

# Labels DO Matter! A Critique of AECT's Redefinition of the Field

By Patrick Lowenthal and Brent G. Wilson

## Abstract

AECT has recently (yet again!) redefined our field, reverting back to the use of the term *educational technology*. We believe this recent change is problematic for a number of reasons, but primarily because of the weak rationale offered for the change. This change affects how

external audiences view our profession and is likely to confuse practitioners in corporate and higher education settings in particular. We offer a review of job postings, program titles, and listserv discussions to support our case. The labels we use to define ourselves are critically important - and we hope to see a stronger case made for changes for our foundational definitions in the future.

**Keywords:** *Definitions, Redefinition of Field, Labels, Language and Identity, Branding, Practitioner Perspectives*

Students, academics, and working professionals struggle with some of the naming and labeling conventions used in our field. Most professionals in the field struggle with the *cocktail*

*party question* - "So tell me - what is it that you do exactly?" The question requires some careful thought and a sentence or two in reply, since few people are really familiar with the names we use to describe ourselves. Ongoing exchanges on the Instructional Technology Forum (ITFORUM) listserv and the Distance Education Online Symposium (DEOS) listserv are further evidence of this. For instance, in May 2007 a graduate student sent a question to the ITFORUM (DeFrias, 2007) listserv asking:

What's the most efficient/market-able/current name for folks who do what we ID folks do? ... [T]here are other graduate programs out there for Educational Technology, Instructional Technology, etc. I'm an instructional designer right now, but my boss asked me what I wanted on my new business card, and a quick search of the job boards shows all of the above titles. And from what I can read, all those programs produce graduates who do close to the same thing.

In response, Clark Quinn (2007) responded:

I've been bemoaning for years that we have a labeling problem. Instructional and Educational are both so limiting, implying as they do only formal learning solutions (which can lump you

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into either the ‘school’ group or worse, the ‘training’ group, which gets no respect). However, Learning Technology, while somewhat better (can include more forms of learning than just education or instruction) still sort of misses the performance support category. And then, Performance Technologist might mean pump performance, or financial performance, or... and I find ‘human performance technologist’ kind of weird (a sports trainer? a sexual therapist?).

This past year the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) published a new book entitled *Educational Technology: A Definition with Commentary* (Januszewski & Molenda, 2008). It is this redefinition – particularly its adoption of the term *educational technology* – that we respond to in this paper.

## Background

Among the different professional organizations relating to technology and education (e.g., AECT, ISTE, ISPI, ASTD, AACE, SALT), AECT historically has been uniquely influential in shaping and guiding theory and practice of instructional design and technology. As a veteran organization dating back to the early audio-visual movement, AECT is the only group to systematically attempt to define the field over the years (Seels & Richey, 1994). In 1963, 1972, 1977, 1994, and now in 2008, AECT has published official definitions of the field meant to serve as a conceptual foundation for theory and practice. In this paper we discuss AECT’s return to the use of the term *educational technology* as a point for considering how definitions get made and changed.

Both Seels and Richey (1994), authors of *Instructional Technology: The definition of the field*, and Januszewski and Molenda (2008), authors of *Educational Technology: A Definition with Commentary*, agree that the terms *educational technology* and *instructional technology* are often used interchangeably. Even so, some distinctions are commonly made (Gentry, 1995). Insiders and outsiders to the field suggest that *educational technology* suggests a greater focus on K12 settings and *instructional technology* a more generic reference to a variety of school and work settings. These perceptions are sometimes entrenched – for example, one of us had an Associate Dean of Distance Learning tell him that she would not even consider hiring someone with a degree in *Educational Technology* because she believed they were not prepared the same way as graduates with a degree in *Instructional Technology* or *Instructional Design*.

AECT’s definitions have followed an interesting route in their use of these two terms. In 1972 and 1977, AECT officially adopted the label *educational technology*; however, in 1994, AECT began officially adopting the label *instructional technology*, with the publication of *Instructional Technology: The Definition of the Field* (Seels & Richey, 1994). The authors devoted a six-paragraph section to justifying the decision to change the label from *educational technology* to *instructional technology*. Disappointingly, the following is about the extent to which Januszewski and Molenda (2008) specifically address the change:

This book presents a definition of the field of study and practice as “educational technology” or “instructional technology.” While recognizing that educational and instructional have different connotations, the authors intend that

this definition encompass both terms. It could be argued that either term is broader and more inclusive in some sense, but the current definition and Terminology Committee chooses to focus on the sense in which education is the broader term. (p. ix)

In a later chapter on implications for academic programs, Persichitte (2008) suggests: “the important point is not whether the definition (or the program title) is educational technology or instructional technology or any other combination of relevant terms” (p. 332). In both cases the authors seem to be accepting a couple of tacit points:

- One way, or perhaps the best way, to choose a label for our field and practice is by choosing the more general or broader label
- Labels, or at least the label of *educational technology* or *instructional technology*, do not matter very much and the changing of these labels does not warrant a full rationale

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Choosing a label though should be a bit more complicated than this and require more forethought. How a professional organization labels a field can have far-reaching consequences both for members within the organization as well as those outside of it. Thus, changing a label of a field should be more than an academic exercise of picking

the more general of two terms (that are sometimes used interchangeably).

The definition's authors may see this as an unfair characterization of their position – and we frankly hope and suspect this is the case. The problem is that *a thorough justification for the change cannot be found in the book* – leaving readers to piece together some kind of grounds for the decision.

## Labels Matter

Of course, the choice of label for our field matters, even for words often used interchangeably. Before looking at some empirical evidence of how and when certain labels are used, we review below some reasons why labels are important.

## Market and Branding

Connotations of words refer to shades of meaning that color or suggest association, but do not concretely change the referent. Connotations of labels have important impacts because people are drawn to certain names and repelled by others; hence the considerable investment in branding and promotion by marketing specialists. A brand is seen as a primary asset by an organization, reflecting years of investment in quality and promotion. Companies consider a change in a label only very reluctantly, understanding that the market may perceive a name change as a sign of trouble in the brand.

## Language, Thought, and Identity

Language is intricately connected to thought and learning (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). Just as language shapes thought and social practices, thought and social practices shape language. Language is the foundation of culture (Ong, 1982; White & Lowenthal, 2009) and plays an important role in communities of practice such as ours (Wenger, 1999). The way we communicate reveals who we are and how

we think; and as such, language is never value neutral (Bourdieu, 1970). The language that is used by an organization can shape how members think. We need to reflect on the language and the labels that we use and how it impacts our thinking and our field. Despite the early work by psychologists like Vygotsky (1962), and later work by linguists like Gee (1996) and cognitive scientists like Lakoff (1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), we seem to forget—or not even acknowledge in the first place—how the language we use influences and structures thought. Moreover, language, or more specifically discourse, is not merely the transference of ideas from one person or people to another; it is the very making of meaning and shaping of identities.

We create ourselves and are created through the language we use (Bruner, 1986, 1990, 2002; Gee, 2002, 2003; Vygotsky, 1962). Thus, a change in language use can bring with it changes in identity. Theorists now agree that we each have multiple identities (Gee, 2003); identity is not a static unchanging entity but rather a dynamic entity that is influenced by the communities of practice we are a part of and their associated uses of language (Gee, 2000). In fact, Wertsch (1991) has argued that language plays a crucial role in an individual's inclusion within a specific environment or culture. While simply changing a label or adopting an older alternative, might seem like a minor change, there is reason to believe based on the literature on identity and language that a change like this could have a greater impact than some realize. Specifically, when the label or language that is changed is directly related to name of a field of practice.

## Perspectives from the Field

While definitions of the field may be of primary interest to academics, many practitioners have an interest in how we label and talk about the field – especially if those definitions affect their jobs. To get a feel for how day-to-day practitioners talk about the field, we reviewed professional job announcements, the titles of academic programs, listservs, and book titles.

## Professional Job Announcements

Job postings seemed the natural starting point. Interestingly, before we began analyzing the titles of job postings, we noticed that neither the *Chronicle of Higher Education* nor HigherEdJobs.com labeled jobs in our field *educational technology*. For instance, on the *Chronicle's* website, one must select one of the following options:

| Source                            | Total Job Postings | Educational Technology | Instructional Technology | Instructional Design |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Indiana University I.T. Job Board | 52                 | 1                      | 9                        | 19                   |
| AECT Job Board                    | 17                 | 0                      | 5                        | 1                    |
| HigherEdJobs.com                  | 65                 | 4                      | 8                        | 15                   |
| Chronicle of Higher Education     | 193                | 4                      | 7                        | 9                    |
| Total                             | 327                | 9                      | 29                       | 44                   |

Table 1: Labels Used in Professional Job Announcements

Instruction design  
 Instruction development  
 Instructional technology  
 Instructional technology education  
 Instructional technology/design  
 Instructional technology/design (campus)

Similarly, if one searches on [higherjobs.com](http://higherjobs.com) by type, our field is labeled as *instructional technology and design*. While we chose not to sample job postings from [InsideHigherEd.com](http://InsideHigherEd.com), we noted that they too have no option to search for jobs in the field of *educational technology*—instead they label our field as *instructional technology/ distance education*.

We purposefully sampled job postings from national job boards that are known to publish vacant positions in our field. The following web sites were purposefully selected because of their overall popularity (e.g., the *Chronicle* and [HigherEdJobs.com](http://HigherEdJobs.com) both list more positions in our field than most other employment web sites combined):

1. Chronicle of Higher Education
2. HigherEdJobs.com
3. AECT
4. University of Indiana’s Instructional Technology Job Board

Six weeks of job postings were compiled from each employment website. The postings were copied and pasted into an excel spreadsheet. The data was then cleaned up. Finally, the data was compiled and analyzed.

While the name of a field does not have to correspond to specific job titles, we did expect to find positions for such things as educational technologists as well as instructional technologists and finally instructional designers. We found though that of the 327 job postings we analyzed, only 9 of those positions had the label *educational technology* in the job title. On the other hand, we did find that label *instructional technology* was used 29 times or more than 3 times as often as *educational technology*. Interestingly, *instructional design* was used the most

often; see Table 1 for a complete list of what we found.

This finding bears out our informal observations of how people tend to talk about jobs, particularly in adult-learning settings.

### Titles of Academic Programs

We also felt it would be useful to see what universities are labeling the degrees and programs because this data could perhaps be the most persuasive in influencing graduates perceptions of the field. We utilized the *Curricula Data Of Degree Programs In Educational Communications And Technology* listed on the AECT’s website to identify universities who had programs of study in our field. Even though this lists does not include every possible program throughout the country – mainly because universities have to self-select to be included on this list by submitting the required information – it does list the majority of programs throughout the country. Further, there is reason to believe that the programs that are listed represent groups that identify with AECT.

The *Curricula Data of Degree Programs* lists both the title of the degree as well as the title of the program at the institution. The list contained 134 programs in the United States. We specifically chose to sample only programs in the U.S. because AECT, despite its interna-

|   | Degree Name | Program Name |
|---|-------------|--------------|
| Educational Technology  | 20          | 34           |
| Instructional Technology                                      | 29          | 51           |
| Instructional Design and/or Instructional Design & Technology | 9           | 13           |

Table 2: Breakdown of the Labels Used by Universities

**“AECT is the oldest of the educational/instructional technology organizations. Throughout its history, it has continually changed with the times.”**

tional influence, is historically and primarily an American professional organization. We counted any degree or program that had the words Educational Technology, Instructional Technology or Instructional Design in the title. For instance, a degree or program called Instructional Systems Design would be counted in this category but a

program called Instructional Systems would not. Of the 134 programs, 20 of the programs used the label *Educational Technology*, 29 used the label *Instructional Technology*, and 9 used the label *Instructional Design* or *Instructional Design and Technology*. The numbers increase when one looks at the names of programs (see Table 1). There were 34 programs with the name *Educational Technology*, 51 with the name *Instructional Technology*, and 13 with *Instruction Design* or *Instruc-*

*tional Design and Technology* in the name. This is most likely due to the fact that as hard as it is to change the name of a program or department, it is even harder to change the name of a degree. It is important to note though that we recognize that some of the information in the *Curricula Data of Degree Programs* could be outdated.

## Listserv Conversation

Issues of naming conventions and labels are regularly brought up on listservs like ITFORUM and DEOS. Listserv participants occasionally argue for new labels like *learning design* or *learning technology*. Advocates of *educational technology*, however, seldom surface. We did a few basic searches in the ITFORUM archives, using key words like “Definition of the field” and “Labels used in the field,” to get a sense of some of the past discussions that have taken place. As we suspected, we did not find anyone advocating for the use of the label *educational technology*. However, a few themes did emerge.

First, members of the ITFORUM acknowledge that our current labels are confusing. The following excerpt is representative (Left, 1998):

... [The] terms ‘education technology’ and ‘instructional technology’ are also a little ambiguous to newcomers because of the uncertain relationship between the two words – is it the

technology of instruction, or is it instruction about technology? Many assume it is the latter because they know that ‘children learn about computers in schools.’

But despite dissatisfaction with the labels *educational technology* and *instructional technology*, members of ITFORUM cannot agree on an alternative label. Some are not happy with the label instructional designer (Ferrell, 2004):

We are ... more than “instructional” designers because that limits us and gives the perception of designing for the “giving” of instruction. In the times and days of constructivism e-learning, “blended” learning etc. the main word is learning. I agree that it should be along the Learning Systems Design to more adequately describe what we do ... That will be the biggest hurdle, since even changing a program name in academia takes forever...

...My problem with instructional designer is they want me to create stand-up training. When I use instructional technologist, I get blank looks (from, I think, confusion with Information Technology). When I talk about educational technology, I get asked to wire classrooms. ... I agree that Instructional Technology has the unfortunate overlap with the other IT acronym. However, I also think Instructional Designer doesn’t separate us as the ones who play with toys. ... I’m trying to make us think beyond just instruction, to other forms of learning, to start taking responsibility for performance support, knowledge management, and other information needs that lead to ability to act... so I’ve been looking for a new term. Given that instruction is only a part of that, I think at least we should think about learning technology, or be willing to be even broader (learning technology and performance support...), or something. I have no simple answer, I confess, so I’m continuing to troll for a new branding.

... [A]sking for a definition of IT is not the right way to go about understanding the eclectic nature of our field. I think that the corporate world has come the closest to pinning down the term “instructional designer” as an accepted position description.... I am not sure though that as an academic IT

community we ought to seek a solid definition for the field. If we were able to do that, it would cease to be a definition.

Others have mixed feelings about the role of “performance” (Spencer, 2004):

... I think that whatever the field is called it will be for our own organization and purposes. Whether I tell someone I'm an ID&T, IT or HPT - the general public will still be saying, “Now what is it you. ... I have nothing against the inclusion of non-instructional solution to the tasks ... I just found it a little bit ironical to ... use the name Instructional Design and Technology for our field when ... we already expanded our scope covering even the non-instructional solution like improving incentive or rewards system for employees, why not totally change the name of our field to something that would fit to its actual nature. So, if Human Performance Technology would best describe our field, so be it. Because sometimes I'm just confuse to refer our field, ID&T or HPT?

... I personally do not like the word performance in the name because of a personal aversion to indicating that I deal with making others “perform.” It gives me a feeling of a monkey on a chain and it is but one aspect of our skills. ...I prefer the word “development.”

Others seem to struggle with AECT's place in our field, especially given other professional organizations. Take for instance the following posts (Barbour, 2008):

... AECT released a new definition of educational technology... they specifically used educational technology because that was the term used in the name of the organization. Based on that definition, who should be included as programs in our field? Or should we be using AECT as our measuring stick? ... If not AECT, what is our primary professional organization? If we have more than one primary professional organization, are we really all in the same field? ...Part of the problem with the definitions is that AECT has been less than consistent, too media related and there is no professional group of IDs that defines the profession or IT and we have argued here over a name (see the archives and papers). AECT still caters too much to k12 and NCATE accredited programs ignore the business, military, govt and

training world where many IDs work. ...There are clearly more than three of four organizations that inform the field. Off the top of my head, I can think of eight: AECT, AACE, ISPI, ITSE, ASTD, IEEE, ACM, and Educare. While each of these organizations takes a unique perspective (or at least tries to), they all contribute something to the research and practice of our field. I think it would be disingenuous to not recognize that....

Some have pointed out that given the diversity of our field, any label will leave some out (Shewanown, 2004):

...[G]iven the broad scope of our field, regardless what label we use..., we will leave out some “important” aspects of what we do (or at least what we think we do). At least for now, I am not sure how productive it is to try to derive one “right” label for our field. I do agree with Clark, ideally, that “we do need a good label for this group, for branding purposes”. However, I am not optimistic that we (the filed) are ready to agree on one label...

## Publications

The last indicator we looked at to get a sense of how people in our field our labeling or referring to our field was publications--specifically, books. This was perhaps the least systematic of our analyses but we wanted to point out a few trends that we have noticed regarding publications in our field.

Daniel Surry and colleagues took a list of 700 books in our field and had surveyed people on their perceptions of the most influential / foundational. Of the list that they identified, only one book, *Trends & Issues in Educational Technology* (Ely, 1989) had the label *educational technology* in the title. Surprisingly though, only two books had *instructional technology* in the title. They were *Instructional Technology: The Definition and Domains of the Field* (Seels & Richey, 1994) and *Classic Writings on Instructional Technology* (Ely & Plomp, 2001). However, there were over 19 books with *instructional design* in the title.

***“...while Heinich (1984) put technology as the base of our field...we believe that design is equally important and should have equal standing.”***

## Concluding Thoughts

Our critique of the new label leaves certain issues unexplored (e.g., the political subtexts and competitive environment that the definitions committee worked within). Regrettably, these issues remain unexamined and un-argued for. There may be issues and requirements facing AECT and the field that we are unaware of. We therefore invite a response from the terminology committee to our paper, and more open discussion of these issues that will shape our professional practice for years to come.

AECT is the oldest of the educational/instructional technology organizations. Throughout its history, it has continually changed with the times. For instance, AECT began as the *Department of Visual Instruction*; then it changed its name to *Audiovisual Instruction* and then to *Audiovisual Communications* (Torkelson, 1998), and then later in the early 1970s to *Association for Educational Communications and Technology* (AECT) (Molenda, 2005). Another example of AECT changing with the times is when in the late 1980s it merged two journals to create ETRD. So throughout its history, AECT has not been afraid to make changes and change with the times.

As an organization, AECT needs to focus on its future. This is not something new though; throughout its history, AECT has had to adjust to the times. Almost 20 years ago, Reigeluth (1989) claimed that “the field is undergoing an identity crisis like none in its history” (p. 67). With the rise of online learning and the increased presence of competing, and at times more specialized professional organizations, AECT finds itself in many ways once again in an identity crisis. We suspect that part of AECT’s problem might be the “vague and inconsistent language” that Reigeluth and Carr-Chellman (2006) explain can impede a disciplines growth. Morgan even pointed out in 1978 that “some would say that a discipline about whose name there is no certainty is no discipline at all, and educational technology has a variety of other labels—instructional systems development, instructional design, and, occasionally, educational engineering” (p. 142).

We are not arguing necessarily for the adoption of one label over another. While there are a growing number of people who recommend adopting a label that includes the word “learning”—such as “Learning Design”—there are others like Reiser and colleagues (e.g., Reiser, 2007) who have for years made a compelling case for the label *instructional design and technology*. And given the frequent use of the label “Instructional Design,” as illustrated earlier in this paper, it makes sense to consider the place of instructional design in our

field. While the new definition has now replaced the word “design” with “create,” a quick glance at the subject index reveals the importance of design; the book has 29 references to instructional design but none to creating or creation.

We recognize that many see *instructional design* as simply a part of the field of *instructional technology* (e.g., Molenda, 1997) or even as its own field (Wilson, 2005); we believe however that there is a design component in nearly every aspect of instructional technology. Therefore, while Heinich (1984) put technology as the base of our field in 1984, we believe that design is equally important and should have equal standing. Reiser (1987) has pointed out that there have been basically two types of definitions of our field over the years, the type that focuses on technology and media and then the type that focuses on systematic design. We believe, especially with the increased pressure of other professional organizations, that AECT needs to begin to differentiate itself from its peers—regardless of the label used.

We recognize that any label will unquestionably highlight some things while ignoring others. Or as Saun Shewanown pointed out on March, 25, 2004 on ITFORUM: “regardless what label we use for ourselves, we will leave out some important aspects of what we do (or at least what we think we do)” (Shewanown, 2004). We even agree to some degree with Saun, who stated in the same message, “I am not sure how productive it is to try to derive one right label for our field.” We don’t think we can ever find the “right” or the “perfect” label for the field. Further, many have pointed out that word “instructional” has negative connotations to international members and audiences. The question might not be so much one of defining the field but defining AECT’s position in the field and if attracting international members is atop that list then perhaps educational technology is an appropriate label. The key issue at hand, in our opinion, is not the move from instructional technology to educational technology but rather the method of decision-making and rationale for the change. Without input from practitioners and outsiders, and without a thorough and clear rationale for changes, changes are likely to have negative impacts as well as positive ones.

We conclude with the words of Ely and Plomp (2001), who have encouraged dialogue such as that found in this paper:

Where are the voices today? What are they saying? How has the field changed? How does it need to change? Professionals should continue to seek answers to such questions if the profession is to grow and prosper? (p. 255)

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# An Invitation to Developers

*TechTrends* is seeking short illustrated articles describing outstanding instructional products/designs for publication in a running feature titled "Instructional Design Portfolio." The purpose of the Portfolio is to offer practitioners in the field of ID a chance to see the work of other designers more frequently than they are sometimes able to do and to provide for the sharing of design knowledge that is not always available in other formats. We will accept articles from all sectors and all levels of designers, including student designers.

Consulting editors chosen for their instructional design expertise will assist the editor-in-chief in selecting the projects to appear in the Portfolio from among those submitted. *TechTrends* will edit the write-ups and select from among the illustrations provided by authors to produce a concise representation of the product for each portfolio.

## Guidelines for submissions

The write-up text should include at least the following information about the project:

- Official name of the project or product and any organization supporting or sponsoring it.
- Recognition of the primary contributors to the project with job titles and role on the project.
- Context of the project: Original design problem; Overview of timeline and budget; Conditions under which the project was carried out (consulting, in-house development, individual effort, etc.).
- Current status of the project - where is it being used? By whom? What have been the outcomes of the project?
- Statement of the measures used to evaluate the effectiveness of the project, and overview of the data from those measures.

The author of the Portfolio write-up must secure any required permissions for reproducing elements of the product and/or for describing the product in *TechTrends* and provide the documentation of those permissions to the editor.

**Technical specifications:** All illustrations for a Portfolio entry must be high resolution (150 dpi or greater for electronic files from screen or digital photographs; photo-ready line art; 35mm photographs; 300 dpi files for vector graphics). Send manuscripts or query letters to:

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