Chapter 16. The Bottom End: Transposing Online Bass Lessons to Online Writing Instruction

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Abstract: This chapter argues that writing programs have the opportunity (if not an imperative) to critically and culturally rethink OWI. One of the existential challenges for OWI is that many of its teachers have never been online writing students. As a result, many instructors have trouble empathizing with the experiences and needs of online writing students and/or are fixated on creating online experiences that resemble the "virtues" of F2F classes. Drawing on user experience theory and employing autoethnographic writing, this chapter explores and transposes the author's experience as an online bass student at an online bass academy to reimagine OWI from the bottom up.

Keywords: user experience, MOOCS, online bass lessons, student experience, design

I believe deeply in teamwork, community, and collaboration. But most of all, I believe that by being ferociously driven and passionate about ScottsBassLessons I can make a difference to people's lives.

- Devine, Scott's Bass Lessons, 2020, para. 1

Back at the Clubhouse!

In golf, the clubhouse is a place for coming together and getting better—a place for golfers to reflect on their successes, discuss struggles, share a few tips, and digress (Tiger Woods).¹When we think about the equivalent for online writing instruction (OWI), the clubhouse is a community of administrators and instructors that are working together to support online students in a way that responds to issues in the world (COVID 19, Black Lives Matter). One of the best ways that our OWI clubhouse can do this is by employing a user experience (UX) driven-PARS (personable, accessible, responsive, and strategic) approach to the instruction, design, and administration of our online writing classes (Borgman & McArdle, 2019). But UX means more than eliciting and responding to user feedback from

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2021.1145.2.16

^{1.} The author would like to thank to Kellie Sharp-Hoskins, Kavita Surya, Jessie Borgman, Casey McArdle, and peer reviewers for their feedback and support.

students—it means being critically and culturally aware of the experiences that shape us as instructors and researchers; and working together means more than providing trainings, resources, and support for individual instructors—it means collaborating on the production of a learning experience that accounts for the diverse (social, political, material, modal, and embodied) needs of students.

Are U Experienced?²

Like many, I began teaching online as a graduate student. I was a poet in a program (M.F.A.) with a graduate assistantship (GA) responsible for a hybrid freshman composition course. The pedagogical impetus for the online hour, I later learned, was that in lieu of a lab, it enabled administration to designate it as a four, instead of three-unit course. My OWI training, led by senior GAs, included importing a shell and an instructor intro to the WebCT LMS complete with html tricks. To slide the story on to the fairway <marquee>, from the beginning there was a lack of strategic planning—making a course hybrid for an extra credit hour and allocating the OWI training to tech-savvy graduate students pedagogically trivialized the online component and inadvertently tethered it to those who had strong digital literacy skills. Being html illiterate and having never taken (let alone taught) an online course resulted in my first OWI experience being one of disdain for digital distance.

It was after I graduated when the FOMO (fear of missing out) set in. If I wanted to adjunct, I had to get with online teaching. At first, this took the form of enrolling in tech trainings that guided instructors through the architectural affordances of the new Blackboard LMS and equipped us with the procedural behaviors we would need to do things in-the-system. Later, as a full-time emergency hire at an affiliated community college, I had the fortune of having access to a responsive instructional technology center which provided training and an open space for teachers and students to get one-on-one help with the online dimensions of their courses. Encouraged by the center's director, I enrolled in an online distance education course developed around the Quality Matters (qualitymatters.org) rubric and peer review model, that she was teaching. It was here, in an online course created for aspiring online instructors like me (albeit not OWI specific), where I learned how to design an accessible learning experience and, importantly, had my first experience as an online student and it was personal. I recall the apprehension I felt selecting a profile picture (I ain't professional looking), the anxiety of participating in a choose an animal that represents your personality icebreaker (a donkey, 'cause I'm stubborn), and the time I accidentally insulted another student in a discussion comment (with what I thought was lighthearted joke) and had to walk it back.

With the emergency over (and getting passed over by Ph.Ds. for the business as usual hire), I surmised that I had to doctor my name if I wanted a full-time

^{2.} See The Jimi Hendrix Experience (1967), Are You Experienced?

teaching position. Returning to school to pursue a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Professional Communication, I was a GA teaching online again, but my lean was different now. We had the shiny new Canvas LMS that responded to user feedback, I was engaged in the theory and practice of OWI, and soon enough I was the OGA (online graduate assistant) training new GAs and adjuncts in OWI. Behind the scenes, I was also conducting ethnographic research on identity politics in online learning spaces, or what I like to call interface-to-interface (I2I) classrooms. This project (my dissertation, I2I: The poetics of identification; Retzinger, 2018) was the exigency of my personal experience, my reaction to a student's experience, and what I perceived to be a disciplinary need. One of the reasons I came to like teaching online, after I got the hang of it, is because the interface provided a curtain for me to Wizard of Oz my ethos and conceal my embodied insecurities behind clean-cut sentences and a "white" name. But, as I came to realize, my comfort and privilege wasn't accessible to all. When I asked students to choose an animal that represented their identity, an international student chose a shark because all he wanted to do was swim free with other fish, but he couldn't because his identity was marked and he felt that people were threatened by his presence even online. Recognizing white privilege at play, I went looking for critical/cultural scholarship on identity politics in distance education and OWI and found myself snapping to a silent count: Not only was there a lack of scholarship, there was an underlying white gaze that didn't account for embodied locations. Or in hook's (1994) words, "The person who is the most powerful has the privilege of denying their body" (hooks, 1994, pp. 136-137). So, I opined, if we were going to promote interactive online learning experiences (Palloff & Pratt, 2007) that were rooted in notions of social presence (Gunawardena, 1995) and crafting a persona (Warnock, 2009) as performances and simulacra of embodied ways of engagement in a society that is wrestling with systemic prejudice, then we needed to account for the locations of our biases in online learning and understand the ways in which identification happened and mattered (Ratcliffe, 2005) on both sides of the interface through names, pictures, ideas, clicks, key strokes, and behaviors (Nakamura, 2002).

I share these experiences and exigencies with you for several reasons. First, because in many ways, my path follows the discoursed terrains and crossroads of distance education literature:

- Issues of administrative agenda and economics being put ahead of pedagogy and instructor training (e.g., Hewett & Powers, 2007; Mechenbier, 2015);
- A digital divide that speaks to literacy and material concerns (e.g., boyd, 2014);
- An existential crisis that reminds us that learning, teaching, and otherwise being online is modally, affectively, and viscerally different (e.g., Haraway 1991; Sunden, 2003; Turkle, 1995);

- Perpetual doubts about the ethos and value of an online education (e.g., Croy, 1998; Woodruff, 2020);
- A pedagogical turn driven by new interactive technology and democratic ideologies (e.g., Goode, 2009; Rosen 2012);
- The lack of situated OWI support and the prominence of LMS workshops and quality standards for training and vetting instructors (e.g., Kerns & Mancilla, 2017);
- And a host of research interests related to all aspects of online learning, such as social presence (e.g., Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017), software politics (e.g., Chambers, 2016; Friesen, 2011; Witte, 2018), cyberpsychology (e.g., Zembylas, 2005), ability (e.g., Borgman & Dockter, 2018), usability (e.g., Bartolotta, et al., 2018); power and identity politics (e.g., Arroyo, 2010; Bomberger, 2004; Chen & Bennet, 2012; Fangfeng et al., 2011).

And second, because both my narrative and the existing literature exposes an existential hole in our course of thinking about distance education, generally, and Borman and McArdle's (2019) UX driven PARS approach to OWI, specifically: Despite my student experience in online distance education courses (e.g., Quality Matters) and for all of my teaching experience, trainings, and research, one of the voids that I face as an online instructor is that I've never been an online writing student.

Who Are U?³

User Experience (UX) is the proverbial elephant that we only touch part of (but never the whole), an allochthonous amalgamation (derived and togethered from theories and practices outside of academia), and an improvisation (making it work). Emerging out of industry standards to help designers understand the experiences and meet the technical and affective needs of users, UX has been adopted by distance educators as a vehicle of humanizing systems (Greer & Harris, 2018). While it can be ideologically uncomfortable to identify students as users (Opel & Rhodes, 2018) or even hyphenate them, it does encourage teachers to remember that I2I interactions are different from F2F interactions because they are interfaced and mediated by non-human agents that interpellate students and, I would add, teachers-we are hailed by a machine according to our role. Further, the emphasis on X encourages pedagogues to remember that distance education is more than content or learning management—it is a network of interactions that occurs in digital places, a system that regulates and expects our behaviors in any given location, and a panopticon that administrates and polices our identities. Coupled together, UX is also a compelling framework because it is at once singular and plural, enabling us to move between and address the needs of individual

^{3.} See The Who's "Who Are You?" (Townsend, 1978).

students, situated communities, and the larger cultural apparatus, and, like the coupling of students and teachers, UX helps us articulate the political dimensions of the relationship between teacher-designers and student-users. Or in Redish's (2010) words, "We are not our users, and users will always surprise you" (p. 193).

In Personal, Accessible, Responsive Strategic: Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors, Borgman and McArdle (2019) ground their PARS approach to OWI in UX as a way for instructors and administrators to make strategic decisions that respond to the needs of student-users and institutions:

> We know from experience that user research is an important part of success in an online course and degree program. And yet, many do not spend the time to do user research or user testing and the like . . . "UX learning opportunities have the potential to help academic organizations improve customer satisfaction and business strategy, as well as help them better fulfill their mission" (Ghetto & Beecher, 2016, p. 158). We see the PARS approach as a way to apply a user focused approach to your online courses so that your students don't become an afterthought. (p. 89)

To be sure, UX is an important and ethical drive towards on-PARS learning experiences. However, if UX is the theory behind the stroke (praxis), one of the hazards for many online writing instructors (myself included) is that we (older "I"s) don't teach online writing (OW) from a place of lived experience. Unlike the extensive reservoir of F2F experience (i.e., the socio-political, cognitive, embodied, material, spatial, and emotional assemblages of our k-undergraduate education) that we can draw from and use to consciously and unconsciously inform our decisions about the types of experiences that we want to create (and, importantly, avoid) for and with our students in the classroom, our UX as online students (let alone as OW students) is relatively scant or altogether absent. We simply aren't able to empathize with our students or recapitulate UX from a lived place and as a result-out of necessity-many OW teachers, in varying degrees allow/acquiesce and rely on the architectural affordances and values of LMSs, transposing of F2F pedagogy to I2I contexts, and/or scholarship and pedagogical frameworks to anticipate the flattened terrain, map out the route, and become a digital actor. This is not to undermine what these valuable resources and strategies allow us to do, but to remind us that one of the reasons that OWI is so challenging is because we are pedagoging from an existential deficiency—a deficiency that is often filled in and obscured by (if not oriented towards) the experiences that we have and in part shape (for student users) as teacher-designers.⁴ Further,

^{4.} One complication that UX theory presents OWI is that there are multiple (separate and overlapping) locations of experience: Both the instructors' and students' UX of the LMS interacting with their respective hardware and bodies; the students' UX of an

because the predominant model of OWI (i.e., a single teacher responsible for creating a learning experience for a class of students based on materials and outcomes determined by an administration) is by and large an unapologetic effort to recapitulate the epistemic virtues of F2F learning experiences for I2I students, many OWI instructors are left frustrated by or fixated on fabricating what's lost in the transposition and/or epistemically blind to/economically skeptical of alternative models of online education that more readily embrace online contexts and economies for what they are capable of, such as massive open online courses (MOOCs) and their variants (Krause & Lowe, 2014). In response, in this chapter I use autoethnographic writing to reflect my UX as an online bass (OB) student at an online bass academy and then transpose the implications for OW instructors and administrators through a PARS framework.

Briefly, for those who are curious about my methodological approach to discussing UX, let me begin with Marcus and Fisher's (1999) premise that ethnography "is not the mindless collection of the exotic, but the use of cultural richness for self-reflection and self-growth" (pp. ix-x). Following, the less familiar autoethnography exists in a continuum between objective ethnographic methods and subjective evocation that employs "personal experience as the primary data" (Chang, 2009, p. 49) and allows us to "represent the insider perspective on an experience or a culture" (Canagarajah, 2012, p. 114). In short, I contend that because UXs are at once individual and cultural and because ethnography is a vehicle for community-oriented reflection and growth, autoethnography enables us (you and I, dear reader) to both explore and learn from our personal experiences in order to take action in the world.

Ethnography aside, there is still the bottom end of an elephant obscuring the hole-the subject and field site of my experiences as an online student. Because it is disingenuous for me to pretend to be an OW student, I instead draw upon my experience as an OB student at Scott's Bass Lessons (SBL) (scottsbasslessons. com/). Founded by the British bassist and educator Scott Devine in 2010, SBL is a worldwide online academy for bassists whose mission is to provide a "worldclass bass education without boundaries" (Scott's Bass Lessons, 2020, para. 5). Consisting of the SBL academy website, an LMS location, and social media extensions, SBL is a multifaceted music education entity that provides bass lessons and creates an international community for its 85,000 members (Scott's Bass Lessons, 2020), 833,000 + YouTube channel subscribers (Scott's Bass Lessons, n.d.), and some. While there is a dissonance between being an OB and an OW student, I contend that my experiences as a beginning musician (i.e., full of insecurities, unable to read, or keep time) allow me to reflect on my UX through a beginner's eye in ways that my graduate and postgraduate UX in online education courses or trainings wouldn't.

instructors' pedagogy; and the UX of an instructor teaching the course [they designed] in relation to the students. And, to be sure, one location informs the UX of another.

Someone Like U⁵

I like iambic pentameter, but I can't keep a beat. I've got big ears, but I can't find the key. I'm not musically talented, but I'm intrigued. At Jefferson Elementary School, the drum and percussion of the Chinese New Year lion dance woke my bottom end up. At Malcolm X Middle School (in the only F2F music class I ever had) I learned some rhythms that I couldn't exactly coordinate with my hands and feet, but the beats still lingered-Dom-ka-da-ka-ka-Dom-Dom. At Berkeley High School, I learned about genre conventions (reggae) and collaboration ("music is music if you want to play music then you can play music if you have people you want to play music with then you can play music" Marley, 1991), but I was too insecure to think that I could. Once, when I did try to sing for fun, I remember being told I sounded like a hoarse mule. On my own, I played a guitar now and then, but aside from the chords a friend taught me, I never really learned the instrument. Altogether, I was uneducated and didn't have confidence in my musical ability, but I had a root. In some ways this is similar to the sentiments of many of the beginning writers that I work with. When I ask them about their identity as a writer-many lack confidence or don't identify as writers, but just as many write more than they think, love all kinds of ink, or realize that writing is a vehicle of power.

I started playing bass seven years ago because I wanted to put some poems to a beat. I bought a used amp, got Too Fresh (the name of the bass) out of my friend's closet, and knew enough to fret a G or groove on a BD. And it was fun, or I had fun but I was clueless. Every now and then, to fill in the gaps, I'd get a book or find lessons on YouTube that interested me. Soon enough SBL videos started catching my attention, e.g., "The most important scale you'll ever learn" (Scott's Bass Lessons, 2014), and at some point I bit on the one free month bait, which was the channel's hook, and checked out the SBL Academy. Upon joining, I was prompted to create a profile (see Figure 16.1) and invited to a synchronous video/chat orientation for new members that was given by Scott himself. Before long, I was navigating the academy website, checking out community discussion threads, and taking lessons. What I initially liked best about SBL was the comprehensive course library (see Figure 16.2), organized by ability level (beginning, intermediate, advanced) and subject matter (e.g., genre, theory, reading, recording), that not only allowed me to personalize my learning experience based on my ability and interests, but also in terms of who I wanted to learn from-Scott or one of the many SBL instructors (see Figure 16.3). Further, unlike the piecemeal YouTube lessons that were available on the SBL channel, in the academy each course was a curated and accessible learning experience complete with sequenced videos, downloadable workbooks, and often backing tracks to practice with. As someone without any real knowledge, the UX was perfect for me—I enjoyed working through lessons at my own pace, according to my level, and finding teachers and topics that resonated with me.

^{5.} See Adele's "Someone Like You" (Adkins & Wilson, 2011).



Figure 16.2. SBL's course library.

^{6.} Pictures (Figures 16.1, 16.2, 16.3, & 16.4) courtesy of Scott's Bass Lessons.



Figure 16.3. SBL faculty.

After the trial ended, I signed up for a year and continued on. I enjoyed SBL and I was learning a lot, but at some point, I kind of hit a wall—the course library got hard and/or the "choose your own adventure" left me indecisive sometimes. It was during this time when SBL, responding to that feeling, introduced "The Bass Technique Accelerator Program," which was advertised as a more familiar asynchronous course (AC):

For 26 weeks, I'll be your bass tutor.

Every week, we'll have a new lesson.

It will be focused.

It will be deep.

We'll hammer technique.

And at the end, you'll be a different bass player than you were when you started. (Scott's Bass Lessons, personal communication, Sep. 18, 2018). Having earned my trust, looking for structure, and wanting to get better, I signed up. Conducted through Teachable (<u>scotts-bass-lessons.teachable.com</u>), for twenty-six-weeks I received lessons from Scott that broke down aspects of technique as a series of exercises to practice and build upon. Delivered as weekly modules, the materials included sequenced video with supplemental materials, a discussion board where members could interact with one another or have questions answered by an SBL administrator, and monthly live Q&A sessions with Scott that were then recorded and made available on demand. Soon after this first course, several other courses offered by Scott and other instructors followed—some of which are in their second or third iterations (see Figure 16.4). In many ways these courses are similar to semester-long OW ACs, but there is one key difference—I have access to them for life. In this capacity, each course is like an interactive multimodal textbook (or together like a multimodal library) and while I didn't always finish them on time and found some materials above my level, I didn't mind too much because I can always go back when I'm ready.



Figure 16.4. SBL's asynchronous course library.

When my year was up, I decided to become a lifetime member and I'm still shedding.⁷ I keep tabs on SBLs emails and the YouTube channel to see what's going on; I check in on the community every now and then to get advice on gear, ask questions about lessons, see what others are up to, or share what I'm up to (sound-

^{7. &}quot;The shed" is SBL colloquial for practicing bass or doing things in SBL.

cloud.com/user-633191931); I've continue to work through the course library; and I keep signing up for the enrolled courses. To be sure, there are still a few features of the Academy that I haven't really used, such as the "Bass Hang" where Scott invites members to submit practice videos for feedback or the recently introduced "Player's Path," which he designed to give students a sense of accomplishment and accountability by progressing through songs at different skill levels. But that is one of the things I like about SBL; it's strategically responsive to the members' needs and there is always something new (or old) waiting for me (when I'm ready)—be that lessons, different instructors, video essays, or pedagogical approaches and utilizations of technology. Further, what this experience has reminded me of is, despite all of the progress I've made and all the practice I've put in, I'm still far from being a competent bassist (or rapper) and it's humbling-like writing, learning the bass is a lifetime craft and some things just take a long time to learn (because they are hard) or don't really make sense until you're ready, but unlike a traditional writing class, SBL is there for me when I am. To be sure, my experience as an OB student has given me a lot of empathy with OW students, and when thinking about the SBL paradigm, my UX has shown me that OWI could learn a lot from SBL. While SBL is by no means a perfect or equivocal model, it offers OW instructors, and importantly, administrators an opportunity to reimagine the status quo in exciting ways. I'll share with you a few—in the key of PARS.

What's the Use?8

Scott Devine is a very capable bassist and teacher, but one of the things that made SBL such a personal educational experience was that Scott was just one of the many SBL instructors I was able to learn from. This personalization happened in three ways. At the administration level, SBL strategically selected a diverse group of instructors—each of whom brings their own musical expertise, life experiences, and teaching style-to produce content that they are passionate about. Following, and more familiarly, at the instructor level, each teacher is able to personalize their course and pedagogy. For example, when teaching theory, Scott likes to focus on practical application, while Phil Mann (another SBL faculty) likes to focus on conceptual understanding. And, importantly, at the student level, users are able to personalize their experiences by choosing what they want to learn, who they want to learn from, when they want to learn, and at what pace they want to learn. Transposing this model to OWI, I can imagine English departments, which are often composed of specialists in many fields, leveraging talent to create a passionate and diverse catalog of instructional content—one that includes approaching any given topic from multiple points of view for learners with different needs. For example, grammar and mechanics for ESL students taught by ESL specialists or syntax taught by a Gertrude Stein scholar.

^{8.} See Mac Miller's "What's the Use?" (McCormick, 2018).

Of course, creating a personalized catalog of content presents (at least) three other pressing issues in our thinking about PARS: (1) How to make content accessible to students; (2) how to be responsive to students outside of the teacher-LMS-student paradigm; and (3) how to strategically produce this experience? In regard to accessibility, SBL offers a couple of viable answers. First, and structurally speaking, SBL is essentially an online instruction library (OIL) where students are able to access content on demand according to their needs, interest, and learning style. Second, and more familiarly, SBL offers iterative ACs that students can enroll in. Transposing these approaches to OWI, SBL offers two compelling paradigmatic shifts. In regard to the OIL, imagine each university's writing program producing an OIL that students could access on demand to supplement their learning in a particular course or throughout their degree program. And in thinking about ACs, imagine iterative courses that are produced by a department (e.g., a writing program administrator working with graduate assistants and/or colleagues to record lectures [by more than one teacher], develop assignments [of multiple imaginations], and design the course site [with students and teachers in mind]), and then administered by individual instructors who can focus on responding to student work (and, along with students, give feedback or even participate in the next iteration). In looking at both together, the keys here are to see the OIL and ACs as complimentary, where, for example, if a student was in a technical communication AC, where command of APA style was expected but not covered, and they didn't know it, the instructor could refer them to the APA courses in the OIL.

Which leads to questions about responsiveness—who is responding to students in ACs and OILs. In short, an orchestrated team. Breaking down SBL's approach, responsiveness looks something like this:

- Administrators who moderate and respond to discussion board posts and respond to private student questions in ACs and the OIL;
- Instructors (of OIL courses and ACs) who host live Q&A sessions or seminars and (occasionally) invite students to contact them privately;
- Members responding to other members in the OIL community or AC discussion boards.

Transposing SBL's approach to OWI, I can imagine writing programs creating administrators or "librarians" for their OIL, creating schedules for synchronous workshops with instructors of the OIL and ACs, and creating opportunities for students to engage with one another in a community page of an OIL, where for example they could talk about a writing project in their anthropology class (and maybe, in the spirit of writing across the curriculum, one of the OIL librarians is from the anthropology department). Further, at universities with writing centers, I can imagine collaborations where the OIL is integrated into a virtual writing center.

Finally, in response to the strategic production of multimodal OILs and ACs, it goes without saying that this requires a coordinated team effort. When look-

ing at the SBL approach, collaboration is apparent at every step—in the pedagogy (instructors with administrators), in the recorded lectures (instructors with audio/video engineers), in the workbooks and backing tracks (instructors with technical writers and musicians), and of course, the orchestrated effort of updating the website and responding to students. Transposing such a strategic model to the production of OWI courses would be transformative. Instead of each instructor being responsible for producing their own accessible multimodal content, creating and implementing engaging assignments, designing and moderating their own course site, and responding to students' technical questions and writing, which, no matter how you cut it, is a lot to put on one person, writing programs could strategically collaborate on the production of the UX: Administrators working with pedagogues working with audio/video engineers working with technical writers working with web designers working with teachers to personalize learning experiences in accessible, responsive, and strategic ways that make a difference in student's lives.

Final Thoughts and Application

Back at the clubhouse, Bad Bunny⁹ (2020) is playing. It sounds interesting, the golfers say, but they're just not sure. It's music from a different culture, in another language, and they weren't expecting it—it's not what we play here. For many instructors, that's what "the internet" is. For many students, that's what academic "English" is. In other words, experience is not only powerful, it's rhythmical. It produces the stories we tell, shapes our expectations about where the story is going, manifests our actions in the narrative in time, and is capable of connecting or dividing us. If there are UX OWI takeaways from this chapter, it's two:

- 1. To remember that our experiences shape our students' experiences and unless we account for the experiences that shape us as researchers and designers, then we are obscuring our understanding of their experience;
- 2. Drawing on industry practices, sometimes we need to step outside of our disciplinary values and pedagogies in order to explore the possibility of experience.

Finally, my UX at SBL has transformed my thinking about the possibility of OWI. I'm not sure if it's the economics, values and attachments (to F2F learning), infrastructure and material constraints, a matter of time (current students and future OWI instructors will have lived it), or some combination thereof, but I am certain that now (COVID-19, Black Lives Matter) is the time to explore the possibility of providing students with: personalized learning experience from multiple and diverse instructors who are experts in their field; access to lessons on demand (let students binge learn, learn with topical agency, or learn when they are ready

^{9.} Bad Bunny is a musical artist from Puerto Rico.

to learn); a responsive learning community that they are not only recipients of but participants in; and the benefits of a strategic (and passionate and ferociously-driven) collaboration that is in response to the UX of the community and its members.

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