

Review of Jessie Borgman and Casey McArdle’s *PARS in Practice: More Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors*

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Borgman, Jessie, and Casey McArdle, eds. *PARS in Practice: More Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors*. WAC Clearinghouse, 2021.

In the Spring of 2020, all writing instructors became online writing instructors, prepared or not. The world of online writing instruction (OWI) boomed with webinars and “just-in-time” resources to help those amid the emergency switch to remote instruction think thoughtfully about how modality changes instruction. As online instruction became the new normal, Jessie Borgman and Casey McArdle’s second edited collection, *PARS in Practice: More Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instruction*, was released to continue to develop their approach to OWI introduced in their 2019 release, *Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic: Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors*. Over 20 chapters written by authors from various positionalities, Borgman and McArdle’s collection offers a practical and thoughtful compilation of approaches to OWI. At its core, the collection pushes instructors to center humanizing approaches to online learning, considering design and accessibility throughout, adding new depth and nuance to the role of online writing instructors.

Borgman and McArdle open the collection by describing the PARS framework applied across three distinct layers—design, instruction, and administration—and how the collection leverages user experience (UX) research and user-centered design (UCD) as grounding perspectives, setting the stage for considering students as people whose learning is mediated through tools and interfaces.

The first section emphasizes learning design that is humanizing, accessible, adaptive, and strategic. Kristy Liles Crawley begins with “Online Writing Instructors as Strategic Caddies: Reading Digital Landscapes and Selecting Online Learning Tools,” a chapter focusing on intentional tool use. Crawley uses Jody Shipka’s statement of goals and choices framework to make sense of the tool selection process,⁽¹⁾ emphasizing the need for a heuristic in choosing online tools, suggesting that these choices should become more intentional and strategic than ever before to meet learner needs. In “My Online Instruction Mulligan: How PARS Transformed My Technical Writing Community College Course,” Thomas M. Geary emphasizes the need to know one’s audience and context in the design of an online writing course (OWC). This chapter is a lesson on revising courses by learning about students and adapting with empathy. Mary K. Stewart’s “Strategic, User-Centered Design for a Globally Distributed, Condensed Format, Online Graduate Course” tells a similar story, arguing that user-centered design “helps us account for the humans” in our online courses, while digital rhetoric “helps us account for the social contexts and power dynamics” informing them (49). Stewart details the development of an online graduate class where students were dispersed, requiring Stewart to learn alongside students, make in-the-moment adjustments to pedagogical practices, and develop a recursive feedback loop to consistently gauge student needs.

Alex Sibó continues Stewart’s discussion of student needs in “The Literacy Load is Too Damn High! A PARS Approach to Cohort-Based Discussion” by detailing the use of cohort-based discussions to lessen the labor of students and instructors; this chapter emphasizes a major concern of design in OWI—a heightened literacy load that may overwhelm learners—and provides ways to address textual overload. Finally, the design section ends with Allegra Smith, Libby Chernouski, Bianca Batti, Alisha Karabinus, and Bradley Dilger’s “People, Programs, and Practices: A Grids-Based Approach to Designing and Supporting Online Writing Curriculum,” which historicizes a grid-based curriculum used to facilitate graduate student instruction of online courses, emphasizing the need for instructor feedback in prescribed course materials. This chapter again emphasizes the need for design to be reoccurring and thoughtful by soliciting feedback and revising to account for UX. While UX is often employed for improving commercial endeavors, its application in designing online courses throughout this section is helpful in rethinking how student learning is an experience interfaced by the technological tools of the course and the role that instructors can play in facilitating this interaction.

The second section of the collection focuses on instruction, beginning with Christine I. McClure and Cat Mahaffey’s “Finding the Sweet Spot: Strategic Course Design Using Videos,” which asks OWI instructors to engage with students outside of text using videos. McClure and Mahaffey demonstrate how instructors can communicate a wide range of course content to meet student needs, emphasizing accessibility and responsiveness over complexity. In Chapter 7, “Designing a More Equitable Scorecard: Grading Contracts and Online Writing Instruction,” Angela Laflen and Mikenna Sims also consider accessibility and equity in the use of contract grading in OWCs; particularly, they describe ways to engage students more deeply in contract grading as an alternative assessment by using self-assessment forms and creating individualized contracts. Nitya Pandey, in “Not a Laughing Matter: Creating a Humor-Centric User Design in OWI,” joins many of the collection’s authors in developing a humanizing approach to design. Pandley establishes a student-centered community using humor in icebreakers, instructional videos, and one-on-one conferencing, among other strategies, acknowledging the possibilities and challenges of approaching OWI with humor.

Following, Cynthia Pengilly describes critical approaches to text consumption in “Confronting Ableist Texts: Teaching Usability and Accessibility in the Online Technical Writing Classroom.” Pengilly asks instructors to become models of accessibility for their students, demonstrating how to help students develop critical awareness around issues of access in text consumption and creation. Finally, Theresa M. Evans provides a firsthand narrative of surviving a last-minute online course assignment and navigating the associated perils. “Negotiating the Hazards of the ‘Just-in-Time’ Online Writing Course” details navigating a first-time OWI assignment and provides helpful tips and resources for this experience. Holistically, these chapters focus on practical approaches to OWI and provide instructors with materials and instructions that center designing for student access; in emphasizing the teacher as a designer and technological creator, this section begins to add new dimensions to the role of the online writing instructor.

The section focused on administration begins with Rhonda Thomas, Karen Kuralt, Heidi Skurat Harris, and George Jensen’s “Create, Support, and Facilitate Personal Online Writing Courses in Online Writing Programs.” This chapter uses focus group data to think through how instructors can facilitate connection and comfort among students in online courses, and how WPAs can model personal connection in OWCs. Lyra Hillard’s chapter, “Using PARS to Build a Community of Practice for Hybrid Writing Instructors,” implores WPAs to develop personal, accessible, responsive, and strategic instructor training to build a culture of pedagogical excellence that supports student success. In “Preparing Graduate Students and Contingent Faculty for OWI: A Responsive and Strategic Approach to Designing Professional Development Opportunities,” N. Claire Jackson and Andrea R. Olinger attended to some of the most precarious of instructor positionalities to ensure appropriate preparation for teaching online. Jackson and Olinger provide an overview of their training approach by answering imperative questions surrounding teacher preparation, training modalities, teacher incentives, content, timing, and so on; their questions are a helpful guide for developing training that ensures student success.

Continuing the administrative conversation, Jason Snart’s chapter, “Online Writing Instructors as Web Designers: Tapping into Existing Expertise,” describes how online instructors serve the overlapping roles of teachers and designers and details a teaching training assignment that develops instructors’ views of online design. Snart taps into the assets of future teachers (who are online learners themselves) to consider OWI design. Similarly, Lydia Wilkes’ “PARS for the Course: Using PARS to Teach PARS in an Online Graduate Seminar” focuses on the PARS strategy as both a tool to teach new instructors and a tool to empower their instruction during the global pandemic. As Wilkes suggests, PARS as a framework for instruction allows new instructors to keep student learners at the center of their pedagogical development. This portion of the collection demonstrates the larger organizational work of OWI and how PARS works as a broader model in teacher training. The emphasis here on teacher training is also notable as so many instructors went without professional development when switching to remote instruction during the pandemic, reminding us of the importance of thoughtful, well-designed preparation and the many aspects of training new OWI teachers need.

The final section focuses on “User Experience,” one of the overlying concepts of the collection. To begin, “The Bottom End: Transposing Online Bass Lessons to Online Writing Instruction” by Dylan “Too Fresh” Retzinger, details their experience as a student in an online music training course to think through important experiential components of OWI. Retzinger implores instructors to consider “the possibility of experience” by stepping outside our traditional disciplinary bounds and working to embody the user/student perspective in OWCs (289). In continuing to examine the online student experience as UX, Guiseppe Getto’s “Ensuring High-Quality Student Experiences: PARS and the Technical Communication Online Writing Class” describes using PARS as the goal of UX in online course development. The chapter details preliminary research, prototype creation, usability testing, and subsequent revision of an online course to create the ideal student experience; this chapter echoes calls from the first section to consider course design as recursive and never ending.

Joseph Bartolotta expands usability testing in “Usability Testing for OWI Instructors,” detailing a grounded approach to how online instructors can employ a usability test in their own classes. Bartolotta asks students to richly describe their experience with an online writing task to receive feedback, better understand students, and expose students to the ways writing and design are enmeshed. In “Aiming for the Sweet Spot: A User-Centered Approach to Migrating a Community-engaged Course Online,” Erica M. Stone considers how modalities shift and provides a lens into operationalizing the PARS approach by centering student experience during a shift from synchronous to asynchronous practices. Finally, in “PARSing out the Course: User-centered Design through HyperDocs in Online Writing Instruction,” Kathleen Turner Ledgerwood describes the use of a common K-12 practice of using interactive online documents, Hyperdocs; the chapter models the use of these tools to encourage new forms of student engagement and interaction with pedagogical hypertexts. The final portion of the book emphasizes the role of design in online courses, suggesting that instructors employ a research-minded approach to actively soliciting feedback on design and that instructors intentionally cross disciplinary lines to improve online instruction.

In the afterword of the collection, Kirk St.Amant describes how the 20 preceding chapters allow OWI instructors to address “complex usability expectations in a manageable way” (358). Overall, it’s also important to recognize the field-based impact of this collection in its emphasis on how the PARS approach asks instructors to *humanize* students and the process of online teaching. This is made abundantly clear by the many appendices and tables where authors provide templates and instructions for approaching OWI, some of which are cataloged in the table below. These practical, student-centered materials remind us that while conducted at physical distance, the person-to-person experience is essential to online teaching. However, and perhaps more importantly, this collection reimagines the role of an online instructor as richer than ever before, suggesting that instructors also act as researchers about student experience, designers of student engagement, facilitators of technology, and masters of interdisciplinarity, highlighting the deep intellectual work of effective online teaching.

Table 1.

Author(s)	Resource	Pages
Stewart	Overview of graduate course assignments demonstrating design	pp. 66-69
Smith, Chernouski, Batti, Karabinus, and Dilger	Assignment grids detailing the evolution of curriculum over time	pp. 86, 87, 92
McClure and Mahaffey	Step-by-step instructions for creating course videos on several platforms	pp. 113-17
Laflen and Sims	Sample grading contract, self-assessment form, & individualized grading contract	pp. 133-39
Pengilly	Weekly discussion topics for confronting ableist texts	p. 160
Thomas, Kuralt, Skurat Harris, and Jensen	Tables & narratives of practical advice for designing & facilitating personal connections in online courses	pp. 195, 199, 201, 203-07
Jackson and Olinger	Weekly curriculum of the instructor training course	pp. 237-242
Snart	Design-focused assignment for online instructors	p. 247
Wilkes	Example questionnaires for understanding students in online classes	pp. 259, 267-69
Getto	Usability testing process figure	p. 300
Stone	Usability report templates	p. 331-35

Notes

1. See Shipka, *Toward a Composition Made Whole*. ([Return to text.](#))

Works Cited

Borgman, Jessie, and Casey McArdle, eds. *Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic: Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors*. WAC Clearinghouse, 2019.

Shipka, Jody. *Toward a Composition Made Whole*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2011.

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