TA Resource Guide

for the

Online Environment

Table of Contents

Introduction

Arts & Science Online (ASO, formerly CDS), upholds the level of educational quality associated with Queen's University by

- using best practices in online learning to guide the development and teaching of online courses,
- working collaboratively with academic departments to plan course and program offerings,
- identifying the best qualified faculty member to develop and teach courses, and
- maintaining the academic standards of the Faculty.

When taking one of our online courses, students are able to interact with peers from across the world through online group work, study projects, debates and even online presentations. As a TA for ASO, you play a key role in supporting our students and helping them to have a positive experience in an interactive and collaborative learning environment.

The purpose of this document is to provide a resource guide for TA's working in the online environment in order to maximize their ability to facilitate learning in an online environment.

"One of the most important ingredients for successful online learning is the creation of social learning online through interaction between the student and instructor among students. In addition, a key role for instructors is to facilitate, monitor and support online communication."

(Folinsbee, 2008)

Online vs On-Campus Learning

Online Learning

Advantages of Online Learning
- Enables ongoing discussion outside of scheduled class time
- Encourages additional interaction among students and Instructors
- Encourages students to assume responsibility for their own learning
- Students have more flexibility to accommodate 'virtual' classes into their personal schedule
- Students can study at their own pace
- Students can revisit lecture material, as required
- Fosters a more diverse student body

Disadvantages of Online Learning
- Without a clear structure, students could go 'off track' or get confused regarding course activities and deadlines
- Potential isolation from the Instructor and/or classmates
- Learners with low motivation (or poor study habits) could fall behind
- Slow web connections or older computers could create frustration when accessing course materials
- Reliant on accessibility to technical resources
- Could appear to be difficult to manage online resources for those not familiar with beginner-level computer skills
- Won't have the 'experience' of utilizing traditional on-campus facilities (such as gyms, residence halls, libraries, etc.)
- Perception of the difficulty in fostering peer collaboration and facilitating student learning

On-Campus Learning

Advantages of On-Campus Learning
- Face-to-face instruction
- Students can ask questions immediately
- Face-to-face interaction with classmates
- Easier to network with fellow students / Instructors
- Physical access to on campus-facilities (gyms, residence halls, libraries, etc.)

Disadvantages of On-Campus Learning
- Students have to go to the 'on-campus' location (which may conflict with personal circumstances, work, seasonal weather, etc.)
- No flexibility as to when classes can be taken
- Learning is dependent on the speed of the Instructor, rather than at own pace

as adapted from Roper, A.R. (2007) and Bass, S. (nd)

Best Practice in Teaching Online

Chickering and Gamson (1987) identify seven principles necessary for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education (see table) that guide our practice in teaching and learning online.

	Principle	Rationale	How
1	**Maximize Learner-Instructor Contact**	Learners need to feel supported and Instructors aware of learners' concerns	• Be present • Facilitate communication • Manage conflict
2	**Support peer-to-peer contact, teaching and learning**	Learners need to feel connected to each other and this helps build a strong community of learning	• Empower learners • Set up a social forum • Provide clear guidelines
3	**Emphasize active learning and applied practice**	Learners see the Instructor as an active participant and are more likely to model this behaviour	• Inspire and support learners • Encourage connections • Motivate learners
4	**Provide prompt feedback**	Affirm learners' achievements and knowledge to promote greater online confidence and participation	• Respond to general questions promptly • Keep learners on track • Provide timely feedback
5	**Allocate realistic amounts of time for effective learnings**	Learners and teachers learn to use their time well and setting this precedence establishes the basis for high performance for everyone	• Define time and expectations upfront • Establish a basis for performance • Outline time management for learning content
6	**Good practice communicates high expectations**	Instructors set high expectations for not only themselves but also for their students by expecting them to perform well	• Set high expectations • Expect that students will perform well • Make extra efforts
7	**Respect Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning**	Each learner brings different talents and ways of learning to the course	• Provide opportunities for students to display talents • Create a variety of ways for students to learn

While all seven principles for good practice outlined by Chickering and Gamson (1987) guide our practices, three factors play a critical role in effective course pedagogy in the online learning environment: **active learning techniques**, **cooperative learning among students**, and **student and faculty interaction** (Bangert, 2008). Engaging students in active learning increases their knowledge of content and promotes critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Anderson et al., 2005; Williams & Lahman, 2011), while instilling a sense of belonging to the learning community, increasing communication with the Instructor, and enhancing student persistence in online courses (Hart, 2012).

Active Learning

Increased student engagement and improved student learning is achieved by focusing on active and collaborative learning, and minimizing or eliminating the passive transmission of information. Active learning increases student's knowledge of content and promotes critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Anderson et al. 2005; Williams & Lahman, 2011). Furthermore, students actively engaged with the content promotes participation in a meaningful way and fosters development of new knowledge (Partlow & Gibbs, 2003).

We know that engaging students in active learning increases knowledge of content and promotes critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, while instilling a sense of belonging in the learning community. Additionally, being able to work effectively in a team is a skill that students will need throughout their academic studies, as well as in the workplace throughout their career.

In an online environment, we achieve these objectives through student participation in groups and various discussion activities where students are able to review each other's work, comment on questions, and critically assess topics posed by the Instructor and/or peers, and so on. Students are also able to test out their ideas, receive feedback from TAs and clarify their understanding in this environment.

Examples of active online learning strategies may include: case studies, simulations, role play, Socratic questioning, debates, problem-based learning, guided questions, master classes, graphic organizers, group projects and virtual labs.

"Active learning environments with high levels of interactivity between students and their environment (peers, instructors, TAs and content) not only motivate students, but also improve overall learning achievement and satisfaction."

Croxton, 2014, p. 316.

Interaction

Frequent and ongoing interaction is a significant component to a successful online course. Social interaction and the development of an online community reduces feelings of isolation, eases stress and increases confidence (Haythornthwaite, C., Kazmer, M., Robins, J., Shoemaker, S., 2000). Additionally, ongoing interaction promotes motivation and learner satisfaction (Harris and Martin, 2012; Sargeant et al., 2006). Part of the course design is establishing ways for peer interaction and Instructor-to-student interaction to develop an online community is essential and should be woven throughout the course.

Interacting in an Online Environment

Despite this being an online 'community', all members of the teaching team, along with students, are expected to behave and interact as they would in a traditional classroom. You may find the following Netiquette guidelines useful (for both yourself and students) when participating in discussion activities, giving feedback, etc.

- Do not dominate discussion. Give students the opportunity to join in the discussion.
- Do not use offensive language.
- Present ideas appropriately.
- Be cautious in using Internet language. For example, do not capitalize all letters, since this suggests shouting.
- Popular emoticons such as 😊 or ☹ can be helpful to convey your tone but do not overdo or overuse them.
- Avoid using vernacular and/or slang language. This could possibly lead to misinterpretation.
- Never make fun of someone's ability to read or write.
- Share tips with students.
- Keep an open-mind and be willing to express even your minority opinion. Minority opinions have to be respected.
- Think and edit before you push the **Send** button.
- Do not hesitate to ask for feedback.
- Using humour is acceptable but be careful that it is not misinterpreted. For example, are you being humorous or sarcastic?

Mintu-Wimsatt, Kernek & Lozada, 2010, p. 266.

Interaction with Instructors and/or TAs

The effectiveness and quality of the Instructor contributes more towards student satisfaction than technology. A key component of a quality Instructor and/or TA is his or her interaction with students. Listed below are a few ways to increase interaction with students.

Instructors can:
- Encourage students to stay motivated and engaged.
- Post weekly updates.
- Comment on student progress.
- Highlight connections between course topics and real life examples.
- Provide online instructional support that addresses students' difficulties based on quiz scores, questions on discussion board, etc.
- Host online office hours.
- Offer a synchronous exam preparation session, which will be recorded and posted.

TAs can provide the front-line contact with students by checking forums regularly to respond to course-related questions, providing timely and supportive feedback on assignments, outlining current accomplishments and identifying ways to improve.

Interaction Among Students

When students collaborate with one another they are more likely to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, develop higher levels of interest and have a more positive online experience.

A few ideas that the Instructor may choose to implement include:
- Create small groups at the beginning of the course and perform activities in the same groups throughout the course (i.e. case studies, presentations, etc.).
- Have students participate in weekly discussion forums.
- Have students engage in peer feedback for various assignments and papers.
- Encourage students to respond to questions posted by peers about content or activities.
- Include synchronous small group activities to promote real-life application of knowledge.

Facilitating Discussion Forums

The information provided below is from Rick Nigol's Facilitator's Guide (2011).

A facilitator models good online behaviour in everything she/he does.
A good facilitator,

- Establishes a safe, open, non-threatening, comfortable, respectful, constructive, and inclusive environment that encourages open participation.
- Helps the group define norms and codes of conduct and models these.
- Allows for a range of member roles within the group.
- Helps groups build trust among members.
- Injects humour into the proceedings when and where needed.

Facilitator Roles

Task Master
Sometimes the facilitator needs to play the role of task master, helping ensure that the group does not veer too far off track and stays focused on its stated goals. This also involves reminding the group of important deadlines and helping them ensure that all their important tasks are completed in a timely matter in order to maintain the pace of the course or program.

Catalyst and Prober
A very important role for a facilitator is to spur their learners on to think more deeply about the topics, issues, challenges, etc. they are examining. A good facilitator is always asking the provocative questions that encourage critical or creative thinking among learners. Socratic questioning gets learners to go beyond the obvious and to think more deeply and to critically re-examine their own thinking from time to time.

Synthesizer
A good facilitator can help a group find consensus on key issues. She/he is able to weave together areas of agreement among the group and find the common ground. This often involves summarizing or encapsulating discussions and stating these back to the group so that members can focus more upon what unites than what divides them.

Facilitators also make linkages between various topics and themes and provide the relevant segues to the next topic or task at hand for the group.

Cheerleader
Often times the facilitator needs to ensure that the energy and enthusiasm of the group is maintained. This is especially the case of longer duration courses or programs. Groups that need to work closely and intensely together for a long period of time and can experience natural ups and downs during the course of a program.

It is important that the facilitator celebrate group victories, accomplishments, and key milestones. Simple words of encouragement, support and validation go a long way during the course of an extended program. Group members are sometimes too close to the process and sometimes do not recognize the progress and accomplishments they have made along the way. It is up to the facilitator to ensure that these accomplishments be acknowledged and celebrated.

Referee

There are times that the facilitator needs to help mediate and resolve disputes within a group. Of course, groups should be empowered to do this themselves via the adoption of an agreed-upon group contract around their vision, goals, procedures, and community norms, rules, and netiquette, etc. However, there may be times that a facilitator needs to intervene to ensure that disputes do not fester and undermine the ability of the group to function properly. Often times, this may involve talking to some group members offline to either get to the bottom of things or to address particularly negative online behaviours directly, on a one-on-one basis.

Facilitation Tips

- **Avoid over-facilitating.**
  A facilitator who is too quick to jump in to each and every discussion is in danger of possibly stifling debate and interaction among group members. (Remember the importance of peer-to-peer learning.)
- **Draw out the quiet or non-participating members.**
  Check in on quiet students privately (offline) to see why they are not participating.
- **Focus the noisier chatterers on key issues.**
- **Be the change you want to see.**
  Model respectful online behaviour. (Nastiness is contagious, but so is civility.)
- **Take things offline if a dispute becomes nasty.**
  It is often difficult to solve disputes online.
- **Be very careful in the use of humour, irony or satire.**
  In online environments, these often do not come across as intended.

Providing Feedback

Feedback helps direct [students as to] what they should do with their time, how they should feel about their efforts, whether their motivation level is appropriate, whether they are meeting expectations, and more.

Mandernach & Garrett, 2014

Feedback is a tool that
- develops cognitive understanding, motivation and engagement, and interpersonal connections,
- helps students learn course material but also helps keep them motivated, engaged in what can feel like an isolated environment, and connected to the course,
- can foster interpersonal connections between Instructors and students,
- can even foster connections among students, and
- has a direct bearing on whether students have meaningful interactions with course materials and overall positive course experience.

Mandernach J. & Garrett, J., 2014

Feedback to students is an area that our students often identify of high importance to them. In your course, students will be offered several opportunities for both formative feedback (i.e. feedback that doesn't contribute to final grades per se, but helps students to learn where and how they can make improvements) and summative feedback (i.e., feedback which evaluates whether students have achieved an instructional goal and for which a grade is assigned). In other words, feedback is **information about how we're doing in our efforts to reach a goal.** In order for students to know how they are doing, they need to know what it is that they are trying to achieve.

There are several ways that students can get the feedback they need (from Instructors, TA's, peers, technology, and so on). Depending on the role that you have within the teaching team and the specific duties you have been assigned, you are likely to give feedback to students. This can be for a variety of reasons:

- Discussion activities
- Forum posts
- Course questions & answers
- Email queries
- Assignments
- Tests

"Advice, evaluation, grades - none of these provide the descriptive information that students need to reach their goals. What is true feedback - and how can it improve learning?"

(Wiggins, 2012)

Feedback is NOT advice, praise, or a performance evaluation. Before giving feedback, you may want to consider whether your feedback provides the learner with specific advice about how to improve their performance.

Here are some practical guidelines for giving feedback:

Feedback should be timely.	Provide feedback on assignments within 7 days Respond to discussion posts and emails within 24 hours
Feedback should be meaningful.	Target individual needs. Specifically link feedback to the assessment criteria
Feedback should be forward-looking.	Provide feedback that will allow the student to improve their performance before the next assignment.
Feedback should be constructive.	Highlight both strengths and weaknesses

Seven key areas to consider when providing feedback

Feedback should be:	Which means:
Goal-referenced	Remind the student about the initial goal ('the goal of this assessment was…') and then give goal-related information about his or her actions (when re-reading your assignment, this could be achieved by considering…doing…evaluating…')
Tangible and Transparent	Feedback must be clear and understood by the student. (Just because you understand what you are saying doesn't mean that they will.) Avoid jargon and remember your goal is that the student will understand what they can learn from the feedback. Consider responding like a 'reader' and not just a 'grader'.
Actionable	Let the student know what they have to do (i.e. more or less of something), what they could consider reviewing, what areas of research they should look at next time, etc. Telling a student that they did a 'good job' doesn't help them when looking to improve. Students need to understand how they could do a better job the next time.
User-friendly (specific and personalized)	Consider the person that you are giving the feedback to and target the feedback to them. After all, feedback isn't of much use if they won't understand what you are saying! Consider just providing feedback in one or two areas where they could make improvements (giving too much feedback can be overwhelming and not user-friendly).
Timely	The sooner that students get the feedback the better. Students need to know what they can do to improve prior to the next assignment, test, discussion etc. Giving feedback too late can take away from the relevance of it (and restrict their ability to improve).
Ongoing	Ongoing feedback provides the student with the opportunity to adapt their skills, style etc and then implement the advice in a practical manner.
Consistent	Students can only adjust their performance if the information fed back to them is stable, accurate and trustworthy. As a part of the teaching team, it is your responsibility to agree the standards of what high quality work 'looks' like, how you will give feedback and what that feedback 'looks' like.

Adapted from Wiggins, 2012.

Tips for Students

Students may ask you for advice or tips when taking an online course. The following table highlights a few key areas and skills that students will need to consider developing in order to succeed in the online environment.

Self motivation	A set routine and/or schedule will help to keep students motivated. By doing so, tasks will be achieved, and students will see that they are progressing through the course. Finding ways to apply the knowledge that they are learning (such as in the workplace) will help to reinforce their learning, see the relevance and encourage them to continue with their studies.
Working Independently	Taking an online course requires students to be able to work without the daily supervision of an Instructor. This skill will prove to be invaluable in other areas (such as the work environment, volunteer duties etc). Minimising the opportunities for 'distractions' will help students to succeed when working independently. Saying that, students should still look for opportunities for networking with other students (for study and work purposes alike).
Organization and time management	Students will find it helpful to identify all tasks that need to be completed on a weekly or monthly basis. This includes coursework, assignments, work commitments, personal/family activities and so on. Once ALL tasks have been identified, an overall timetable can be developed, including the days or times allocated to completing course requirements. Students may find it helpful to allocate specific study day(s), sessions for writing assignments, reading sessions, etc. within their personalized timetable.
Realistic workload	It is important that students are realistic about the workload that they are taking on. For example, if they are working full time, are new to studying, or they are a returning student, then starting with a smaller course load may be more suitable. Students who have concerns in this area are welcome to contact the ASO Academic Advisor for an appointment to discuss their concerns and strategies to deal with them via phone or in person.
Clear communication	In an online environment, students must be willing to ask questions, discuss issues and generally be up front when communicating with the teaching team and fellow students. Making the most of online discussions will help students in this area. Ensuring that the message is clear is of utmost importance in an online environment, as the physical communication clues (such as body language) are not present, making it somewhat easier to misinterpret the message. Making the questions useful to the student's personal learning will also help to make the subject more understandable.
Access to resources	A requirement of taking an online course is that students must have access to high-speed internet (ADSL, cable, or better) and meet the minimum computer requirements identified during enrollment. Other resource that students should ensure they have access to include books, articles, dedicated work space, stationary, etc.

Adapted from Roper, A.R. (2007) and Bass, S. (nd)

TA Roles and Responsibilities

In the online environment, it is important that the existing design and framework of the course is maintained in order to preserve the integrity of the course. The role of the TA is to facilitate student learning within this framework. In the absence of the face-to-face environment and the feedback loop that occurs naturally within that environment, online communication and learner support are key. Communication takes place through feedback on assignments, facilitated online discussions, regular progress reports and real-time chats. A significant investment of time from both students and Instructors/TAs is required to sustain a vibrant and effective online learning community.

Each Instructor will identify the roles and responsibilities that you, as a TA, will be taking on. We encourage you to have this dialogue with your Instructor early on and to continue to discuss any issues that you may be having as you progress through the course with your students.

Some of the responsibilities that you **may** be asked to do include:
- Marking tests
- Marking assignments
- Marking exams (if applicable)
- Answering student emails
- Managing the course Q&A forum
- Facilitating discussion forums

If you are asked to carry out marking duties, your Instructor will advise you as to how the process will work. Most courses will have the assessment details, including the marking rubrics, posted for students to be able to view online. If this is your first time as a TA, don't hesitate to ask either ASO or your Instructor for additional help regarding the use of the gradebook facility within onQ, using embedded marking rubrics, navigating the assessment submission folders, and so on.

If you are asked to facilitate discussion forums/activities, please make sure that you have read our 'Facilitating Discussion Forums' section of this Resource Guide. Experience tells us that you will need to participate enough to show interest but not too much as you may find that the discussion is stifled and the students end up just waiting to have your final answer! Essentially, facilitating discussion forums is somewhat of a balancing act. Initially, you will need to make comments fairly regularly, but as the students gain confidence, you will then be able to begin to wait until their discussion has taken hold (and probably only end up contributing every other day).

The following are general guidelines outlining some of the areas you may wish to consider at various stages of the course.
Note: the requirements of each course will vary. As a TA, you should clarify your specific roles & requirements directly with your Instructor.

Before / Once the Course Starts

- Familiarize yourself with the course layout.
- Discuss your roles and responsibilities with your Instructor.
- Review the course from a students perspective.
  What questions do you think they may ask? Where possible, discuss these with your Instructor and the teaching team.

During the First Week

- **Monitor the course questions forum.**
  If answering the questions posed in the course questions forum is one of your responsibilities, answer questions within 24 hours.
  If you are not responsible for answering the questions, it is still worthwhile to monitor them as this will help cultivate an understanding of students' experiences of the course.
- **Participate in the Introductory Forum, if applicable.**
  Students not only enjoy getting to know each other, but their teaching team as well!
- **Identify and talk to ASO and/or your Instructor about what additional training you feel you may need.**

While the Course is Running

- **Read student emails and the forums frequently, responding to students when applicable.**
  This is extremely important in an online course, since students usually do not have the option of finding their Instructor in person for urgent matters. Respond within 24 hours.
- **Participate in discussion activities as appropriate, if applicable.**
- **Grade assignments and provide feedback to students in a timely manner, if applicable.**
  Turnaround time should be within a week.
- **Assign grades in onQ, if applicable.**
- **Liaise with your Instructor regularly about any questions you may have or potential issues that you have identified.**

At the End of the Course

- Assign any remaining grades in onQ, if applicable.
- Grade any exams, if applicable.
- Have a debrief with your Instructor and discuss how the course went, what could have been improved and any outstanding actions.

Administrative Information

The following information is for your reference only. Instructors normally deal with these areas and will contact ASO as required. However, it may still be useful to have an understanding of some of the issues that may arise, and the actions that your Instructor may take.

Student Accommodations

- Your course onQ page should have an 'Accommodation and Considerations' Homepage widget. (If it does not, please let the instructor know.)

- Encourage students to upload their accommodation letter through the Accommodation/Considerations widget.

- If a student sends their accommodations letter from Accessibility Services (i.e., through email), please forward the letter to asc.online@queensu.ca. We will ensure that the letter gets uploaded to the Accommodations widget, and that all accommodations are applied to online quizzes and midterms as well as online final exams.

- If ASO receives an accommodations letter directly from a student, we will set up the appropriate accommodations in the course and follow up with the Instructor.

- Extensions for assignments are at the discretion of the Instructor.

Technical Support

- During working hours (Monday to Friday from 9 am to 4 pm) students can **contact the ASO office** if they are experiencing technical difficulty in the course onQ site. We recommend that quiz and assignment deadlines fall during these working hours.

- The main ASO email (asc.online@queensu.ca) is **monitored Monday-Friday from 8:30-4:30** to provide technical support to you as needed. A LMS specialist will answer your email within 24 hours Monday-Friday.

- If your course uses Zoom, meetings can be accessed from the course's Zoom page. If you experience an issue during your Zoom meeting you can contact asozoom@queensu.ca during regular working hours or the ITServices Support Center through phone (613-533-6666) or online chat outside of regular working hours.

- If you would like training in using Zoom or need to book a meeting, please send fill out the Zoom Meeting Request Form

onQ Forums

- During the term, we will post reminders to students about upcoming sessional dates (i.e., last day add/drop, examination-related information, etc.).

- The Course Questions forum is monitored on a regular basis by the ASO team. We will follow up with the Instructor regarding any outstanding issues (for example, those that may still require a response or further information) and respond to administrative-related questions in the forums as needed.

Questions

- If you have questions about your course, please liaise directly with your Instructor who will be your first point-of-contact.

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