# Reflect and Enjoy Your Round!

Golf is a sport anyone can play. Whether you're just starting out or you're a professional, anyone can pick up a club and play. While golf has not traditionally been an inclusive sport, it's moving in that direction, and now we see people from all over the world playing golf. All ages, races, genders, etc. can now participate in the game of golf as a hobby or with a more ambitious goal in mind (like becoming a pro golfer). Inclusivity is very important, especially in leadership and online writing instruction (OWI). What we like about Joanne Baird Giordano and Cassandra Phillips' chapter is that they continue this conversation of inclusivity with a specific focus on community colleges, where there tends to be less access to many things, specifically technological things like computers and internet.

We really like how Giordano and Phillips' chapter utilizes a reverse design process that supports creating inclusive online learning spaces that support students from community colleges who have experienced educational inequities at previous institutions. We also like how the connection to the PARS approach allows the authors to build open-access online courses in a way that engages students and includes them in the learning process, rather than creating a space that excludes.

# Chapter 19. Inclusive, Equitable, and Responsive Strategies for Redesigning Open-Access Online Literacy Courses

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**Abstract:** This chapter is for instructors, disciplinary course developers, and course leads who are working on improving processes and practices for developing online literacy courses for students who are inexperienced with both online learning and academic literacy. We describe a backward design process for developing equitable and inclusive writing and reading courses that support learners from diverse educational backgrounds at two-year colleges and other open-access institutions. We define equitable and inclusive course design, and we describe considerations for developing online literacy courses and adapting PARS to courses in programs without admission standards. We then outline a six-step backward design process for creating open-access online model courses that build in scaffolded and inclusive learning support with accompanying reflective questions to help online faculty adapt the process to their own teaching contexts.

**Keywords:** access, equity, inclusion, course design process, literacy development

In our work as two-year college online course developers and program coordinators at multiple institutions, we have long been tasked with developing online courses for students with greatly varying cultural and linguistic backgrounds, educational experiences, and literacy needs. Together, we designed and coordinated a statewide, open-access online writing program. While we now teach at different two-year institutions, we continue our work in developing, teaching, and mentoring instructors in online literacy programs. We frequently teach students who would be inadmissible at four-year institutions and whose only option for college is taking courses through an open-access online program. For community colleges, *open-access* means that all adult learners regardless of their educational and literacy backgrounds can participate in higher education. In this chapter, we hope to contribute to disciplinary conversations about online program design principles with a focus on creating equitable learning opportunities for students who have traditionally been excluded from higher education outside of open-access institutions.


DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2023.1985.2.19

Equitable and inclusive course design supports learning and literacy development for all students enrolled in an online writing course regardless of their linguistic, educational, and cultural backgrounds or their prior experiences with online learning. In open-access online courses, students experience inequities when the design of a course, the assignments, and the teaching practices create barriers to course completion, online learning, and their postsecondary literacy development. Courses can also be inequitable when they are designed for students who meet selective admissions standards but not for students who are taking the course. We define *equitable online course design* as an approach to developing, assessing, and redesigning courses using strategies that account for the inequities and barriers that some students previously faced before college and often continue to experience in higher education. Erin L. Castro (2015) explains that "equity in higher education is the idea that students from historically and contemporarily marginalized and minoritized communities have access to what they need in order to be successful" (p. 6). Equitable course design aligns the structure, assignments, activities, teaching practices, and resources of a course with the learning needs of students from the communities that an online course serves. Similarly, we define *inclusive online course design* as strategically building support into courses to help students complete the course, develop as college readers and writers, do their best learning, and participate fully within an online community that values their diverse cultural, linguistic, and social identities. Equitable course design also takes into consideration the working conditions and workloads of instructors who teach in a program.

Equitable and inclusive course design strategies are essential for any online program with diverse student learning needs, but they are especially crucial at community colleges and open-access institutions. Administrators, course developers, and faculty in open-access contexts need online course design strategies that account for students who aren't in other higher education spaces because admission standards don't permit them to enroll, they can't attend in-person courses, or they can't afford four-year tuition and the cost of living away from home. Professionals in online two-year college English programs also need to expand their definitions of program administration beyond writing courses to include other types of open-access literacy education, which (depending on the institution) might include developmental writing, reading, integrated reading and writing, corequisite support, and English for speakers of other languages courses.

This chapter describes a framework for designing online literacy courses to support community college learners who have experienced inequities in their prior educational experiences and who need effective, inclusive, and culturally responsive (Chávez & Longerbeam, 2016) online courses to help them transition to college learning. We use the term *literacy courses* because many two-year college programs include integrated reading and writing, developmental education, corequisite support, and other types of courses that go beyond a traditional degree-credit writing program. This chapter explains how to apply backward design

principles (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) to open-access online literacy programs. Our goal is to provide disciplinary course developers, lead instructors, and faculty with strategies for designing equitable online literacy courses that align with Borgman and McArdle's PARS framework. Equitable course design is essential for creating online educational opportunities for students who need intensive learning support to successfully complete online courses and develop as college readers and writers.

## Theory and Practice

### Online Literacy Courses at Two-Year Colleges

Open-access, two-year college writing programs arguably serve the broadest range of students with the most diverse learning needs in higher education. Community colleges enroll students from diverse educational, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. These students often experience educational equity gaps as they transition to college learning. Almost half of students in the United States take courses at community colleges as they work toward a degree (Community College Research Center, n.d.). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately two million community college students took distance education courses each year, with 37 percent taking at least some online coursework and 15 percent taking only distance education courses (Community College Research Center, n.d.). Studies from the Community College Research Center suggest that success rates are lower for community college students who enroll in online courses, especially developmental English (Jaggars & Xu, 2011, 2016). Because online courses are text-heavy and reading-intensive, they are especially challenging for inexperienced college readers (Martirosyan et al., 2021).

Despite the large and growing numbers of community college students taking online courses, writing studies as a field offers significantly more resources for designing online courses at four-year institutions compared to community colleges. Beth L. Hewett (2015) describes the development of the 2013 CCCC OWI principles as

> a story that admits of uncertainty and a need for *A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for OWI* to be organic; changing with research, scholarship, and experience; and one to which the practitioners in the field can contribute as well as from which they can benefit. (p. 37)

The field needs to add to the story that Hewett describes with more research about practices that support online learning for students who can't be admitted to most institutions. For example, online practitioners who teach and design courses at community colleges typically rely more heavily on empirical data related to

student success outcomes and retention and less on theories about how online teaching works in other contexts.

Online teaching is a normal part of workload for a large percentage of two-year college English faculty. In a Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) survey, 59 percent of respondents reported that they previously taught asynchronous online courses before the COVID-19 pandemic, and 45 percent taught online synchronous courses before the pandemic (Tinoco et al., 2022). A pre-pandemic TYCA survey suggests that online teaching is a preferred instructional modality for helping some two-year college English instructors manage a teaching-intensive workload that is typically five or more courses (or 30 credits) each semester; however, other respondents reported that they avoid online teaching because of workload issues (Giordano & Wegner, 2020). Because online teaching at an open-access institution is labor-intensive work that requires professional expertise, the TYCA "White Paper on Two-Year College Faculty Workload" recommends providing adjunct instructors with course development shells to reduce workload while also providing professional training for online teaching and compensation for faculty who develop online courses (Giordano et al., 2022, p. 298). Equitable online course design work for open-access literacy programs requires a complex and challenging balance between the intensive high needs of students and the teaching-intensive and often underpaid workloads for faculty.

## Adapting the PARS Model for Open-Access Courses

In programs without admissions standards, students need online courses that are strategically designed to support successful course completion. Writing courses are almost universally required for receiving a college degree in the United States, and every open-access online program enrolls students who have limited (or even no) experience with academic reading and writing, college success strategies, and the knowledge required for independently navigating online learning. While all online literacy courses benefit from course design that reflects the PARS framework (personal, accessible, responsive, and strategic), the stakes for applying the basic principles of PARS are higher for course developers and faculty at community colleges and other open-access institutions.

Because of equity issues for both instructors and students, we argue that open-access institutions need to provide instructors with carefully designed standardized model courses (sometimes called development shells, pre-designed courses, or template courses) in a learning management system (LMS) that uses inclusive disciplinary teaching strategies and provides a curricular program structure that supports transfer between courses. These models provide instructors with a completely developed course that they can then adapt and personalize over time as they respond to student needs. Online community college instructors typically work off the tenure track with high teaching loads and often for more than one institution (Suh et al., 2021). Their compensation rarely accounts

for labor-intensive work required for designing multiple effective online courses that support equitable learning for students (Giordano et al., 2022). Instructors also need a shared understanding of the curriculum in relation to the local literacy needs of students. An additional benefit of using model courses is that many students take more than one online course, and consistency across courses lets students focus on literacy development and transitions to more complex reading, writing, and research (instead of navigating how the class works).

Students benefit when PARS principles are purposefully embedded into the design of a course and across an entire program to support learning and literacy development for online students with diverse needs. Table 19.1 gives an overview of concepts for adapting the PARS approach to open-access online courses.

**Table 19.1. The PARS Approach for Open-Access Online Courses**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Personal** | Students' diverse literacy needs require individualized learning support. Many students at open-admissions institutions can't transition to online learning without a personalized approach to course design and interaction with an instructor. |
| **Accessible** | Model courses need to account for accessibility for students who are inexperienced with online learning, including consistent structure in modules, multiple ways of learning, clear assignment instructions, support for technology, appropriate reading level in course materials, and access to institutional support resources. |
| **Responsive** | Incorporating repeated and systematically responsive instruction into a model course is an essential component of open-access literacy course design, especially in courses for students who are inexperienced with both academic literacy and online learning. Courses need to build in opportunities for instructors to respond to student learning needs in varied ways across a course and an entire program. |
| **Strategic** | Open-access course design needs to strategically respond to vastly diverse student literacy needs across multiple courses, create an equitable and inclusive learning environment, and support student transitions between courses. |

## Creating a Course Design Plan

The starting point for redesigning an equitable online literacy program is creating a plan to guide systematic, cohesive changes (or the development of new courses). This can include mapping out the entire program as well as planning for individual courses. Backward design (i.e., backward planning or mapping) is a process for creating courses around learning goals or outcomes to help students apply learning from one situation to a new context (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). The term *backward* describes a course design process that starts with the student learning goals for the end of a course or program. Developers or faculty work

backward through the course or program from the end to the beginning, creating assignments and activities that help students achieve learning goals. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005) outline three stages of the backward design process:

- Identify desired results. (What learning goals will students work toward achieving?)
- Determine acceptable evidence for assessing student learning. (What assignments and activities will help students achieve and demonstrate the goals of the course and help instructors assess their learning?)
- Plan learning experiences and instruction. (What activities will help students work toward achieving course goals and complete major assignments?)

Backward design has become a standard practice for online course development, but it's especially important for literacy courses at open-access institutions. Inexperienced college readers, writers, and online learners need a structured approach to literacy instruction that helps them gradually develop increasingly more complex skills and strategies that will help them become successful college students, transfer between courses, and complete writing requirements for attaining a degree. However, backward design can reproduce inequities when the process is used to maintain unachievable standards, weed students out of higher ed, or reinforce teaching practices that are misaligned with open-access education. For this reason, online literacy programs benefit from an equity-focused (Chardin & Nowak, 2021), entire program backward design approach that takes students from the first day of a developmental (or ESL) course through to the last writing course required for an associate's degree or transfer within a state system. Administrators and participating faculty can create a program-level plan for redesigning courses to support inclusive and equitable online learning opportunities for students even when individual courses will be created or revised separately over time.

Any effective backward design process that combines inclusive pedagogy with disciplinary practices can support equitable learning opportunities for all students. However, a systematic, program-level approach to course design is especially crucial for students who are inexperienced with academic literacy and/or online learning. For open-access online literacy programs, course design is problematic when individual courses are developed in isolation from other courses without consideration for the learning that students need to do in their initial writing and reading course to prepare them for subsequent courses and online learning in other disciplines. Because community college students bring varied experiences with language and literacy to online courses, program administrators and participating faculty need to plan for ways to reduce educational inequities and provide consistent learning support for students who would otherwise have difficulty transitioning into and between courses. The following steps and planning questions describe a backward design process for (re)designing an online literacy program to close equity gaps between courses.

*Step 1: Identify and evaluate program-level learning outcomes (or goals).*

The first step in a program-level backward redesign process is to examine existing program-level student learning outcomes—or to create new ones if they don't exist. Typically, this part of the process includes collaboration with everyone who teaches in an online program. Programs that don't already have learning outcomes that focus on online and digital literacies (National Council of Teachers of English, 2019) can develop them to create a structure for supporting students' transitions to online learning (for example, goals for reading digital texts or engaging in virtual discussions). Program faculty might also collaboratively identify course outcomes that create barriers to student course completion in their teaching context and then make adjustments to outcomes to make them more equitable. The questions in Table 19.2 can help you assess which program-level learning outcomes might be added, removed, or modified to support students' development as college readers and writers in your online teaching environment.

**Table 19.2 Questions for Developing Program-Level Outcomes**

- Which literacy courses are required for students to attain a degree in your state system? What are the learning goals of those courses?
- What are the most challenging barriers that students face in completing the writing program? Where do those challenges occur in the writing program sequence?
- What are the most important reading, writing, and research strategies that students need to achieve by the end of the writing program to help them be successful college students?
- What literacy skills and strategies help inexperienced students successfully complete reading-intensive and writing-intensive courses at your institution, receive a degree, and transfer to another institution?

The questions in Table 19.3 provide a starting point for discussing how student learning goals for each course fit within the outcomes for an overall online program.

**Table 19.3. Questions for Planning Course Learning Outcomes for a Program**

- What challenges do students experience in completing writing program requirements? What barriers make it challenging for some students to successfully transition between courses in your program, especially for online students?
- What needs to happen in first-year writing so that students can successfully transition to sophomore courses if they are required by your institution or by transfer institutions?
- What needs to happen in developmental writing, reading, integrated reading and writing, and/or ESL courses to help students successfully transition to first-year writing?

*Step 2: Assess, create, and/or revise learning outcomes for each course, starting with the last and ending with the first.*

One effective way to get a big picture view of student learning across an entire program is to create a single document that maps out outcomes for each course in the order that students take their coursework online. However, the process for developing the outcomes themselves begins with the final required course (or set of courses if students have more than one choice to fulfill degree requirements). First, identify the literacy skills and strategies students need to develop in the final course to achieve the overall goals of the program. Next, work backward through the learning goals of each course to the first course in the online program. Prioritize essential learning goals that students need to achieve to successfully move between courses and become successful college readers and writers in a virtual environment instead of focusing on small module or lesson-level objectives. For online courses, it's important to think through the order in which students work on learning outcomes in each course to facilitate the process of designing and updating standardized courses. Finally, after mapping out each course, examine the entire sequence of learning outcomes across the program to make sure that they are aligned and provide students with a carefully structured plan for moving from the first day of the first course to the final week of the last course. Table 19.4 has questions to guide the process of developing equitable course-level learning outcomes.

**Table 19.4. Revising or Creating Equitable Course Learning Outcomes**

- How are students placed into the course, and how do your placement processes shape the community of learners who take the course? How might you account for the individualized and diverse literacy needs of students who are placed into the course, self-select it, or move into it from earlier courses?
- What learning gaps (if any) make it difficult for students to successfully complete the course after taking previous courses in the writing program sequence? How might you address these gaps through revised or new learning outcomes?
- What learning outcomes for online learning, technology, and digital literacy are important for helping students successfully complete this course and prepare to take the next online or hybrid course?
- Does the course have learning objectives that reinforce inequities for students based on their educational or linguistic backgrounds? How might you change those outcomes and/or build in support for achieving them to provide individualized support for struggling students?
- Are the outcomes for the course realistic and attainable for students in your teaching context? What adjustments do you need to make to your program to create course goals that students can reasonably achieve with the time and resources available to them in your program?

*Step 3: Create a backward design writing project plan for the entire online program.*

A program-level assignment design process creates a basic overview of major projects for each course, which focuses activities on helping students transition between courses. For open-access online literacy education, it's important that the assignments students complete in earlier courses prepare them for learning in subsequent courses. Table 19.5 shows an example of a writing project design plan that supports students' literacy development across a program by introducing literacy skills and strategies that students will build on in later courses.

**Table 19.5. Designing Writing Projects Across an Online Program**

| Focus | Developmental | First-Year Writing | Sophomore Writing |
|---|---|---|---|
| Personal Literacy Practices | Essay exploring prior experiences with reading and writing | Essay analyzing students' own literacy practices in relation to their cultural backgrounds | Essay that responds to texts about literacy, using examples from personal literacy practices |
| Textual Analysis | Essay analyzing evidence that an author uses to support an argument | Essay analyzing the rhetorical strategies of a website | Essay analyzing several texts from a field of study to draw conclusions about disciplinary writing conventions |
| Source-Based Writing | Project based on a self-selected issue from course texts | Project based on independent research | Project exploring research and writing practices for a field of study |
| Self-Assessment | Essay self-assessing learning from the course | Essay analyzing examples from a portfolio to self-assess literacy development | Essay self-assessing literacy development, using examples from both inside and outside the course |

*Step 4: Create a program-level plan for online learning activities.*

A program approach to developing and structuring learning activities supports students who start in basic courses as they transition to more challenging courses and allows them to focus on literacy development rather than requiring them to navigate a completely different course structure. Consider the types of online learning activities that students need to do across the program to successfully complete each major project while also developing as college readers and writers. One effective way to support inexperienced students in online courses is to design modules (or units) and activities so that they have the same structure in

every course. For example, an online writing program might include a module structure described in Table 19.6 for all courses.

**Table 19.6. Learning Activity Plan Example**

| Module Section | Purpose |
|---|---|
| Module introduction | Overview, instructor video, suggested schedule, learning to-do list, etc. |
| Learning pages | One or more pages focusing on reading and writing strategy topics for the module with definitions, how-tos, videos, and links to resources |
| Reading assignment | Introduction to readings, links or page numbers for the assignment, and comprehension or analysis questions |
| Reading discussion | Discussion about texts focusing on reading and writing strategies introduced in the module and reinforcing learning from previous modules (and often helping students analyze sources for a writing project) |
| Writing workshop | Informal discussion for sharing ideas and receiving feedback on the current project or formal peer review |
| Review | A page that helps students bring together learning from the module, connect the module to their writing projects, and prepare for the next module |

A program plan like this one for online learning activities provides students with a familiar structure as they engage in increasingly more complex literacy tasks over time. The questions in Table 19.7 can also help you use a PARS approach in designing a program-level learning activity plan.

**Table 19.7. Questions for Creating an Online Learning Activity Plan**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Personal** | What types of learning activities across the program will create a personalized experience for students and provide them with inclusive opportunities for learning? |
| **Accessible** | What types of activities will reduce barriers to course completion for online students? What is an equitable way to structure learning across the program to make courses accessible? |
| **Responsive** | What types of learning activities help build structured opportunities for responsive feedback and frequent instructor interaction into each course? When does responsive interaction need to happen to support student learning? |
| **Strategic** | What are the most important considerations for strategically developing learning activities across the program to reduce equity gaps for students and increase student success? |

*Step 5: Plan for sequenced instruction and learning support within each course.*

The most labor-intensive part of an online course redesign process is developing instructional content and learning activities for each course. This includes creating learning opportunities to move students through each writing project; guide them in developing college-level literacy strategies; provide them with individualized, responsive support; and help them achieve the goals of the course. However, this work can take place in stages over several semesters, or different teams of faculty can work on separate online courses using the work developed in the program-level course design process.

In an online literacy course, one of the most important strategies for creating an inclusive and equitable open-access learning environment is to carefully sequence and scaffold instruction and activities with a focus on students who might otherwise struggle to complete each course. The practices described in Table 19.8 can help developers and faculty create courses that support learning for inexperienced online learners.

**Table 19.8. Sequencing and Scaffolding Instruction**

| Strategy | Course Design Activities |
|---|---|
| Sequence activities strategically. | Order activities to guide students from basic reading, writing, research, and online learning skills to complex and challenging activities. |
| Build in support for online learning. | Provide low-stakes activities that help students practice using the LMS and digital tools that they will use later in a course for graded assignments. |
| Break projects into manageable steps. | Break projects into manageable learning tasks to model effective writing processes and help students complete each stage of an assignment with feedback and support from the instructor and the class. |
| Include recursive instruction. | Loop back to previous literacy skills to give students time to develop strategies for college reading and writing. Include links to pages from previous modules that discuss strategies that students need to use for subsequent, more challenging activities. |
| End with literacy skills from the next course. | Build in time at the end of the course to help students practice the reading and writing strategies that they will use in the next writing course. |
| Anticipate the needs of inexperienced readers. | Start with the assumption that some students will struggle with online reading. Write activity and assignment instructions using clear, transparent language at a reading level that is lower than course reading assignments. |
| Provide multiple methods for learning. | Create multiple ways for students to learn about college reading and writing strategies at an individual level through supplemental resources, along with opportunities for receiving support through discussions and writing workshops. |

After designing individual learning activities, it's important to examine the overall course structure to determine whether each component supports learning and literacy development for online students in your local context. The questions in Table 19.9 can help you use an equitable and inclusive approach to embedding learning support into a course.

**Table 19.9. Questions for Developing Learning Support**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Personal** | What activities early in the course can help students develop a sense of belonging in an online learning community? What varied activities throughout the course provide inclusive opportunities for student engagement? |
| **Accessible** | What are the most challenging points in the course that create barriers to course completion? What types of activities, instructional support, and resources reduce barriers for the student communities that the course serves? |
| **Responsive** | At what points in the course do struggling students most need opportunities for individualized instruction and instructor feedback through discussion activities, virtual workshops, and conferences? |
| **Strategic** | How do individual components of the course work together to support student learning and help struggling online learners develop as college readers and writers? What changes need to happen to create consistent, equitable opportunities for students to receive learning support? |

*Step 6: Assess course revisions for student success and equity over time.*

Develop a written plan for assessing the effectiveness of changes to each course, and involve all online program instructors with an opportunity to provide feedback on course changes. Systematic assessment using multiple measures of data helps with ongoing planning for subsequent revisions to the program. A course redesign assessment plan might include some of the following activities: examining institutional data about online success outcomes (disaggregated by student communities), reviewing course LMS data about engagement and assignment completion, and assessing students' end-of-semester assignments to determine their progress toward achieving course goals. Inclusive assessment activities also include feedback from instructors through discussions in a meeting, a survey, written reflections, or focus groups. Courses might also provide a learning activity that asks students to assess their experiences in the course and share recommendations for potential changes. The questions in Table 19.10 can guide you through the process of assessing the inclusivity of student-centered course revisions.

**Table 19.10. Reflective Questions for Assessing Redesign Work**

| | |
|---|---|
| Personal | How do course revisions provide students from diverse backgrounds with opportunities for learning that address their individual literacy needs? What further changes might increase success for struggling students? |
| Accessible | To what extent do revisions reduce barriers to course completion, learning, and literacy development? How might future revisions address ongoing barriers that make online learning difficult for some students? |
| Responsive | How do the course revisions provide structured opportunities for students to receive instructor support and feedback? What adjustments might help instructors provide responsive support? |
| Strategic | What does your assessment process show about future changes to make to the program and course to increase equitable learning opportunities for students? |

## Conclusion and Takeaways

The redesign process outlined in this chapter can be used in any online writing program to support students' literacy development. One takeaway from our program design work is that equitable online course design processes are aligned with the locally situated learning needs of students based on the mission of a program and the communities that it serves. A program-level plan for online teaching helps students who need intensive learning support thrive in online environments throughout a sequence of multiple courses. Another takeaway is that embedding equity and inclusion into model courses provides a foundation that guides instructors through creating online conditions for learning that support literacy development for all students regardless of their educational backgrounds. And finally, the design process that we describe creates a structure across a program that can reduce workload and free up time for instructors to focus on the needs of their students. They can then work to adapt a model course to fit their own teaching needs over time.

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