

A Juggler's Guide to ISD

Transcript of Russ Powell's 10-minute TED-style talk at Institute for Performance and Learning (I4PL) 2016 conference in Toronto, ON Canada, 4 Nov 2016.

Set the Stage

[Ahead of time, assistant has placed Russ' juggling props – hat, clubs, beans bags, knives – on colorful towel at center stage. Slide is up showing name of presentation, etc.]

[Russ, wearing suit, walks out on stage.]

Thank you.

What an honor to be here.

My name is Russ Powell. I am a learning-industry veteran and a training consultant with the firm Peregrine Performance Group.

[Russ continues speaking as he takes off jacket, hangs it on chair, tucks tie into shirt, rolls up sleeves.]

I'd like to take you back to a time many years ago: 1991.

Brian Mulroney is the Prime Minister of Canada.

Jazz fans are mourning the death of the legendary trumpet player, Miles Davis.

The United States, for the first time in many years, has two teams in the Stanley Cup finals – Pittsburgh beats Minnesota.

[Picks up top hat, points to "loaded" towel and says...]

And THIS is how I begin my work-day.

[Flips top hat from low hand to high hand. After catch, sets it on ground. Hands are empty.]

I was in my twenties, fresh out of graduate school, and my first consulting business had crashed and burned.

In order to get back on my feet financially, I was waiting tables in a new shopping and entertainment district in Atlanta. To attract more tourists, the district had put out a call for buskers – you know, street performers. This piqued my interest.

You see, just a few years earlier, I had completed my undergraduate studies in New Orleans, and while there I learned to juggle from some extraordinary performers who worked the French Quarter.

I had learned some great tricks and had performed at a few campus events. So, when this opportunity came up in Atlanta, I figured what-the-heck I should audition. And so I did.

[Picks up clubs.]

I was terrified, but they loved it. And they hired me.

And, so, for six months, in 1991, that's how I earned my living... as a street juggler.

[Briefly juggles clubs. Sets them down. Hands are empty.]

Fast forward.

Today, I run an award-winning workforce performance improvement firm. We help business leaders design and create training programs and tools that support training.

When I4PL invited me to speak with you, I thought it might be fascinating and fun to journey back to that time, my juggling years, *[points to towel, props]* and look for lessons that apply to instructional systems design.

What do you think? Sound good?

Great. There are a thousand lessons I learned in those years that apply to my work today. But time is short, so I've chosen three.

[SLIDE ADVANCE – New Slide appears, “Be clear, ask for what you want.”]

#1 – Be Clear and Ask for What You Want

Back when I was juggling, I was pretty clear. What I wanted was money.

I wanted people to enjoy my shows, but I also wanted them to open their wallets, dig deep and put some of their hard-earned cash in my hat. I had a handful of ways of asking for that.

One of my favorites was to joke about it.

[Picks up top hat.]

In the middle of my show I'd grab my hat, turn to the audience, and say, “Whenever I pick up my hat someone always says, ‘Russ, is that a magic hat?’”

[Russ looks at the audience, listens. No response. Looks at the hat, looks at the audience and says again, this time more forcefully.]

Let's try that again. "Whenever I pick up my hat someone always says..."

[Eventually someone responds.]

Thank you!

And I'd say, "Of course it's a magic hat; whenever I pull it out people disappear."

[Laughter.]

It was just a funny way of drawing attention to the fact that I was NOT performing for free. And it gave me a perfect opening to ask for their cash.

[Sets hat on towel. Hands are empty.]

Quick show of hands: how many of you consider yourselves instructional designers? Great. Thanks.

As instructional designers, we are charged with creating experiences that help people acquire knowledge and skills. Right?

And if we can do that in a manner that's fast and effective, we can consider ourselves successful. Yes?

But it takes a lot to do that.

We have to understand the needs of the business and the needs of the learners. We have to determine the end goal and the steps for achieving that goal. And the details of these things inform the design of the "intervention" we build.

So, there's a lot we need. And the more specific we can be about the time and the people and the material resources we need, the easier it is for our clients to provide them.

Here's a simple example: At Peregrine when we start an instructional project, we like to distinguish between two types of people — *subject matter experts* and *accomplished performers*.

Subject matter experts are the people with the theory in their heads. We want access to them, but what we REALLY want... is access to the *accomplished performers*.

These are the people out in the field who are doing the work, successfully, every day. They are closest to the tasks we're preparing to teach others. And we've found the outputs of our projects tend to be better when we have access to them.

So, at Peregrine, up front, clearly and deliberately, we ask for access to those accomplished performers. And, more often than not, we get it.

So, figure out what you want, what you need. Be clear. And ask for it.

[Picks up three bean bags.]

Number two.

#2 – Let the Inmates Run the Asylum

[SLIDE ADVANCE – New slide appears “Let the inmates run the asylum.”]

One of my juggling coaches used to encourage me to get my audiences more involved in my shows.

[Throws two bean bags to people in the audience.]

And so I did. I would HAVE THEM, for example, hold dangerous objects – if only to confirm that they were real. Or they might choose the props that I would juggle. Or throw props to me...

[Has audience members throw the bean bags back to him.]

...or AT ME in the case of small children and instructional designers.

When I gave audience members active parts in the show, my shows became more engaging and more fun. And the audiences grew larger and they stayed longer. All good things.

[Sets bean bags on towel.]

Thinking about instructional design, one of my favorite mentors, Thiagi, has this adage. He would say, “The person who learns the most on an instructional project is rarely the student. It's usually the instructional designer.”

A bit of a paradox, isn't it?

But think about it. It's the instructional designer who's doing all the hard work. WE are the ones going out into the real world and speaking with the experts. WE are the ones reviewing and evaluating the source materials.

The idea behind this principle is simply to get out of the way of the student—the participant.

Let THEM do more of that work you do as the instructional designer.

Empower them and hold them accountable.

Let THEM help out with the design. Let THEM be the trainer. Let THEM help build and test the job aids, the quizzes, and the games that will help future participants learn.

Treat them as the smart and motivated adults they are.

And you can recall this by remembering the phrase, *Let the inmates run the asylum.*

[Picks up three bean bags again.]

Number three.

#3 – Do Your Best Work, but Be Prepared for Mistakes

[SLIDE ADVANCE – New slide appears “Be Prepared for Mistakes”]

I remember the day I realized I did NOT have to be afraid of dropping things.

I was at a comedy club watching an extraordinary juggler perform.

[Juggles three balls. Throws two behind back...]

In the middle of a complex move he dropped a ball.

[...and drops third on stage floor.]

Rather than get upset, he turned to the audience and, sounding just as surprised as we were, said, “Whoa. Sudden burst of gravity there. Did you feel that?”

[Laughter.]

Exactly. And he carried on with his performance.

Turns out jugglers have a thousand ways to recover from dropped props. They have what they call “drop lines.”

Another example: “It’s just part of the act. The part I didn’t practice.”

It may sound odd, but before that time – before I learned about these drop lines – I was TERRIFIED of dropping things, so I didn’t take any risks. After that, it became normal. I realized if I wasn’t dropping things, I wasn’t pushing myself hard enough.

[Sets bean bags on towel.]

As instructional designers and training consultants, I encourage you to think of that.

If you're not making at least a few mistakes here and there, you're probably not taking enough risks or pushing yourself and your teams hard enough.

Wrap-up

Okay, so let's review:

[SLIDE ADVANCE – New slide appears w/ three main points, numbered.]

When you start your next instructional project...

One. Figure out what you want, what you need, in order to be successful and ask for it.

Two. Don't be afraid to let the inmates run the asylum. Get your participants involved in the design and engaged with the content *sooner* rather than later.

And three. Do your best work; but be prepared for mistakes. Find some mistake-recovery strategies that work for you—and use them.

Alright. If you have any questions or would like to talk more about design strategies, come see me after the talks. I'd be delighted to meet you and talk shop. Or offer a juggling lesson.

So, whaddaya think? Should I do a little more juggling before I go?

[Enthusiastic yesses from audience.]

Fantastic.

[Picks up knives. Pretends to sharpen them. Fakes to audience member that he's going to throw one to h/her.]

Alright. Help me out. Count with me – one, two, three. Ready?

[Counts ONE, TWO... and stops b/c the crowd is not loud enough.]

Oh, come on. You can do better than that. I'm about to risk my LIFE up here.

[Gestures to emphasize about to juggle knives.]

Once more, out loud, on my count. And from the diaphragm...

[Again counts ONE... TWO... THREE.... Juggles knives for count of five. Stops.]

[SLIDE ADVANCE – As Russ starts juggling knives, final slide appears identical to first slide w/ presentation title and name.]

[Audience applauds.]

Thank you. It's been a pleasure. I hope you enjoy the remainder of the conference.

[Russ puts jacket on. Exits.]