

# Characteristics of a Profession

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The purpose of this article is to provide information describing the characteristics of a profession. The objective is to present documentation and an educated opinion of how these characteristics may relate to instructional technology and distance education (ITDE). A brief look at the history of ITDE leads us to James Finn and his six characteristics of a profession. The characteristics are discussed, and a conjecture is made as to the professionalism of ITDE.

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**M**any people strive to attain a professional career. What does it mean to be a professional? How does one determine a profession? Educators are seen as professionals, but are the educational specialists a profession within that group? Instructional technologists are a subspecialty of educators, but

what if the instructional technologist is not a certified teacher? Are they considered a professional?

The purpose of this article is to provide information describing the characteristics of a profession. The objective is to present documentation and an educated opinion of how these characteristics may relate to instructional technology and distance Education (ITDE).



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## **A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF ITDE**

In 1953 James D. Finn, an associate professor of education and chairman of audio-visual education at the University of Southern California, provided six criteria for a profession. Finn is also chairman of the Department of Audio-Visual Instruction of the National Education Association Committee on Professional Education (Finn, 1953). He is one of the earliest contributors to information technology's development, and Finn is instrumental in shaping the IT field. Finn stated that a profession must have six criteria. These six criteria include intellectual technique, an application to practical affairs, a defined training period, a professional association including a high-quality level of communi-

cation and collaboration, enforced standards and ethics, and expanding theory based on research. Although Finn's work was done in the 1950s, his findings still hold relevance to today's perspectives via his six criteria. "Being a member of a profession, that is, a professional, is generally seen as an indicator of integrity, ethics, trust, and expertise," according to the Australian Council of Professions.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF A PROFESSION**

Webster defines a profession as engaged in one of the learned professions; characterized by or conforming to the technical or ethical standards of a profession (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It seems that the definition has not changed much over the years. The Australian Council of Professions's definition, 50 years later, is congruent with Finn's definition: "a profession is a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards and hold themselves out as, and are accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognized body of learning derived from research, education, and training at a high level, and who are prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others' (Australian Council of Professions, 2003). Coincidentally, Corporate Finance Institute (CFI) defines a professional as 'anyone who earns their living from performing an activity that requires a certain level of education, skill, or training' (CFI). In addition, the CFI stated there must be a level of competency achieved as well as codes of conduct and ethical standards (CFI, n.d.).

Another source indicates 10 areas that comprise a profession. These 10 areas include great responsibility, accountability, specialized services based on specialized, theoretical knowledge, institutional preparation, autonomy, clients rather than customers, direct working relationships, ethical constraints, merit-based, and morality (Thu, 2016). Finn's six characteris-

tics encompass the entire 10 from the Association of Accredited Public Policy Advocates. However, another source defines a profession as an activity that requires specialized training, knowledge, qualification, and skill (Surbhi, 2018). It implies membership in a professional body, a certificate of practice, and guided by a specific code of conduct, set up by the respective body (Surbhi, 2018).

Some commonalities exist in the cited definitions. First, all definitions refer to a set of standards and ethics. In addition, most of the definitions refer to specialized knowledge and skills, training at a high level, and the use of knowledge and skills in the interest of others. A more in-depth look at these definitions, a comparison of the traits they refer to, and how they relate to Finn's 1953 criteria will provide a basis for determining IDTE as a profession.

### **INTELLECTUAL TECHNIQUE**

Finn's initial criterion is an intellectual technique. Finn explains intellectual technique as thinking reflectively and considering many facets, including planning and administration. In 2022, instructional technologists must be more reflective in their thinking and application than in 1953. A review of Instructional Coordinators in the Occupational Outlook Handbook, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, infers this occupation must have a master's degree and oversee school curriculums and teaching standards. In addition, this employee is expected to train and teach others, develop instructional materials, implement them, and assess their effectiveness (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

### **APPLICATION TO PRACTICAL**

Applying the technique to the practical affairs of a man is a characteristic Finn (1953) lists. This characteristic agrees with Australian Council of Professions, which states that individuals must be prepared to apply their knowledge and skills in the

interest of others (Australian Council of Professions, 2003). Instructional technologists are near to essential in the classroom today. Distance education has been more accepted since the pandemic of 2020, when distance education was necessary for students of all ages to maintain education standards, and instruction was required to accommodate those needs (Shankar, 2021). IT professionals reviewed educational software, designing and crafting educational applications to educate and actively engage students in their learning.

### TRAINING PERIOD

A long training period is necessary before entering the profession (Finn, 1953), a common theme for all definitions. No definition delineates the amount of education or training necessary for a field to be called a profession. Formal training is not a requirement to enter the field of instructional technology, and many persons enter this field and “learn on the job,” having no formal instruction. However, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics lists a master’s degree and 5 years or more of experience as requirements for an instructional coordinator. United States Distance Learning Association certifies institutions and educational providers who meet its quality standards for distance learning. This certification verifies that institutions and practitioners have met the approximate 91 quality standards and are adaptable to needs and situations.

Professional development opportunities within the Association of Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) help maintain and enhance skills through intentional self-improvement. AECT has a career opportunities page for members to view and search, providing industry-specific opportunities. The International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) also offers avenues for certification. International Society for Performance Improvement certifies performance technologists

based on 10 standards followed by “competent practitioners” (CPT Performance Standards, n.d.).

Often a high degree of professionalism is synonymous with rigorous training for members of the profession. This training is generally monitored and specified either by state regulation or a system of accredited training institutions (Finn, 1953). Doctors are regulated by American Medical Association, and there is an agreement on the requirements to become a medical physician. Pharmacy technicians are monitored and required to attain certification and continued training. Program management professionals must complete the initial training and maintain certain professional development hours to maintain their credentials. These fields meet the requirements of this definition without question. ITDE does not have such a system of oversight, ensuring members remain current with new technologies. There is no agreement in the field of ITDE as to the nature of training necessary. This lack of agreement continues to be accurate more than 65 years after Finn. Although there are now degree programs for ITDE students, it may be incumbent that the field develops standards that the community would uphold.

### PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION

An association of the members of the profession comprising a closely-knit group with a high quality of communication between members is another characteristic of a profession mentioned by Finn (1953). The definitions indicate a governing body; however, they do not necessarily refer to an association. Instructional technologists and distance educators go a step beyond and meet this requirement listed by Finn. The AECT is an association of the members of instructional technology; AECT is a professional association that holds annual conferences and communicates via email with members (AECT Membership Brochure,

n.d.). In addition, USDLA engages with a broad spectrum of distance learning professionals in K–12, higher education, corporate, government, military, telehealth, and homeschooling (Memberships, 2022). There are 10 international distance learning associations, 18 state distance learning associations, and four United States distance learning associations for persons to attend and procure information (Distance Learning Associations, 2022).

### **A HIGH LEVEL OF COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION**

The AECT and USDLA provide opportunities for members to collaborate (AECT Membership Brochure, n.d.; Memberships, 2022). These opportunities tend to encourage members to strive to improve their expertise. The AECT and USDLA allow members to present at conferences, thus giving back to the community (AECT Membership Brochure, n.d.; Flores, n.d.). Another benefit of membership is networking with like-minded professionals, and communication is carried on in meetings and conferences.

Connections with others help keep practitioners up to date by sharing tips and strategies. Having such connections provide an opportunity to consider multiple perspectives from others. In addition, these connections may provide references when you are job searching. Furthermore, membership with AECT and USDLA provides access to many industry-specific journals. Members may expand their knowledge through journals and may contribute to these journals. Members have an opportunity to publish in journals demonstrating their expertise and knowledge. To receive the most from any membership, one must be an active participant.

### **STANDARDS AND ETHICS**

A series of standards and a statement of ethics that is enforced is next on Finn's cri-

teria, which is a standard indicator amongst the definitions investigated. The AECT, USDLA, and National Education Association each have standards and a statement of ethics; however, there is little enforcement of these items within the field. A professional is expected to perform duties to engender trust and confidence. These standards and ethics generally encompass morality and represent the interest of the group (Thu, 2016). These standards often include accountability, specifically taking responsibility for their actions (Thu, 2016). Professionals have control over and ultimate responsibility for their tasks and often define their terms and conditions of work (Thu, 2016). A professional must also maintain confidentiality (Thu, 2016). They must reserve knowledge of sensitive information from those without a need to know (Thu, 2016). Honesty is another trait of a professional (Corporate Finance Institute, n.d.). It is necessary to be truthful in all circumstances.

Integrity or doing the right thing even when no one is watching is a quality to be observed in a professional (Corporate Finance Institute, n.d.). A professional should also exhibit law-abiding attributes, following all governing laws in the jurisdictions where their activities are performed (Corporate Finance Institute, n.d.). Loyalty and remaining committed to their profession are observed in a professional (Corporate Finance Institute, n.d.). Objectivity and not allowing themselves to be influenced by biases are essential for a professional (Corporate Finance Institute, n.d.). A professional should also have an air of transparency (Thu, 2016). It is expected that a professional will convey all necessary and relevant information and not conceal information. In addition to the characteristics listed by these organizations defining a profession, we must also consider attitude. This trait is woven within all other characteristics listed by Finn and others: attitude in communications with others and collaboration. Professionals must

present themselves as knowledgeable and confident. While the associations have published standards and ethics, there does not seem to be enforcement of these items. The American Medical Association implements its standards and ethics, culling out those who practice medicine without a license or in an unsafe manner. Engineers and architects are held accountable by building standards, and courts may disbar a lawyer for illegal practices. Perhaps ITDE professionals should be held to this level of accountability.

### EXPANDING INTELLECTUAL THEORY BASED ON RESEARCH

The sources reviewed indicated that specialized services based on theory, knowledge, and skills are often required leading me to believe it is the most fundamental of Finn's (1953) characteristics. This intellectual information is often beyond the understanding of those outside the profession. Finn relates that an organized body of intellectual theory constantly expanding by research is necessary for a profession. An organized body of intellectual theory is constantly being expanded by research in the IT field. There are many theories used for benchmarks in ITDE. Behaviorism, cognitivism, constructionism, and connectivism are a few theories used to guide research in this field. The ITDE should not be confined to its research, and other fields should be included, such as educational psychology, social psychology, art and design, and communication. ITDE has much literature and research on which to base studies. Malcolm Knowles' andragogy model relates to and has been analyzed as it applies to distance education and the adult learner (Knowles, 1980). In addition, several theories related to distance education are relative e.g., cognitive load theory, motivation theory, transactional distance theory, and social presence theory (Saykili, 2018).

### WHERE IS ITDE HEADING AS A PROFESSION?

A review of Finn's six criteria concludes that ITDE lacks as a profession. The ITDE professionals are thoughtful in their thinking and application of their skills and abilities. These professionals are prepared to apply their knowledge and exercise their skills in the interest of others in a practical manner. While there is no formal training and no agreement amongst associations regarding training necessary, there are job requirements realized within the workforce for this field. There are professional associations for members of this profession to attend and promote themselves within. These associations provide opportunities for members to collaborate and network. Much research is being completed and is based on theory and a variety of literature.

The field of instructional technology is evolving; however, at this time, it cannot meet the training requirement nor the enforcement of ethics and standards Finn requires of a profession. The related associations have a standards and ethics statement that members agree to when they enroll; however, there is no enforcement of the standards and ethics. According to Finn (1953), when these criteria are met, the field of instructional technology will meet the criteria of a profession.

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