What is instructional design and what purpose does it serve you ask?

(Several people enter the elevator at the lobby level and the doors shut.)

Well...one of the clearest definitions that I’ve come across was in a textbook about instructional design written by two experts in the field named Tillman Ragan and Patricia Smith. In their book, they said that the job of the instructional designer was to answer three major questions:

1. Where are we going?
   What they meant was, “What are the goals of the instruction?”

2. How will we get there?
   What they meant was, “What is the instructional strategy and the instructional medium?”

3. How will we know when we have arrived?
   What they meant in this case was, “What should our tests look like? How will we evaluate and revise the instructional materials?” (Ragan & Smith, 2005, p. 8)

(The elevator stops...and a person exits at the 4th floor.)

Mainly, instructional design aims to systematize the process of creating instructional materials. There are numerous theories, models, paradigms, and perspectives that underlie the discipline of instructional design...such as learning theories, instructional theories, instructional design theories, psychology, systems theory, communication theory, technology, and philosophy. But the main idea here is that the art and science of instructional design exists to help insure that the instructional materials hit their mark. That is, that the learning materials are effective and that they achieve the congruence between what someone says that they are going to teach someone, what someone actually teaches them, and then making sure that the assessments for those learners are fair...that they prove that the learners learned what they were supposed to have learned.

(The elevator stops, and someone from the 8th floor gets in.)

But it really is both an art and a science. No two designers would deliver the exact same things on a large project, though the deliverables and strategies would be in the same ball park.

Why?

Because both instructional designers would want and need to know about the learning needs, the learning context/environment, the relevant tasks, and some detailed information about the characteristics of the learners.

Did I hear you correctly? Did you just ask, “What’s the difference between instructional design and things like creating – and teaching – a curriculum?”

(Just past the 12th floor.)

Well...curriculum designers are flying at an 80,000 foot level...at more of a macro level and are often concerned with meeting certain standards and of insuring that certain content is addressed. Whereas the instructional designer flies at a much lower level...say at 25-500 feet. It’s at much more of a micro level. The instructional designer is often not the one who actually teaches or delivers the instructional materials. They are really two separate roles and have two different sets of skills.

(Just arrived on the 15th floor; time to get off.)