

Reflections on the 2008 AECT Definitions of the Field

The newest version of the AECT definition of the field is now available. This book has been several years in the process, from the charge to the Definition and Terminology Committee, through the inception of the revised definition, on to the final book with the many chapters that generate the details of this new definition. We have asked three AECT members who have worked on previous versions of the definition of the field to provide comment to this latest version. What follows are their perspectives of the Educational Technology: A Definition with Commentary.

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The Board of Directors of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) has approved a new definition of the field. This is the fifth officially endorsed definition of the field, replacing the one approved in 1994. The new definition is:

Educational Technology is the study and ethical practice of facilitating learning and improving performance by creating, using and managing appropriate technological processes and resources.

I have been asked to briefly comment on this definition, but first I would like to comment on the new definition book itself. Januszewski and Molenda (2008) and the many chapter authors provide a full discussion of the conceptual components of this definition. In doing so, this book provides a fairly complete history of the field. It has a wealth of information in one location that will serve

students, practitioners, and scholars alike. The book also recognizes the intellectual growth of our field since the last definition and seeks to explain the increasingly diverse array of choices that our practitioners make on a daily basis.

With respect to the definition itself, I would like to focus on the implications of only two elements:

- The de-emphasis of instructional design and development; and
- The limited interpretation of the role of performance improvement.

There are many other definition discussions that one could have, and I suspect have already taken place within the committee

Traditional instructional systems design (ISD) is de-emphasized, although clearly not ignored, in this new definition. This is highlighted in the definition by the substitution of the term “creating” for the words “design,” “development,” and “evaluation” since “these terms tend to be associated with a particular approach – the systems approach” (Molenda & Boling, 2008, p. 81). Creating, it is explained, allows the use of alternative mindsets and design approaches other than that of ISD. While the recognition of alternative paradigms is surely warranted, instructional design and development has been a central part of this field and of every formal definition of the field since 1963. Moreover, these tasks probably are a key part of the jobs of most professionals in the field. Many will be surprised that they are no longer highlighted in the definition itself. I wonder if the word “creating” is so broad that, as Boulding (1956) argued long ago with respect to theory, it could become so general as to mean nothing.

What the use of “creating” does is highlight the dominance of construc-

tivist philosophy in many parts of the field (and the book). This orientation is further emphasized by highlighting learning facilitation in the definition, rather than simply learning.

A critical addition to the 2008 definition is the term “improving performance”. This echoes the demands now placed on our field. Effective products are no longer the primary goal. Even learning is no longer the only goal. Our efforts are expected to impact transfer as shown in individual and organizational performance improvement. This addition is applauded, but to me its explanation raises a key question. Should non-instructional solutions to performance problems be *outside* the province of educational technologists? The authors suggest that the answer to this question is “yes”. This narrow interpretation of performance improvement (and in turn of our field), I believe, discounts the daily activities of many practitioners in the field and the emphases of many of our academic programs.

I am very pleased that AECT is once again putting resources into the task of defining the field. With its publication, the Association membership and many student learning communities will also have the opportunity to engage in the thought (and the arguments) that definition projects always generate.

References

- Boulding, K.E. (1956). General systems theory: The skeleton of science. *Management Science*, 2, 197-208.
- Januszewski, A. & Molenda, M. (Eds.) (2008). *Educational technology: A definition with commentary*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Molenda, M. & Boling, E. (2008). Creating. In Januszewski, A. & Molenda, M. (Eds.), *Educational technology: A definition with commentary* (pp. 81-139). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

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The new AECT definition of educational technology is a welcome one. It updates and adds important nuances to the explanation of what our field is and how it relates to other fields – and does so in language that we can use with people outside the field.

The new definition takes into account recent conceptualizations of and research about the learning process. Further, it clarifies the role of our field in facilitating that learning in a manner that provides room under the ET umbrella for those of many differing instructional philosophies.

The new definition finally addresses the issue of performance, as well as learning. It explains the notion of “improving performance” in several ways. Most important, it finally clarifies the relationship of ET to HPT in a way that will promote dialogue and cooperation between the two highly related fields.

The new definition emphasizes the importance of theory and research as well as practice as integral parts of the field, while using the word “study” to allow for the many ways of advancing knowledge in the field.

The new definition continues the tradition of prior definitions of attempting to use the correct definition of the word “technology,” and to de-emphasize the “stuff” of our field as the *raison-d'être* of the field.

The new definition's use of creation, use and management (in place of functions or domains) again allows users to apply most instructional theories and philosophies in addressing learning problems.

All of AECT is to be congratulated on coming to consensus on an exemplary definition for the 21st century, and by assembling a stellar group of authors who wrote a brilliant series of chapters that expand on each facet of the definition.

And (as a former definition author/editor) I personally congratulate Al and Mike for facilitating that consensus, tying it all together, and shepherding the project through the entire creation process.

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One sign of a new profession is a series of publications attempting to describe the current status and scope of the field. Educational technology is no exception.

One of the first official statements (and definitions) about the field was published by the Department of Audiovisual Instruction (DAVI) of the National Education Association in 1963. *The Changing Role of the Audiovisual Process in Education: A Definition and a Glossary of Related Terms* was proposed by James D. Finn, President of DAVI, who organized the Commission on Definition and Terminology. As President of DAVI in 1963, he organized the *Commission on Definition and Terminology*. From this first effort there have been at least five more (different) versions of educational technology definitions and terminology published by AECT (DAVI).

Almost any professional field has a “dictionary” or “encyclopedia” that spells out the basic concepts that guide the purpose and definitions used by practitioners. When a professional organization publishes a basic volume about the scope of the field and adds specific definitions, there is usually an acceptance of the publication by the membership. AECT is no exception. Professionals in the field have given untold hours to shape the field by publishing authoritative dictionaries about the organization's scope and purpose.

Since 1963, there have been six definitive publications about the scope of the field. Each publication appears to be appropriate for the time it was published. However, changing technological borders and pedagogical ap-

plications have led each edition to new concepts.

This new edition is built on five of the previous publications since 1963. The historians have reviewed earlier editions and carefully compared publications. When an organization is concerned about its concepts and terminology it usually calls for a new (or changing) scope of the field. When definitions and terminologies are reviewed and tested by professional people over time, the field often begins to work together using new standards and terminologies.

The key publications for definition and terminology of the field began with the 1963 publication authored by the AECT Definition and Terminology Committee and published by The Association for Educational Communication and Technology. The original AECT definition and terms have been revised five times since 1963.

- *The Field of Educational Technology: A Statement of Definition* (1972)
- *Educational Technology: A Glossary of Terms* (1977)
- *Instructional Technology: The Definition and Domains of the Field* (1994)
- *The Field of Educational Technology as Reflected Through Its Definitions* (1997)
- *Distance Education: Definition and Glossary of Terms* (2002)

Perhaps some of these definitions will continue to be used; others may be adjusted and still others dropped. One way to handle definitions may be to follow the advice of F. K. Berrien (1976): “Definitions, however, are arbitrary conveniences – neither true or false – it is the privilege of any theorist to establish his own definitions hopeful that his readers will find them not discordant with their own thinking and of equal convenience.”

Reference

- Berrien, F. K. (1976). A general systems approach to organizations. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, (pp. 42-43). Chicago: Rand McNally.

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