



Afterword. Before, During, and (Hopefully) After COVID

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When Jessie Borgman and Casey McArdle invited me to write the afterword for this collection of essays, I was flattered, I immediately agreed, and then I put it on the back burner as I continued my other work. But then as the deadline for this afterword approached, I realized I wasn't exactly sure what I had agreed to do. So, the first thing I did was to return to the previous books in the PARS series to see what my predecessors had done in their afterwords.

Bill Hart-Davidson wrote the afterword for *Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic: Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors*. This was, of course, the book Jessie and Casey co-wrote that began the series. I read the book when it was first published in 2019, and even though I had been teaching at least some of my courses online for years and had spent a great deal of time researching and writing about online courses generally and Massive Open Online Courses in particular, the book was useful in my own teaching. The PARS approach shed a different light on the courses I had been teaching online, and it both inspired new ideas and provided a vocabulary to some of what I had already been doing in my online courses. I recommended the book to many.

Like the book as a whole, Bill's afterword was friendly, casual, and encouraging. Also like the book as a whole, the primary audience Bill seems to have had in mind were writing teachers who perhaps had considered teaching online before (or who perhaps found themselves in a situation where they had no choice but to

teach online) but who needed both a pedagogical apparatus and also a bit of a pep talk. “In online learning environments we simply must practice an approach like PARS in order to make up (for) our own inability to be improvisational, to shift things on the fly, as instructors may be accustomed to doing in face-to-face classrooms” (Borgman & McArdle, 2019, p. 95), and Bill’s afterword is an invitation to taking that approach. Online spaces can be just as transformative for learners and teachers as face-to-face ones, but it does take “a deliberate effort on the part of those who teach to help realize this potential. That is what this book,” Bill tells us, “will help you do” (Borgman & McArdle, 2019, p. 97).

PARS in Practice: More Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors, the follow-up collection of essays from contributors inspired by the PARS approach to online teaching, was published just two years later and its approach is quite different. If *Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic* was an effort to persuade those new to teaching online to give the approach a try, the over two dozen contributors to *PARS in Practice* demonstrated how the approach worked for them, and they wrote for an audience already engaged in teaching writing online at the college level. The depth and breadth of the readings in that collection reflected the work that many of us had been doing for years. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most estimates suggested well over a third of college students across all types of institutions took at least one online course as a part of their studies, and of course many students were enrolled in programs that are offered entirely online. So, if Jessie and Casey’s first co-authored book was an effort to welcome would-be instructors to the “PARS party,” their first edited collection introduced readers to the many practitioners who have been at that party for quite some time.

Once again, the afterword—this time by Kirk St.Amant—suited the context and voice of the book perfectly. In his afterword titled “Re-Mapping the Global Context for Online Education,” St.Amant wrote that billions of people worldwide now have online access and that “over the last two decades, hardware and software have evolved to the point that online interactions are a regular part of the daily lives of many individuals” (p. 356), both in traditional schooling and in lifelong learning opportunities.

PARS in Practice was first published electronically in early January 2021. The pace of academic publishing being what it is, I assume most of the chapters and St.Amant’s afterword were all but complete and being prepared for press somewhere around late spring/early summer 2020, just when the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic and its lockdowns were beginning in the United States. Certainly, many of the chapters in *PARS in Practice* and St.Amant’s afterword discuss the pandemic’s impact on online teaching, but I must say I found this passage somewhat surprising when I reread it as I was writing this essay in early fall 2022:

In online educational settings, written communiques like emails and text messages are central to providing regular updates and notifications. Similarly, the online venues where

individuals share ideas and debate concepts—discussion boards, chat rooms, and online forums—also rely heavily on written messages for exchanges. Even in situations where the mechanism for interactions seems visual in nature (e.g., a graphic user interface), the use of such media often requires corresponding written texts explaining how to operate a technology in order to access educational content and participate in related exchanges. Essentially, interactions usually done orally in face-to-face classrooms must be re-cast in textual form to create parallel exchanges in online spaces. (p. 357)

I agreed then and I agree now with St. Amant's point: moving a class from the face-to-face classroom to online delivery requires significant adjustments to the differences, affordances, and limitations of the format, and most of that work means "re-casting" both content and interaction from synchronous activities and live oral communication to asynchronous activities and textual and other pre-recorded communication. I think it's fair to say that St. Amant's observation was not only the conventional wisdom and practice of all (or nearly all) of the dozens of scholars contributing to *PARS in Practice*; it was the conventional wisdom and practice in distance education at most institutions that offered courses and degree programs online before the COVID pandemic.

And then along came Zoom! For much to my surprise (and I suspect much to the surprise of many of the contributors to *PARS in Practice* and also this collection, *PARS in Charge*), a majority of faculty new to online teaching during the COVID pandemic decided to forgo much of the previously assumed best practices. Instead, a majority of faculty new to online teaching decided on their own (and most faculty did indeed have choices about how they wanted to teach during the pandemic) to teach their courses synchronously and with the use of video-conferencing software. For those of us who had been teaching online asynchronously for years and largely with courses "re-cast in textual form," this approach to online teaching didn't make a lot of sense. As Bill Hart-Davidson put it to me when we were chatting early in the COVID pandemic (possibly while on a golf course, actually), teaching online during a Zoom session is sort of like teaching a face-to-face class on a moving bus: You could do that, but why?

Personally, I found the choice of so many faculty to teach with Zoom baffling, which is why I began my current research project about college faculty experiences with teaching online during COVID. This work began as a survey I distributed via social media between December 2020 and June 2021; I collected responses from 104 college-level instructors (mostly in writing studies). I then invited respondents to the survey to participate in a more detailed follow-up interview, and between January 2022 and June 2022, I conducted about 35 interviews exploring in more detail my interviewees' choices and experiences teaching online during the pandemic. I presented summaries of this research at the March 2022

Conference for College Composition and Communication meeting in an “on demand” session titled “When ‘You’ Cannot be ‘Here:’ What Shifting Teaching Online Teaches Us about Access, Diversity, Inclusion, and Opportunity,” and at the May 2022 Computers and Writing Conference at an “on demand” session titled “Online Teaching and ‘The New Normal:’ A survey of Faculty in the Midst of an Unprecedented ‘Natural Experiment.’” I also published a much more detailed webtext for a December 2022 special issue of *Computers and Composition Online* focused on online teaching, titled “The Role of Previous Online Teaching Experience During the Covid Pandemic: An Exploratory Study of Faculty Perceptions and Approaches.” My current work of analyzing the 270,000-300,000 words of transcribed conversations with faculty about their experiences continues, and I suspect I will be conducting follow-up interviews in 2023 and 2024. But for now, I will mention three observations as they relate to both the PARS approach generally and to this collection, *PARS in Charge*, in particular.

First, I think the main values of the PARS approach are in the balance of a pragmatic focus on literally how to “do” online teaching and a pedagogical philosophy about how teaching online must be engaging and tailored to the format, and not merely face-to-face teaching “poured” into an online course shell via a video-conferencing software. Rather, online teaching must be adaptive, and it must be, well, personal, accessible, responsive, and strategic, requiring teachers to adjust the delivery of the course to their students and the situation. In *PARS in Charge*, we see that same mix of pragmatism and ideals extended to the role of the writing program administrator (WPA), and how WPAs adjusted to become online writing program administrators (OWPAs)—especially for those who were charged with coordinating a successful shift from “emergency remote teaching” to more routine online writing instruction (OWI).

The research and interviews I’ve done to date suggest that for many of the instructors who taught online for the first time during COVID and who taught synchronously with Zoom, revising their courses for the asynchronous online format either seemed like too much work or it never even occurred to them as something that would need to be done. If these instructors had been exposed to the practices and pedagogies exemplified by PARS prior to COVID, I am certain many would have taken a different approach. That seems especially clear to me in several different essays in *PARS in Charge* that tell stories about how these authors in their roles as OWPAs made systematic and programmatic efforts to prepare faculty to teach online, both before and during the pandemic.

Second, the PARS approach is flexible enough to accommodate the new technologies and approaches to OWI that have come from instructors and program administrators who did not have experience teaching online prior to COVID. The clearest example of this for me is actually the use of synchronous video-conferencing software, because while Zoom didn’t play much of a role in online writing courses prior to COVID, it’s clearly part of the standard practice now. That’s reflected in numerous essays in *PARS in Charge* as well. Video-conferencing

software is a key tool OWPA's are using for facilitating hybrid classes, for hosting organizational meetings and training sessions with program instructors, and for continuing informal meetings and to facilitate "safe space" discussions. Many of those activities have once again resumed happening face to face, but even amongst those of us who grew "fatigued" with video conferencing during COVID, Zoom still has its advantages after the pandemic, especially for facilitating those Friday afternoon program meetings.

Third, the many stories I heard from the faculty I interviewed about their experiences teaching during COVID and the many stories here in *PARS in Charge* illustrate how different writing programs (not to mention different institutions) function in ways that are simultaneously similar and strikingly different. At the risk of overworking the golf metaphor of PARS, it reminds me of how courses are also always very much the same and very much different. Golf courses all have 18 holes (setting aside the so-called executive nine-hole courses); they all have a similar mix of par 3/par 4/par 5 holes; those holes all have recognizably similar tees, greens, fairways, sand traps, and so forth; and the rules for playing different courses are all the same. The other trappings of a golf course tend to be similar as well: golf carts; groundskeepers; the "pro shop" where players pay for their rounds and perhaps also buy some tees, balls, or even clubs; and the so-called "19th hole" bar area with beverages, snacks (the ubiquitous golf course hot dog), and sometimes more elaborate offerings.

And yet every golf course is unique, and the level of difficulty of courses varies tremendously. Some courses are for "members only" (not where I play!), some are private but open to the public, and some are a part of municipal or county park systems. Some courses are horrifically expensive and fancy, though many (certainly the courses I play regularly) are not. And most courses have at least one odd feature that requires a certain amount of "previous experience" to navigate. For example, the course I play most often (which is not difficult, privately owned but open to the public, inexpensive, and with a wide variety of beverages but a narrow selection of hot dogs and snacks) includes a hole where players must hit their tee shots off of a wooden-planked and AstroTurf-covered platform, a surface that is just dissimilar enough from a regular grass tee to frustrate golfers new to the course.

PARS in Charge is a fine example of these simultaneous similarities and differences between writing programs, OWPA's, and the premises of writing instruction and program administration. As I read these essays, I see a lot of similarities, at least in broad terms. The writers in all of these essays speak about a "personal" approach for welcoming individual perspectives to teaching within program guidelines. They all discuss how to be "accessible" to both instructors and students through support materials like pre-designed course shells and an awareness of acknowledging different approaches to writing instruction that can meet similar goals, and the needs to maximize "responsiveness" by communicating with instructors and adapting to their needs. Perhaps the most common denominator

for all OWPA at all types of institutions is the need to be “strategic,” especially in terms of mentoring and supporting faculty and also by incorporating an awareness of other guiding principles and assessment protocols present at an institution, such as “Quality Matters” or other large strategic initiatives on campus.

And yet, each of the chapters and the stories from OWPA in *PARS in Charge* is different. Some of these contributors are describing OWI initiatives and programs established long before the COVID pandemic, and others describe their experiences leading programs through emergency remote teaching and beyond. The definitions of “online” range from all courses in a program offered entirely online (and typically asynchronously), to a mix of modes, including hybrid courses. By “writing,” many of the contributors here mean the first-year writing experience, though others mean a different selection of writing courses, including general education writing courses beyond the typical first-year composition class, technical writing programs, courses in the major or in the graduate program, and so forth. Many of these stories recount the experience of facilitating training and support for the instructors teaching in their programs, and all the small and large differences are there—how the process actually worked, who the instructors were and what sort of support and training they need, what the institutional restraints and requirements were, and so forth. These similarities and differences are what kept me going as a reader, finding parts of the stories I identify with and also noting the ways in which, for better or worse, my experiences are different.

Let me close by perhaps priming the pump for another PARS volume in the post-COVID era. I believe we are in the midst of a clear and rapid paradigm shift regarding distance education and online instruction across the board—certainly in higher education, but also in online instruction at the elementary and secondary levels, and online learning opportunities beyond higher education. COVID forced nearly everyone in higher education to move their courses online, and the majority of students and instructors did this against their will. The reality of the global pandemic—particularly during the 2020-21 school year—meant that if students and faculty wanted to continue to be engaged in higher education, it was going to have a significant remote-learning component. Now, many of the faculty I interviewed as part of my survey research (not to mention many of my colleagues at my university and around the country) who were new to online teaching found the experience inspiring and liberating, and they are anxious to teach online in the future and in more “normal times.” Obviously, some faculty felt completely the opposite, though I will say most of my interviewees were at a minimum open to the idea of teaching online again. In part, I assume that is part of a self-selection bias since I doubt someone who was adamantly against online teaching in the future would have bothered to have taken my survey in the first place, let alone agreed to participate in an interview. And while this isn’t a part of my research, my sense from my own teaching is that students are in a similar position.

At my university, a public regional institution where around 25 percent of the courses were online before the pandemic, the president and provost want to

return us to a “pre-COVID” balance of online and face-to-face offerings. This seems to be a national trend, and one that is even more acute at traditionally residential colleges and flagship universities. Administrators have claimed students and their parents have complained and demanded a return to face-to-face instruction. That is perhaps true, though it also seems unlikely that administrators would receive a lot of emails or notes from students or their parents expressing happiness about online courses. My own sense from talking with my online students before, during, and now (hopefully) after COVID is that the demand for face-to-face versus online courses is mixed. Of course, students who were forced to take online courses against their will and who had bad experiences want to return to the face-to-face classroom, but I also encountered many students who took online courses for the first time during COVID and were pleasantly surprised with the results.

My own admittedly cynical and jaded view is that university administrators have to find ways of getting students to physically come back to campuses in order to spend money on things like dorms, meal plans, student center purchases, campus parking, sporting events, expensive-to-build-and-operate recreation facilities, and so forth. The reality is I don't think anyone yet knows what the balance of online versus face-to-face offerings should be after COVID, and it's likely to take most universities a few years to figure that out. But I think it is quite obvious that online teaching and the need to support and facilitate OWI is going to continue, which means that *PARS in Charge* and the other books in the PARS series are going to have a place on the shelf of any ongoing or would-be OWPA.

References

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