



Nice work, the round is complete!

Golf courses are, by design, meant to be difficult to navigate as you hit a ball. While it can be difficult for your shots to find fairways and greens, they are not supposed to be difficult to navigate when it comes to walking or riding the course! Golf courses can be somewhere in the middle of nowhere, on a single island or the side of a cliff, spread out stretching miles and miles of land, or they can be squished in between housing developments, shopping centers, and restaurants.

Navigating complex institutional processes for faculty can be difficult, even when it is your job. Remember when you were a grad student and you were trying to learn how to navigate a curriculum you were attempting to learn and potentially a new curriculum you were attempting to teach? It was/is not easy!

We really like how in this chapter Heidi Skurat Harris and Rhonda Thomas ground their structure of interaction and support of grad students via PARS. It provides a guide for administrators to help navigate students through complex pathways constructed by the institution in a way that supports rather than confuses.

Chapter 20. Wayfinding in Distance Learning: Finding Our Way Through Times of Stress in Online Writing Graduate Programs

Heidi Skurat Harris and Rhonda Thomas
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT LITTLE ROCK

Abstract: When designing online writing (OW) programs and web-based instructional environments, we need to ensure we design for human ways of behaving. By being personal and strategic in how they engage students in the program, online writing program administrators can help graduate students wayfind and change course when necessary, and assist them in constructing mental maps of their learning process in both courses and programs.

Keywords: wayfinding, user-centered design, human-centered design, cognition, graduate students

In *Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic: Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors* (hereafter referred to as *The PARS Approach*), authors Jessie Borgman and Casey McArdle (2019) introduced their model of online writing instruction (OWI), that is, a “version of teaching” (p. vii). Along with colleagues George Jensen and Karen Kuralt, we contributed to Borgman and McArdle’s follow-up to *The PARS Approach*: the 2021 edited collection *PARS in Practice: More Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors* (hereafter referred to as *PARS in Practice*). To help teachers and administrators “forge strong personal connections with and among their online students,” Thomas et al. (2021) shared research collected from students and alumni of their three fully online programs at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR): the BA and MA in Professional and Technical Writing and the Online Writing Instruction Graduate Certificate program (p. 185; see Borgman & McArdle, 2019, p. 18).

We build on our 2021 *PARS in Practice* contribution by mapping ways that online writing program administrators (OWPAs),¹ writing instructors, and course designers can build personal connections with learners to personalize the learner’s experience. Our user-centric design draws from all components of *The PARS Approach* but focuses primarily on the need to make all-important

1. Hereafter, when we refer to the OWPA, this reference extends to advisors, course designers, and writing instructors (both current and new faculty, writing teachers, or teachers of writing-intensive classes).

personal (*P*) connections with learners, and offers a strategy (*S*) for operationalizing this process.

As an associate professor and graduate coordinator in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing at UALR, Heidi has advised and mentored hundreds of students and designed and delivered 20 different online writing courses. As such, Heidi is not only an expert WPA/OWPA but also an expert at designing user-centered web-based writing programs and courses. Drawing from her ongoing user-centered design (UCD) research and practical experience, Heidi provides a way forward to designing writing programs and web-based courses that reflect an understanding of “what users need” by incorporating “interfaces, products, and experiences that meet those needs” (Greer & Skurat Harris, 2018, p. 14).

One of the many students Heidi advised and mentored for nearly five years was Rhonda—a fully online student of OWI at UALR. After completing UALR’s MA in Professional and Technical Writing and Online Writing Instruction Graduate Certificate (OWIGC), Rhonda completed the Master of Science in Education–Digital Age Learning and Educational Technology program at Johns Hopkins University. After successfully completing writing-intensive web-based courses for well over a decade, Rhonda offers insights on human-centered design. As an end-user of web-based environments, Rhonda’s insights are important because, as Peter Morville (2009) observes, user experience (UX) designers often “maintain *empathy for the user* as a matter of faith” for the simple reason that they rarely get to “see the personal impact of their work” (p. 15).

That “personal impact” is achieved through direct instruction and through program administration: It should be seen and felt in instructional materials, assignment descriptions, and communications between faculty, students, and administrators. This is because, in addition to taking in higher volumes of reading and writing, online learners spend substantial time finding their way through our information-built writing environments and deciphering our instructional messaging.² If our web-based environment is poorly designed, we risk our learners becoming disoriented—that is, they become *lost*. The implication of their becoming lost is that they switch off. When learners switch off, learning potential is arrested. In this chapter, we offer practical techniques OWPAs can apply to their OWI programs and courses that work to keep web-based learners switched on and oriented—techniques that promote the continuous forging of personal connections and that provide the user feedback needed to continuously improve our web-based educational offerings.

The practical techniques we offer in this chapter are presented through the lens of Rhonda’s recent examination of a particular human behavior: *wayfinding*.

2. Mayer and Alexander [Use full names. Missing from reference list](2017) define an instructional message as “a communication intended to promote learning . . . words are verbal representations, such as printed text (delivered on a page or screen) or spoken text (delivered face-to-face or via speakers)” (p. 483).

Reginald Golledge (1999) explains, “Wayfinding is the process of determining and following a path or route between an origin and a destination. It is a purposive, directed, and motivated activity” (p. 6). Thomas (2022) proposes that unimpeded wayfinding is critical to student success in web-based learning. To drive home how important she believes it is, she compares wayfinding to breathing:

If breathing is what allows us to *be alive*, wayfinding is what allows us to *stay alive*—by permitting us to *benefit from* our spatial environment . . . by driving our physical locomotion through it. Just as we would lose the ability to live if we suddenly found we could no longer breathe, we would lose the ability to stay alive if we lost the ability to wayfind. (p. 10)

Rhonda suggests that the same cognitive processes used to make decisions on how we will move through three-dimensional environments extend to environments that exist only in the mind—such as web-based instructional environments—and that learning and knowledge transfer are embodied in the natural operations of wayfinding. When we design web-based instructional environments that impede wayfinding, we risk learners becoming lost in our multimodal web of instructional information; at the very least, we will cause learners unnecessary anxiety.

Theory and Practice

As many of us know, the brain struggles to process information and learn when it is under stress. The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium survey, which investigated the state of student mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, reveals that students who did not adapt well to remote instruction were 1.5 times more likely to develop generalized anxiety disorder, and emphasizes that, for “graduate and professional students,” this number doubled from 2019 to 2020 (Chirikov et al., 2020, p. 1). Of the 15,346 graduate and professional students surveyed from nine public research universities, “32% . . . screened positive for major depressive disorder, while 39% of undergraduate and graduate and professional students screened positive for generalized anxiety disorder” (Chirikov et al., 2020, p. 1).

Losing Our Way: How Did We Get Here?

The fact remains that all graduate students—even the two-thirds who did not develop an anxiety or depressive disorder—must still find their way through, what is for them, the uncharted territory of graduate programs. Most schools or universities provide an orientation in the form of an information dump at the beginning of the student’s enrollment. This practice highlights a program design flaw: University and college systems are designed to provide information, not

directions. Moreover, even well-written instructions can be full of references to strange-sounding acronyms, personnel titles, and unfamiliar campus locations with illogical names, such as *bursar*. Indeed, before their first day of college, many students are unlikely to have ever encountered a *bursar* out in the wilds of their everyday lived experiences. Directing learners to Records and Registration does little to help them find their way, particularly when they are already feeling the stress induced by being in unfamiliar terrain.

The online graduate student not only deals with all the same issues as the student attending face-to-face classes, but she might live in California and attend a program in Arkansas, where she may not even step on campus until graduation. For distance learners, the university's chosen web-based course management system (CMS) is the closest they will ever come to sitting in a classroom amongst peers. Most of their encounters with others will take place within the CMS. These learners will not be able to simply swing by their professor's office to get a quick answer to a question, grab a coffee with a fellow student, or run over to financial aid to check on the status of an application. Indeed, their entire academic experience is guided by their mental representations of the web-based instructional environments we design for them—environments that exist only in their minds. As such, our learners are at the receiving end of every design decision we make, at both the program level and the course design level.

Lost in Cognitive Space

As highlighted above, a web-based instructional environment exists in the mind. This means that how we design these environments and how we present instructional information in them has a direct bearing on how the environment is constructed and represented in the mind of the learner. In other words, the instructional environment takes on a particular shape, or form, in the mind of the learner as a result of both the learner's prior experience and the information and modalities we select to design the space (Morville, 2009). As Heidi Skurat Harris and Michael Greer (2016) observe, "Technology—including large-scale commercial course management systems—is never neutral. Any digital platform designs and shapes spatial and temporal relations among users" (p. 47). Why does this matter? When learners cannot make sense of our web-based instructional environment, they become lost. When learners become lost, they switch off. When learners switch off, learning stops.

The Implications of Being Lost

"Lost is a state of mind" (Thomas, 2022, pg. 22). Disorientation occurs as a result of how we *feel* about where we are, not about where we *actually* are. When we don't recognize where we are, we feel confused, which induces the unpleasant emotions of fear, panic, and anxiety. Learners feel lost in poorly designed web-based

instructional spaces because these spaces hinder their ability to construct, from our multimodal instructional information, an environmental image—a logical “neural structure and the representation of a particular environment” (O’Keefe & Nadel, 1978, p. 7). If learners are unable to “visualize” our environment, then they cannot cognitively map it to their particular versions of reality, which is necessary for them to find their way through it. In his landmark work, *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch (1960) explains that the “strategic link” between becoming lost and not becoming lost is our ability to build this environmental image, which is a

generalized mental picture of the exterior physical world that is held by an individual. This image is the product both of immediate sensation and of the memory of past experience, and it is used to interpret information and to guide action. The need to recognize and pattern our surroundings is so crucial, and has such long roots in the past, that this image has wide practical and emotional importance to the individual. (p. 4)

The web-based instructional environments we design may be located in the digital distance, but they are still part of our physical world. Moreover, to our human minds, the experiences we have in these spaces are “very real” (Rosenfeld et al., 2015, p. 17). Indeed, these *environments of the mind*, like three-dimensional space, have a sort of psychogeography that impacts “the emotions and behavior of individuals” (Tate, n.d.).

Finding Our Way in the Distance

Well-designed online writing (OW) programs and web-based instructional environments are designed with the wayfinding *human* learner in mind. Recall that wayfinding is the cognitive process in operation—primarily in novel situations—as humans make decisions on the path they will follow to get to some destination (Golledge, 1999). To help you better grasp this cognitive process, it might be helpful to break it down into discrete actions. As described by Lynch and Horton (2016), wayfinding—as a decision-making process—includes four cognitive *actions*:

- Orientation
- Route decisions
- Mental mapping
- Closure

When learners arrive in a web-based instructional environment, they must orient themselves. They need to make sense of the space in order to cognitively situate *themselves* within it. In other words, they must be able to determine, based on prior experience, where they are *now* by building a generalized mental picture of the environment. Establishing where they are now relies on learners being able

to interpret directing cues strategically embedded in instructional information—cues purposefully designed to promote learners looking back to prior experience to make decisions on how they will proceed through the space.

Based on the success of orientation, learners next make decisions on the route, or path, they will follow through the instructional space. To make these decisions, learners rely on prior experience and directing cues in the learning environment. Learners must also, however, incorporate instructional information into their decisions. This might include information gleaned from course introductions; syllabi and schedules; text-based, video, or audio lectures; and assignments.

After making route decisions, learners select from available directing cues, integrate this information with instructional information, and mentally map the path they will follow through the instructional space. The adult brain relies heavily on prediction to make meaning and construct particular versions of reality. In this way, learners make the space their own, connecting what they “see” before them in novel space to their prior experience in order to predict what comes next.

Finally, closure is a cognitive action whereby the learner checks their cognitive location (alternatively, this final step might be thought of as a checkpoint). Closure also requires that the learner look back to ensure they are advancing forward in the right direction.

Promoting Wayfinding at the Program Level Through Advising and Mentoring

Helping learners find their way begins with advising—before they even place a proverbial foot into our instructional environments. We continue to help them find their way through mentoring experiences. Helping learners find their way during advising and mentoring requires speaking to learners in *a language* that advances cognitive mapmaking and, therefore, wayfinding. To put it another way, communicating with learners in a way that helps them construct and revise their own stories confined within the ever-shifting, ever-moving walls of bureaucratic systems. Fortunately, we all speak this language. It is the language of storytelling. As Thomas (2022) observes, “storytelling, mapmaking, and wayfinding are in our DNA” (p. 56). The human mind seems designed to communicate in this way. We tell stories to convey information and apply what we learn from stories to find our way through novel situations.

To tell a story requires application of the *personal* (*P*) element of *The PARS Approach* during advising. Here, we think it important to digress for a moment and ask what we mean by *personal* and to whom it applies—to the OWPA or to the learner. As Borgman and McArdle (2019) observe, “Teaching writing has always been personal for faculty and learning to write has always been personal for students” (p. 10). As such, the *P* element applies to both the work of the OWPA and to the student of writing.

The OWPA as Advisor/Mentor

Before the *P* element can be applied to the learner, it must first be applied to the OWPA. To cultivate relationships and build personal connections with learners begins with the OWPA having a knowable “identity and presence” (Borgman & McArdle, 2019, p. 7; Thomas et al., 2021, p. 197). This begins at the program level, outside the web-based instructional environment. Through a series of planned OWPA-learner touchpoints, OWPAs can build and establish themselves as knowable by being the first to share something personal about themselves. For example, OWPAs can share a story about how they struggled with rhetorical theory and what steps they took to overcome those challenges. They might share that the title of the course “Writing Software Documentation” sounds intimidating to them, too, but that it is an excellent course that students should take. The story of the OWPA’s journey can provide a model of what to do (and what not to do) in the student’s learning process.

The Learner

Advising and mentoring online graduate students who live both near and far involves more than helping them select classes, acquire internships and assistantships, or complete graduate theses. It also requires helping learners position their life contexts within the program. First-generation college students, in particular, may not have the kind of prior experience that transfers to the world of academia, and even at the graduate level will need help navigating this novel experience—one that requires a great deal of self-direction and intrinsic motivation. Prior to beginning their first course in the program, some learners may not have made a clear path through their educational journey that relates to their life contexts and to their career or personal goals. Therefore, in addition to striving to be knowable by their learners, OWPAs should have authentic conversations with learners and encourage them to tell their stories, to become knowable themselves. Having already shared something of themselves establishes that OWPAs are willing to take the same risks they are asking of learners when querying them for the kind of information required to personalize their experiences. As such, *P* is applied to learners to draw out from them this critical information.

A good example of measures we can take to help learners continue to position their life contexts within our programs, and that also works to ensure we do not obstruct learners’ paths through their educational journeys, is in how we advise individuals looking for a change in direction, but who are likely not clear about what that change might look like, or how what they have done in the past and what they are doing now transfers to novel academic experiences. In both the MA in Professional and Technical Writing program and the OWIGC at UALR, the OWPA not only deliberately works to provide

professionalization experiences to learners through coursework, but they also strive to help learners articulate their goals so that learners can continue to mentally map the program and upcoming courses to their life contexts. Take, for example, the graduate student who enters the MA program to follow the editing and publishing concentration, only to find that they love their nonfiction classes and want to change to that concentration mid-degree. The OWPA needs to work with the student so that they understand the concentration as well as the course and other changes that might come about when changing concentrations—for example, the opportunities for internship, publishing, and even job opportunities.

Advising as an Iterative Process

Building personal connections with learners cannot be established with a series of random, disconnected interactions. Moreover, making and building personal connections with learners is not a singular event: The OWPA's attempts to personally connect—like our OW course design—must be repeated. In other words, it is an iterative process. Each *instance* of connection-building should be seen as part of a process designed into the program and its OW courses to build personal connections, improve the individual learner's experience, and improve the program.

One final note: We should clarify what personal does not mean. As we highlight in our *PARS in Practice* chapter, “being personal in online classes isn't simply having a good personality” (Thomas et al., 2021, p. 187). While we each may have distinct characteristics, mannerisms, and other qualities, personality is not what we are concerned about when applying the PARS *P* element to what we do. In fact, a 15-year study strongly suggests that “despite some popular beliefs to the contrary, personality played little or no role in successful teaching” (Bain, 2004, p. 136). The study identified

an elaborate pattern of beliefs, attitudes, conceptions, and perceptions behind the way outstanding teachers treated the people who took their classes. The patterns alone couldn't transform otherwise ineffective teaching, but the most effective instructors as a group always came closer to following them than did even their slightly less effective colleagues . . . the best teachers we studied displayed not power but an investment in the students. Their practices stem from a concern with learning that is strongly felt and powerfully communicated. (Bain, 2004, pp. 136-137)

Research conducted by Rebecca Glazier and Heidi Skurat Harris (2021a, 2021b) reinforces these findings and demonstrates that student retention is significantly linked to efforts instructors make to establish rapport, or personal connections, initiated and enforced by instructors who demonstrate their care and concern for students by communicating with them clearly and often (see also Glazier, 2021).

Promoting Wayfinding in the OW Environment

Human-centered design (HCD), as a philosophy, is to design with the user's experience in mind. This suggests that to design OW instructional environments with our wayfinding learners in mind means we must have "a deep understanding of users, what they need, what they value, their abilities, and also their limitations" (Usability.gov, n.d.). To apply HCD means that OW course design is iterative (just like advising and mentoring), relying heavily on ongoing user feedback "throughout the design and development process" (Usability.gov, n.d.). In discussing the need for this feedback in UCD, Greer and Harris (2018) explain,

The overarching goal of user experience research is to discover what users need, and to design interfaces, products, and experiences that meet those needs. . . . Most user experience professionals today view themselves as user advocates and perceive their role in terms of working to persuade product development teams to build around users and their human needs and experiences rather than the needs of abstractly defined system specifications. (p. 14)

As a product, a web-based instructional environment must be designed to promote personal connection-building between instructor and learner and solicit the feedback needed to personalize the learning experience for individual learners. We need to continuously improve the OW space and ensure that it does not impede learners finding their way. This requires a front-end *strategy*—*The PARS Approach* S element with the learner's experience at its center (Borgman & McArdle, 2019, p 71): a "systematic program . . . to assess [our] efforts and to make appropriate changes" (Bain, 2004, p. 19).

Building an Environmental Image of the OW Space

Whether or not we are aware, when we design an OW space, our goal should be to design an environment that is perceptible to users. Recall that in HCD, what we design should revolve around human "needs, capabilities . . . and ways of behaving" (Norman, 1988/2013, p. 8). With that in mind, let us consider for a moment the multimodal web of instructional information our human learners are expected to engage with in a typical web-based course. During a single course offering, learners might be asked to map their way across several platforms (e.g., Blackboard, Google Drive, Google Sites). On each platform, our wayfinding learners interact with embedded course schedules and syllabi in either Google Docs, Word, or Adobe Acrobat PDF formats. They encounter course introductions and assignment instructions as on-screen texts, videos, or audio, and embedded readings or third-party web-based readings. Learners are expected to engage with embedded or linked PowerPoint, Prezi, or Google Slides presentations; mix with mashups; and interact with peers via CMS discussions or via third-party apps such as FlipGrid or other social learning platforms. As if this is not enough, learners may be purposely sent away from the CMS and out into the wilds of the World Wide Web—for example,

to conduct research. From this multimodal web of instructional information, our wayfinding learners are expected to build a generalized mental picture of our *instructional space* and map it for meaning (Thomas, 2022).

As OWPA's, it may seem a cakewalk to bounce from platform to platform and from app to app. To novice learners, however, our instructional information may come across as a confused mixture of disparate information. If this is the case, learners will be unable to build a generalized mental picture. Wayfinding humans must be able to cognitively *see* our environment before they can situate themselves within it. Our human learners must first learn *the* map of what is our instructional space before learning can begin.

Operationalizing the building of personal connection and the design of personalized learner experiences may seem counterintuitive. In advising and course design, however, our strategies must scale to multiple learners across multiple courses. This scalability requires strategic planning. In the next section, we offer implementable, scalable techniques that work to keep web-based learners cognitively switched on.

Conclusion and Takeaways

Keeping Web-Based Learners on Track at the Program Design Level

Heidi regularly advises between 40 and 60 graduate students every term in addition to recruiting new students, supporting applicants, coordinating the graduate committee, and teaching her graduate classes (not to mention research, committee work, and writing time). This advising load is exhausting. But having a systematic approach helps organize some of the chaos and develops healthy habits of mind for OWPA's. On a set schedule, she downloads active student rosters and keeps spreadsheets of key information—such as student ID numbers—that will be used regularly. In addition to entering advising notes in Ellucian Degree Works—the academic advising and degree audit tool—Heidi sends out listserv or group emails for multiple students who have the same question.

Heidi applies the entire PARS approach to sum up what OWPA's can do at the program level to help learners find their way:

Personal

Make contact with your students at least twice a semester, one of which should be a dedicated advising time where you talk not only about classes but about their concerns, changes in their lives, modifications in their degree path, or their experience in the program.

Regularly update and scan graduate student lists to identify students who have been silent or to just send out a “Hey, I’m thinking about you. Let me know if I can help you with anything” email.

Listen more than you talk. Encourage students to share by holding space for their concerns.

Accessible

Offer multiple ways for the student to contact you so that they can benefit from connecting in the way they feel most comfortable. All grad students in our program, whether at a distance or on campus, can select their method of advising each semester: in-person, phone call, Zoom conference, or email.

Keep a listserv (or other email or social media group) of graduate students that you update regularly, and use it at least once or twice a week to make announcements, post jobs, recruit for internships, and provide reminders or information that they will need to navigate the semester.

Responsive

Write out notes from advising calls or videoconferences and distribute them through email or post them in an advising system such as Degree Works. The notes should reflect what was discussed, why the student needs to proceed along a particular path, *how* the student can proceed, and specific directives that instruct them on their next steps in the process.

Encourage students to check these notes when they face a problem or can't remember a step in a process.

Offer occasional recorded videoconferences (individual conferences or small group conferences) so that students can attend or access them later when they have the time and mental energy to process the information.

Strategic

Lay out multiple options in advising sessions, and keep a degree plan of what students should or could take for at least the next two terms in their degree. These plans help students feel grounded in their journey, but allow for flexibility in what might come next on their journey.

Check in during each advising session to discuss not only what classes to take for the following term, but also to prepare students for their final project work—which might include choosing committee members or preparing for final examinations.

Connect the program outcomes to student goals beyond the program. Communicate these outcomes to students with examples of alumni who transferred skills developed during the program to work or writing and publishing opportunities.

If your degree program or graduate certificate doesn't allow for the type of flexibility some of these suggestions require, or you find yourself spending more time trying to figure out how to make your current program work for the learner rather than working with the learner in the program, consider revising the

program based on feedback you collect from previous students and alumni. Our department, for example, regularly seeks feedback from current students and alumni about their experiences in the program via surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one meetings. We have collected data from 2017-2021 on student needs in regard to class planning, final project options, preferred modalities, and the application of their classwork to their “real world” situations.

As a result of this information, we spent a year reviewing and restructuring our program to make it more intuitive for students; for example, we removed a portfolio option that served our program well a decade earlier but has since grown confusing. Our primary goal was to streamline the process for students, make possible paths through the degree program clearer, and allow for more flexibility in program options (for example, making it easy to switch between non-fiction, editing and publishing, or technical writing concentrations). Finally, we embedded common experiences during the program through two required core courses at the end of the program where learners reflect on their journey in a capstone project preparation class and then work with a committee to complete a thesis, a professional portfolio, or a digital project. These new, expanded options for student final projects allow a closer connection between student coursework and the final project, rather than a student choosing to complete the 36-hour “thesis track” or the 42-hour “portfolio track.”

Keeping Learners on Track at the OW Course Design Level

How can we keep learners switched on and on track in an environment that can easily be experienced as a wall of words? One way is through the strategic use of visualization aids in our instructional information, that is, pictures and graphics. Mayer and Alexander (2017) define instructional visualization as “a visual-spatial representation intended to promote learning” (p. 483). It is well known that, when applied purposefully, “people learn better from words and pictures than from words alone” (p. 483). As a simple example, Figure 20.1 is a visual-spatial representation of Rhonda’s journey through UALR’s OWIGC.³ It illustrates, on a smaller scale, how pictures and graphics can aid learners in mentally mapping a larger academic program that spans several semesters—and that for many learners will be a novel experience.

3. The OWIGC is an 18-hour program that also requires one elective in Rhetoric and Writing, not represented in this graphic. Students can complete the OWIGC 1) as a concentration in the MA in Professional and Technical Writing; 2) as a stand-alone, nine-month program (nine hours per term); or 3) one course at a time (finish in roughly two years). Source: <https://ualr.edu/rhetoric/graduate/owi/>. Figure 20.1 [See previous comment about figure numbers.] was designed using a free PowerPoint template, downloadable from <https://templates.office.com>. Themes can be quickly edited and then saved in a number of formats, including JPEG and PDF.

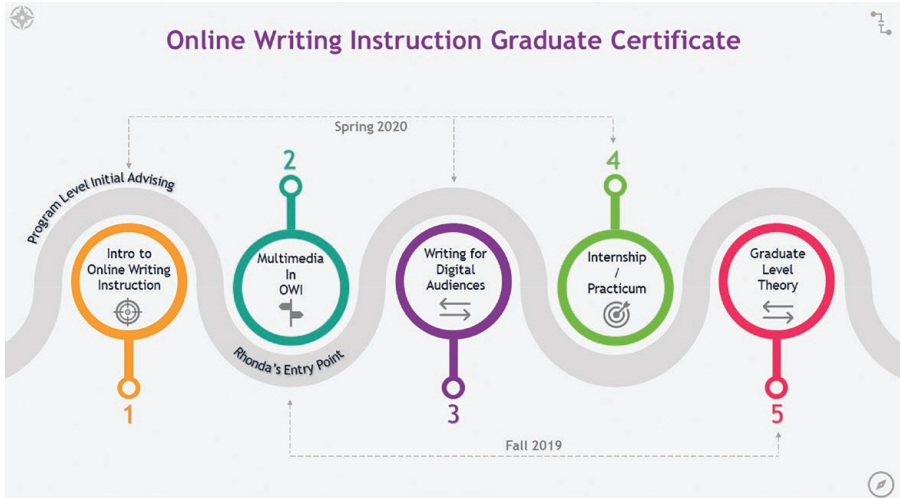


Figure 20.1. Graphical representation of Rhonda's journey through the OWIGC Program.

Rhonda suggests using visual-spatial representations similar to that shown in Figure 20.1 whenever and wherever appropriate in your course design. This specific example could also be used as an aid during advising and as a roadmap at the beginning of each course in the program, to help learners reorient themselves to where they are, for example, on their OWIGC journey. Such visual aids may seem elementary, but they can illuminate aspects of a learner's journey through a program that might otherwise be overlooked. Notice, for example, that Rhonda entered the OWIGC program in Fall 2019, during a semester the *Intro to Online Writing Instruction* course was not on offer. This reminds us that movement through a program such as the OWIGC is never linear and that learners benefit from strategically designed advising.

Our preference for visualizing information goes hand-in-hand with our need to map for meaning, to wayfind and to integrate stories into our particular versions of reality. As Thomas (2022) observes, web-based instruction environments “lend themselves well to storytelling and mapmaking” (p. 56). Just as we can use the language of storytelling at the program level to keep learners switched on, we can also use storytelling at the OW course design level. For learners to find their way, they need instructional narratives that, to them, are real and personal:

Make it real: Find opportunities to help learners connect the dots to past, present, and future learning; that is, share how the current course connects to the overall program and how it connects to other courses in the program. Help learners connect coursework to what they have done in the past, what they are doing now, and what they would like to do in the future. For learners hoping to change their professional direction, for example, these connections become the cognitive stepping stones that lead to a desired change.

Make it personal: Find opportunities to help learners *own* what they are doing in a course. Convey the real-life situations and experiences of others; for example, share how others have applied what is being taught in a course. Doing so can help students begin to establish for themselves how a course and the overall program might be applied to their particular life contexts.

Author Reflections

Heidi's favorite quote is from James Berlin (1982): "To teach writing is to argue for a version of reality, and the best way of knowing and communicating it" (p. 766). As OWPA's, our primary responsibility is to understand the reality of our students' lives, to appreciate where they are on their educational and life journey, and to place the stones in the river to help them get across to the next adventure.

Simply put, when we lose our way as OWPA's, we lose our learners. But the fact remains that all of us at one time have found ourselves lost on our professional and educational journeys, and there is much in life that we have no control over. In recent years, many have suffered actual loss—loved ones, jobs, homes, and financial and emotional security. Faculty thrust for the first time into emergency remote teaching in March 2020 (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) were suddenly lost in a place that once felt familiar—the World Wide Web—as they suddenly taught in a CMS for which some had little to no training or preparation. This change of venue caused many to feel like strangers in a foreign place and left them understandably shaken in their confidence as instructors. Students dropped out of college under increased pressure brought on by the pandemic and cultural and economic upheavals—foregoing education to just exist. For many learners, including adult learners and those entering graduate programs, just staying the course proved almost impossible.

We do, fortunately, have some control. We have control over how we plan and carry out advising and mentoring, over how we design web-based OW spaces, and over how we work to continuously improve learners' educational experiences. We can work within our means on the parts of reality we can shape, the paths we can set, and the support we can give to our learners as they map their way through an ever more difficult higher education landscape.

Rhonda's favorite quote is from Peter Turchi (2004): "To ask for a map is to say, 'Tell me a story'" (p. 11). To map environments that exist only in their minds, learners must be able to integrate their stories with the objectives of a structured learning experience; that is, they must be able to transfer prior experience to our instructional environment in order to find their way and anchor themselves to the novel situation.

The more we invest in learners through our endeavors to personally connect and understand their needs, the more human-centered our program and course designs become, and the more rewarding the experiences had by learners. Think of the efforts we make to connect as ongoing UX research. We do this through

a series of planned OWPA touchpoints that occur both outside the instructional environment and inside the instructional environment.

To design with wayfinding *human* learners in mind, we must endeavor to not obstruct their ability to gain a generalized mental picture of our OW programs and web-based OW environments. When our learners become lost at either the program level or within an OW course, it impedes their learning and causes them undue stress. To ensure we are doing what we can to help learners find their way, we should design with the learner's need to wayfind in mind. When we construct a program and environmental image that is perceptible to learners and that stimulates the operations of wayfinding behavior, we increase the likelihood of learners remaining cognitively switched on.

References

- Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do*. Harvard University Press.
- Berlin, J. A. (1982). Contemporary composition: The major pedagogical theories. *College English*, 44(8), 765-777. <https://doi.org/10.2307/377329>
- Borgman, J., & McArdle, C. (2019). *Personal, accessible, responsive, strategic: Resources and strategies for online writing instructors*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2019.0322>
- Borgman, J., & McArdle, C. (Eds.). (2021). *PARS in practice: More resources and strategies for online writing instructors*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2021.1145>
- Chirikov, I., Soria, K. M., Horgos, B., & Jones-White, D. (2020). *Undergraduate and graduate students' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic*. UC Berkeley: Center for Studies in Higher Education. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8ok5d5hw>
- Glazier, R. (2021). *Connecting in the online classroom: Building rapport between teachers and students*. Johns Hopkins University.
- Glazier, R., & Harris, H. S. (2021a). How teaching with rapport can improve online student success and retention: Data from empirical studies. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 21(4), 1-17.
- Glazier, R., & Skurat Harris, H. (2021a). Instructor presence and student satisfaction across modalities: Survey data on preferences in online and on-campus courses. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 22(3), 77-98.
- Golledge, R. G. (Ed.). (1999). *Wayfinding behavior: Cognitive mapping and other spatial processes*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Greer, M., & Skurat Harris, H. (2018). User-centered design as a foundation for effective online writing instruction. *Computers and Composition*, 49, 14-24.
- Harris, H. S., & Greer, M. (2016). Over, under, or through: Design strategies to supplement the LMS and enhance interaction in online writing courses. *Communication Design Quarterly*, 4(4), 46-54.
- Lynch, K. (1960). *The image of the city*. The MIT Press.

- Lynch, P. & Horton, S. (2016). Navigation and wayfinding. *Web style guide*. <https://webstyleguide.com/wsg3/4-interface-design/2-navigation.html>
- Mayer, R. E. (2017). Instruction based on visualizations. In R. E. Mayer & P. A. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of research on learning and instruction* (2nd ed., pp. 483-501). Routledge.
- Mayer, R. E., & Alexander, P. A. (2017). Introduction to research on learning. In R. E. Mayer & P. A. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of research on learning and instruction*, 2nd ed. (pp. 3-7). New York: Routledge.
- McLeod, S. H. (2007). *Writing program administration*. Parlor Press; The WAC Clearinghouse. <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/referenceguides/mcleod-wpa/>
- Morville, P. (2009). *Ambient findability: What we find changes who we become*. O'Reilly.
- Mulcahy, E. R. (2022, March). Developing a philosophy of advising graduate students. *Academic Advising Today*, 45(1). <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Developing-a-Philosophy-of-Advising-Graduate-Students.aspx>
- Norman, D. (2013). *The design of everyday things*. Basic Books. (Original work published 1988)
- O'Keefe, J., & Nadel, L. (1978). *The hippocampus as a cognitive map*. Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press.
- Rosenfeld, L., Morville, P., & Arango, J. (2015). *Information architecture: For the web and beyond* (4th ed.). O'Reilly.
- Tate. (n.d.). *Psychogeography: Psychogeography describes the effect of a geographical location on the emotions and behaviour of individuals*. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/psychogeography>
- Thomas, R. (2022). *Mapping for meaning in a multimodal web: Advancing learning using web-based instruction that stimulates wayfinding behavior* (Publication No. 29061338) [Master's thesis, University of Arkansas at Little Rock]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.
- Thomas, R., Kuralt, K., Skurat Harris, H. & Jensen, G. (2021). Create, support, and facilitate personal online writing courses in online writing programs. In J. Borgman & C. McArdle (Eds.), *PARS in practice: More resources and strategies for online writing instructors* (pp. 185-207). The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2021.1145.2.11>.
- Turchi, P. (2004). *Maps of the imagination: The writer as cartographer*. Trinity University Press.
- Usability.gov. (n.d.). *User experience basics*. <https://www.usability.gov/what-and-why/user-experience.html>