



Don't Throw Your Clubs!

There are a variety of rules and regulations associated with golf when it comes to equipment and the game. And while these are almost the same across the board, almost everyone revises or personalizes their putter. Whether it is a new comfortable grip or lead tape on the head to make it heavier, the club was once standard, and everyone was able to buy it off the shelf. Now, making those adjustments to the putter is a personal act, and everyone has different preferences and strategies for the design and use of their putter. It is how the golfer uses the putter that helps to form a connection to hopefully see better results.

Pre-designed courses offer instructors and administrators a variety of options when it comes to standardizing content, learning outcomes, and experiences for students. Mariya Tseptsura's chapter lays solid groundwork for creating accessible and usable spaces for students to engage and learn. What we like about Tseptsura's chapter is that it lays the groundwork for how to collaboratively develop a pre-designed course that meets the program goals, course goals, student goals, and instructor goals. It provides a solid structure for faculty and administrators to examine the personal nature of course and curricular design.

Chapter 16. Pre-Designed Courses and Instructor Autonomy: Emphasizing the Personal in Course Design

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Abstract: While pre-designed online courses, or PDCs, are becoming more common across writing programs, concerns over their use are far from subsiding. This chapter argues that many of these concerns, and particularly the debates over the loss of instructor autonomy, can be addressed by applying the PARS framework and putting a strategic emphasis on the personal elements of the PDC. The chapter describes one approach to creating a PDC that provided instructors with multiple curricular choices, easily customizable elements, and course assignments that facilitated personal connections and communication. The chapter further argues that in order to make the best use of PDCs, writing instructors must be able to modify their courses and have sufficient training in personalizing the PDCs.

Keywords: pre-designed courses, course design, personal, online writing instruction, OWI training

Pre-designed courses, or PDCs (also known as “master,” “template,” or “canned” courses), were once commonly used mostly in for-profit higher education institutions but have become a staple in many writing programs across the nation. According to the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s (CCCC) 2021 *State of the Art of OWI Report*, 19 percent of the respondents in the most recent survey of online writing instruction (OWI) practitioners indicated that they were given PDCs to teach from, and 28 percent responded that they had received training for working with the PDCs. At the same time, scholars and practitioners continue to raise valid concerns over the use of PDCs, most notably regarding the loss of instructor autonomy: as Samantha NeCamp and Connie Theado (2021) put it, many instructors find PDCs “limiting and impersonal” (p. 1). While these concerns remain justified, this chapter argues that they can be addressed by applying the PARS (personal, accessible, responsive, strategic) framework designed by Jessie Borgman and Casey McArdle (2019) and specifically by emphasizing the *personal* element of the framework in course design and use. This chapter describes one writing program’s approach to building a PDC with a *strategic* emphasis on giving instructors opportunities to make the course *personal* and offers an overview of specific curricular and design strategies and course materials.

Theory and Practice

One of the more serious points of criticism of PDCs is that these courses remove instructor autonomy and control over course content and design. Indeed, teaching from a PDC seemingly goes against the CCCC OWI Principle 5 that argues that “Online writing teachers should retain reasonable control over their own content and/or techniques for conveying, teaching, and assessing their students’ writing in their OWCs” (CCCC A Position Statement, 2013). Losing instructor autonomy can lead to dissatisfaction on the part of composition instructors who might already feel disenfranchised by the structure of the discipline or resent that their roles were seemingly reduced to maintenance and grading (Mechenbier, 2015; Penrose, 2012; Rice, 2015). Being limited in how and how much they can modify a course severely curtails instructors’ ability to make it personal: not only are the instructional materials designed by someone else, but lack of ownership and autonomy might lead instructors to feel less willing to go the extra mile to project their personality into the course or to make the course more personal for their students. Using PDCs might also limit how responsive the course is to students’ needs, as the disconnect between those who design online courses and the students who take them (Rogers et al., 2007) is further exacerbated.

While these criticisms are not unjustified, universities and writing programs are becoming increasingly reliant on PDCs not only because of their desire to capitalize on the easy expansion methods promised by the PDCs but also because these courses provide some level of necessary standardization and instruction quality in situations where, just as learning management systems (LMSs) are becoming more complex, writing programs often rely on contingent workforce and are unable to provide adequate OWI-focused training in order to prepare their instructors to be proficient course designers. Developing a pedagogically sound, technologically up-to-date, accessible, and visually appealing course takes a high level of expertise in a number of fields from writing pedagogy to instructional design and digital technology. As Shelley Rodrigo and Cristina Ramírez (2017) argued,

It is unfair to accept, then, that all writing studies scholars have the knowledge, design, and technological expertise to design their own online courses. Further, it is unreasonable and unethical to assume that less experienced scholars and instructors, such as graduate student teachers and lecturers, are prepared to design their own online course. (p. 316)

It is not surprising that under such conditions, instructors feel overwhelmed and exploited (Stewart et al., 2016); for instance, online instructors in Peter Shea’s study (2007) named the increased workload of online “course development, revision, and teaching” (p. 84) as the main demotivating factor for choosing to teach online, with many pointing out that their institutions were unwilling to

acknowledge this increased workload. Furthermore, there are some valid concerns about quality of online instruction; for instance, the CCCC's 2021 *State of the Art of OWI Report* revealed that "Only 37% of respondents offered more text-based communication for ESL students, and only 48% viewed their courses as ADA compliant" (p. 11). While lack of attention to accessibility is a serious concern that can potentially create barriers for multiple groups of students, these statistics further confirm that it is unreasonable to expect all online writing instructors to be expert course designers.

By creating a PDC, writing programs can alleviate the additional workload writing instructors have to tackle when teaching online and can offer them an *accessible* course, *strategically* designed based on the best practices in OWI and educational technology. The resources typically available to writing programs far outweigh individual instructors' design ability, especially as a team model of course development has become increasingly common. For example, the design of the course described in this chapter involved a team of six: three experienced composition instructors, an instructional designer, a graphic designer, and an educational technology specialist, not to mention a video production team and a slew of technology available through the university's office of online education. Shared curriculum and PDCs can alleviate the burden of course development and help instructors focus on the needs of their students instead of content creation, leading to "instructional growth and greater student success" (Thompson, 2021, p. 79). PDCs can provide the benefits of a well-designed, strategic, and accessible course, but it might seem that by their very definition, they are doomed to remain impersonal. However, this doesn't have to be the case: this limitation can be addressed through a strategic focus on the personal elements of the course through specific strategies described below.

To make a course personal, though, instructors need to have the freedom to modify course content whenever needed. Different programs have different levels of restrictions when it comes to modifying course content. Some programs limit the scope of changes instructors can make, and some do not allow instructors to make any changes at all. As Rodrigo and Ramírez (2017) pointed out, sometimes these restrictions are necessitated by external factors like the Quality Matters (QM) certification limitations that require that individual courses be taught with minimal modifications if they want to maintain the QM certificate. However, in other cases, these restrictions seem to communicate a lack of trust in instructors' abilities and might lead to feelings of resentment or "a sense of disempowerment over their own work" (Ruiz, 2015). And of course, stricter restrictions make it more difficult to make the course personal. The negative outcomes of restricting instructor autonomy outweigh potential benefits of retaining greater control over course content. Instead of restricting instructors' ability to modify their courses, writing program administrators (WPAs) should encourage it and train instructors on how to customize their courses in the most effective and efficient ways. Working with the PDCs can then become a professional development

opportunity at a time when opportunities for building OWI expertise are still (regrettably) rare: the CCCC's 2021 *State of the Art of OWI Report* indicated that only 29 percent of instructors teaching online courses received mandatory training (with 77 percent of those responses indicating their training was limited to working with the LMS), and 27 percent indicated that they did not receive any training for teaching online. Using and adapting a PDC can become a valuable OWI training opportunity, and furthermore, such training can then be directed back towards course development, allowing the PDC design team to incorporate instructors' feedback into continuous course revision. In what follows, this chapter describes one writing program's approach to creating a PDC with enough strategically built-in flexibility to be personal and responsive.

Developing English 101 PDC

The writing program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) serves approximately 9,000 students each year and offers a two-semester composition sequence (English 101 and 102). At the time I joined the program in my position as the associate director of composition in charge of the program's online courses in the fall 2019, the program offered 10-12 sections of online composition courses per semester. The program's director had recently developed a PDC for English 102, but there was no PDC for English 101, and instructors were routinely given online courses to teach with little support in developing or delivering them. During my first round of online teaching observations, it became clear that many of our highly qualified, accomplished instructors were struggling with moving their traditional face-to-face (F2F) teaching strategies into online spaces. Considering that at the time, the writing program (WP) was not able to offer extensive OWI training, creating a PDC for English 101 became one way to support our online instructors and lighten the heavy load of designing a course (Melonçon, 2017). I developed the first iteration of the English 101 PDC in fall 2019, and it was used in individual sections of the course for the first time in spring 2020—just in time for the COVID-19 pandemic transition to emergency remote instruction.

The development of the PDC also dovetailed with some broader standardization initiatives in the writing program. The standardization efforts included a required course portfolio assignment, a common timeline for major assignment due dates, and some aspects of the curriculum such as course structure (three main units culminating in major writing projects), as well as a list of required reading assignments and common themes and genres for the major writing projects.

The English 101 PDC included these standardized elements too, and the course was scaffolded following the principles of backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) so that each unit contained a major writing project and a series of smaller assignments, discussions, quizzes, and reading materials that all built on each other, leading students towards each unit's learning outcomes. In creating

the major assignments, I collaborated with two of our most experienced online instructors; three course development specialists from the UNLV Office of Online Education supported me through the entire process of course development. The course was built following accessibility and universal design principles, as well as the needs of our highly diverse, multilingual student population (Amorim & Martorana, 2021; Miller-Cochran, 2015). For instance, all course documents and online materials were reviewed for compliance with the university's accessibility standards (e.g., all videos included closed captions and all course materials were accessible to screen readers and other assistive technology tools as well as displayed consistently in web and app versions of the LMS). Finally, to lighten the literacy load for our students, the course featured multiple multimodal components, such as introductory video lectures for each of the reading assignments and major writing assignments.

It took a semester of team efforts and labor to build the PDC and make it into a well-designed course that was strategic in helping students achieve the program's learning outcomes. Similar to other programs (e.g., Rodrigo & Ramírez, 2017), we made the English 101 PDC a requirement for all instructors teaching online for the first time. We also held a two-hour OWI orientation prior to the start of each semester and conducted teaching observations that gave us a chance to provide more individualized support. We gave our instructors complete control over their courses: They were welcome to modify any part of the course on the condition that they followed the program's curriculum guidelines and did not drastically alter student workload. Finally, instructors who had taught the course online before were able to opt out of the PDC and use their own materials instead; often, they preferred to reuse a version of the PDC they had modified before.

During a year and a half of using the PDC across our online sections of English 101, I surveyed our instructors on how they were using the course and what changes they would like to see¹. From the instructor surveys, I received many positive comments about the course, and a majority responded that they made only minimal modifications to the course. Only less than a quarter of instructors said they used the course as a rough draft and modified it significantly; some changes I observed included introducing different major assignments and alternative reading materials. However, I was curious as to why most of the instructors chose not to modify the course, considering they were free to do so. In informal conversations with instructors, many of them voiced the concerns that they were not familiar enough with the curriculum to modify it, or that they did not have enough time to make significant changes.

1. At the time, it was beyond our capacity to survey the students as well; the program had plans for implementing a few student surveys and user data collection tools in the upcoming years, after this chapter was written. The course development team relied on the combined expertise and extensive online teaching experience of its composition-instructor members to determine the best ways to accommodate our students' needs.

Perhaps not surprisingly, none of the instructors teaching online for the first time wanted to modify the course, instead trusting in the program's expertise and taking their time to gain more experience. However, in some ways, the PDC itself felt restrictive as instructors could not see easy pathways to modifying and personalizing its content: because each small part was designed to be connected to a larger whole, they were hesitant to change anything lest they trigger a domino-like collapse of a curricular unit. It was evident that instructors needed clearer guidelines on how to personalize the course, both in the instructor manual that accompanied the course and in the course materials themselves. Finally, when asked about future changes they would like to see in the course, the most common answer was adding alternative assignments or units to diversify the course curriculum.

To address these concerns, I directed a team of three experienced instructors to revise the PDC in the summer of 2021. Below is a description of some of the major elements of the course that were introduced in order to help our instructors take greater ownership of their courses and make them feel more personal, as well as forge better personal connections to their students. As Borgman and McArde (2019) stated, "Personalization of the classroom doesn't have to be a huge endeavor, small steps go a long way" (p. 30); some of the revisions might seem small-scale individually, but together, they accumulated to create a noticeable change in how easily the PDCs could be personalized.

Alternative Curricular Units

One of the main goals of our revisions was to create alternative units that would allow instructors to exercise greater control over their own curriculum. We designed five alternative units (see Table 16.1 for an overview of course curriculum and alternative units), each complete with a major writing project prompt and a series of lower-stakes activities and reading and writing assignments that helped students advance towards the unit's outcomes. Our approach was similar to what Allegra Smith et al. (2021) described as a grid-based course design where instructors could choose between different assignments and genres that would best suit their pedagogical approaches. Jacqueline Amorim and Christine Martorana (2021) described a similar approach that they called a "drag-and-drop" model that let instructors choose between different assignment options to include into their course modules.

Because of the limitations of our particular LMS (Canvas), we built these alternative units as separate modules inside a course shared with our cohort of online instructors: each module included all of the instructional materials needed to replace a default module with an alternative one, preceded by a set of step-by-step directions on how to do it. Instructors just needed to "import" the alternative materials and delete the old ones from their courses. Not only did instructors have greater autonomy over their curriculum, these alternative units also made it

explicit how the different pieces of the curriculum puzzle fit together in the PDC, pointing to a clearer way to revise and personalize the course materials. Finally, diversifying curriculum can help alleviate some of the concerns over academic honesty, as students can potentially recycle their papers when re-enrolling in a different section of the course (Mitchum & Rodrigo, 2021).

Table 16.1. Course Curriculum for All Sections of English 101 and in the PDC

	Unit 1: Weeks 1-5	Unit 2: Weeks 6-9	Unit 3: Weeks 10-14	Unit 4: Weeks 15-16
Common major project genres recommended by the writing program:	Literacy narrative Memoir Response essay	Opinion or letter to the editor Brochure or infographic Review Commentary	Rhetorical analysis Genre analysis Textual analysis	Course portfolio
PDC major assignment options:	Literacy narrative Language memoir “This I Believe about Writing” essay “Place of Memory” memoir	Opinion piece with infographic Letter to the editor with a brochure or flier	Rhetorical analysis Genre analysis	Course portfolio

Focusing on Personal in Course Design

As Rhonda Thomas et al. (2021) remind us, “Being personal in online classes isn’t simply having a good personality” (p. 187). In the context of online courses, “personal” goes beyond simply reflecting the instructor’s personality, although the course should include enough opportunities for instructors to do that as well. Thomas et al.’s (2021) research indicates that students need to feel “a ‘personal connection’ to the course and the instructor,” which they define as “distinct moments in a course when students recognize links between their ideas and identities and those of the instructor” (p. 188). Arguably, it is easier to design a course that would focus on the personal aspect if the instructor were the designer of the course. When designing a PDC though, course designers need to be strategic about building in the personal elements in two ways: 1) they can include intentional blank spots to be filled in by individual instructors, such as an instructor introduction page placeholder, course announcement templates, or personalized

course policies, and 2) they can build elements of the course that would help humanize instructor and students alike and help students establish personal connections to the course materials, their classmates, and their instructor. In our course design, we pursued these two lines of personalization with a range of elements described below (for an overview of these elements, see Table 16.2).

Table 16.2. Overview of PDC Design Strategies for Course Personalization

Curricular Design Elements	Personalizable “Blank Space” Elements	Elements Promoting Personal Connections
Multiple alternative curricular units and assignments	Instructor introduction template (with supplemental support for developing multimodal introductions) Course announcement templates Customizable instructor policies “Welcome” and “First Steps” pages featuring short instructor introductions Short, visually distinct annotations on course materials and assignments that provide supplemental instructor commentary	Icebreaking introduction discussion Confidential student introduction survey Informal surveys at mid- and end-points of the semester Informal, ungraded “checking in” discussions and surveys Short assignments (e.g., open-ended quiz questions) that serve as comprehension checks and initiate student-instructor communication Assignments encouraging students to make connections between course concepts and their lives Optional multimodal elements in course assignments Group projects and discussions promoting a sense of community

From the start, our English 101 PDC included an “Instructor Introduction” page template that left space for instructors to add their photo or video and share a few professional and personal details about themselves. In addition to the template page, the course manual included directions to the existing university resources for creating a professional introductory video. The home page of the course also included a short personal welcome video that featured the author of this chapter as one of the composition program directors. In addition, the course

“Welcome” and “First Steps” pages also featured short instructor introductions that could be easily modified.

Besides the introduction page and videos that would help students get to know their instructors as people, instructors were encouraged to participate in the ice-breaking introductory discussion and respond to the prompt’s questions the same way their students would. The questions invited students to share details about their backgrounds and academic and personal interests as well as their beliefs about writing; students were also asked to attach a photo or video of themselves to enhance their introduction. Such icebreaking discussions are very helpful in personalizing the course (Borgman & McArdle, 2019); furthermore, they can be used to establish course cohorts (Sibo, 2021) or form small groups for future activities. However, the public nature of such discussions may discourage some students from sharing more personal details that might help their instructor be better prepared to assist them. Understandably, some students might not want to publicly share their linguistic, age, or cultural and national backgrounds. Some students might only want to share very minimally; it is perhaps not surprising that some studies (e.g., Matsuda et al., 2013) have shown that online instructors feel like they don’t always know who their students are.

To help instructors get to know their students beyond the introduction discussion, we included a confidential student survey that invited students to share more private details about their backgrounds, such as their age or spoken languages, and also asked about students’ past experiences with writing and online courses and the challenges they were anticipating that semester. Besides the initial questionnaire, the course also included a mid-semester informal survey asking students for feedback on how the course was going, their reflections on the instructor’s feedback, and any other concerns or suggestions they might have. The course also featured an ungraded “Checking In” public discussion in the second half of the semester, designed to let students voice any thoughts and concerns about the course or the current writing project and find some help and advice from their instructor and classmates.

Most of the course assignments also prompted students to make personal connections to the course themes. For the first unit, for instance, we designed four major assignments that instructors could choose from: a literacy narrative, a language memoir, a “This I Believe about Writing” essay, and a place-centered memoir assignment. All of these assignments asked students to use their personal experiences with language, writing, and literacy to reflect on larger social or cultural trends. The course also promoted a sense of community through multiple small-group assignments, discussions, and peer reviews.

Moreover, the course included strategically placed check-in elements that facilitated better communication between instructors and students; as Thomas et al. (2021) points out, “Creating a personalized experience for students requires layers of strategic and purposeful communication with each student” (p. 191). Thus, after the introduction of each of the four major writing assignments, students

took a quiz that asked them to submit a question about the assignment to their instructor. In my personal experience, students often hesitate to ask questions via email or do so at the last moment before a major due date. Prompting students to ask questions early on helped make sure that they considered the prompt carefully and asked questions at an appropriate time. It also opened one more channel of communication between students and their instructor, as the LMS allowed students to comment on instructor's feedback (and the instructor was also able to respond to students' comments or questions that way too).

Finally, some assignments in the course invited students to make use of multiple modalities by, for instance, creating an audio post or a short screencast video in response to a discussion prompt. Mindful of potential impediments students might face when it comes to using technology (Bancroft, 2016), these multimodal components were not required but highly encouraged as an additional means to bring students' personality into the course and lessen its literacy load. Additionally, we looked for more ways to make it easier for instructors to add their own voice to the course materials. Videos are a great tool for infusing instructors' voices and personalities into the course, but creating them can be time-consuming and technologically challenging. One aspect of F2F instruction that is often lost in online spaces is the verbal commentary instructors often share with the class when discussing new writing or reading assignments. We sought to replicate that aspect with a series of annotations that appeared as yellow sticky notes placed on top of course materials such as assignment prompts or reading guides. These notes contained instructor commentary on the assignments and materials; by default, they explained some of the rationale behind the curriculum and gave students additional studying tips (e.g., a note on one of the first discussion assignments read, "Remember that to earn full credit, you need to come back to the discussion and respond to your peers' posts. It will be even more awesome if you can come back once or twice after that to check if your responses got any replies"). The instructor manual that accompanied the course emphasized that these sticky notes were an easy place where instructors could give students additional directions, explanations, or metacommentary—especially if instructors have taught the course before or if they noticed common challenges or confusion that students were experiencing in the current course.

Conclusion and Takeaways

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 campus closures, it is clear that not only is the demand for online courses unlikely to subside but that writing programs should have sufficient resources for scaling up their online offerings when needed. PDCs can be an invaluable tool in alleviating the heavy workload of course development that often falls on individual instructors without adequate training or compensation. PDCs can also provide supplemental OWI training, although it should be stressed that OWI training should never be limited to providing PDCs alone. Reportedly,

most instructors appreciate having this form of support (e.g., Rodrigo & Ramírez, 2017), but the potential negative effects of PDCs should not be overlooked. In the worst-case scenario, PDCs can feel restrictive and impersonal and can turn instructors away from online teaching. To make better use of the PDCs' potential and mitigate their limitations, course designers need to place strategic emphasis on the personal elements of the course. This chapter described three main ways our program sought to make our PDC more personal (see Table 16.2 in the previous section offers an overview of the main strategies in each of the three categories):

1. offering alternative curricular units and assignments that allowed instructors more control of their own course,
2. building in blank spaces to be filled in by the instructors, bringing forth their personality and voice, and
3. including activities that facilitated students' personal connection to the course and helped build a sense of community.

More importantly, however, implementing these strategies rests on the underlying principle of granting instructors more freedom in modifying and personalizing their courses. "Locking in" course content can not only spark dissatisfaction and resentment towards PDCs but can ultimately make the course worse by keeping it impersonal. Instructors should also have sufficient training and resources for navigating and customizing the PDC in addition to the recommended OWI professional development. By building multiple ways for instructors to customize their courses and giving them the freedom to make these courses their own, we can ensure that PDCs remain personal as well as responsive, strategic, and accessible (as Borgman and McArdle remind us, these four elements are always interconnected). Finally, WPAs and course design teams need to be responsive to instructors' and students' needs and actively seek their feedback; regular surveys and focus groups should be used for continuous PDC revision and updates.

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