Chapter 1. Online Writing Instructors as Strategic Caddies: Reading Digital Landscapes and Selecting Online Learning Tools

Kristy Liles Crawley
Forsyth Technical Community College

Abstract: With so many tools to choose from such as listservs, discussion boards, video conferencing apps, blogs, podcasts, and Second Life, instructors' decisions become complicated and research or trial and error become cumbersome ways to pinpoint obstacles or flaws in online learning tools. To streamline the online tool selection process, in this chapter, I utilize Jody Shipka's statement of goals and choices (SOGC) (2011) as a strategic framework for choosing an appropriate online learning tool for specific goals and audiences. I focus on key questions adapted from SOGC to examine learning goals, audience, context, and online learning tools' capabilities and limitations. To illustrate the efficacy of SOGC, I apply SOGC to determine if I should use a discussion board forum or Zoom, a video conferencing tool, in my composition class to interrogate the tools' alignment with my students' needs and learning goals for a peer response session. Through my application of SOGC, I argue that SOGC assists instructors in strategically aligning online learning tools with students' needs and learning goals. Overall, SOGC prompts instructors to articulate their reasons for using specific learning tools. With new learning tools constantly emerging, SOGC serves as a sound framework for strategic online tool selection.

Keywords: strategic, online learning tools, statement of goals and choices, Jody Shipka, peer response, Zoom, discussion boards

In hopes of coaching their players to victory, caddies strategically calculate yardage, select the best club, and ponder ideal body mechanics conducive to a flawless swing while considering obstacles such as wind speed, hills, water, bunkers, and sand traps. Of course, in movies like Caddyshack (1980), they also worry about pesky, dancing gophers. Like contemplative caddies, online writing instructors strategically select tools to help students achieve specific goals. With so many tools to choose from such as listservs, discussion boards, video conferencing software, blogs, podcasts, and Second Life (secondlife.com), instructors' decisions become complicated and research or trial and error become the only ways to pinpoint obstacles or flaws in online learning tools. To limit the overwhelming

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2020.1145.2.01

task of sampling numerous tools, instructors often experiment with a few tools or default to the primary tools built into their college's LMS.

To avoid a default or "trial and error" method when selecting tools, instructors, like caddies, need a strategic approach. For caddies, each shot calls for the strategic approach of reading the greens. Serving as composers when recording their observations, they provide a clear reading of the landscape as they consider goals and obstacles before they choose the best club for the shot. Although a similar reading process takes place for instructors, how do instructors read the digital classroom landscape to determine the best learning tools for a specific audience's goals?

In this chapter, I utilize Jody Shipka's (2011) statement of goals and choices (SOGC) as a framework for choosing an appropriate online learning tool for specific goals and audiences. SOGC fits into the PARS (personal, accessible, responsive, strategic) framework due to its focus on personal and strategic. Below I have adapted Shipka's SOGC's questions so that each question focuses on digital tools:

1. "What, specifically, is this piece [tool] trying to accomplish . . .? In other words, what work does, or might this piece [tool] do? For whom? In what contexts?"
2. "How did you end up [using this tool] as opposed to others . . .? How did [this tool] allow you to accomplish things that other [tools] would not have?" (p. 114).

The first question focuses on goals, the tool's capabilities, audience, and context. The second question prompts instructors to reflect on the tool's weaknesses and strengths compared to others. To illustrate the efficacy of SOGC, I apply the aforementioned questions to determine if I should use Zoom (zoom.us), a video conferencing tool, as opposed to a discussion board forum in my composition class for peer response sessions. I apply SOGC to Zoom in order to interrogate the tool's alignment with my students' needs and learning goals. Because tools of the same type such as Blackboard's Collaborate (blackboard.com), a similar video conference tool, possess only slight differences, it is not worthwhile to apply SOGC due to their almost identical approaches to student learning. Obviously, there are not correct answers to SOGC's guiding questions. SOGC provides a foundation for making an informed decision. Through my application of SOGC, I argue that SOGC assists instructors in strategically aligning online learning tools with students' needs and learning goals.

The Strategic Caddy: Reading the Landscape via SOGC

Each year Callaway, Ping, Cleveland, and so many other brands release new golf clubs on the market with the promise of driving distance and accuracy. Caddies strategically fill bags with clubs aligned with their players' needs in mind. Acknowledging a player's slow swing speed, a caddy selects an ultralight hybrid club

with high-strength stainless steel to enable the player to powerfully launch the ball without being encumbered with a heavy club. With an in-depth knowledge of their players' strengths and limitations, caddies thoughtfully advise players.

Similarly, instructors' knowledge of students and context aids in online tool selection, a process best performed with SOGC. While I am using Shipka's SOGC as a framework for strategic tool selection, Shipka's SOGC originally focused on student writers' detailed statements of their goals and choices. In the classroom, Shipka (2011) asked students to "detail how, why, and "under what conditions they made their rhetorical, technological, and methodological choices" (p. 113). For example, students pondered the following questions: Is the composer successful in communicating his or her message? Why did the composer choose to include a hyperlink near the bottom of the page? What tools did they use to create their work? Why did they use these tools? By formulating answers to the aforementioned questions, students become aware of the choices that the composer made, and when students create their own texts, they too will be conscious of the choices that they make. When they deliberately reflect on their choices or others' choices, they recognize the importance of audience because all choices are tied to audience. Because they are considering their choices, students' revisions will also be meaningful. If they cannot articulate a specific choice, they may find that another choice assists them in communicating their message more effectively.

Keeping Shipka's emphasis on choices, I adapted Shipka's SOGC to reflect the choices instructors make in the process of online tool selection. To begin the process of tool selection, I address the first set of SOGC questions: "What, specifically, is this piece [tool] trying to accomplish . . .? In other words, what work does, or might this piece[tool] do? For whom? In what contexts?" (Shipka, 2011, p. 114). By responding to SOGC questions, I focus on audience and context. For example, if I were using a peer review tool, I would ask myself what this tool is trying to accomplish. The answer would be peer review, and then I would consider the work the tool would do for my students in the context of our course. With audience and context in mind, instructors strategically select tools when designing an effective online writing course.

Audience

When selecting online tools, I envision the work tools perform for specific users under unique circumstances. In other words, I read the digital classroom landscape to determine the best learning tools for a specific group of students. Part of exploring the digital landscape involves course mapping that assists instructors in designing a course. While this chapter does not focus on creating course maps, SOGC's concern for audience aligns with course design considerations addressed in Borgman and McArdle's (2019) Personal, Accessible, Responsible, Strategic: Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors. According to Borgman and McArdle (2019), "The main thing to consider when creating a course de-

sign is who are your student users. How will they be accessing the content? How comfortable are they with technology? What do they need to learn to move on to the next course?" (p. 72). SOGC builds on these useful design questions by further examining audience and context for online learning tools. Considering most community colleges and universities possess diverse student populations, I included concerns related to audience and context below as a guide for interrogating tools.

Age

It is easy to label students in their teens or twenties as tech savvy digital natives and older adults as technologically challenged. Do not let misleading assumptions persuade you to think certain tools will be challenging or easy to use for some students. Often students rely on the same transferable knowledge they utilize in new writing situations. Downs and Wardle (2012) underscore the important role transferable knowledge plays in new learning situations:

> While we may not be able to teach students transferable writing skills, we can provide them with transferable writing knowledge that they can take with them to help them work through any writing/communication assignment. As different writing situations offer different answers, the transferable knowledge is not the answers but the questions: not "how to write," but how to ask about how to write. (p. 134)

When confronted with new tools, students often rely on their prior knowledge. Their previous technological experiences help them shape questions and expedite their learning. For instance, when I assist advisees with registering for classes for the first time, they frequently say, "Is this like adding items to an Amazon shopping cart?" Students draw connections between learning technologies and the technologies they experience in the military, in their workplace, or in their personal lives such as gaming or shopping. Their transferable knowledge accelerates the learning process. Likewise, classroom peers enhance the learning process by serving as mentors to those struggling with new tools.

Academic Standing

Freshman composition students may have their first LMS experience in your classroom whereas in an advanced composition class, students have completed more than one college-level class. For freshman or returning students who are re-taking FYW in a digital environment, they may rely on their personal experiences with technology and peer mentoring, as noted in the previous section on age. For advanced composition students, your FYW class in conjunction with the other classes afforded them experience with your college's LMS as well as specific

online learning tools. Even for students taking all face-to-face classes for multiple years, their LMS use is likely because many instructors utilize an LMS as a supplemental resource. Although freshmen and advanced composition students never experience all online learning tools, their transferable knowledge increases with multiple classes' use of different online learning tools.

Accessibility

When considering the work that online learning tools perform for students, instructors must consider accessibility. Tools with closed captioning and screen readers assist those with hearing and visual impairments as well as benefit students in other ways. In a 2014 study, Berg et al. observed that "students commented that the captions made it easier to take notes, improved understanding by watching and reading, helped them learn the spellings of words, enabled them to watch the videos with the sound turned off, and enabled them to follow the videos more closely, as the captions helped focus attention" (p. 5). While captions potentially enhance all students' understanding, captions seem especially beneficial for second language learners to see and hear words to reinforce their understanding of words they may encounter for the first time or words that appear unclear due to a speaker's accent, rate of speech, volume, or pitch. As an accessibility feature, captions aid in diminishing language barriers to help level the playing field so that native English speakers do not have an advantage over ESL speakers.

Additionally, accessibility features coincide with students' lifestyles. A student in my class once mentioned that she loved the closed-captioned feature because she could silently read the text of the video while her children slept. Another student shared his experience with listening to course lectures on his cell phone when driving or working around the house. Both examples undergird the importance of online tools' accessibility features.

Social Class

Seeing students on their cell phones, tablets, and laptops around campus makes it appear like all students have unlimited access to devices and the internet. However, deep concerns emerge when one considers the materiality of writing technologies. Wysocki (2004) notes that materiality may be

> understood more broadly to refer to a host of socioeconomic conditions contributing to writing production, such as the availability of certain kinds of schooling, number of students in writing classes, student financial aid (and the need for it), public health, access to time and quiet. (p. 3)

Students' limited time and resources weigh heavily in the decision to incorporate certain tools. In some instances, when possessing minimum wage jobs and

supporting families, students rely on financial aid to cover educational expenses. Such considerations prompt instructors to reflect on economic challenges and thoughtfully respond to the following questions: Do students rely on borrowing campus computers or using computers in a campus lab? Are students' access to computers restricted to certain times? Do these devices support the tools that you want to use? How much does the learning tool cost? Will the cost be considered as course materials that will be covered by financial aid? Some tools have free versions but require users to pay for more advanced features. Will the university pay for a campus-wide subscription? Can the tools perform with slower internet speeds and function efficiently on various devices and operating systems?

The aforementioned questions overlap with the important considerations noted above in my discussion on accessibility. By ensuring that each student has access to technology, instructors avoid the scenario that only those with extensive funds have access to technology others cannot afford. To guarantee access, SOGC questions focus on how online learning tools perform work for specific users. Acknowledging students' diversity and specific needs, instructors can employ SOGC questions to ignite conversations between faculty, administrators, students, and financial aid representatives to ensure accessibility.

Context

While students' personal characteristics inform tool selection, the context of the course in terms of timing and modality influence tool selection as well. In the past, colleges subscribed to the quarter or semester system, but now instructors teach a wide spectrum of shorter classes throughout the year from eight-week or four-week classes to self-paced classes with rolling registration dates. Varying time frames prompt instructors to consider several points. For shorter lengths of time, do students have enough time to learn to use a specific online tool effectively? Does this tool play a role in participation or coursework throughout the semester or will this tool be used only one time? Your answers to questions concerning time, cost, and use prove whether a specific tool is a worthwhile investment.

Similar questions connected to context involve synchronous and asynchronous online components. Prior to registration, course descriptions disclose the expectation of synchronous or asynchronous online participation. When selecting tools, consider whether the tool functions best in a synchronous or asynchronous setting. If the class does not have synchronous meetings, is it feasible to ask students to collaborate synchronously through online learning tools on their own time for group work? Considering students' outside commitments to family and employers, tools geared toward synchronous interactions can be punitive when students are unable to interact with their classmates in a timely manner to collaborate and complete assigned work.

Strategically Aiming for a Hole in One: Applying SOGC to Zoom Peer Response Sessions

In order for readers to see SOGC in action, I am applying it to Zoom, a free video conferencing tool that I am using for the first time in a peer response session in my synchronous online composition class. For clarity, I am reposting the SOGC questions above my responses.

> What, specifically, is this piece [tool] trying to accomplish . . .?
> In other words, what work does, or might this piece[tool] do?
> For whom? In what contexts? (Shipka, 2001, p. 114)

Prior to addressing what Zoom accomplishes in an online peer review session, I will first describe the students and specific context. My freshman composition class is made up of twenty-two students at Forsyth Technical Community College in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. With only four students older than thirty, the majority of the class, eighteen students, was under thirty. In an informal discussion, I gathered information about the students' familiarity with Zoom. None of the students mentioned using Zoom or similar apps in other classes. With most of them being in college for only one or two semesters, their potential for in-class experience is limited. A few students used Zoom for personal interactions prior to our peer response session while the majority of the class depended on their knowledge of Skype or similar apps for understanding Zoom's features. Only three students claimed they did not have any knowledge of Zoom or similar apps. Due to students' varying levels of knowledge, I created a voiceover PowerPoint video with captions to demonstrate how to access and use Zoom's basic features. With the majority of students relying on financial aid to cover educational expenses, Zoom's basic plan with free unlimited meetings eliminated any financial obstacles involving financial aid or out of pocket costs.

In terms of Zoom's performance, Zoom's video, screen-sharing, chat feature, and recording capabilities make the work involved in online peer review possible. Because students conveyed their comments orally, the chat feature was not used. However, students desiring to use the closed captioning feature were able to do so. Prior to beginning their meeting, the groups activated the record feature to ensure that I was able to watch their session and they were able to listen to the recording when revising their work. Having access to peer response questions and their peers' papers prior to the meeting, groups of four students met via Zoom. Due to the small group size, the students' images were not minimized to tiny thumbnails. Instead, students could clearly see their peers' facial expressions and hear their tone of voice throughout the session. They periodically shared their screen when they needed to revisit the peer review questions typed on a Microsoft Word document. Likewise, students shared screens when referring to specific passages within their peers' papers and used the annotation tools to underline certain phrases or circle particular words.

> How did you end up [using this tool] as opposed to others . . .? How did [this tool] allow you to accomplish things that other [tools] would not have? (Shipka, 2001, p. 114)

Prior to using Zoom for a peer response session, I utilized Blackboard's discussion board for peer response sessions. Craving interactions akin to those in a face-to-face peer response session, I turned to Zoom's features to accomplish more effectively the goal of students participating in an active writing community. Some discussion board posts often consist of short, unsupported points such as "Great job!" or "I liked your paper. It is interesting." Frequently, discussion board responses did not include a conversation between the author and responders. After the responders posted their comments, authors rarely posed follow-up questions or comments.

Although the question sheet provided a guide for responders, the groups appeared to engage in authentic conversations about writing. The screen sharing feature allowed responders to be more specific. Instead of mentioning that the author needed to elaborate on a certain point, the screen sharing feature enabled responders to physically point to a specific passage that needs additional examples. Through pointing, drawing, and describing, authors' engagement and interest increased as I noticed more authors commenting in response to their peers' suggestions. Some comments consisted of clarification questions such as "Are you saying that the fourth paragraph should be the first body paragraph?" Other comments seemed appreciative or reaffirming as in "That makes sense now." Additional comments outside of advice for improvement surfaced during Zoom sessions underscoring the idea of community. Because papers focused on problems in their chosen profession, some students briefly conveyed their own personal stories related to the author's topic.

Despite strides in creating an active writing community through building personal connections through interactions, reserved students and unprepared students, in some cases, struggled to articulate their responses in the conversations unfolding over the fifty-minute class meeting in which only forty of the minutes could be dedicated to Zoom because its free basic plan only allows forty minutes for meetings with more than three participants. Often when shy or reserved students paused to gather their thoughts, extroverted students' voices frequently filled the silence. The timed meetings failed to provide responders with time for reflection. For those unprepared for the meeting, the timed peer response session did not allow them to stop and read their peers' papers. Instead their brief comments highlighted their minimal participation while prepared responders shared their substantive comments. Acknowledging this challenge in Zoom peer response sessions inspires me to ponder solutions for equal participation opportunities and recognize that tools such as asynchronous discussion boards do provide time for reflection and space for all voices to be heard as students write their responses in a limitless space. Similarly, questions of the quality of comments in

a synchronous conversation via Zoom offer little room for careful planning and expansion. In his discussion of asynchronous discussion boards, Warnock (2009) stated, "I find that the natural delay helps conversations on the boards achieve a level of sophistication beyond many, if not most, onsite class discussions" (p. 70). Warnock's astute observation motivates instructors to consider online learning tools' roles in encouraging or stifling in-depth, sophisticated responses. High stakes and low stakes assignments often determine the level of sophistication needed in the phases of working on specific projects.

Solutions such as establishing roles and rubrics allow for further improvements in Zoom peer responses. In an eCampus News article, Stansbury (2008) pointed to rubrics as a possible solution, as she highlighted that for "real learning to occur in an online setting, virtual-school educators must establish clear rubrics and enforce rules for participation" (par. 1). Likewise, the roles that instructors typically play in an online course can be transferred to students. Roles such as facilitator or moderator offer students the ability to pace their discussion. The aforementioned suggestions serve as potential solutions. In some cases, reserved and unprepared students may not participate, but through rubrics and clearly defined roles, students become aware of expectations tied to participation and accountability. These potential solutions serve as a starting point as I ponder strategies for revision.

Final Thoughts and Application

At the end of a round of golf, caddies with their players often gather in the clubhouse to congratulate today's winners and enjoy refreshments. Amidst the jovial atmosphere, caddies and players reflect on how they initially read the greens and how the greens actually played. With insights gained through experience, caddies revise strategies to assist players in executing skilled shots in tomorrow's game.

Similarly, after classes utilize online learning tools, instructors celebrate their victories and reflect on strategies for improvement. Through reflecting on SOGC, instructors carefully consider how online learning tools align with their students' needs as well as the course's context and objectives. In other words, SOGC's emphasis on the personal and strategic, two of the key elements of the PARS approach to online teaching, assists instructors in making informed decisions. In the peer response example above, Zoom's features performed the work needed for students to engage in an active writing community, and the synchronous nature of the course made the Zoom meeting possible, but revisions, as illustrated by my SOGC responses above, need to be made in terms of extending time for the sessions and encouraging reserved and underprepared students to participate.

Furthermore, a different context and a different set of students transform SOGC responses and bring about new areas for revision. In terms of context, an asynchronous class poses logistical challenges as students must agree to a time to meet, which differs from engaging in a peer review session during a synchronous

class meeting that happens on a weekly basis. Similarly, other obstacles emerge in a different context.

When changing the context to one involving Zoom being used for a large class discussion, differences in participation and sense of community arise. Reed (2020) noted,

> Some professors argued, correctly, that it's disheartening in Zoom to talk to a bunch of black boxes with names in them. Cold-calling those black boxes often result in silence, strongly implying that the student isn't actually there. Good discussions—one of the affordances of synchronous technology—require that people are actually tuned in. (para. 3)

The black boxes and unresponsive students, in some cases, allude to a disconnect between the goal of active class participation and Zoom's minimization of students' presence. Tanya Joosten further confirms the disconnect between a large class discussion via Zoom and engagement: "Video conferencing tools end up encouraging 'teacher-centered learning,' Joosten says. While these platforms are meant to facilitate multiway interaction, she says, they effectively collapse into one-way communication after a certain number of people join in" (as cited in Supiano, 2020, para. 11). Joosten's description of teacher-centered learning via Zoom illustrates the importance of SOGC's final question: "How did [this tool] allow you to accomplish things that other [tools] would not have?" (Shipka, 2001, p. 114). In this case, Zoom's features fail to perform work that other tools are able to do. Discussion boards outshine Zoom in terms of large groups' participation, for discussion boards afford all students space to participate through their written posts. Unlike a timed Zoom meeting, an asynchronous discussion board forum allows time for reflection.

The large group discussion example above highlights SOGC's ability to affirm one's reasons for utilizing a specific learning tool or acknowledge the tool's limitations that keep it from satisfying students' needs and aiding students in meeting course objectives. There are never right or wrong answers for SOGC. Overall, SOGC replaces random trial and error with a strategic approach to online learning tool selection involving the following steps:

- Identify the work a tool performs for a specific audience and context.
- Recognize reasons for using a tool in light of a project's goals.
- Pinpoint how a tool enables you to accomplish goals that other tools do not. (Shipka, 2001, p. 114)

When following the steps listed above, instructors soon discover SOGC is not a flawless approach to tool selection. Sometimes instructors have clear goals and choices for a tool, but the tool does not function as planned, so revisions become inevitable. Results vary with differing contexts, students, and learning objectives. Considering all learning tools possess limitations or weaknesses, SOGC prompts

instructors to articulate their reasons for using specific learning tools. With new learning tools constantly emerging, SOGC serves as a sound framework for strategic tool selection.

References

Berg, R., Brand, A., Grant, J., Kirk, J. S., & Zimmerman, T. (2014). Leveraging recorded mini-lectures to increase student learning. *Online Classroom, 14*(2), 5.

Borgman, J., & McArdle, C. (2019). *Personal, accessible, responsive, strategic: Resources and strategies for online writing instructors.* The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2019.0322

Downs, D., & Wardle, E. (2012). Reimagining the nature of FYC: Trends in writing-about-writing pedagogies. In K. Ritter & P. K. Matsuda (Eds.), *Exploring cmposition studies: Sites, issues, and perspectives* (pp. 123-144). Utah State University Press.

Ramis, H. (1980). *Caddyshack* [film]. Orion Pictures.

Reed, M. (2020, May 13). Should showing faces be mandatory: A new question posed by technology. *Inside Higher Ed.* https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/confessions-community-college-dean/should-showing-faces-be-mandatory

Shipka, J. (2011). *Toward a composition made whole.* University of Pittsburgh Press.

Stansbury, M. (2008). Online insight: Challenges beat cheerleading. *eSchool News*. https://www.eschoolnews.com/2008/05/08/online-insight-challenges-beat-cheerleading/

Supiano, B. (2020, April 2). "Zoomed out": Why "live" teaching isn't always the best. *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/teaching/2020-04-02

Warnock, S. (2009). *Teaching writing online: Why and how.* National Council of Teachers of English.

Wysocki, A. F. (2004). Opening new media to writing: Openings and justifications. In A. F. Wysocki, J. Johnson-Eilola, C. L. Selfe, & G. Sirc (Eds.), *Writing new media: Theory and applications for expanding the teaching of composition* (pp. 1-41). Utah State University Press.