

# Afterword



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In their closing chapter of this book, Jessie and Casey offer a guiding framework for colleagues preparing to teach online in UXD, user experience design. Grounded in both the research on effective online learning and their own years of experience, this is very sound advice. In my own experience teaching online, I have found that the biggest obstacles stem from the radical shift to a much more low-bandwidth environment than both teachers and students are used to in face-to-face, in-person learning environments (see Hart-Davidson, 2014). What do I mean by low-bandwidth?

Well consider how much information passes easily among all the members of a group of learners, including the instructor, when everyone is together in the same room. Just with a glance, as a teacher, I can get a very reliable measure of how well everybody is doing, who is engaged and who is not, who might need my help with something, and who among the group is willing and able to help others. Now consider what that same kind of status check would require in most online teaching settings. How long would it take you to work all of that out as a teacher? And once you had that information, how quickly could you act on it?

In online learning environments, we simply must practice an approach like PARS in order to make up our own inability to be improvisational, to shift things on the fly, as instructors may be accustomed to doing in face-to-face classrooms.

If we do not, what suffers most is something that we often take for granted as a key ingredient of learning: the interactions that lead to meaningful engagement.

If I were to be so audacious as to suggest a tagline for this book and the project it represents to Jessie and Casey, I would suggest something like this: “Four Key Steps to Creating Meaningful Interaction in Digital Learning Spaces.” Those four steps?

Prioritize (P)ersonal connection, ensure an (A)ccessible experience, model and reward (R)esponsiveness, and make (S)trategic use of the affordances of digital spaces. If you do those four things, something amazing can happen. You not only can overcome the potential shortcomings of digital spaces such as the lack of bandwidth, you can help produce experiences that exceed the learning potential of face-to-face interaction!

Wait, did I lose you on that one? How could I go from lamenting the loss of improvisational freedom in a traditional face-to-face classroom to claiming that online learning, done the PARS way, might actually exceed the capacity to foster learning of a face-to-face classroom? The answer is pretty simple. PARS works in both settings equally well. And when we attend to all four, we can see that face-to-face classrooms might be putting some of our students at a disadvantage in ways we fail to notice or act on.

Let’s take the principle of accessibility. And let’s ask ourselves to be a bit literal and rigorous in how we measure whether something is accessible or not. What if, for instance, we evaluated the success of a class discussion (a many-to-many conversation) by how many people were able to participate? It is often the case that in an f2f classroom, we see just a few people interacting when we do a many-to-many activity like large group discussion. And for folks who are out that day, the chance to participate is lost. In online spaces, we can extend the time to participate and we can offer some benefits to folks who might not feel comfortable speaking up, or who might need a few extra minutes to gather their thoughts, before contributing. We might allow folks whose first language is not the language of instruction to enter the dialogue more easily. And I’m sure you can think of a few other affordances of digital spaces that could be used, strategically, to maximize access.

The key, once again, is to imagine that an important part of your work as an instructor—no matter if you are teaching online or in a traditional f2f classroom—is to be creating the conditions for certain kinds of interactions to happen. When I work with new teachers, I find this is not always top of mind. And it’s understandable. We worry a lot about content and our mastery of that. But I want to emphasize here that PARS can help you think more carefully about not just the *topics* but the *structure* of interactions that will enable learning in your classrooms, regardless of where you teach.

And it is especially important to think about the interactions that students have with each other. More than any other thing, students’ ability to interact with other learners is the thing at most risk in an online curriculum. To illustrate just how important that kind of peer interaction can be, I like to ask folks to consider a specific

kind of face-to-face learning space meant to ensure maximum access to peer interaction, often informal, that is critical to learning. I'm talking about a dance studio!

What are the key features of a dance studio? It is typically a large and open space, allowing multiple learners to practice together, ensuring unobstructed line-of-sight among learners and the instructor, but also allowing learners to establish personal space. In a dance studio, your most valuable learning resources are . . . other learners! We learn from them by watching as they attempt to do what we are also attempting. We learn, moreover, equally well from seeing what they do right and seeing how they struggle. We learn by adjusting our own efforts to match our more capable peers and we learn even more when we make explicit to peers who turn to us for help how they might improve. Can your online learning environment do that? How can you use the PARS framework to make sure you create learning spaces that can do that?

A dance studio has something on the walls that is important too. Mirrors. They allow for . . . reflection. The ability to see one's own work in the moment, and in the context of others' practice, so we can make adjustments. A studio is a place for reflective practice. Where a successful attempt can be noticed, recognized as a model for others to follow, celebrated and repeated. It is also a place where an unsuccessful attempt can be broken down, understood, and turned into a more deliberate plan for success the next time. Mirrors make the studio into a maximally responsive space, where we can establish that it is okay to make a mistake as long as we are responsive to feedback about how to improve.

I want just about all the spaces in which I teach and learn to be like a dance studio: populated with fellow learners whom I can share experiences with while I calibrate my intentions and efforts. I want a space where I can safely practice, but with an assurance that someone nearby will respond if I need a correction. I want to help others learn, too, because this means I can use my experience to help solidify and make more routine something that I have begun to master. Alas, not every learning space we teach in online is a dance studio right out of the box. Even if the potential exists for online spaces to be transformative for some learners, it takes a deliberate effort on the part of those who teach to help realize this potential. That is what this book, if you put the ideas of PARS into practice, will help you do.

## References

Hart-Davidson, B. (2014). Learning many-to-many: The best case for writing in digital environments. In S. D. Krause & C. Lowe (Eds.), *Invasion of the MOOCs: The promises and perils of massive open online courses* (pp. 212-222). Anderson, SC: Parlor Press. Retrieved from [http://www.parlorpress.com/invasion\\_of\\_the\\_moocs](http://www.parlorpress.com/invasion_of_the_moocs)