



# **TA Resource Guide**

for the

## **Online Environment**



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## 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
- 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.

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*"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)

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# Online vs On-Campus Learning

## Online Learning

### Advantages of Online Learning

- Flexibility to have discussions at any point of time.
- Additional interaction among students and Instructors.
- Responsibility for his or her learning.
- Students work 'virtual' classes into their own time.
- Students can study at their own pace, increasing the course load as necessary.
- Students can revisit lecture material as required.
- Can lead to 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 pc's and/or beginner-level pc skills.
- Won't have the 'experience' of utilising traditional on-campus facilities (such as gyms, residence halls, libraries etc.)
- Perception of the difficulty in fostering peer collaboration & 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
<b>1 Maximize Learner-Instructor Contact</b>	Learners need to feel supported and Instructors aware of learners' concerns.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• be present</li> <li>• facilitate communication</li> <li>• manage conflict</li> </ul>
<b>2 Support peer-to-peer contact, teaching and learning</b>	Learners need to feel connected to each other and this helps build a strong community of learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• empower learners</li> <li>• set up a social forum</li> <li>• provide clear guidelines</li> </ul>
<b>3 Emphasize active learning and applied practice</b>	Learners see the Instructor as an active participant and are more likely to model this behaviour.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• inspire and support learners</li> <li>• encourage connections</li> <li>• motivate learners</li> </ul>
<b>4 Provide prompt feedback</b>	Affirm learners' achievements and knowledge to promote greater online confidence and participation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• respond to general questions promptly</li> <li>• keep learners on track</li> <li>• provide timely feedback</li> </ul>
<b>5 Allocate realistic amounts of time for effective learnings</b>	Learners and teachers learn to use their time well and setting this precedence establishes the basis for high performance for everyone.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• define time and expectations upfront</li> <li>• establish a basis for performance</li> <li>• outline time management for learning content</li> </ul>
<b>6 Good practice communicates high expectations</b>	Instructors set high expectations for not only themselves but also for their students by expecting them to perform well.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• set high expectations</li> <li>• expect that students will perform well</li> <li>• make extra efforts</li> </ul>
<b>7 Emphasize respect for diverse learning styles</b>	Each learner brings different talents and ways of learning to us.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provide opportunities for students to display talents</li> <li>• create a variety of ways for students to learn</li> </ul>

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. Additionally, active learning increases student's knowledge of content and promotes critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Anderson et al. 2005; Williams & Lahman, 2011). Further, 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 (p316)".*

*Croxton, 2014*

## 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 any 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 humor 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 current 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 (ie 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/programs. Groups will need to be working closely and intensely together for a long 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 – perhaps check in on them privately (offline) to see why they are not participating.
- Get the noisier chatterers to focus 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 some disputes do become nasty...it is often difficult to solve such disputes online.
- Be very careful in the use of humour, irony or satire – these often do not come across as intended in online environments.

## Providing Feedback

*Feedback helps direct (students) 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.
- 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 (which doesn't contribute to final grades per se, but helps students to learn where and how they can make improvements) and summative feedback (where student learning is evaluated and a final grade for a piece of assessment is provided). In other words, feedback is **information about how we're doing in our efforts to reach a goal**. In order for a student 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 (it will be up to your Instructor to allocate your specific duties), you will often find that you need to give feedback to some of your 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. When giving feedback, consider... 'given the feedback, does the learner have some ideas about how to improve'?

On a practical level, examples of what feedback can 'look' like is as follows:

<b>Timely:</b>	Provide feedback on assignments within 7 days Respond to forums & emails within 24 hours
<b>Meaningful:</b>	Target individual needs Specifically link to assessment criteria
<b>In-time:</b>	Give time for the student to improve before the next assignment
<b>Constructive:</b>	Highlight strengths and weaknesses

The following table illustrates seven (7) key areas that should be considered when providing feedback:

<b>Feedback should be:</b>	<b>Which means:</b>
<b>Goal-referenced</b>	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...')
<b>Tangible and Transparent</b>	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'.
<b>Actionable</b>	Let the student know what they have to do (ie 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.
<b>User-friendly (specific and personalized)</b>	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).
<b>Timely</b>	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).
<b>Ongoing</b>	Ongoing feedback provides the student with the opportunity to adapt their skills, style etc and then implement the advice in a practical manner.
<b>Consistent</b>	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.

*As adapted from Wiggins G (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 & skills that students will need to consider developing in order to succeed in the online environment :

<b>Self motivation</b>	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.
<b>Independent working</b>	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).
<b>Organization &amp; time management</b>	Students will find it helpful to identify all tasks that need to be completed on a weekly/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/times allocated to completing course requirements. Students may find it helpful to allocate specific study day(s), sessions for writing assignments, reading ‘slots’ etc within their personalized timetable.
<b>Realistic workload</b>	It is important that students are realistic about the workload that they are taking on. For example, if they are working full time, new to online study or 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).
<b>Clear communication</b>	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. Doing so as clearly as possible to ensure 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.
<b>Access to resources</b>	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.

as 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 & 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 questions & answers 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 assessments in dropbox and so on.

If you are asked to facilitate discussion forums/activities, please make sure that you have read our 'Facilitating Discussions' section (pages 8-9 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 & responsibilities with your Instructor.
- Review the course through a 'student's eyes'. What questions do you think they may ask? Where possible, discuss these with your Instructor / 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 give you a good 'feel' for what the students are thinking.
- 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 as appropriate (if 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 any 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 'de-brief' 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. As a rule, Instructors will deal with these areas and will contact ASO as required. However, it may still be of use to you to have an understanding of some of the issues that may arise, and the actions that your Instructor may take.

### Student Accommodations

- If a student sends their accommodations letter from Accessibility Services, please forward the letter to your Instructor who will then liaise with ASO. We will ensure that the accommodations are met in online quizzes and midterms as well as online and face-to-face final exams. Extensions for assignments are at the discretion of the Instructor.
- 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.

### Technical Support

- During working hours (Monday-Friday from 9-4) students can contact the ASO office if they are experiencing technical difficulty in the course site. We recommend to Instructors that quiz and assignment deadlines fall during these working hours.
- The main ASO email ([asc.online@queensu.ca](mailto:asc.online@queensu.ca)) is monitored on weekends to provide technical support as needed.
- If your course uses 'Zoom' for synchronous sessions (or other similar platforms such as 'Adobe Connect'), we will provide technical support during mandatory course sessions. If you would like training in using Zoom etc., please contact [asozoom@queensu.ca](mailto:asozoom@queensu.ca).

### 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.



## Examinations

- If your course has a final proctored exam, a print copy of the exam is due to the Exams Office 4 weeks prior to the start of the examination period. Information will be emailed to the Instructors ahead of this deadline. Students writing with an online proctor will complete their exam in onQ.
- Students writing **off-campus** will write their proctored exam on the date scheduled by the University although the start time may vary slightly. Many of the p.m. exams start at 1:00 p.m. or 1:30 p.m. depending on the Exam Centre. An e-mail is sent to these students approximately 2 weeks prior to the exam period with the exam location details and confirming the date and start time. If a student has provided ASO with a letter from Accessibility Services, the accommodations will be included in the e-mail. If you receive questions from students about their exam, please liaise with your Instructor as to the action that they wish to take. In some cases, your Instructor may contact ASO for assistance regarding exam logistics.
- Students who contact us to request a deferred exam are referred to the Instructor. The decision to defer an exam is at the discretion of the Instructor based on the extenuating circumstances and appropriate documentation. If the student is an on-campus student, arrangements to write the deferred exam are between the student and the Instructor. If the student is off-campus, ASO will work with the Instructor and student to find the best date/time for the student to write the deferred exam. Students can only write an exam early with approval from the Associate Dean (Studies) and support from the Instructor. Approval is only granted in very exceptional circumstances.

## 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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