

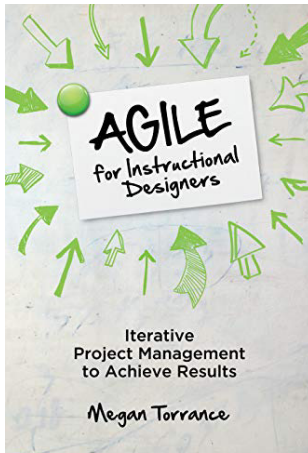
e-mentor

DWUMIESIĘCZNIK SZKOŁY GŁÓWNEJ HANDLOWEJ W WARSZAWIE
WSPÓŁWYDAWCA: FUNDACJA PROMOCJI I AKREDYTACJ KIERUNKÓW EKONOMICZNYCH

2019, No 3(80)



Zajac, M. (2019). Agile for Instructional Designers – review of the book by Megan Torrance. *e-mentor*, 3(80), 71–72. DOI: 10.15219/em80.1426



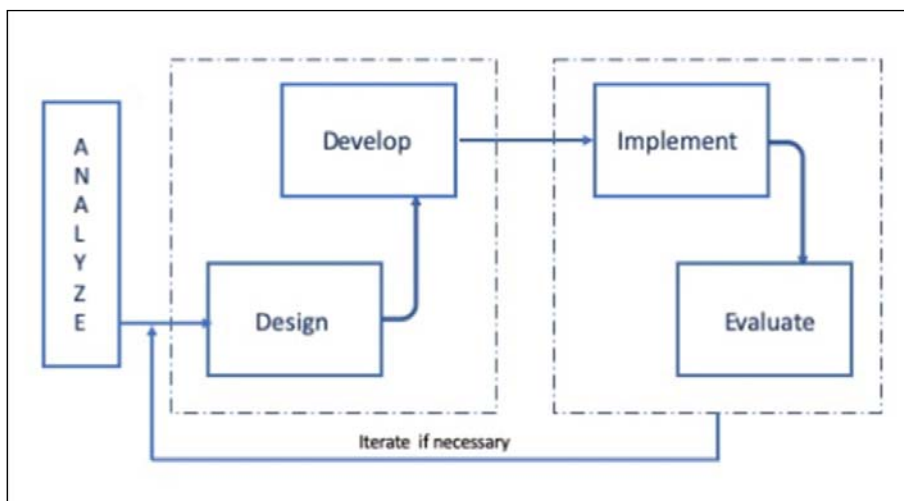
Agile for Instructional Designers – review of the book by Megan Torrance

Maria Zajac

Megan Torrance is a practitioner who leads the e-learning design and development firm. In her book **Agile for Instructional Designers. Iterative Project Management to Achieve Results**, she presents how to apply the agile methodology for designing an e-learning experience. She argues that the ADDIE¹ model still commonly used in instructional design does not suit the needs of contemporary learners, and therefore it should be replaced by a more flexible approach. Flexibility means, in this context, openness to change, which can be introduced even while the training or the course is being delivered. The author of the book claims that the agile approach, well known from software development practices, can be effectively used to support the traditional approach to designing the learning experience. Hence, she introduces first her own, concise definition of agile, and then describes the methodology of using the agile approach to instructional design which she calls LLAMA from the words Lot Like Agile Management Approach.

According to Torrance, “Agile is an iterative, incremental method of guiding the design and building projects in a highly flexible and interactive manner, focusing on maximizing customer value and fostering high team engagement.” The practice of software development has proved that testing and evaluating the “product” during the design process rather than at the end of it is much more effective and leads to higher customer satisfaction. The author observes that the final evaluation of the courses and pieces of training cannot be beneficial for the current learners, it may help to improve the course for its future participants but not for the present. In the LLAMA approach, it is possible to accommodate changes when necessary, for instance, when the managers decided to equip a particular group of the staff with tablets and therefore mobile access to the course content appears to be essential for them.

It is worth to stress, however, that agile methodology itself is not a learning design method. Therefore, Torrance developed the LLAMA model, which she



Source: own elaboration based on the book being reviewed

¹ The acronym ADDIE stands from Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation.

calls in short, the ADDIE model adapted for Agile. The core assumption applied in the model is that changes are introduced iteratively, i.e., the development phase can be repeated (iterated) several times, depending on the flow of implementation followed each time by the evaluation phase. The author points out that “rather than assuming that the initial analysis covered every aspect and that no changes will be requested during design and development, the Agile approach implies a continuous return to the design and development phases after prior evaluation.” Such an approach transforms the course creation process into a multi-stage project, completed in small increments. After each stage, its result (a course or a part of it) can be viewed, used, and tested by the learners and those who ordered it. As Torrance says, “this gives teams the chance to identify problems not previously anticipated or reevaluate features or functions that might not work in practice as they had envisioned.”

Explaining the idea of how an agile methodology can be adjusted to the needs of learning designers constitutes the introductory part of the book. Then the three main parts come, named subsequently: Kicking Off the Project, Managing the Project, and Applying Agile in Your Organization.

Kicking off the project refers to the meeting when not only the goal and scope of the project must be defined, but also the learner and his/her needs are identified. Applying the rule that “one size does not fit all” requires an accurate description of the learner. Torrance recommends using the concept of “learner personas,” very common among marketers. In other contexts, the names “user stories” or “empathy maps” are used as well. The point is that during the course design, “understanding the target customers’ routines, pain points, needs, aspirations and prior knowledge or comfort with what will be delivered to them” may help to improve the original outline of the course. In practice, the learners can usually be represented by three to five personas. It is not only about being a beginner or an advanced learner. Creating the persona means assigning to it as many “real people’s” features as possible, e.g., their interests, motivations, recreational activities, professional goals, the level of comfort with technology. Then indicating the “primary learner persona” (PLP) helps to decide whose needs are to be met first, and in consequence to concentrate on those parts of the course, which are crucial for PLP because they are vital for the organization as well. Such an approach, quite well known in organizational settings, is not so common in educational contexts. Getting familiar with it is one of the reasons why this book is worth reading, especially by the instructional designers employed at the universities.

Concerning the management of the project, it should be remembered that planning the iterations in the project work, maintaining regular lines of communication, and facilitating retrospectives are vital for its proper flow. For the latter, it is crucial not

to focus too much on the things that went wrong. A much more valuable part of the retrospection would be to try to formulate suggestions for improving the process instead.

As the book is intended to help people better design the learning experience, it is strongly practice-oriented, and every chapter ends with the sections *What Could Possibly Go Wrong?* and *Key Takeaways*. The actual value of the first is drawing the attention of the designers to those tiny things, which might often seem obvious, but they are not. Just to give a snip of what is meant one or two examples. First – borrowed from the *Define the Goal* chapter – one of the key takeaways states, “The goal is never to create the training. The goal is to improve performance, and training may be among deliverables that you use to meet the goal.” There are far too many courses built around the goal of creating the training. Another example comes from *Define and Estimate Tasks* chapter – among the things that could possibly go wrong, the author mentions, “You think about estimating duration instead of effort.” In the same section, one of the key takeaways is Torrance’s advice to follow four rules of estimating. And the rules are as follows: “Rule #1: Break things into smaller feasible chunks; Rule #2: The person who does the work estimates the work; Rule #3: Estimate based on what you think it will take to do the work, with no padding; Rule #4: Account for the uncertainty of large things.”

The book ends with two appendices. The first one is called *The Agile Manifesto and 12 Principles for L&D Teams*, this title speaks for itself. The second appendix is called by the Author *the Job Aids* because it offers the sample *Project Kickoff Session Agenda*, *the Learner Persona Question List*, *Learner Persona Template*, *the Written Status Report Outline* and even the template for *Capturing Retrospective Feedback*. The practical approach to the course designing process is clearly visible throughout the whole book. It is written in a very concise but informative way. It is worth to stress that although the LLAMA concept was developed in the business settings, it may equally well be applied in the educational context. In my opinion, one may consider the LLAMA approach as a valuable contribution to solving the problem of adjusting the online courses to the diversified needs of the learners. I would recommend this book as a must-read position for every instructional designer. Even if they do not find a definite answer to their problems or decide not to adopt such an approach into their practice, they still could benefit from it.

The book *Agile for Instructional Designers, Iterative Project Management to Achieve Results* by Megan Torrance was published by ATD (Association for Talent Development) Press in 2019. It can be purchased directly from the publisher’s website (<https://www.td.org/books/agile-for-instructional-designers>) or on Amazon.com.