Conclusion

The 19th Hole!

Look to User Experience (UX) Research: Creating the Best Experience Possible for You and Your Students

As we conclude our text, we'd like to return to the golf metaphor that was the inspiration for the PARS approach. Golf is a game for life. You work to hone your golf game your entire life (or however long you play), but you never master the game; you never master the craft. Think about watching golf on TV or live (we do and we've heard the jokes, but stay with us a moment) and as you watch a golfer hit it into the water or go out of bounds or miss a putt, remember that is their job. Every day they are out at the range hitting balls, at the putting green working on speed control, at the gym trying to build muscle and stay in shape because the courses are getting longer. No one is perfect. Not even the pros! We see online instruction in the same light. It's a commitment, folks! This is not a game for those without a passion for it. The journey from starting as an online instructor to retiring after years of teaching online is a long one, but it's one that is full of growth and connection opportunities. Golfing, like online teaching, is an experience. It takes practice, planning, and persistence to be successful in either one and because of this we feel it's imperative to continually iterate

your design, your instruction, and your administration practices in order to be successful.

It has probably become clear at this point that the elements of the PARS approach overlap and have a fluency to them that, when used together, creates a dynamic overarching experience. But at this point we feel it is important to remind readers that what we're talking about through this whole book is creating a user experience and through "good UX, you are trying to reduce the friction between the task someone wants to accomplish and the tool that they are using to complete that task" (Buley, 2013, p. 4). We hope that through reading the chapters in this text you feel better equipped to plan for and mitigate those friction points in your online writing courses. When working together with PARS, these user experience elements take an online course to a new level, further enhancing the experience for students. We know from an interview that Jon Kolko gave in 2010 that good design is "design that changes behavior for the better . . . [and takes] into account the context of the environment, of the human condition, the culture, and then attempt[s] to make the things you do" better (Laneri, 2010, para. 4).

If you've not gathered this already, 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. Because as much as some hate to admit it, education is a product experience that students are purchasing and consuming and because of this we feel it's important to research and listen to the student consumers when creating online courses. Doing research about what your student users want and need is important. Some brief user research can go a long way to assisting the students in success in their distance education courses because "User research is about understanding users and their [the users'] needs, and user experience design is about designing a user's interactions with a product from moment to moment" (Buley, 2013, p. 5). Iterating your online courses, teaching and administration practices only creates better experiences for all involved. Listening to your instructors (as an administrator) or your students (as an instructor or administrator) will help you identify the touchpoints or the things that just aren't working as well as they should. Gaining this knowledge of issues related to the online course experience will guide you in your continual quest to be a better online program administrator or online instructor because you'll be able to take feedback and apply it to the next iteration of the program or course.

Getto and Beecher (2016) argue, "As more and more consumers look to digital products and services to perform everyday tasks, technical professionals of all stripes will need to support those experiences in myriad ways" (p. 157). With the growth of online education over the past ten years, colleges and universities across the country feel pressure to offer more courses for campus-based degrees via flexible learning formats, such as hybrid courses or fully online courses.

Jobs like Interaction Designer and Instructional Designer are finding their way into academic spaces to support faculty and students. The most recent distance education report noted that 29.7% of all students in higher education are taking at least one distance course. Of that 29.7%, students taking only distance courses make up 14.3%; students taking a combination of both traditional and online courses make up 15.4% (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Both of these trends—fully online degrees and degrees earned by a combination of traditional and online—will only grow and universities need to hire people who can help support this growth, or their students/users will attend schools who will support them.

In the fall of 2014, there were around six million students in the US who enrolled in online classes (Friedman, 2016), and the numbers continue to rise. User-centered design (UCD) "means understanding what your users need, how they think, and how they behave—and incorporating that understanding into every aspect of your process" (Garrett, n.d., para. 3). This process can be applied via three main principles of design: usability, accessibility, and sustainability. When creating an online course, educators must create a usable space for students to easily navigate, an accessible space to connect to from any country and from any hardware along with ADA compliance, and it must be sustainable in that the space can adapt and evolve as technologies and social contexts change. We know that more and more schools are adding or increasing online undergraduate and graduate degree programs and as they do, this will increase the demand on their campus-based programs to offer more online options. Already more undergraduate programs are being encouraged, if not required, to put introductory courses such as first-year writing online. We've seen this happen at our own institutions.

However, just because the need is there does not mean institutions should plunge headfirst into the distance education pool. We know from experience that user research is an important part of success in an online course and a degree program. And yet, many do not spend the time to do user research or user testing and the like. Users/students become an afterthought and user feedback is only gathered at the end of the course or upon degree completion. User experience research can be the answer, "UX learning opportunities have the potential to help academic organizations improve customer satisfaction and business strategy, as well as to help them better fulfill their mission" (Getto & 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 student users don't become an afterthought.

An easy way to ensure that your students remain the focus of your course design and instruction is to poll them for their opinions. For example, we do a debrief with our students all the time to get feedback on the subject, readings, methods, and structure of the course. This simple survey allows us to consider the voice of customer (VOC) and it's a quick and easy way to get some feedback on what is and is not working from your actual student users. We recommend

you have a survey ready for your online classes as well that asks students what they are struggling with in terms of concepts, readings, accessibility, hardware, software, the CMS, and so on. You can send out this survey every week or pick a few key points in the semester to send it out. Mega companies such as Apple and Microsoft pour millions of dollars into getting user feedback before, during, and after launches of their products—why shouldn't an instructor do the same for their class?

Another idea we've honed after having worked with faculty and colleagues over the years on pedagogy, products, and processes, is an adapted five-day design sprint. Design sprints are typically used to solve problems. This five-day sprint can help to inform users of curriculum changes and course design developments. What you see in the example below is something Casey has used in the past based on Mark Di Sciullo's article "UX and Agile: How to Run a Product Design Sprint" (https://www.tandemseven.com/experience-design/ux-agile-run-product-design-sprint/). It's a great starting point and a good entry for people trying to understand UX concepts and methods and how to apply them to things in their daily lives. There are more robust sprints out there, so feel free to tailor each one to your needs. This is an example of how you might run it with your faculty or a group of online instructors to understand and solve some problems you might be having with an online writing course.

Day 1: Understand the Problem

Who are the users: students

Define the problem: they won't engage with discussion boards and respond

Terms: learning, feedback, discussion, interactive, feedback, writing

What will they find useful: ??

Related research: [sources here]

Competition: face-to-face

Notes:

Successful metrics: student engagement and number of posts increase? grades?

Testing: pick a class to pilot some new discussion board approaches

Day 2: Gain Insight

Create activities to generate insights and churn out many possible solutions to address the problem.

The team will explore as many ways of solving the problems as possible, regardless of how realistic, feasible, or viable they may or may not be.

Use games from *Gamestorming* (Gray, Brown, & Macanufo, 2010) to get participants thinking about how to write and revise various feedback prompts in the discussion boards. Is it the posts? Is it the CMS? Is it the user interface?

Some outcomes might be:

- New feedback prompts
- New use of discussion boards
- Find a new CMS or deliverable for posts and asynchronous interactions between students

Day 3: Decisions

Come to a decision based on the results learned from Day 2. What are the causes? What are you going to do? Note that not every idea will be able to be explored and used in terms of fixing the problem (budget, tech, etc., reasons). Cull the suggestions down to the more viable solution.

- Game
  - ▷ Collect the most viable solutions based on Day 2's sprint
  - ▷ Identify conflicts
  - ▷ Eliminate solutions that cannot be pursued
  - ▷ List assumptions on agreed upon solution
  - ▷ Identify how to test solution

Day 4: Prototype

The goal for this day is to build a prototype you can test with users on your new feedback and discussion board model. You can use paper or generate easy to use mockups online via various software or even use Microsoft Word. The point is to do quick and easy prototypes of what you think might address the problems you identified and tested in the previous three days.

Day 5: Validate and Learn

The goal for this day is to get the design in front of existing and potential users (students) to identify what is working and what is not working and identify what requires more research.

Your target audience (students) is who you want to find your new space useful. The insights of the students will give you an understanding of if you are on the right track. You should know by the end of this day if you are on the right track and meeting the needs of your users/students while still delivering a knowledge making space advertised by your university and your curriculum.

For testing, observe and interview students as they interact with your new space. To test it compared to others, give students a chance to interact with a competitive space—maybe compare the old with the new. At the end of the day have a debrief with everyone involved with the sprint on the day's testing sessions.

Now, come up with an action plan developed from the sprint.

This example of a five-day sprint is an opportunity to get people together to work on a common problem and find solutions together. It is great for facul-

ty to interact and share ideas to problems they have all experienced. It builds teamwork and a better understanding of the goals of the program, the university mission, and the faculty.

Final Thoughts

We see UX playing a larger role in online writing instruction going forward and, as you use the PARS approach, we know you'll have a solid understanding of what it means to keep the users at the forefront of your processes and designs. We see this book as a conversation with fellow new/existing online writing instructors and administrators who need support *and* are willing to support one another. Far too often we attend conferences and hear amazing stories of pedagogical brilliance, courage, and vulnerability when it comes to teaching online. At one panel we would see people sharing trials while teaching and, in another panel, hear about successes. We thought we might cut through all of waves of research and anecdotes to create one text everyone can use. Because as we keep saying,

We are all online writing instructors!
And here's the t-shirt we made to prove it :)

References

Allen, I. E., & J. Seaman. (Feb. 2016). Report card: Tracking online education in the United States. *Babson Research Group*. Retrieved from http://onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/onlinereportcard.pdf

Baehr, C., & Cargile Cook, K. (2016). *The agile communicator: Principles and practices in technical communication*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt.

Buley, L. (2013). *The user experience team of one: A research and design survival guide*. Brooklyn, NY: Rosenfield.

Di Sciullo, M. (2015). UX and agile: How to run a product design sprint. Retrieved from https://www.tandemseven.com/experience-design/ux-agile-run-product-

design-sprint/
Friedman, J. (2017). The average online bachelor's student. Retrieved from https://www.usnews.com/higher-education/online-education/articles/2017-04-04/us-news-data-the-average-online-bachelors-student
Friedman, J. (2018). Study: More students are enrolling in online courses. Retrieved from https://www.usnews.com/higher-education/online-education/articles/2018-01-11/study-more-students-are-enrolling-in-online-courses
Garrett, J. J. (n.d.) Quote. Retrieved from http://www.affordableusability.com/usability/principles.html
Getto, G., & Beecher, F. (2016). Toward a model of UX education: Training UX designers within the academy. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, 59*(2), 153-164.
Gray, D., Brown, S., Macanufo, J. (2010). *Gamestorming: A playbook for innovators, rulebreakers, and changemakers*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly.
Hewett, B. (2015). *Reading to learn and writing to teach: Literacy strategies for online writing instruction*. Boston, MA: Bedford St. Martin's.
Laneri, R. (2010).Jon Kolko on design that changes human behavior. Forbes.com. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/2010/06/15/jon-kolko-designer-technology-future-design-10-frog.html#1b3381f42bf6
Leijten, M., Van Waes, L., Schriver, K., & Hayes, J. (2014). Writing in the workplace: Constructing documents using multiple digital sources. *Journal of Writing Research, 5*(3), 285-337.
National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). Characteristics of postsecondary students. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_csb.asp
Olson, S. A. (2016, May). Higher learning across three generations. *Sky Magazine,* 129-137.
Smith, D. F. (2014). Who is the average online college student? Retrieved from https://edtechmagazine.com/higher/article/2014/05/who-average-online-college-student-infographic
Williams, J. (2014, September 22). College of tomorrow: The changing demographics of the student body. *USA Today*. Retrieved from http://www.usnews.com/news/college-of-tomorrow/articles/2014/09/22/college-of-tomorrow-the-changing-demographics-of-the-student-body