

Incorporating Undergraduate Learning Assistants into the Online Environment at RIT

Learning Assistants (LAs) are undergraduate students trained in pedagogy who assist with teaching courses at RIT. LAs are skilled, committed students who are able to support student learning and assist faculty with their teaching responsibilities through a variety of means, some of which are listed below. For more information on the LA Program at RIT please visit our [website](#) or contact Emily Mehlman, the LA Program Coordinator (ekmsps@rit.edu).

Below you will find a preliminary list of general considerations to make when planning/running an online course along with possible tasks/roles that an LA could undertake in support of these considerations.

Please note, this list is expanding as more information and ideas are compiled. Visit the [Google Doc](#) to see the most updated version.

Planning phase

1. Begin planning by identifying important learning outcomes/goals.
 - a. LAs can help identify what course material was most impactful for them as a student and provide insight into how the knowledge gained from this course carried over to future classes. This information can aid in your assessment of how to emphasize your learning goals and how to plan course material around these decisions.
 - b. An important point here, be mindful of the amount of information being presented to students. TLS at RIT has excellent [resources](#) for determining the amount of time to expect for student commitment to an online class. This can be a tricky math problem to solve when estimating the actual time and workload of your average student. LAs, having been students themselves, both online and in person, can help advise on the typical time to completion for particular tasks. They can also provide context to the typical day to day time table for students taking multiple online courses and help faculty balance their course assignments within the greater scope of the student experience.
2. Once learning outcomes have been identified, work backwards to determine acceptable assessments to evaluate student progress.
 - a. These assessments are ideally a mix of formative and summative assessment, as appropriate for each class.
 - b. LAs have experience creating assessment material and are particularly skilled at discussing and brainstorming formative assessment ideas.
3. Finally, create learning materials that map onto the learning outcomes and assessment identified above.
 - a. (These three steps are the three main phases outlined by Wiggins and McTighe in their process of Backwards Design).

- b. LAs are trained in creating learning materials using Backwards Design methods. In addition, they have experience creating lesson plans, incorporating active learning, and aligning learning outcomes with learning materials. They can have amazing ideas so be sure to ask them!
4. Consider what modality is best for your course: asynchronous (recommended by ILI and TLS), synchronous meetings, or blending your class with synchronous and asynchronous meeting modalities.
 - a. In allforms, LAs can aid in the progress of the class.
 - b. In a synchronous class, LAs can perform many of the duties assigned to LAs in an in-person class (facilitating small group discussion, answering questions, etc).
 - c. In an asynchronous class, LAs can perform the duties outlined below and also provide insight into course schedules, activities, and lessons that would be beneficial to the group. This perspective is provided by their own experience and also possible insights they gain from forming relationships with the students in the class.
5. Keep in mind accessibility, cultural differences, and other barriers to individual student learning.
 - a. International students may need additional support because of technology or language barriers.
 - b. Deaf/hard of hearing students may require ASL interpretation or captioning.
 - c. LAs can be a voice for those students whose needs may have been overlooked.
 - d. LAs can caption and post videos of lectures.
 - e. LAs can help provide a more personal connection to individuals in the class. This can help ensure that everyone in the class gets their needs met and feels like a valued part of the learning classroom community.

Course phase- What to do once you are running an online course

1. Provide an “orientation” for students to familiarize themselves with the course format, technology, and other virtual “classroom” quirks and practices
 - a. LAs can master this technology and run these sessions independently on the first day or the weekend before classes begin.
2. Establish “ground rules” or “rules of engagement” for the online learning environment.
 - a. A formal list of behaviors, practices, and expectations is ideally developed collaboratively by individuals in the class so that there is consensus on the terms decided. LAs have experience with this exercise and have been trained to cultivate discussions which make this practice effective and productive so that the final product is not simply a list of general, common sense terms (i.e., instead of “be respectful”, LAs can facilitate a discussion amongst the group which produces concrete examples such as “do not interrupt”, “make an effort to understand”, and “actively listen to others ideas”). Ideally this takes place in the first class, however, a post-first-class LA session could be utilized to accomplish this task along with other community building activities.

3. Maintain an FAQ section of the course so that students can get the help they need on their own.
 - a. LAs can create, edit, and maintain this list.
4. Utilize multiple forms of communication.
 - a. LAs are excellent at digital communication and could be put in charge of managing a Slack or other messaging program that students can use to get updates on the course, ask quick questions, and to generally form a community. This should be separate from the standard class platform such as MyCourses which does not have a messenger function.
5. Utilize multiple forms of media to present ideas.
 - a. LAs can help gather, review, and post alternative media on course content. For example, if you give a lecture on mitosis, the LA could seek out (or create!) videos, podcasts, infographics, etc, on mitosis and place them on the course website as an adjunct to the core material. This helps you achieve a more universally designed class that supports multiple learning preferences and challenges students to think about concepts in new ways, but importantly by reducing the time and effort needed by you the faculty to create a comprehensive list of resources.
6. When utilizing asynchronous class meetings, focus on the strengths of that modality.
 - a. In an asynchronous learning environment, the student has a greater opportunity for individual reflection and a greater ability to connect with other students in the class through online discussions and assigned collaborative learning exercises.
 - i. Working with an LA to create opportunities for student reflection can provide learning support agnostic of content. LAs are able to create writing prompts, guided reflection forms, formative assessment, and other (small and large) class materials that provide opportunities for student reflection.
 - ii. In addition to the creation of these materials, LAs are able to evaluate student reflections and provide feedback in the form of small group discussion or written commentary that reinforces the students insights gleaned from reflecting on the content and learning process.
 - iii. LAs are experts in facilitating small group discussion. If incorporating collaborative learning into an online course, LAs can facilitate group work and monitor group progress by attending group meetings outside of class, developing and managing check points for groups which require short progress reports/check-ins with the LA, and aiding faculty in the development of collaborative learning materials based on the LAs prior experience and knowledge.
7. Support peer-peer discussion and learning on online forums.
 - a. LAs can monitor online discussion forums where students argue and discuss their ideas about course content in a more informal setting. These discussions can be prime locations to mine material to be revisited in class and LAs can monitor these forums seeking out quotes from students worth reexamining.

- b. In addition, LAs can actively facilitate online discussions by choosing specific student responses or comments to highlight or challenge. In doing this, the LA not only engages individual students to think critically, but they provide an important model for engagement in an online forum. Commenting on a handful of student responses implicitly encourages others in the class to engage with and respond to their peers thoughts in the online environment.
 - c. Finally, by prompting further discussion and following up with student ideas, LAs can provide formal acknowledgement and reassurance to students so that they feel that putting effort into online discussions is meaningful and not simply a point requirement or “busy work”.
- 8. Allow opportunities for students to get early feedback on assignments. Especially those of high point value or complexity.
 - a. LAs can provide informal feedback on student work and help manage the potential large numbers of submissions of draft work. Since all work here is a draft, grading and confidentiality considerations are less critical as long as the application of the feedback is made intentional.
- 9. Depending on your approach to online learning, you may encounter an increase or decrease in your grading load based on the assignments you choose to assign and the size of your class. It can be a challenge to balance time devoted to teaching to time devoted to providing thorough, meaningful feedback to students.
 - a. LAs can assist with grading, particularly with assignments where “scoring” (i.e., true/false, multiple choice, etc) is the main form of assessment.
 - b. Grading of additional, more in depth assignments is possible, but we suggest training the LA on the exact expectations for each assignment prior to assigning any of these more complex grading responsibilities.
- 10. Recognize that your students will be taking on more autonomy and ownership of their learning.
 - a. In the online format, more organization, initiative, and commitment to the learning process must be contributed by the student. This may be a new and challenging experience for them, in addition to the content delivered by your course. LAs can act as a support to students within this realm by providing study tools, organizational suggestions, and personalized check-ins to keep students on track and motivated.
- 11. The online environment can feel sterile and exceedingly formal because of the lack of human face-to-face interaction. Numerous studies have identified interaction with a course instructor to be a primary contributor to student satisfaction in online courses. Providing opportunities for formal and informal communication, opportunities for interpersonal connections, and models for productive social engagement is crucial to maintaining class culture and comfort.
 - a. LAs can develop ice breaker activities that can be used to begin classes and create a greater sense of community.

- b. LAs are fluent in online communication and can help create and post information using online parlance which may create a greater sense of involvement and commitment to the course by students.
- c. If an LA uses portions of the online course environment such as the FAQ section or an online discussion forum, students observe their peer utilizing these resources and then have a model for their own participation.
- d. Having an additional person who can assist with your course and interactions with students can help create connections with more of the students in your class.

References

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