Chapter 14. Online Writing Instructors as Web Designers: Tapping into Existing Expertise

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Abstract: This chapter addresses the professional development challenge of getting online writing instructors to think of themselves as instructional designers and embrace a strategic user experience design mindset. This, for many, can feel like the formidable task of becoming as expert in the field of design as they have already become in the field of writing studies. This chapter suggests one professional development activity whereby participants tap into their existing web design and user experience expertise by simply reflecting on their own common web experience: banking online, shopping, booking travel, paying bills, etc. What makes these experiences either "easy" or "difficult"? And what can we learn from our own web user experience that might be applied to instructional design? Designing online learning experiences with the user/student in mind and from a user centered focus does not mean learning a whole new field from scratch. Most everybody already has a level of expertise in user experience - just not one we always intentionally tap into.

Keywords: user experience, user centered design, professional development, faculty development

In May, 2020, I began a "Basic Design Principles" online training course offered by the Adobe Education Exchange (edex.adobe.com/pd/course/basic-principles-of-design). Module one of that course states it pretty succinctly: "Understanding the fundamentals of good design is important for any educator who wants to communicate with impact" (Adobe Education Exchange, 2020). In the February 2020 volume of College Composition and Communication Wible (2020) argues that "Integrating design thinking methodology into writing courses can help students to develop creative approaches to problem definition and solution development" (p. 399).

Rewind the clock a couple of decades and you can find more or less the same sentiment offered in foundational texts like Blythe's (2001) *Computers and Writing* article, "Designing Online Courses: User-Centered Practices." There he writes, "Teachers who develop Web-based courses must learn to act like designers" (2001, p. 329). More recently we find an entire volume of the journal, *Computers and Composition*, devoted to the importance of effective and intentional course design. The 2018 special volume is entitled "User-Centered Design and

Usability in the Composition Classroom." Among the many user-design focused articles in this volume, Harris and Greer (2018) outline the importance of building "a user-experience mindset into the foundation of online writing instruction" (p. 14). And Borgman and Dockter (2018) discuss how online writing instructors can cultivate "user-centered design in their online courses to accommodate all students with varying learning styles" (p. 94).

In short, we might take it as a truism that to teach writing online is unavoidably, to a greater or lesser degree, also to take on the role and responsibility of web designer: the online writing instructor is, *de facto*, the creator of a "user" experience, even if that user is not the corporate user of so much non-higher ed. professional literature on UX and UCD. Rather, the user, for our purposes, is the student.

And yet, for as unavoidable as it might seem that the online writing instructor is both instructor *and* designer, it can be extremely difficult to get instructors to fully embrace that design mindset, likely because so many of us are already highly trained content experts in a particular discipline, no matter what branch of writing studies that may be: rhet/comp, tech comm, composition studies, etc. The thought of having to become an expert, or what we might *perceive* to be an expert, in a wholly separate field can be intimidating to say the least. Scholarship in this area often suggests deferring to instructional designers where matters of course building are concerned. For example, in McBride's (2010) "Leadership in Higher Education: Handling Faculty Resistance to Technology through Strategic Planning," the author states that as institutions develop online learning, any strategic plan "should include instructional designers who can help transform colleges into learning agile organizations" (p. 2). And many institutions rely on online writing course templates, or master shells, that are not designed by those who are actually teaching the classes. But as Skurat Harris et al. (2019) point out, in many, probably most, cases, "the standardized 'one-size-fits-all' course shell is not serving students nor allowing instructors to teach" ("Next Steps for Purposeful Pedagogy-Driven Course Design").

I am not intending to discount the role that instructional designers play in supporting faculty and online course development. But faculty themselves also need to develop a design mindset and take primary responsibility when it comes to designing their courses. That's why we need to tap into online writing instructors' existing design expertise. It does not serve students (or instructors) when all matters of course design are left to instructional designers. Of course, in some cases deferring to or relying on instructional designers might not even be an option: some institutions may not have staff working in this capacity. Thus, design is by necessity falling within the purview of teaching faculty.

So how, and why, do we tap into that instructor expertise? To pick up the golf analogy that provides the framework for Borgman and McArdle's (2019) *Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic: Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors* text: in asking online writing instructors to become strategic, intentional (and competent) web designers, it is like we are inviting somebody who has

not played golf before onto the putting green. Here's a putter, we say. "Now putt." Whether or not that person sinks a few putts (maybe some innate athleticism, maybe just luck), there may be no existing knowledge base or skill set from which they are working. They are functioning as complete novices.

My contribution to the present collection is to offer a professional development activity, which might be used as part of a professional development series or even as a stand-alone exercise, that is designed to reveal the *existing expertise* that almost any online writing instructor will have when it comes to design thinking and usability. The activity does not so much teach participants something wholly new. It actually just brings to the surface a degree of expertise they might not otherwise recognize themselves as already having.

So, to return to the golf analogy, there we are on the putting green with our novice golfer, putter in hand. "Now putt," we say again. But this time we encourage our golfer to think of putting like another sport or activity with which they might already be familiar, whatever that may be. Think of putting like tossing a ball to another person. You don't necessarily have to think about every minute action of the hand, wrist, arm, and body as you go through that throwing motion. You just toss the ball in a controlled way. Or maybe putting is a bit like swinging a baseball bat. Of course, you don't wind up and swing for the fences, but you do stand sideways to your target, you square your shoulders, you concentrate and take an athletic stance, and you follow through. Whatever the specifics, we are looking to reveal some level of existing expertise in our golfer that they might not be connecting with the present, new, activity of trying to sink a putt. In other words, we want to reveal that, despite them maybe never having played golf before, they are far from the complete novice that they may otherwise perceive themselves to be.

Design as Strategy

As Borgman and McArdle (2019) argue throughout their book, "design and strategy are everything in the success or failure of online writing courses and we cannot stress [enough] that you need to pay a lot of attention to these things as you put together distance education experiences for your students" (p. 88). The "strategy" referenced in this quotation—and the S (Strategy) in the PARS acronym—emerges as a foundational pillar, supporting the P (Personal), the A (Accessible), and the R (Responsive), for without any strategy in place, instructors, as content experts but also de facto instructional designers, might only create personal, accessible, and/or responsive experiences for their users—students!—largely by coincidence or fluke. (Sinking the putt by luck, to return to the golf metaphor.)

Instead, as Borgman and McArdle (2019) clearly show, effective writing instruction requires a "plan," a repeatable, iterative process of managing content, designing user experiences, and making revisions as necessary. So how do online writing instructors, particularly those new to the field (or looking to update out-

moded training), begin to think about strategy? What expertise might they draw up? Where to even start!?

Perhaps first, we simply acknowledge that yes, to take on the mindset of the instructional designer, the web designer, can seem like an especially intimidating task for instructors. But, having acknowledged that, let's also discover how almost everybody has a level of web design expertise that provides at least a place to start thinking strategically about creating effective user experiences for online writing students. The activity outlined here helps to reveal existing web design expertise in a straightforward, even simplistic way. But it is simplistic by design, because the whole point is to alleviate the sense that to become an effective, or strategic, web designer is to embark on a whole new professional trajectory. Yes, there are myriad things to learn about effective design.

So how to acknowledge that we all have some level of expertise—or at least immediate experience—with web design? Let's first recognize that we are almost all frequent web *users*. We are always part of the UX formula, just not usually as designers. Instead, we are people who use the web for a wide variety of tasks—for most of us on a daily basis: we do online banking, we book travel online, we find directions online, and, of course, we shop. These various web-based activities form the basis of the professional development activity that I offer to colleagues as part of my Teaching Composition Online (TCO) course.

The TCO class is a five-week course that I run through my institution's Teaching and Learning Center. It is in-house training open only to my English department colleagues, both full time and adjunct. We meet synchronously for 50 minutes (usually going a bit over that with questions and collegial conversation), once per week, for five weeks, and there is asynchronous work to do each week as well. The "web design" assignment is built to help instructors overcome that intimidating sense that while they have to be strategic content designers, they might have little to no formal training in that area.

The Assignment

The web-design assignment occurs in week one of the TCO course because, as I stress to my students/colleagues, embracing that design mindset is foundational to effective online writing instruction. So, as we are doing basic introductions, we are also considering what it means to be both writing instructors and UX designers.

The unit objectives include the following:

- Understand "online" writing instruction and its relation to hybrid and fully on-site instruction
- Understand user-centered and UX (user experience) principles as applied to course design

To hit that second objective, I ask participants in the TCO course to first consider basic principles of both user-centered design and user experience, which I

introduce in a short lecture portion of our meeting and with reference to Wikipedia entries on "User experience" (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User_experience) and "User centered design" (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User-centered_design). (These Wikipedia entries are short enough that workshop participants are—hopefully—not overwhelmed. Assigning books and chapters as we get underway would very likely defeat the purpose of alleviating anxiety!)

So, the readings and my mini-lecture at least get some basic design principles in place. And if nothing else they alert participants to these concepts as fields of study that they *could* explore in much greater depth if they chose to do so. Really, though, it is the *application* of UX and UCD principles that proves most beneficial.

Course participants are asked to reflect on two general types of online/web-based experiences they have on a regular basis, just as part of what they do online all the time: one of these activities should be relatively easy and one must be relatively difficult (or "not so easy" as I have it in the assignment and as I will often say during our synchronous discussion as a way of highlighting how relative these terms are). In fact, we consider at length what terms like easy and difficult even mean, given that they *are* so relative.

Here's an excerpt from the assignment text itself. This is really the heart of the activity:

> In light of what you understand about UCD and UX, now consider a few web-based activities you undertake on a fairly regular basis.
>
> Try to identify one that is particularly "easy" (whatever that term means to you) and one that is not particularly "easy."
>
> Build out a new page in your portfolio (titled "Unit 1 – UCD and UX" or something similar) and describe the two "easy" and "not so easy" web activities you have identified.
>
> Try to make connections to user-experience and UCD principles from the readings (and/or other course materials, your existing knowledge, etc.)
>
> For example, for the web-activities that you find "not so easy"—are there specific elements of effective UX/UCD missing. Could they be applied to make your web experience "easier"?
>
> You can compose directly in your portfolio or you can work in a Google Doc or Slide deck.
>
> Please make sure to include screenshots showing some aspects of your web activities/experience.

The discussion around what constitutes "easy" or "difficult" is generally quite fruitful, because it reveals the degree to which one's existing knowledge and expe-

rience shapes our perception of difficulty or ease. It's almost laughably simplistic to state, but it's a fact of our student-user experience to keep in mind: once you know how to do something, it seems a lot more "easy" than when you don't know how to do something. So, what is easy for one user can be quite difficult for another user. And the user who finds one thing easy (or difficult) will not always find all online tasks equally easy (or difficult). In fact, it is the variability of user experience and expectation that makes the field of UX different from something like user centered design (UCD): what does the user bring to each activity? What are their likely expectations and assumptions?

In general, I try to frame the "easy" v. "difficult" discussion in terms of any given user's *awareness* of the technology required to accomplish a task. The technology in this case is the intermediary between the user and what the user wants to do. So, a pencil is, for most, an "easy" technology. We don't even think of it *as* a piece of technology (it isn't digital, you don't plug it in, it doesn't cost that much). But that's precisely the point: we perceive the pencil as "easy" to use, to accomplish the task of writing something down, because we don't actually think about the pencil as we are using it. It almost disappears from the act of writing.

Of course, for the average five- or six-year-old, the pencil isn't so "easy." Because they are just learning how to hold a pencil and how to write with it, they are acutely aware of it as a "device" for doing something. Consider, for example, that in her early grades my own daughter was learning how to write with pencil and paper at the same time that she was learning to make slideshows in Google Slides. So, for her, for a time at least, pencil and paper and Google Slides were commensurately "easy" or "difficult" technologies.

As we become *more* aware of the technology—the device or tool as intermediary—that is required to accomplish a task, the more likely we are to perceive that technology or task as "difficult." What button do I click? Where is the options menu? What does this icon mean? Why can't I edit what I've already typed? How do I go back?

These are likely familiar questions to anybody who has used the web before because they reflect our experience, probably a frustrating experience if we have to ask these kinds of questions, because all of a sudden we are aware—painfully aware—of the technology that stands between us and the thing we want to do.

Examples

So, the assignment asks participants in the TCO course to reflect on the various activities they do online and to choose an easy and a difficult one (again, we will have already discussed just how complicated those otherwise common terms actually are). Then, once they have chosen their web activities, course participants must articulate, in as much granular detail as possible, exactly what elements of their online experiences made those experiences user-friendly (or not).

Taking that very granular look at how they, as users, experience certain tasks using the web, opens the door to the most important conversation we need to get to about them understanding themselves *as* instructional designers, and thus ready to implement a design approach that is, explicitly, the "S" of PARS: strategic.

In articulating their various user experiences, participants in the course observe very interesting things about the various web interfaces they use. And it is actually from our negative experiences online that we can often learn the most.

Here are some examples and what course participants had to say. One example looked at a utility bill paying site:

> The user experience gets a little wonky due to the user interface.
>
> Perhaps this [zoom in/out] function works on a website, but I'm using a phone and this website is not designed for a phone app . . . the user experience stinks. I need to keep zooming out and zooming in and rotating my phone so that I can see what each box is so that I can fill in the correct information.

Another talks about building in Google Sites:

> I'm used to menu boxes running across the top and left-hand side of a screen. In sites, google.com, they appear along the right.

Here's another one about a bill-pay site:

> Every time I log on, it seems to purposely take me on a tour of all products they have on sale . . . new TV channels, internet plans, etc. Just let me log in and pay my bill already!

And our institutional learning management system is the go-to example for many:

> Blackboard is very hard to navigate. There are so many boxes that I don't use. The language is hard to understand . . . When I am trying to create new content, it feels clunky. When putting in grades, I can never see the assignment when I scroll down and it is so hard to enter grades.

It's actually somewhat therapeutic to share our "difficult" web experiences with one another, since we all struggle with similarly frustrating websites and user interfaces, whether we face an overabundance of information (like advertising) or multiple options when we just want to do a single, straightforward task, or whether it is the frustration of trying to navigate when menus aren't easily findable and when icons represent certain user options but it isn't very clear what the icons actually stand for.

(One of my favorites along these lines is the "web link" icon in Blackboard: a piece of paper and the earth . . . means web link?)

What does this icon even mean??

Figure 14.1. Icon in learning management system.

As we drill down into what actually makes our various web experiences easy, difficult, or somewhere in between, we begin to uncover web design strategies that we can implement in our own course design and teaching. Of course, we acknowledge that unlike other instances of web design, we are constrained by what the LMS allows us to build.

But through working on this assignment, instructors begin to see that, while they might have no formal training in web design *per se*, they do have an existing knowledge base from which to start. To embrace that sense of being both content expert *and* UX designer is hopefully less daunting after my course participants have thought intentionally about their own user experiences.

Final course reflections indicate that participants are well aware of their dual role as instructor-designer. One of our course objectives makes this explicit: "Understand user-centered and UX (user experience) design principles." Here is a sampling of what course participants had to say about this objective:

> For a course to be effective, the framework of the course must take the user experience into focus.

> If something isn't user centered we aren't thinking about what we are including [in our courses] in the right way.

> Students' emotions, attitudes, and perceptions remain central to user centered and user experience design principles. Prior to this course, I never considered how my students were involved in my course design on Blackboard or how they evaluated it.

This series of comments clearly indicates that course participants are thinking from the student perspective. Further, from final course reflections:

> This objective [about UCD and UX] was a good one for me; I always considered my Blackboard to be updated and organized . . . What could be better? This course taught me that it was organized with what made sense in my head. Students want weekly work organized in one space rather than . . . having to jump all over the place.

> A streamlined experience goes such a long way as far as creating an effective learning experience. It should not be a challenge to submit an assignment simply because the dropbox is in a strange place, for example.

Here again we see course participants drawing that clear connection between basic course organization, the student experience, and, perhaps most important, effective learning. Participants also recognized that simplicity in course design was key:

> My big takeaway for user experience is to keep it simple. Students should easily be able to access and receive what you are trying to communicate without technology barriers.

> The focus should be on simplicity for the user . . . If the framework is designed carefully, students can easily move around the site to find readings, videos, or other resources needed for the student to be successful. Confusion puts stress on the student and the student may feel overwhelmed or alienated by not finding the assignment that needs to be completed. Within my framework, I have simplified the left menu to include only the tabs that students need to use.

These are just a few examples of how participants in the Teaching Composition Online course reflected on our course objective that focused on the design mindset. And to get course participants here, early on we completed the existing expertise assignment outlined above.

By emphasizing that course participants actually *already* had substantial knowledge—even expertise—in the field of web design (as a result of being frequent participants in the myriad web-based activities we undertake everyday), we were able to begin that process of applying existing knowledge to course design, and—hopefully—started to overcome the intimidating sense that we, as content experts, skilled at teaching composition, now need to adopt the mindset of the web designer.

As online writing instructors, we are not just moving our "content" (which is the product of our academic expertise) into a digital space; instead, we are thinking strategically about designing a user experience—a student experience—around that content. As Borgman and McArdle reiterate throughout their book, "design and strategy are everything in the success or failure of online writing courses and we cannot stress that you need to pay a lot of attention to these things as you put together distance education experiences for your students" (2019, p. 88).

By recognizing themselves as daily participants in *many* web activities, instructors begin to see that they actually have much more expertise in the field of web design than they might imagine. Borgman and McArdle (2019) begin their chapter in *PARS* on "strategy" by noting that "So much of online instruction is about strategy" (p. 71). One might push that even further: *everything* about online instruction is strategy, if that instruction is to be successful!

Final Thoughts and Application

The activity I present here is admittedly fairly simple, but, as I hope I've shown, it can be highly impactful in terms of getting instructors to think of themselves as

designers who already have some degree of design experience.

As a follow up to the Teaching Composition Online sections I have offered for my colleagues, I invited all course participants to be part of a student-focused research project. I created a very basic survey that asked students just one simple question: "In a paragraph or so, please tell me about your overall experience in this class." I didn't want to ask students specifically about ease of course navigation, course design, instructor presence—all foundational principles in the TCO course. Instead, I wanted to know if students themselves offered insights about these, more or less unprompted. The anonymous and ungraded survey was delivered to students, usually as an online class was wrapping up, by those faculty participating in the TCO course follow-up research project. As of this writing we have almost 60 student responses. I cannot realistically provide them all here (and many students mentioned faculty by name, not to mention signed their own names) but I will offer just a few representative comments that I believe speak to effective course design and user-experience:

> My overall experience with my summer class 2020 was great. Blackboard was easy to navigate.

> Well-designed modules.

> My overall experience in this class was the announcements and the assignments online were well organized and very understandable to follow the directions on black board.

> Course material and Professor were easily accessible.

> The professor created YouTube videos to show the step by steps which is amazing and very clear.

> One touch that I really liked with this class that you included were the weekly unit videos.

> The professor did a great job tying everything together into one cohesive course.

I could go on, as there are numerous comments, that speak to the degree to which students recognize, without really being asked, that their instructors have truly considered the class as a web-based experience for students.

Yes, of course I am hand picking the examples. But I am not cooking the books. Of the 60 or so responses at least half mention something about ease of navigation quite specifically. Holistically, the student feedback is almost entirely positive, and when you are getting student feedback like this . . .

> This class had the BEST online setup. It was super easy and comfortable to use. Other teachers REEEAALLy need to take note on this class.

> . . . you "REEEAALLy" must be doing something right!

To wrap up, it's worth noting that I have presented the instructor-as-designer activity as it exists for me, in my local context, as part of a larger professional development series, the Teaching Composition Online course that I run through my Teaching and Learning Center. Again, that is a five-week course with synchronous meetings and a fairly robust asynchronous component. We use our institutional LMS in depth with discussion boards, posted assignments, videos, slideshow and other "lecture" material. There are even grades! (I don't actually "grade" my colleagues except to demonstrate certain ways in which the gradebook can be used . . .) So, the instructor-as-designer activity I present here has the affordance of existing in a well-developed course framework. We have our course objectives guiding the big picture of everything we do, not to mention a final reflection assignment in which all course participants consider, very specifically, our objective about understanding, *and putting into practice*, UX and UCD principles.

Others may not have this kind of existing framework, like a robust professional development course, already in place. Nor will every department be in the position, even if they wanted to, to design and implement a multi-week course. That being said, I believe the activity outlined in this chapter could still be impactful even as a standalone activity. While I have my course participants actually put into writing the details of their various web experiences (good and bad), it may still be effective and eye opening for instructors to simply have the conversation about what they do online, what activities they perceive as easy or not so easy (and why, exactly), and what might that existing level of experience have to teach them about how they design for their users: students. In other words, I don't think the activity described here necessarily needs an elaborate framework to be successful. It could easily happen in a single department meeting.

So now, to return to the golf metaphor, we are sinking the putt because we are building confidence based on existing expertise and experience. We are successful thanks to skill, not just the occasional stroke of good luck!

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