

ONLINE *ON PURPOSE*

a teaching guide created by TLC Fellows
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MACAULAY
HONORS COLLEGE

**TEACHING
LEARNING &
COLLABORATORY**

The logo for the Teaching & Learning Collaboratory features a stylized graphic of three human figures in red, blue, and orange, arranged in a circle to suggest collaboration.

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WHAT THIS GUIDE OFFERS

This guide offers some grounding philosophies and a general approach, alongside more directed strategies and techniques for teaching “Online On Purpose.” Theory and practice are intertwined throughout the guide. Some ideas may be new, others may reflect what you are already doing. In fact, we don’t suggest reinventing the wheel; your existing pedagogical practices and teaching tools – including simple analog strategies – are still valuable and can fit within the “Online On Purpose” frame.

These are unprecedented times, which present new challenges to effective teaching, but also provide valuable opportunities to reflect upon and rethink our teaching: to connect with students and the current moment in a variety of ways; to reconsider the kinds of questions our classes ask; and to foster equity and access throughout.

We have included [hyperlinks](#) to outside resources and to allow you to navigate through the different sections of this guide. You can also use the [Table of Contents](#) to jump to a specific section.

PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ONLINE

From community-building and participation to assignment design and assessment, the best practices for online instruction offered here are grounded in a commitment to the idea that **justice – as both a goal and a process of centering equity, diversity, and access – is fundamental to strong teaching**. This guide is part of an ongoing effort by TLC Fellows to understand and counter the racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other historical and contemporary systems of discrimination that have created real disparities in people's lives. The work of exposing these systems, and the intellectual and political ways they surface for both instructors and students in classrooms (be they online or in person), is necessarily never complete. We invite you to join us in this work of thinking critically about our own roles in these systems, as well as what and how we teach, as you engage with the strategies of "Online On Purpose."

We encourage **compassion and flexibility**. Particularly in this moment, students and instructors alike may be facing major, and often unseen, challenges. By building more equity-minded, socially conscious spaces within our classrooms, we can model and practice a kind of care that supports learning at the same time as it prepares students to tackle social problems they see, and often personally experience, in the world beyond.

Relatedly, we encourage **connection and community**, between instructors and students, as well as among students. To that end, all online classes should meet synchronously, while also allowing for asynchronous engagement, and always remember to consider the time commitments students are asked to make to the class.

Routine and predictability combined with **flexibility and student choice** gives all students a better chance of success, catering to diverse learning styles and providing students with different ways to demonstrate their learning.

Course design and practices should empower students as participants in their own learning, in a mutually supportive environment. Student-centered, collaborative instruction provides students with the intrinsic reward of personal progress, encouraging deeper, long-lasting investment in their education. While online teaching presents certain challenges, it also prompts creative strategies that can give students greater ownership over their class work and cater to their individual needs and strengths.

TECHNICALITIES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ONLINE

This guide provides some basic approaches and strategies for creating an effective online class. As always, your TLC Fellow is there to help you implement these and can offer general guidance, workshops, tips and technical assistance.

Your TLC Fellow can set up an Eportfolio site that can function as an analogous space to a classroom where you can not only post course materials and assignments, but encourage students to contribute and respond to content, facilitate discussion and class engagement, build collaborative class projects, and create a classroom community.

Several other platforms are an option also. Your TLC Fellow can walk you through the pros and cons and may be able to assist with the set-up and functions of each.

BUILDING COMMUNITY IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

Creating a sense of community is key for any successful learning environment, but this is both especially important and rather difficult when learning happens remotely. It is a particular challenge to establish trust and a collaborative spirit when you're faced with a class full of students whom you've never met, and who may not know one another. Here are some tips for creating community despite the digital divide.

- **Welcome students to the class (in advance of class)!** Reaching out to students in advance of class goes a long way toward building connections, fostering community, and empowering students even before the semester begins!
 - **Send out a welcome email**, introducing yourself and the course, and directing students to the Eportfolio site (or other platform where they can find course information). Consider making a brief welcome [video](#) (your TLC Fellow can help).
 - **Survey students** to help you better plan your class and respond to their individual and collective needs and interests. Your TLC Fellow can assist with setting this up. (Note: If you are teaching Seminar 3: Science Forward, you may have already seen an example of a survey such as these. TLC Fellow Dominique Nisperos, for instance, has some great examples of surveys for [learning more about students](#) and also for specifically [understanding their](#)

remote learning circumstances; you may wish to generate some combination of these with your TLC Fellow.)

Consider surveying students about the following:

- how they are accessing the internet (availability, technology, devices)
 - pronouns
 - preferred ways of communicating as a class (email announcement, group chat, Slack, etc.)
 - ways of learning, ways of brainstorming
 - interests, a skill they could teach the class, major (this may assist you in grouping students)
 - previous (Spring 2020) online experience
 - if they foresee any barriers to their learning, so you can plan for accommodations
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- **First day activities like icebreakers** are a great way to have students introduce themselves to you and others in the class. Consider having students contribute to a class directory, create a bio post, or share an object of importance to them, favorite quote, photo, etc. Your TLC Fellow can help with ideas and also with setting this up on the Eportfolio site.
 - **Additional / alternative spaces for student communication** can provide students more informal spaces to collaborate, ask questions, and support one another, analogous to the ways in which students might communicate before and after in-person classes. These can also be great ways for groups to

correspond about group work, or Accountability Buddies to check in with each other.

- Students may be familiar with Slack or GroupMe, or they can simply email, or use shared Google docs. You might leave it up to the students to decide! Your TLC Fellow can support this.
- **The Eportfolio is a collaborative space.** Ask students to contribute content – perhaps podcasts, videos, news clips, articles, charts, etc. – to the course. Many instructors use Eportfolio for a weekly blog, where students can also comment on each other's reflections in a low-pressure forum.
 - Creating space for students to share the connections they are making encourages engagement with each other and the course material and empowers them as learners. Your TLC Fellow can help build this space into the Eportfolio.
- Consider **collaborative annotation** to tackle challenging readings. Rather than having students struggle alone, encourage them to ask questions and grapple with ideas together using something like Google docs, [Genius.com](https://www.genius.com/), or [Hypothes.is](https://hypothes.is/). Your TLC Fellow can help set up these tools, and train you and your students to use them.

STUDENT SUCCESS IN ONLINE COURSES

***Building community** is a crucial part of supporting students as they learn online. Here are some other ways you can set your students up for success in your online class.*

- Establishing and maintaining contact is key for online classes. Be very clear about the **forms of communication** the class will use and the **virtual spaces** (environments) where class meets/students interact.
 - Where should students go for class sessions? When they have questions? To find resources/readings/information? To do group work? To submit assignments? Where should they look for announcements from you?
 - Provide links in the syllabus and on the Eportfolio for:
 - **Google Meet / Zoom** (or other synchronous platform)
 - **Eportfolio class website**
 - **Slack / GroupMe / WhatsApp** (if you will use a group chat to communicate as a class)

Important note: In advance of the first class, the synchronous platform link and Eportfolio site information should be posted on Blackboard, as well as provided to the campus Macaulay Director.

- Providing a **detailed semester overview** in the syllabus (with dates, readings, assignments, etc., as well as which parts of the class are synchronous/asynchronous) makes expectations for the course clear for students and helps students to get ahead when they can or catch up if they fall behind.

- Develop a **consistent rhythm** for your course schedule so weekly classwork can become habitual for students. Online is different from in-person; using a format that is more or less similar each week can be extremely beneficial in a course that is online.
 - Knowing that **every week follows a similar structure or schedule** – for example, every week there will be readings + individual response + group activity – helps students both balance their workloads with other classes and stay on top of things in this class.

 - **Use consistent due dates for repeated assignments**, for example making blog posts always due on Tuesday and response to a classmate’s post always due on Thursday.

- Give students a **recommended work schedule** with a day-by-day breakdown of what they should work on to keep up with the course.
 - Why?
 - This helps students to stay on top of the workload for the course and balance their time for other courses and commitments.

- Writing out a schedule for students will help you gauge whether the workload you are assigning is manageable in a particular time frame.
 - It should also aid you in planning and managing your schedule with regard to providing student feedback or engaging with student responses.
- Examples:
- Here is [one example](#) that provides students the predictable rhythm of the course, both in terms of what is expected from them (tasks and processes), and what they can expect from the instructor.
 - Here is another recommended schedule from Dr. Kelly O'Donnell's [Seminar 3: Science Forward](#) course at Macaulay

Personal Schedule

Each week will have a detailed page on the course site. All weekly deadlines are on Fridays at 5pm with the exception of comments on your classmates' posts in the Discussion Forum, which are due on Mondays at 5pm. The comments are due on Mondays because I realize that, once or twice, you may not get the discussion in until right before the deadline and I want to give your classmates a chance to engage in a conversation with your posts. Before we get into the specific weekly topics, you may find it helpful to follow this personal schedule below. You can adjust this to suit your needs, but I highly recommend setting up a schedule similar to this one as soon as you can when the semester starts. Online courses require you to be very good at managing your own time.

Recommended Personal Schedule

Monday/Tuesday – Read/watch required papers and videos and take the self-assessment

Wednesday – Our class meets, make a discussion post

Thursday – Work on Assignments (including activities and major assignments)

Friday – Complete the assignments for the week

Saturday/Sunday – Read your classmates' posts and make your (at least) two comments.

- Keep your course tools simple.
 - The **analog tools** you are already familiar with like a well-structured syllabus and clear assessment rubrics are also effective in an online teaching environment.
 - **Digital tools can facilitate learning and participation** in your class, but keep in mind that students will need time to learn how to use them. Your TLC Fellow can help you choose simple, pedagogically effective digital tools, and can run synchronous training workshops or provide asynchronous tutorials for your students.
- **Adjust content expectations and be mindful of time demands.** Be aware that you likely won't be able to cover the same amount of course material as you would with an in-person class.
 - Humans aren't able to **read and digest** the same length texts online as we can in print, so it is best to moderate your expectations for the amount of reading students will be able to accomplish each week.
 - If there is a lengthy text that you consider essential for your course, provide **excerpts** which get at the meat of the reading in lieu of requiring students to complete it in full.
 - If a certain amount of coverage is necessary, you may also consider a modified version of the **“jigsaw method”**: making smaller groups responsible for reading, digesting, and synthesizing a section of the

reading for the rest of the class. The task of explaining to their peers can be beneficial in itself.

- While synchronous class sessions are expected in all Macaulay courses, there are a number of ways to set up synchronous sessions aside from whole-class activities or group discussion.

Synchronous sessions may also be used for

- small group work
- workshops with a TLC Fellow
- one-on-one conferences with the instructor (scheduling these periodically may be especially valuable)

- Courses do not need to meet for all of the hours listed for the course, and in fact, it may be more useful to **designate part of those class hours** for students to **complete activities asynchronously**, working individually or in small groups.

- **Approach the semester with a spirit of generosity and compassion.** This means reaching out to students regularly, following up with students who fall out of touch (don't assume they are "slacking off"), being understanding about requests for additional time (within reason), using free open-access resources as much as possible. **Remember that their home situation may present them with difficulties that aren't evident to you.** If students for whatever reason are not able to join synchronous sessions, they should not be penalized. (See also [Online Assessment](#))

FACILITATING PARTICIPATION IN AN ONLINE COURSE

Actively participating in synchronous class discussions can be even more challenging in an online setting. If you are going to hold synchronous class discussions, have a clear plan for how students will engage. (Also see below for ideas about [holding classes online synchronously](#).)

- Determine a **procedure for hand-raising**. (See also [best practices for phone-ins](#).)
- **Actively call on students to contribute** (perhaps consider options like “[taking stack](#)” to ensure every student has a chance to speak up).
- There are a variety of reasons why students may find it difficult to join in discussions in your synchronous sessions. Promote equity and justice in your class practices by [offering options](#) for participation that **engage a multitude of ways students can demonstrate their interest and involvement** in your course.
- Relatedly, build in **low-stakes opportunities to participate**.
 - For example:
 - Use breakout rooms, if your online meeting platform supports them, to answer discussion questions and report back. Google docs can also be used – ask your TLC Fellow.

- Allow other formats for participating in discussion, like submitting a question via the platform's built-in chat feature.
 - Provide structuring questions beforehand so students can come prepared.
 - Have students come with one thing written out related to the reading – a question, a reaction/response, an agreement or disagreement, a favorite quote or passage – to share during class discussion.
- Help students feel more at ease participating in virtual discussion by building in **collaborative, asynchronous pre-discussion assignments**.
 - See [Reimagine the Discussion Board](#) for examples of activities you can adapt for your class.

HOLDING ONLINE CLASS SESSIONS SYNCHRONOUSLY

Use synchronous time for what benefits from in-person interaction – this includes building community, having discussion, sharing ideas but not lecture or slides.

- Create a **consistent structure for class sessions**. Offer an agenda for using the class time. Make clear to students your expectations of them during class meeting times.
- Always have a **backup plan** for what you'll do in the event of **internet connectivity issues** during a synchronous session. You'll want to think through the technological and the pedagogical issues that might arise: what this means for facilitating the class session, and any adjustments to the assignment structure that might be necessary.
- **Do not require that students have their cameras on**. It can be encouraged, but not required.
 - For a variety of reasons,
 - students may need to turn off their cameras, step away from the computer for a moment, or be otherwise interrupted.
 - some students may not be comfortable with showing their faces or their home environments on video.

- **Setting clear expectations** for student participation, while also **remaining flexible** in accommodating individual circumstances, fosters equity in the virtual classroom and will help students feel more comfortable both engaging with the class and taking care of their needs.
- **Major assignments should not be assessed synchronously.** A live presentation may factor into a grade but should not be the entirety of the grade (see [Online Assessment](#)).
- Best practices for:
 - **Dealing with phone-ins**
 - During class discussion, be sure to call on students who are on the phone.
 - Avoid basing class discussion on visual materials or screen sharing which phone-in students aren't able to see.
 - Remember that phone-in students can't see the chat. So occasionally stop to read out questions or comments posed in the chat.
 - [Accessibility](#)
 - [Universal Design](#)

ONLINE ASSESSMENT

From the outset, ask yourself whether your assessment criteria privileges white supremacist versions of “intelligence” and ideas about what knowledge should look like. You may find you want to back up a step and reconsider how the assignment is structured (see [Student Assignments](#) for more on this). Here are some other ways to promote equity and justice through your online assessment practices.

- **Avoid High-Stakes Assessment:** The bulk of a student’s grade should not come from a one-off, one-time assignment.
 - If your class has a large project that does make up the majority of the students’ grade, look back at how the assignment is **scaffolded** and consider assessing these smaller steps, providing feedback and opportunity for revision.
 - Grade the *process* rather than the *product* alone.
- **Transparent Expectations:** Students should know up front how they will be assessed. Are there certain elements that must be included, sources consulted, etc.? Is there a particular format that students are expected to use? Can a rubric be provided so that students are very clear what is required of them for this task?

- **Compassionate Assessment:** As with your overall approach to student success, err on the side of compassion. Online learning can be uniquely challenging, especially when students are used to in-person instruction.
 - If the work a student submits initially doesn't meet your expectations, rather than taking a punitive approach, you can:
 - Offer them an opportunity to try again.
 - Help them **identify and remove barriers to success**; perhaps another format will be better for demonstrating their learning, perhaps they need access to additional resources, etc.
 - Consider building in **deadline flexibility**.
 - Student self-assessment and/or reflection on what they learned in the process can be an effective supplement to your assessment of the product they submit.
- **Assessment of Live Presentations:** As noted above, a live presentation should count only as one element of a grade. Consider that connectivity issues are likely, and there is no guarantee that students have a private, uninterrupted space from which to present.
 - Students should not be penalized if circumstances affect their ability to give live presentations. Your TLC Fellow can assist in the creation of an asynchronous alternative like a video with voiceover for presentation slides.

STUDENT ASSIGNMENTS

In this section, you will find practical advice about assignment design, as well as examples and model assignments which you can incorporate into your course.

- **Larger Assignments:** Larger assignments should be **scaffolded** (broken down into steps, with opportunities for feedback and revision built into the process).
 - **Plan backwards.** Begin your thinking about the assignment by thinking about what you want students to have learned or practiced, and how they can demonstrate that.
 - Once you have an idea of what the “product” is, think about what students need to do and know to accomplish the larger task, and how they will do that.
What are the steps?
 - Once you have these steps, begin to **map them onto the course schedule**, giving students (and yourself) enough time to both complete the work, and also give and incorporate feedback. Include opportunities for student self-reflection.
 - As you consider how you will grade the larger assignments, consider assigning smaller point values to the scaffolded steps that are included in the final grade.

- **Group Projects:**

- Let students know **how you will support the project groups** throughout their process. For example, will you have a synchronous meeting with each group? Will you have the groups share a draft for feedback, and if so, in what format?
 - Remind students they can also contact your class's TLC Fellow for project assistance.
- Determine **how group projects will be assessed** and make expectations transparent to students. Will there be individual components that are graded? Will students be submitting self- and group-assessments?
- Online group projects necessitate a **clear workplan up front**. You should facilitate the creation of this work plan, rather than leaving it up to the initiative of the students. An effective work plan should cover:
 - How will group members communicate (group text message, WhatsApp, Slack, etc.)?
 - What are the tasks needed throughout the project and how will they be divided up?
 - What is the order of operations for completing tasks, and when will they be created (have students set internal deadlines for themselves)
 - What format will the group use to compile their work and resources (Google doc? Dropbox? etc.)

- **Regular Assignments:** Are there regular assignments – perhaps weekly – that students are expected to complete? What is the aim of these assignments? How will you and other students engage with them (reading and commenting in advance of class)? Is there enough time in the schedule for students realistically to complete the assignments? (See also [recommended student schedule](#).)

- **Reimagine the Discussion Board for Asynchronous Discussion:** Traditional online discussion boards can, but rarely do, lead to much student engagement from large numbers of students, particularly without a lot of instructor participation. Take a step back. What is the purpose of the discussion board, for you? Is it that students engage with the readings? Address a particular question? Prepare for whole-class discussion? Have a discussion with each other? Perhaps consider a different approach to the discussion board.
 - **Google Slide Discussion Space:** Instructor creates a slide with a prompt. Students are tasked with creating one slide and then use the comments feature to have discussions.

 - **Twitter / Instagram / Pinterest response:** Students find 1-5 images, articles, videos, music, quotes, or other things online and offer a brief explanation (two sentences) of their selection and how it relates/reflects the main argument or a major question in the reading. Students respond to two others. Your TLC Fellow can help set this up.

- **Blog Posts:** Assign one or two students (or a small group) to write a blog post that summarizes the main points of the readings, points out connections, raises questions, etc. The rest of the class is tasked with responding to these posts by answering a question, providing examples for the text that support or refute an argument made, etc.
 - A low-stakes, pre-discussion assignment such as responding to a blog post encourages students to engage with the material prior to meeting as a group and offers them ideas that they – and you! – can draw from during class discussion.

- **Flipgrid:** Have students work individually or in small groups to post brief (1 min) video responses to readings or prompts. [Flipgrid.com](https://flipgrid.com)

Note: Preparing and responding asynchronously takes time, so build that into the due dates and the “[recommended student schedule](#).”

- **Offer Options:** Offering students choices encourages them to take ownership of their work and learning process. It’s also an important way to foster equity in your classroom. By building in options, students who face particular challenges with an online format (due to learning differences or language barriers, for instance) can still demonstrate their interest and involvement through the methods suggested here.
 - For larger assignments and group projects, give students **freedom to select topics** based on their own interests and

consider offering **more than one option for the format** of what they produce.

- For regular assignments, consider offering a **menu of options** from which students may select, or a **Bingo card of choices** that leads students to cover a spectrum of styles / types / formats over the course of the semester.
- If you have a participation grade, be transparent about what you consider active participation, and also offer **multiple avenues for students to engage** that exceed your base requirements.
 - Consult the options in [reimagining the discussion board](#) for collaborative pre-discussion assignments that encourage diverse engagement.

WHAT DOES MY SYLLABUS LOOK LIKE?

We encourage you to think of the syllabus not as an assimilationist document that lays out criteria for students in your class, but as a relational document – one that helps students understand the process of learning in your course and the structures you have created to help support them in that process. The class goals and expectations you articulate in the syllabus serve as the foundation for the knowledge you and your students will build collectively during the semester.

The TLC Fellows will be offering **workshops on anti-racism and accessibility**, which can help you to consider the work your syllabus is doing in relation to best practices.

Does your syllabus also do the following?

Lists resources where students can find support at Macaulay and/or on your home campus: counseling/mental health services, advisors, library resources, writing support services.

Includes clear notation about the **virtual class spaces** that will be used for group communications, synchronous sessions, and course materials.

Prominently displays all **relevant course links**

- Have you also posted these links on Blackboard, and shared them with both your TLC Fellow and your campus Macaulay Director?

Provides a clear course structure & schedule, including:

- **Assignments / Grade Breakdown**
 - Brief description of assignments and how many points (percentage of final grade?) each is worth. Indicate those assignments that are regular/weekly and those that will be scaffolded.
 - See also [scaffolding](#); [assessment](#)

- **Semester Schedule**
 - [Detailed overview of semester](#): including dates/weeks, readings, assignments, etc., as well as which parts of the class are synchronous vs. asynchronous.

- [Recommended work schedule for students](#)