

Online writing students as expert end-users in their own experience

Beau Pihlaja, PhD | OWI Symposium: Small Online Writing Instruction | September 10, 2020

Key idea:

Empower online writing students to act on their status as **expert end-users¹ of their own experience** in our classes.

Students are experts in knowing how they will—not necessarily should—use our syllabi, assignment instruction sets, and in the case of online classes the learning management system (LMS) or course website.

- Create a digital space explicitly and strictly for students to provide usability- or user experience-related feedback—especially in asynchronous online writing learning environments

Idea in practice:

Example: I created an **extra credit discussion board** in my **asynchronous ENGL 3365 Professional Report Writing course** where students provided feedback **strictly on their experience of using the class's Blackboard site**, accessing assignments, using discussion boards, navigating to weekly modules, or any other aspect of the class's "usability." I then made walkthroughs, how-to screen caps, and even organizational and design changes to the site based on their feedback.

It allowed students to advocate for their needs as users relative to the design and structure of my class. This may be even an even more important issue in asynchronous online classes where both students and instructors may often ask in various ways, "Can anyone hear me?" Several students explicitly, spontaneously, and appreciatively noted this.

Issues to consider:

- **Spread out** timeframe for feedback, say, at the beginning, middle, and end of courses
- **Make** actual changes to site or other components of course in response to students' reasonable feedback
- **Inform** students of any changes or students can find themselves unsettled by unspecified design changes
- **Encourage** participation using whatever means fit with your pedagogy: extra credit, make it required to pass
- **Adapt** to digital context—for example, this semester I created a UX channel in the class's MS Team

For further reference

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Still, B., & Koerber, A. (2010). Listening to students: A usability evaluation of instructor commentary. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 24(2), 206–233. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651909353304>

¹ I am indebted to Jones (2018) for the phrase "expert end-users" and the underlying logic of this idea as well as to Crane (2015), Crane & Cargile Cook (Forthcoming), and Still & Koerber (2010).