Afterword: Re-Mapping the Global Context for Online Education

Kirk St.Amant

Louisiana Tech University and University of Limerick

As of this writing, some 4.8 billion persons worldwide have online access (Internet World Stats, 2020). From an education perspective, these individuals include roughly 77 million students in the US (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), 270 million students in China (Guet et al., 2019), and 260 million students in India (Trines, 2018). Yet these numbers fail to show the full scope of online education today. In truth, every individual with online access is a learner—someone who goes online to learn something they do not know. These leaners account for 60+ percent of the world's population and represent individuals from almost every background imaginable.

It is a context where online learning has become lifelong learning as multiple generations regularly consult online sources to acquire the knowledge they need and skills they desire. This connected context of lifelong learning represents the new normal for most individuals born in the lasts three decades and for perhaps every generation to come. It is a situation of great potential for online education worldwide. The question becomes: How do we realize these opportunities? The answer involves understanding content creation—or composing of texts in order to convey ideas, create conversations, and establish communities when online.

Infrastructure and Education

For decades, the hard infrastructure—or physical requirements—needed for large-scale online education have existed (St.Amant, 2017a). Over the last two de-

cades, hardware and software have evolved the point that online interactions are a regular part of the daily lives of many individuals around the globe. Likewise, telecommunication technologies and network infrastructures have advanced to the point that a growing number of persons worldwide can access the Web with reasonable consistency. Thus, the prospects for a massive, global shift to online education has been available for some time. Historically, however, that opportunity has remained largely unrecognized on both a local and a global scale.

The limitations to realizing the potential of online education were due primarily to soft infrastructure—the cultural attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors affecting how individuals viewed online education (St.Amant, 2017a). It is this soft infrastructure that clouds opinions of online programs and skews perceptions of their students and graduates. It is soft infrastructure that has prompted many students and educators to opt for the more familiar yet often less convenient on-site classroom over the online learning environment. As a result, global forays into online education have remained relatively "ancillary" with the core focus of education worldwide remaining on-site instruction.

Shifting Paradigms

These perspectives shifted drastically in the spring of 2020 when an unprecedented number of students around the world found online offerings to be the only educational option available (Li & Lalani, 2020). Suddenly, students in multiple nations were thrust into online learning situations with many of them having little experience and even less preparation for this transition. The same was the case for many of the world's educators, who were suddenly confronting a situation several had previously avoided or relegated to secondary status (Anderson, 2020). The transition was far from perfect anywhere. Yet it was one of the greatest paradigm shifts in the history of modern education.

A lack of familiarity with digital pedagogies, a limited understanding of what one could (and should) do in virtual classrooms, and an inconsistent grasp of how students and instructors should use technologies created confusion, miscommunication, and frustration at the start (Anderson, 2020; Li & Lalani, 2020). The situation did, however, increase exposure to and participation in online education in a way not previously possible. That exposure has led to widespread familiarity with online options for education. Large-scale online learning quickly moved from an abstract concept to a global reality where students and teachers alike had to navigate unfamiliar spaces in what was often a "learn-as-you-go" style.

With that familiarity came adaptation to new venues and, in many cases, an appreciation for what these contexts could offer (Schleicher, 2020). For many individuals, this level of familiarity also brought a paradigm shifting revelation: By removing the limitations of physical space, online education opened classrooms to instructors from across the nation and around the world. It allowed for new, large-scale collaborations ranging from regular guest lectures by experts in other

nations to innovative co-teaching across a region. It also created an unprecedented opportunity for students in different countries to interact via collaborative activities and projects. The paradigm of pedagogy as tied to physical space had shifted greatly; the challenge became how to successfully recognize this potential. The answer involves a focus on writing.

Centrality of Content Creation

At its core, online education is about content creation—composing texts (content) to convey information in virtual spaces (St.Amant & Rice, 2015). In online educational settings, written communiques like emails and text messages are central to providing regular updates and notifications. Similarly, the online venues where individuals share ideas and debate concepts—discussion boards, chat rooms, and online forums—also rely heavily on written messages for exchanges. Even in situations where the mechanism for interactions seems visual in nature (e.g., a graphic user interface), the use of such media often requires corresponding written texts explaining how to operate a technology in order to access educational content and participate in related exchanges.

Essentially, interactions usually done orally in face-to-face classrooms must be re-cast in textual form to create parallel exchanges in online spaces. This dynamic means the importance of writing to pedagogical method and educational success in online contexts is not confined to certain disciplines. Rather, the centrality of writing to online education ripples across every field and program where online instruction occurs. Thus, recognizing the potential of online teaching and learning writ large depends upon how effectively individuals use writing to facilitate learning experiences. Individuals engaged in the teaching of writing are poised to play a central role in this process. These individuals have the opportunity to re-shape pedagogy to solidify the importance of writing and the teaching of writing across disciplines and on a global scale.

Realizing these opportunities involves addressing three interconnected factors known as the "3Cs":

- Contacting: The ability to access others—instructors or students—via online media. Online, text is essential to such access, for individuals need information (e.g., texts) making them aware of available opportunities and instruction (texts) on how to participate in such situations.
- Conveying: Rendering ideas in a format that allows them to be shared with and viewed/read by others. As online spaces often limit the modality of engagement, conveying often means creating texts (written content) in order to share, review, consider, and critique ideas.
- Connecting: Interacting with others to process information, reflect upon ideas, and engage in exploration where multiple perspectives discuss concepts to foster understanding. As such interactions often occur in text-

> based forums online, writing is central to these processes. (St.Amant & Rice, 2015, p. v-x)

These 3C factors generally exist as abstract concepts around which educators must often struggle when shaping practices for teaching and learning. The PARS approach examined in this collection provides teachers with a key a mechanism for addressing such challenges. The entries in this collection also provide effective examples of how to implement these 3Cs ideas in different ways, via different technologies, and for different audiences. Moreover, PARS's focus on writing and writing instruction maximizes the content creation core of online education and helps individuals integrate the practice of and teaching of writing in different ways across a range of classes, curricula, and programs.

The PARS Advantage

The PARS framework focuses on usability as connected to the experiences of those who will read (use) texts. This focus allows PARS to help educators realize writing involves more than putting words on a (digital) page. Rather, to successfully foster connections, meaningfully convey ideas, and effectively connect with others, writing must focus on how, where, and when learners access, review, and engage with online texts. It is a question of usability—both in terms of the texts provided and the technologies used to access and interact with them. In this way, educational content creation must account for how texts fit into the lifestyles of the learners who use them.

The modern context of lifelong, globally distributed consumption of educational content requires a deep understanding of who the users of that content are and the experiences they bring to the learning process (see Moore & Hodges, 2020). By focusing on four variables central to such practices, the PARS approach helps educators across disciplines better understand, map out, and create strategies for addressing these complex usability expectations in a manageable way. Central to this framework is how PARS helps educators humanize learners by focusing content creation on

- Who learners are
- Where they interact with educational content
- How they engage with ideas
- What technologies they used to create content to convey ideas

It is a view that places learners at the center of the content-creation processes in online education.

PARS focus on the personal (P) and the accessible (A) reminds educators that no one approach works for all (Moore & Hodges, 2020; Will, 2020). It also reminds educators that their expectations of how to contact, convey, and connect are not universal—both in terms of texts used or technologies involved. Such

awareness prompts the reflection and investigation needed to produce texts with the user (audience that uses text + technology used + contexts where used) in mind (St.Amant, 2017a). It also leads to the development of content that can help learners use texts and technologies to create as well as consume content when sharing, discussing, and debating in online spaces.

PARS's focus on the responsive (R) and the strategic (S) prompts online educators to engage in reflection on how learners in a subject are user of subject-related content. Essentially, both face-to-face or online interactions are based on expectations of how to act, react, and interact. When mapped into online environments, such expectations can become hazy (Moore & Hodges, 2020; Will, 2020). When distributed across globally dispersed lifelong learners, meeting such expectations can become challenging (St.Amant, 2017b). The solution, as the RS part of PARS teaches, is to craft experiences and create content that help learners understand the patterns used to foster interactions in online educational spaces. Doing so involves passive approaches to content creation (e.g., modeling how to do by doing one's self) and active instructions for writing (e.g., providing instructions for how to engage in certain interactions).

Through these four PARS elements, educators learn that there is no single approach to creating usable content for fostering effective education online. Rather, like usability, it is a continual process of

- Identifying who users (leaners) are
- Researching and understanding their experience-based expectations
- Creating content that can help them use (access and engage with) texts to create meaningful learning experiences (St.Amant, 2018)

In this way, PARS helps online educators continually adapt and expand their practices to meet the changing needs of learners. By examining these ideas across different contexts, this collection provides examples for how to use content to contact, convey, and connect effectively in online educational environments. By using PARS as a guide to achieving the 3Cs, educators can enhance their content to meet the needs of lifelong learners in global contexts.

Final Thoughts

Every challenge presents an opportunity to reflect, explore, and create. As more individuals around the world gain online access, the challenges for educators teaching in online contexts will only grow. It is an environment of continual opportunity for educators across all disciplines and institutions. Realizing such opportunity as it evolves requires a framework for understanding the ever-changing nature of

- Who users of online educational content are, and
- How their experiences shape their expectations for online education

The PARS approach can play a major role in meeting these challenges and creating opportunities for all involved. By applying it to address the 3Cs of global online education, individuals can establish the pedagogical practices essential to success in today's educational paradigm of globalized lifelong learning.

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