

Careers in Learning Design - Aprel Mendenhall

08/26/2021



Aprel Mendenhall

Careers in Learning - Aprel Mendenhall

Aprel Mendenhall is a USU alumna with her Master of Education degree in Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences. Mendenhall is currently working as the director of Instructional Design at American Heritage Worldwide, where she oversees teams of writers, editors, graphic designers, and illustrators in the design and development of the K-12 curriculum for the school's homeschool and online programs. She also works closely with the school's director of video production as they move scripts from writing to film.

Mendenhall is currently working on turning the school's parent-led resources for art, music, science, literature, geography, and history into a student-led learning experience that will be housed on a Learning Experience Platform (LXP). "We are creating what we call an 'adventure learning model,' where students have the ability to make choices about what content they learn and how deep to dive into that content," she explained. "We are also in the process of creating mastery-based programs for K-8 math and language arts. We will develop this first as a parent-led resource and then flip it into the student-led experience."

Her Research

Mendenhall partnered with Michelle Jensen to compete in the 2019 Association for Educational Communications and Technology Design and Development Competition. At the conclusion of the three different phases of the competition, Mendenhall and Jensen were selected as finalists and won the Best Presentation award.

They had designed a microlearning app, Knowing NATO, for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Allied Command Transformation (NATO ACT). Their design was based on four main components: microlearning, or small bite-size learning modules in the form of videos, short articles, podcasts, or infographics; user-generated content, with officers submitting microlearning lessons and units to share tacit knowledge with incoming and fellow officers around the globe; affinity spaces where officers could find support in interest-based chat rooms, forums, and private messaging; and gamification elements like badges and leader boards. After the competition, they were invited to present at the NATO Technology Training Summit in June 2020, which was unfortunately canceled due to COVID-19.

Her Story

Mendenhall's college career was spent at Utah State University, where she first acquired her Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education with endorsements in math and English as a second language. After working remotely as a content writer for a few years, she felt that it was time for her to begin her master's degree. At first, she wasn't entirely sure what program she wanted to complete; she wanted something that was flexible and that could be done remotely. In her search for programs that met these criteria, she happened across the ITLS website. The program seemed to check off all her requirements and then some.

Because it had been nearly 20 years since she had been to school, Mendenhall was nervous to apply and afraid that she wouldn't be accepted into the program. Now, the ITLS department proudly acknowledges all of Mendenhall's accomplishments and contributions and is pleased to say that she is one of the department's graduate alumni.

"I learned so much in the ITLS program," Mendenhall said, "Before I started, I thought I would be working by myself, having a very isolated experience, but that is not at all how this program was! I was fortunate to become part of a community of practice. The ITLS program is a living, breathing entity that allows students, faculty, and alumni to work together and learn from each other in a responsive,

highly collaborative, and innovative environment. In my current work, I am striving to replicate this model with my coworkers and those who work for me.

"I felt very prepared to step into my role with American Heritage Worldwide because of the ITLS program. I use the principles of design thinking daily as we iterate through the design process. I rely on the knowledge and skills gained in the video production and graphic design classes to communicate with our video production and graphic design teams. I rely on the games and learning class as we are building out our LXP to include gamification elements. I rely on my Instructional Design 1 and 2 classes as I work with my teams using very agile processes. I rely on the skills I learned in the project management class to help me keep the project rolling forward. I could go on. I honestly can't think of a single class that has not had an impact on my current work.

"Even my creative project, Knowing NATO, has had an impact on my current work. I never imagined this would be the case, as that project focused on a very specific group of people. It allowed me to test and play with theories that we are now implementing as we build our LXP. I spent a lot of time researching theories like affinity spaces and user-generated content for my creative project. This research has helped inform many of the decisions we currently make about our UX and UI.

Overall, I can sit around a table with other highly trained and knowledgeable people and contribute ideas founded in research because of my time at USU. The ITLS program prepared me to walk into the position I hold today. I left USU very qualified to make a difference in this industry."

Mendenhall is currently living in Mapleton, Utah with her husband and her four children. She loves gardening and works in her yard to make her little corner of the world beautiful. Her family is very musical, as her husband is a musician. They all sing, and though Mendenhall spends a lot of time driving her kids to and from music lessons, she enjoys seeing them grow and progress in their musical capabilities.

If you are interested in pursuing a degree in Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences, or if you have any questions, feel free to contact the department advisor, Janet Blad, for more information.