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User-Centered Design as a Foundation for Effective Online Writing Instruction

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Abstract

The CCCC *Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction* can be viewed as a set of principles for user-centered design in online writing classrooms. However, operationalizing the principles and practices can be overwhelming. Our article identifies a set of principles that we introduce to new online writing instructors. We describe how we build a user-experience mindset into the foundation of online writing instruction using the CCCC *Position Statement* as well as principles from UX and user-centered design; we draw on work by key figures in UX and usability, including Goodwin (2009), Klein (2016), and Buley (2013; see also Howard & Greer, 2011). Our article describes how we introduce basic principles of user-centered design to new instructors, apply those principles to core topics in online writing instruction, and model a process of student feedback to promote an iterative design philosophy for online courses.
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1. Introduction

User experience design emerged in the early 1990s as designers of commercial products and interfaces sought methods for understanding the humans using their products (Buley, 2013). The overarching goal of user experience research is to discover what users need, and to design interfaces, products, and experiences that meet those needs. User interface design (UI), a subset of user experience design (UX), seeks to design usable interfaces (usually digital), including websites, mobile apps, and related stand-alone interfaces such as ticket kiosks or bank ATMs. 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.

Stuart Blythe (2001), among others (see Savenye, Olina, & Niemczyk, 2001), recognized a potential linkage between user experience design concepts and online writing pedagogy as early as 2001. Blythe identified two contrasting design models: system-centered and user-centered. A system-centered model "create[s] a formal specification and then build[s] a system that meets it" (p. 331); a user-centered model begins with "the user's practical knowledge" and promotes a

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design process that emerges "from designers' observations of actual technology use" (p. 332). Nearly two decades later, online writing instruction continues to wrestle with the process for moving from a system-centered approach to a user-centered approach. User experience designers have, over this time, developed a rigorous methodology for conducting user research, identifying user needs, and designing interfaces around those needs. At this point in the evolution of professional development in online writing instruction, we have arrived at a moment in which we can move students and learners onto the center of the stage, displacing technology to a supporting role. How can we promote user-centered design practices as we design training and professional development for current and future online instructors?

We have yet to develop a rigorous methodology for either online course design or faculty professional development based on user experience, although Jospeh Bartolotta, Tiffany Bourelle, and Julianne Newmark (2017) have laid the groundwork for such a move and Susan K. Miller-Cochran and Rochelle L. Rodrigo (2006) have shown us how UX can be integrated into the online course design process (see Bourelle, 2016; Hewett & Ehmann, 2004). Professional development opportunities at institutions are often devoted to mastering the complexities of the LMS platform. Online instructors, who are often contingent faculty (see Mechenbier, 2015), teach from pre-designed course shells or are required to design courses through systems-based templates, such as Quality Matters^{TM}. Graduate students may have scant training in online or hybrid writing instruction and few opportunities to teach online or hybrid (see Grover, 2017). While we understand the utility in these programs, we argue that online writing instruction as a discipline stands to benefit from a deeper engagement with the practices and mindset of user experience design because of the changing dynamics of our students.

Since 2001, our students have become more deeply immersed in technology as users, largely as a result of the rapid proliferation of smartphones, and they have also become more diverse in terms of age, culture, and comfort level with technologies. Web 2.0 and mobile technologies have opened up a wider range of options for instructors to use. In terms of both costs and usability, the barriers of entry are far lower for online instructional technologies today than in 2001. Two decades ago, a systems-based model made practical sense. Institutions and instructors were grappling with the process of inventing a new modality of instruction in the new environment of the Internet. Today, student expectations entering our courses are shaped by the experiences they have with Web 2.0 and mobile apps designed to be engaging, fun, and easy to use. They expect the same kind of ease of use and delightful engagement when they log in to our online courses.

We propose a framework for helping online writing instructors to develop a user-centered mindset in their design practices. First, we identify a set of core practices and principles that define our understanding of what user experience design is and does. Second, we demonstrate how those UX principles can be used as a lens through which to view and understand the CCCC *Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction* and other approaches to preparing instructors for online writing instruction. Connecting UX principles to online writing instruction provides a framework for our third section, where we use our own Graduate Certificate in Online Writing Instruction (GCOWI) as a case study in using UX principles to design an online learning environment and to prepare future OWI faculty for taking a user-centered approach in their teaching.

2. User experience as a set of practices

While user experience is "a famously messy thing to describe" (Buley, 2013, p. 4), we can identify three elements of contemporary UX practice: user research, iterative design, and collaboration. Each of these is a core component in the UX toolbox, and we explore how each connects to online writing instruction. The growing body of literature on user-experience research comes from industry and professional settings, as opposed to academic contexts. In most cases, this literature has been developed for practitioners working in commercial settings, in product development teams. While this work is important, and, we argue, vital for online instructors to understand, it can not be simply imported into an academic setting. Importing UX practices from industry into educational, learner-focused settings requires a considered, deep translation and reframing.

A first step toward the reframing of UX practices for professional development in OWI requires that we consider our terminology. We cannot simply substitute "students" or "learners" for "users." In most UX research, a user seeks to achieve a single task or goal (to purchase an airline ticket, for example). By contrast, a writing student is a learner, with complex, long-term needs and goals. Further, not all learners are students. A learner can be a self-directed person seeking knowledge outside of traditional higher education. (Think of a subscriber to *LinkedIn Learning* for example, as opposed to a student enrolled in a university course.) In arguing for bringing UX concepts into OWI, we seek to use