanding its own everydayness. Studies of everyday practice in nursing have drawn attention to how the caring outcomes that are definitive of the field are sometimes best achieved through a nurse's ordinary routines (e.g., Arndt, 1992; Gullick et al., 2020). There need not be an either/or dichotomy between what nurses do to care and other aspects of their job, like completing routine paperwork. Similarly, the findings of this study suggest there does not need to be an either/or dichotomy between pursuing quality innovations in online course design, and the rather pedestrian work of fixing a misspelling or similar production mistake.

Emphasizing this to students can help overcome some of the challenges of strictly methodological approaches to design, where the typical procedure is to find a design process or technique to address an observed problem or need. While this may be a useful approach at times, it is needlessly limiting. Other forms of intervention, where the connection to a conventional design or innovation process could be several steps removed, or otherwise unclear, may be more useful in a given situation. If such practices are both modeled and validated through instructional designers' education, it can only expand the number of tools they have in their repertoire. Further, shifting the focus from the design process to the designers' willingness to fully engage in the mundane, sometimes tedious work of refinement, could help combat what Woudhuysen (2011) described as a near-fetishization of design, where much of the discourse in the field disproportionately focuses on design's most visible, appealing aspects (represented by the process phases found in many contemporary design models). This neglects many of the other drivers involved in an organization's pursuit of excellence in a domain, thereby misleading designers—as well as clients and other stakeholders—into assuming that the design methods themselves are the most decisive factor in achieving a quality outcome. Without discounting the importance design processes can offer, foregrounding the role of refining practices in pursuing quality can encourage designers to wholeheartedly commit to the work of online course design, even in it's less-enticing forms, or even when it does not resemble what convention suggests to them is the proper form that instructional design should take.

Conclusion

This study investigated the everydayness of online course design, specifically the questions: What kinds of everyday, routine practices do instructional designers engage in during online course design? And, how did those forms of everydayness fit into designers' pursuit of quality in online course design? By studying the work of instructional design at the OCO, I concluded that the frequency and repetition of designers' practices of refinement meant they played an important role in their pursuit of quality. In addition, designers experienced refinement

as distinct and different from their more conventional, iterative approaches to instructional design and innovation largely through the adjustability and neutrality of refining practices compared to the alternatives. Refining practices also contributed towards the normative sense of meaning designers shared about their work at the OCO. These findings have implications for understanding the pursuit of quality in online courses more broadly. Recognizing the role refining plays in designers' experience contributes to an understanding that instructional design cannot be limited to its formal processes and methods. Other forms of social interaction are also critical, and so researchers should be willing to study the full range of what they observe designers doing. Practices of refinement can also be intentionally integrated into instructional design curricula, teaching new designers that they have more tools available to them in their pursuit of quality than the specialized processes that have been traditionally the focus. Finally, foregrounding refinement practices emphasizes that designers can pursue quality *through* their mundane activities; there need not be a dichotomy between engaging in the pedestrian work of course design and the pursuit of innovative, novel forms of online course quality.

Declarations
The author declared no conflicts of interest associated with this study.

The research ethics board at Brigham Young University, USA approved this study. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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