Chapter 10. Negotiating the Hazards of the "Just-in-Time" Online Writing Course

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Abstract: Last-minute or "just-in-time" course assignments are "par for the course" for instructors who are contingent and teach online, despite numerous arguments against such practices. Universities and administrators have mythologized online instruction as less labor-intensive and those who teach online as somehow having less expertise than those who teach face-to-face. The reality is that tenure-line faculty resist such assignments without additional professional development compensation and without a guarantee that this labor-intensive and often invisible work will be recognized for tenure and promotion. This chapter takes an anecdotal perspective of a contingent instructor thrust into a full year of "just-in-time" online writing instruction. The chapter details how the instructor developed a strategic, flexible, and reflective mindset to counter the institutional silos and silences she encountered. Her experience serves as an alert to new online instructors and a reality check for administrators who may be unaware of the isolation and frustration of their online teaching faculty, especially those teaching in less-than-ideal contexts. The chapter includes a checklist of the information and resources needed for effective online instruction and a summary of the PARS approach to take with "just-in-time" assignments to help instructors best meet the needs of their students.

Keywords: online writing instruction, contingency studies, writing program administration, OWI professional development, "just-in-time"

This chapter takes my own anecdotal perspective of what it's like to be thrust into "just-in-time" online teaching assignments. The purpose is to serve as a heads-up to new online instructors, to offer some coping strategies, and to provide a reality check for administrators who may be unaware of the isolation and frustration of their online teaching faculty. Because institutions, technologies, and student populations vary so much, no one-size-fits-all remedy is offered here. Instead, I present an exploration into how one instructor developed a strategic, flexible, and reflective mindset to counter institutional silos and silences. My goal is to describe how to make the "just-in-time" online course as personal, accessible, responsive, and strategic (PARS) as possible in less-than-ideal contexts. I have not worked as a writing program administrator, but I have been on the receiving

end of less-than-ideal experiences as a writing student and writing instructor in online environments.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the difficulties of transitioning the on-ground class to online, but "just-in-time" courses are nothing new for contingent faculty. Last-minute course assignments are "par for the course" for those who are contingent and teach online, despite numerous arguments against such practices. Noting the difficulty of finding instructors for in-demand online courses, Rodrigo & Ramírez (2017) emphasized that "it is not enough to train online teachers how to use the institutionally supported learning management system (LMS); training also needs to support pedagogy" (p. 315). Borgman & McArdle (2019) have argued, "Anyone can send an email, anyone can put things on a CMS, but teaching online requires more than using a technology tool to facilitate or enhance your teaching" (p. 3). Yet universities and administrators have consistently mythologized online instruction as less labor-intensive and those who teach online courses as somehow having less expertise than those who teach face-to-face. These attitudes are reflected in what Greer & Harris (2018) call "a heavy reliance on existing systems and instructional design models, which tend to focus on courses as content repositories that can be 'built' once and delivered multiple times" (p. 22). Standardized and linear delivery platforms minimize instructors and treat students as interchangeable cogs.

Citing a 2012 study conducted by the Babson Survey Research Group, Palloff & Pratt (2013) noted that faculty were mostly pessimistic about online instruction; however, they also noted that 75 percent of those surveyed were full-time faculty who did not teach online. In fact, the study found that adjunct instructors were more open to online instruction than those on the tenure track (Babson Survey Research Group, cited in Palloff & Pratt, 2013). Instead of acknowledging the precarious status of adjunct instructors as a potential factor in their openness to online course assignments, Palloff & Pratt (2013) argued that convincing tenure-line professors to participate in online instruction would require fair compensation for the extra time involved. They failed to acknowledge that contingent faculty already are expected to develop and teach online courses with minimal lead time and resources—and for substantially less compensation than any tenure-line instructor. Blair & Monske (2003) noted that efforts to make technologies seamless often erase the course-planning and delivery labor of online instruction, and tenure and promotion have not been adjusted to reflect or respect the work of online educators (pp. 446-448). The lack of incentives for tenure-line faculty to specialize in online education helps explain why much of the online teaching is delivered by contingent faculty, who not only have limited opportunities to conduct their own research, but may also be reporting to administrators who cannot adequately advise them.

If online courses are taught by contingent faculty hired at the last minute—and if contingent faculty get little in the way of professional development before teaching those courses—then published scholarly theories and empirical research are

less likely to inform practice than "baptism-by-fire" individual experience and professional development limited to instruction on the LMS. Online writing instructors may have to contend with poorly designed course master templates—or no template at all—and may be denied adequate resources and provided limited guidance as to the chain of command or institutional policies. Sometimes policies specific to online instruction don't exist, or they don't exist in ways relevant to a writing course. Online courses can also make contingent instructors even more invisible to their departments and institutions than they already are. Mechenbier (2015) noted, "Placing an adjunct into an OWC a few days before the semester begins is more common than the academy would care to admit; additional research might help to identify more precisely the frequency and resulting challenges for online writing students" (p. 229). In such a "just-in-time" context, instructors are forced to develop their own theories and reflect on their own experience and observations.

Experience as an Online Student

My first online teaching experiences were informed more by experience than research. To shift to the PARS metaphor, I see research as the caddy in the golf cart who observes and analyzes the game, while offering suggestions to players on the course. Research studies can help instructors to justify what they already know and alert them to strategies that might help them negotiate future roughs, sand traps, and water hazards of the online writing course, just as caddies help golfers with these things on the golf course.

But before I discuss my experience teaching online, I want to briefly describe my experience as an online student, which shaped my approach to online instruction before I had ever taught an online class. I took an online technical writing course in 2007 as a graduate student in a terminal master's program. I wanted to find out what it was like to take an online course, with my curiosity driven by the knowledge that I might be asked to teach an online course at some point. I wanted to make sure I had at least a glimpse of the experience from the student perspective. As a side note, I should mention that I had already been working in virtual environments and on virtual teams since the early 1990s as a freelance copywriter specializing in advertising and marketing communication. I did not come to the online course with a fear of technology or resistance to online instruction.

The online course was invisible to me. With no mandated class meetings or synchronous interactions, and no regular communication from the instructor, the sense of urgency was missing, and I often forgot that I was taking the class. It was taught like a correspondence class: Writing assignments were due once per week, and I received feedback once per week. If I had questions about the writing prompt or my draft in progress, I had to wait several days for an email response. If the answer was unhelpful, I didn't have the time to ask again. In their survey of online writing students, Martinez et al. (2019) found that a majority of online students highly value instructor feedback: "Students value their instructors be-

cause of their expertise in writing, they value their instructor's feedback on their writing, and they want and need advice/directions from instructors regularly" (Results & Discussion). The lack of instructor presence made me feel as if I were teaching myself and then sending off my assignments to be judged.

The biggest problem with the course is that I felt so isolated. The course was not set up for any kind of interaction among students; for example, instead of class discussions, the course required weekly multiple-choice quizzes provided by the textbook publisher. Fortunately, I found two students on the roster who were in my graduate school cohort. I connected with them offline, and we began to regularly talk about the course. That helped me tremendously, and I had an "aha!" moment about the social nature of learning: I got as much out of a course from classmates as I did from the instructor. I recognized that peer interaction not only made learning more rewarding, but it also made the instructor's work more effective. I also recognized how important it was for instructors to establish their own social presence. Cunningham (2015) found that two key components of social presence in an online course are "a present and responsive instructor who can provide relevant feedback . . . in a timely manner" and "the ability to work with other students in small groups and on larger projects in ways that are direct and pragmatic" (p. 45). Having classmates to talk with gave me additional support beyond the instructor: I wasn't in this alone anymore, and I didn't have to rely on one person for clarification or even instruction. For future reference, I understood that being present for students in an online course was more important than the technology used to deliver the course.

Scholars who are serious about online writing courses consider how best to adapt writing pedagogy to the online environment; however, institutional reasons for implementing online instruction often have little to do with pedagogy. When it isn't being touted as a potential plug-and-play money-maker, online education seems to be the emergency alternative to finding an available classroom or on-site instructor. Predictably, that means that the pedagogical aspect is not usually well thought out and neither the instructor nor students receive adequate training or lead time before the course begins. Further, although some students do prefer online courses, many students view online options as a way to fit coursework into their busy schedules or to work around limited face-to-face course offerings. Sometimes online instruction is a way to meet unexpected demand for a particular course, which is an important distinction: Even if students prefer a face-to-face classroom, face-to-face is not always an option. Finally, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 switch to remote learning, online instruction can be an emergency response to the unexpected.

PARS as an Ideal for Writing Program Administrators

Although the PARS approach does address the ideal of what an online writing program administrator should be, the ideal is not what instructors will find in

every institutional or administrative context. In their advice on Personal Administration, McArdle & Borgman (2019) stated,

> Communication with your faculty is imperative and sharing the student demographics, the school's new online learning initiatives, the available resources for online students really helps support your faculty and allows them to be more successful in their jobs because they get a better picture of the school's goals and a clearer picture of the student learner's needs. (p. 28)

That's the ideal; however, once the course has been assigned, the instructor might not have an accessible administrator—or an administrator who understands online instruction, or an administrator at all! Instructors without a PARS administrator will need to strategically negotiate the lack of access or a lack of understanding about what they need to get the job done.

McArdle & Borgman (2019) defined the three elements of Accessible Administration as "1) helping faculty resolve problems with students, 2) being there to listen to your faculty, and 3) connecting them with technical support" (p. 43). Again, what the PARS approach advocates is not necessarily what instructors will encounter. In practice they may be left to their own best judgment when resolving issues with students. Even those administrators willing to listen might not have the answer to questions, might have little experience with online education, and they will likely expect instructors to contact technical support on their own. Another PARS ideal is Responsive Administration: "Being a responsive administrator means responding to faculty when problems arise and getting your faculty what they need in terms of skills and resources before problems arise" (McArdle & Borgman, 2019, p. 62). If the department has a problem to address, the online instructor may *be* "the skills and resources" the administrator provides as a response to tenure-line faculty who do not have the skills and resources to teach online. Little thought may be given to what an instructor needs to get started, such as obtaining an ID badge, getting email and other university technologies set up, learning how to use the LMS, and becoming familiar with the pre-designed course shell, if one exists. In some cases, instructors may need to quickly design their own online course, which requires that they are provided learning objectives and outcomes and given some sense of what the department values in terms of writing and writing assignments.

Ideally, a writing program administrator would provide Strategic Administration: McArdle & Borgman (2019) suggested, "As administrators, you need to strategize how you'll prepare your online instructors for the student demographic they'll face" (p. 17). In a "just-in-time" situation, an administrator's strategy may simply be to find someone, anyone, who is available to teach at the last minute. If that's the case, the instructor should not expect much in the way of preparation, and may even face confusion about who or what actually *is* the administrator. DePew et al. (2006) noted that "A single [distance education] class can be sup-

ported—pedagogically, administratively, financially, technologically—by differ-
ent individuals and different (micro)institutions with disparate and sometimes
competing agendas" (54). Online writing instructors might be bounced from one
group to another while searching for answers—and they have to carefully consid-
er their own strategies about what to do with conflicting information.

First Year on the Tour: A Narrative of "Just-in-Time" Online Instruction

What follows is the story of how I negotiated the roughs and hazards during my
first year teaching writing courses online. I start by describing the context that
led to my first online course assignment in fall 2012 and discuss the steps I took
to quickly educate myself about teaching online as a contingent instructor. Next,
I explain how I addressed the false starts and new constraints of the spring 2013
semester, when more online courses were assigned to me at the last minute. Fol-
lowing that, I discuss how those initial experiences prepared me to better manage
just-in-time online courses by the 2013 summer session and beyond. Finally, I
summarize the key issues of online instruction that contingent faculty and ad-
ministrators need to be aware of and that administrators of distance education
programs and traditional writing programs may tend to overlook.

My first online teaching experience was a "just-in-time" assignment offered to
me shortly after the start of the school year in 2012. Two face-to-face dual-cred-
it first-year composition classes at a high school had just started, when the in-
structor suddenly quit. I had just defended my dissertation in August and had
no job lined up, so I jumped at the opportunity to step in. Given that I was more
than 200 miles away from the high school, the course had to be moved online.
Neither dual-credit nor online first-year composition courses were the norm for
the writing program at that time—and they were being administered by the dis-
tance-education program—so I experienced first-hand the lack of direction com-
monly experienced by contingent faculty, as university silos led to absent, vague,
or contradictory policies. The courses were familiar to me, having taught them
for the past five years; however, I had never taught the courses online or to high
school students. I reached out to someone who has expertise in online literacy ed-
ucation, which turned out to be a good move. She directed me to some useful re-
sources that allowed me to quickly get a sense of how to design an online course.

This particular course was unusual in numerous other ways:

1. This was the first where my interaction with students was solely through
    writing: No synchronous technologies were available.
2. My students had expected a traditional face-to-face experience, but the
    sudden departure of the original instructor left us all negotiating a new
    online experience.
3. By the time the course started, only 12 weeks were left in the semester to

teach it, which resulted in a seat-of-the-pants style of curriculum, focused on the essentials of the course.

4. Some students were taking the course independently, while others were in a teacher-monitored classroom, but I could not immediately determine which students were in which group because the course had to be set up as a Community on Blackboard, with all students listed on one roster

5. After taking the time to develop some YouTube videos, I discovered that the high school blocked access to YouTube. Blackboard could not handle large video files or even PowerPoint files, so I turned all my presentations into PDFs.

6. Due to issues with registration and Blackboard access, several weeks passed before I could determine who was actually supposed to be taking the course. My Blackboard roster included people who were either no longer registered or who were observing the course in some capacity.

Teaching dual-credit classes online was different from teaching regular college courses because I was often unsure of the chain of command. With no written policies or guidelines and so many stakeholders—high school representatives, the university writing program, the distance education program—I found it difficult to know who had authority over any decision I needed to make. For example, I found myself in an odd conversation about whether the grade in a college-level course was going to prevent a senior from graduating from high school.

I needed to know where my agency began and ended from an institutional standpoint to avoid being in violation of the law or institutional policy—or simply to avoid getting the "runaround" or wasting the time of the wrong people with my questions and concerns. I recall asking for clarification on some forgotten issue from the high school representative, who referred me back to the university. When I contacted the writing program, I was referred to distance learning, which referred me back to the writing program. I don't have advice about this except to warn instructors that a lack of coordination among stakeholders is probably not all that uncommon.

After fall semester ended, I figured that was the end of my online assignment. Then, a few days before spring semester started, I was asked to teach the dual-credit composition courses again, along with two sections of second-semester composition for on-campus students. The online sections were by permission only and being offered to ensure spaces for seniors who needed the course in time to graduate that year.

When I telephoned the distance-education office to ask about setting up Blackboard course sites, I recall the person on the other end of the line saying incredulously, "But you don't even have a course template!" Unfazed, I went into overdrive to prepare the syllabi and course sites for the 15-week semester for undergraduates and an 18-week semester for the dual-credit students. The day before class was to start, I was informed that the online course for undergraduate

students was on a 10-week schedule. I reworked everything with just hours to spare. Exhausted, but relieved to be ready for class, I sent students an email welcoming them to the course and directing them to the Blackboard site. Soon after, I was overwhelmed with emails from students who could not log into the course site. Thinking this was an IT issue, I was surprised to discover that students could choose their start–end dates any time within the regular 15-week semester, but students could not access the course site until their start date. The technical question was resolved, but now I had 54 undergraduates with 13 different start-end dates (Table 10.1). I had to completely rethink how to manage the course schedule and how to encourage interaction among peers who were constantly coming and going. Further complicating that process was that students were not automatically closed out of the course site after their end date. I discovered that glitch when a few students attempted to submit work after their 10 weeks in the course had already expired. I had to block them from the course until all students finished the course, and then I had to add them back in before submitting final grades, which were due at the end of the regular 15-week semester.

Table 10.1. Student roster for 10-week online course by start-end dates

Start Week	Start–End Date	Combined Rosters
Week 1	Jan 7–Mar 17	[16 students]
	Jan 8–Mar 18	[4 students]
	Jan 9–Mar 19	[3 students]
	Jan 11–Mar 21	[5 students]
	Jan 12–Mar 22	[1 student]
	Jan 13–Mar 23	[1 student]
Week 2	Jan 14–Mar 24	[10 students]
	Jan 15–Mar 25	[1 student]
	Jan 18–Mar 28	[1 student]
Week 3	Jan 21–Mar 31	[5 students]
	Jan 22–Apr 1	[1 student]
Week 4	Jan 28–Apr 7	[2 students]
	Feb 1–Apr 11	[4 students]
Total		54 students

But wait, there's more! In addition to the variable start dates, I also learned that online courses on our campus were self-paced. This nuance was brought to my attention after some students balked at assignment due dates, which, I learned, had to be suggested, rather than mandated. Although most students recognized that they needed due dates to stay on track to complete the course, a few students either resisted or ignored the suggested due dates, and emails to them were left unanswered.

Self-pacing is reasonable for a content-driven, self-study course with automated quizzes and tests to measure competency. Writing instruction, on the other hand, requires ongoing writing practice, along with instructor feedback, peer responses, and student revision. Noting the disparity of retention and grades between online and face-to-face courses, Sapp & Simon (2005) found that marginal students in face-to-face classes tend to drop a course early with no impact on their grade, whereas marginal students in online classes tend to disappear without dropping the course, which leads to a failing grade. Those study results matched my experience with a self-paced online course: Some students never "touched" the course or attended briefly and never dropped the course, which resulted in a much higher number of F's than I ever had in a face-to-face classroom. Once I began teaching online courses that gave me the authority to set deadlines, students were better able to recognize early on if they were going to be able to complete the course.

Self-paced online courses seem to offer the promise that students can make up a semester's worth of work at the last minute. The day one cohort of students finished their 10 weeks in the course, I no sooner began filling out the 0's for a student who had been missing all semester, when I received a frantic email from that same student: The LMS must be malfunctioning; after all, there were still a few more hours left in the course! The hard lesson I learned that semester was to make no assumptions about the parameters of an online course or student expectations for that course, even when teaching a familiar course at a familiar institution. By the time summer courses started in 2013, my experiences had prepared me to better manage "just-in-time" online courses: With the help of the writing program, I was able to negotiate a more realistic framework for the course. Students had the same start–end dates and all students had to follow the same course schedule.

Since 2015 I have been teaching online and hybrid courses at my current institution. The courses I teach include technical writing and business communication courses in four-week, six-week, and 15-week formats. I continually build on my pedagogical strategies by reading, pursuing professional development opportunities, trying new approaches, seeking out feedback from students, and reflecting on my experience. I continually adapt to new technologies—including Canvas, Google Slides, WeVideo, Webex, and Zoom—and adjust to new or evolving policies—such as the requirement to include synchronous components in online instruction and the authority to drop students who disappear from online courses.

Although the strategies, technologies, and reasons for delivering online writing courses may change or vary, what remains constant is a lag-time between instructor need and administrator response. What often also remains constant are disconnects between institutional requirements for online course delivery and what is actually going to benefit students. For example, required weekly synchronous class meetings are going to be a surprise to students who think they have signed up for a fully asynchronous online course, based on the course description at registration. Due to student expectations of schedule flexibility, what I have found works best is to facilitate small group meetings rather than meetings with the entire class. The

affordances of asynchronous interactions have also led me to re-envision synchronous interactions in terms of their own affordances: as a way to get to know each other, to share ideas, to clear up misunderstandings, and to build trust.

Reflections on the "Just-in-Time" Course

With technologies and pedagogies continually evolving—and with teaching contexts varying so much—no one source can be the final word on how to design and deliver an online course, much less how to take on a "just-in-time" online course. Although not an exhaustive list, Figure 10.1 summarizes the key issues that the instructor of a "just-in-time" course needs to consider and that administrators of distance education programs and traditional writing programs may tend to overlook.

A CHECKLIST
THE OWI COURSE

Why course is offered online
- Student demand for online delivery
- Student demand for a particular course
- Limited classroom space
- Limited on-site instructors

Parameters of course delivery
- Start-end dates
- Synchronous delivery requirements
- Technologies
- Accessible course design requirements
- Class size

Students
- Demographics
- Locations and time zones
- Preparation for online learning
- Need for accommodations

Course Syllabus
- Objectives and outcomes
- Course policies
- Required syllabus statements

Administration
- Chain of command
- Decision-making authority
  - To set assignment due dates
  - To add or drop students
- Policies specific to online instruction
- Resources
  - Teaching and technology support
  - Mentoring
  - Professional development

CONSIDER YOUR TEACHING CONTEXT

Figure 10.1. OWI course checklist for instructors and administrators.

Instructors who understand the need for the course, why it is being offered online, and how it fits into the departmental and institutional strategy can better anticipate the level of student engagement or resistance. Having some idea of student demographics, including why students take online courses and how the university prepares students for the online learning environment, can help instructors prepare for the logistics of organizing collaborative groups and facilitating student interactions.

Knowing the parameters of the course, including start–end dates for students and policies regarding the course schedule, synchronous interactions, and definition of attendance, can go a long way towards managing student expectations, and can help them make decisions about whether the online course is right for them.

Understanding the chain of command, in terms of who instructors report to, what issues instructors need to report, and who has decision-making authority over specific issues, can help instructors to quickly gain institutional knowledge and build positive working relationships. Designated sites where instructors can find policies, guidelines, tips, or suggestions for online instruction makes that information available at the moment it is needed.

Specific policies addressing online writing instruction can eliminate confusion and missteps. For example, administrators can provide required syllabus statements that appropriately reflect the online mode of delivery, rather than— or addition to—statements about an accessible campus. For example, The Miller Center for Student Disability Services at Miami University recommends the following syllabus statement:

> If you are a student with a disability and feel you may need a reasonable accommodation to fulfill the essential functions of this course, you are encouraged to contact Student Disability Services (SDS). SDS provides accommodations and services for students with a variety of disabilities, including physical, medical and psychiatric disabilities. You are encouraged to contact SDS to learn more about registration and procedures for requesting accommodations.

Other policies may include how much of the course must reside within the LMS, how much control the instructor has over the LMS (e.g., to adjust a mandated course template), and how student access to the LMS course site is managed.

Although some institutions have robust OWI administrations, the fact remains that, for many online instructors, a less-than-ideal administrative context is par for the course: In those situations, instructors can use the PARS approach to make their course as Personal, Accessible, Responsive, and Strategic as possible (see Figure 10.2).

Personal Instruction means taking ownership of the course. If you are working with a course template, then personalize it wherever you can. If that's not possible, be sure to show up in discussions, in peer responses, and in your feed-

back. Create your own video announcements and mini-lectures—the polish is less important than the personality. Be personable with all the people you contact throughout the university; developing good working relationships will make your job less stressful.

Accessible Instruction means more than accommodating for students with disabilities. Make sure that all students can easily find their way around the course site, and be as explicit as possible in your instructions. Seek feedback from your students about how they are experiencing the course and the course site. Consider that not everyone may have the same access to technologies.

PARS	
Personal	Take ownership of the course, even when teaching from a course shell.
Accessible	Make your course site and course materials easy to follow.
Responsive	Maintain an active presence in your online classroom.
Strategic	Observe and respond to student expectations to help ensure persistence and success.
A SUMMARY	

Figure10.2. Summary of the PARS approach to "just-in-time" online courses.

Responsive Instruction is having a social presence in the online classroom. That means being observant and proactive, reaching out rather than just waiting for the emails. If a student has gone silent, reach out. When students reach out to you, respond quickly. A responsive instructor also facilitates student interactions, helping them to get to know and trust each other.

Strategic Instruction requires an analysis of the rhetorical situation: the purpose, audience, and context of the course, including technology platforms. If you don't yet have all the facts, proceed and prioritize carefully to avoid investing too much time and energy in planning a course that cannot be delivered. Manage student expectations to ensure their persistence in the course and to enhance their overall satisfaction with the course.

Final Thoughts and Application

If you have been assigned a "just-in-time" online writing course, especially if you are teaching online for the first time, you'll need to get your bearings and do a lot of listening and observing and investigating. Your situation is probably not unique, as frustrating as it may seem. You are not alone, and you don't have to figure it out all out by yourself. Reach out to a wider community of colleagues and mentors. If you don't know anyone with experience teaching online, then reach out to a professional organization: The Online Writing Instruction Community (created by Borgman & McArdle in 2015) and the Global Society for Online Literacy Educators (GSOLE) founded in 2016 are a couple of good options. You didn't get much lead time to begin with, so avoid working overtime to create a complete course plan. Instead, set a goal for publishing the first week's activities with an outline of the plan to come. You can adjust the course, once you get a better sense of your students, their expectations, and their needs.

Be present for your students in ways that let them know you are there and you care. Student perceptions about instructor and peer interactions are more important than any fancy technologies or slick course design. How students feel about their experience in the course goes a long way towards fostering engagement, improving retention, and getting the feedback you need to continually adjust the course for a better user experience.

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