

Lessons from being the Online Support TA in Summer 2020 ▪ *Julianne Doner*

In Summer 2020, I was hired to be an online support TA for the Linguistics Department at UToronto St. George. During this time, I fielded instructor and TA questions on how to navigate online learning, both the technical aspects and the broader pedagogical concerns. Subsequently, I was hired to do the same job at Mississauga in Fall 2020. Here are some takeaways.

A gap in faculty training and resources. After I ran my faculty webinars, one of the pieces of feedback I received is that, unlike the other trainings they attended, I gave instructions on how to actually “do” things. At my university, at least, the teaching support centres focused on very broad pedagogical goals and structural issues, while the IT support team focused on how to do very specific technical things, but there was no one giving instruction on how to creatively make use of the technological tools to meet your pedagogical goals. For example, at my webinars, we discussed how to use a collaborative documents to increase student engagement in break-out group sessions and how sharing a doodling whiteboard while waiting for class to begin creates a more welcoming and social environment and encourages students to come early.

Having a department repository of FAQs, tips, and resources is helpful. Every time I was asked a question, I also put the answer to the question in an online google doc. This google doc had a Table of Contents with hyperlinks to each section, and so it was easy to find the answers you were looking for. There were also screenshots demonstrating how to do particular things or links to other resources, as appropriate. I also gathered ideas from instructors and the Internet at large. Overall, the final google doc is approximately 130 pages long. By the end of my second semester as online support TA, I was not getting very many questions at all. One thing that makes this document unique is that it is both field- and department-specific. I plan to share a public version of this document later (once it is more carefully edited and anonymized).

TAs often think creatively about accessibility. I ran six different webinars with break-out sessions brainstorming accessibility issues and solutions specific to online teaching over the course of two semesters, across two different departments, two for faculty and four for TAs. In a ten-minute break-out session, the faculty break-out groups brainstormed an average of two issues each (n=3, range 0-4) while the TA groups brainstormed an average of 3.7 issues each (n=14, range 1-7), and had more diversity in possible solutions. Your TAs are a valuable resource!

Student participation and engagement can often increase in online learning environments.

When my classes transitioned to online learning in March 2020, I discovered that fewer of my students showed up to the (optional) synchronous lectures but those that did come were more active than in in-person classes. Students who never spoke in class were comfortable asking questions over chat. My summer class was also very active. Some things that help increase student participation include (a) spending time on the first few days of class making sure students know how to navigate your course website and your lecture platform, especially the interactive options; (b) actively soliciting participation in your first few classes and establishing etiquette for asking questions; (c) designing participation activities that take advantage of the properties of online learning (for example, invite students to annotate the slides); (d) allowing for multiple different ways to participate, synchronously and asynchronously; (e) creating an environment where students feel heard (i.e., by creating *and responding to* student surveys); (f) treating students as holistic humans, and not learning robots (i.e., by creating opportunities for them to discuss their lives outside of school with each other); (g) designing assignments based on higher-order learning and trust rather than proctoring software; and more.

Close. Even though online learning is not ideal, it has many advantages that can be leveraged with creativity and collaboration, and may even improve in-person classes in the future.