

## **Arts 100: Gamifying Student Engagement in the Faculty of Arts**

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**Abstract:** This project will evaluate various options for the design and delivery of Arts 100, a fully online, gamified courselet to be required of all future Faculty of Arts undergraduate students. Arts 100 will encourage students to be proactive with respect to their own academic, career and personal development. Research has linked student engagement to academic achievement. Arts 100 will promote student engagement in a number of ways: students will explore program options, majors, program enhancements (e.g. Study Abroad and Community Service Learning), academic expectations, and available academic and personal supports.

### **I. Project Overview and Rationale**

We are seeking funding to research the development of Arts 100, an innovative, online “mini-course” to be required of all future students entering the Faculty of Arts. The course will ensure that all of our students learn what the Faculty of Arts and the University of Alberta have to offer to support their academic and personal growth. Arts 100 will be central to the FoA’s new strategic plan.

The Faculty of Arts has seventeen departments, and offers 40 majors. The Faculty also offers program enhancements like community service learning (CSL), study abroad opportunities, certificate programs (e.g. global citizenship) and AWE, the FoA co-op work experience program. Internal research has indicated that students are not always aware of the many opportunities available to them in the faculty. The same research also identified that students lack key knowledge and skills in important areas: for example, understanding academic expectations, avoiding misconduct, and developing generic research skills (Allan & Clarke, 2007). Although there are multiple avenues for disseminating important information to students, there is presently no way to assure that students are engaging this content.

#### *Arts 100 History*

Arts 100 is a mini-course under development by the Faculty of Arts. The proposed course will be required of all undergraduate students in the FoA, and will use gamified learning strategies to systematically connect students with content that will increase the likelihood of their engagement and academic success.

Arts 100 was proposed by Associate Dean Mickey Adolphson and the Faculty’s Arts Teaching and Learning Engagement Committee (ATLEC) in 2014, and was widely supported by the Faculty’s departments and internal units. A committee was developed to implement Arts 100 in e-Class. However, the committee recognized that an effective course might require more technical and design expertise than initially thought. It was determined that further research into the best strategies and platforms to “gamify” Arts 100 was in order. This would ensure that the final product would be sustainable, robust in terms of data-analytics, and truly engaging and useful for students.

### *Arts 100 Description*

Arts 100 will strengthen student well-being and academic achievement in three key areas. First, students will learn about the broad range of learning options available to them in the Faculty of Arts. Students will be required to explore different departments and majors in the faculty through a quest-based game, and will also learn about undergraduate awards, co-curricular activities, and specialized offerings available to enrich their programs of study. Exploration and awareness of program choices increases the likelihood that students will form meaningful educational goals, which in turn contributes to persistence (Karp, 2011).

Second, Arts 100 will create an engaging platform to help students learn strategies to enhance their academic success. Gamified elements will teach students study skills and academic expectations. It is anticipated that this component of the course will reduce risk and incidences of academic misconduct.

Third, Arts 100 will ensure that students are aware of available support services: Although many campus supports are available to students, lack of awareness of these supports may be a barrier. Arts 100 will ensure that all students are aware of supports available to them (e.g. International Student Services, Centre for Writers, Student Success Centre).

Because it is required, Arts 100 will provide a common framework and point of entry for every student in the Faculty. Once the Arts 100 course is completed, it will be archived so that students have persistent, personalized links to what they have learned in the course. As a complete e-course, Arts 100 will be accessible to students for their entire undergraduate career. Arts 100 will also provide a common core curriculum of academic resources and services that all instructors in the FoA can use as a reference tool for students. It is important to make clear that the Arts 100 mini-course will not duplicate existing online promotions/services; rather, it will ensure that students are aware of resources and services, and know where to find them in a timely manner.

### *Project Activities*

Although the curriculum for Arts 100 is clearly envisioned, optimal delivery is still being explored. An ideal platform for Arts 100 will

1. provide meta-data to track and document student progress and completion;
2. incorporate engaging, gamified elements; and
3. be sustainable with respect to the financial and human resources required to maintain the course content, monitor student outcomes, make effective use metadata for faculty and department level program planning and evaluation, and otherwise optimize the course.

TLEF funding will be used to hire a Research Assistant with expertise in online and gamified learning. The RA will be tasked with:

- Consulting with informants within the Faculty and across campus to learn more about existing best practices on campus;
- Conducting a literature review pertaining to gamified learning, student motivation, and best practices in the online delivery of student support and program enhancing services;

- Comparing and evaluating three to five delivery options for Arts 100. Moodle's strengths and limitations will be compared with those of other options (e.g. Trajectory IQ, Litmos, The Academy, Articulate).

The deliverables for this project are a literature review, a feasibility study reporting on various options for the delivery of Arts 100, and an initial proposal of criteria that would inform an evaluation of Arts 100. The RA will be supported by an advisory team composed of members of the Faculty of Arts *Arts Teaching and Learning Enhancement Committee* (ATLEC).

## **II. Relation to Educational Theory and/or Empirically Validated Practice**

### *Student Success*

Universities are increasingly complex institutions. As student populations have grown and become more diverse, universities have responded with increased programming choices, and a wide array of support, co-curricular and ancillary offerings. Providing many choices has clear benefits because institutions can be more responsive to varied individual student needs (Dietsche, 2012). However, choice can also be overwhelming. Students have to be able to know where to access and keep track of program choices and information (Karp, 2011; Renick, 2015). Students may not be aware of the choices and supports available to them (Winograd & Rust, 2011). As Collier & Morgan (2008) observe, university success is “not just about academic achievement; an important part of success is mastery of the... ‘student role’” (p. 425). This more holistic understanding of student success is supported by a large body of research that links campus engagement with academic success and persistence (Kuh, 2009).

### *Gamification and Student Engagement*

An ongoing concern for student support providers is tracking whether and when services are accessed by students. The best programs are of little value if students are unaware of them, or do not access them. By “gamifying” the experience of exploring program options, student support services, co-curricular opportunities and program enhancements, we anticipate that students will be more inclined, and more positively inclined, to pro-actively plan their programs and seek support when they need it.

Gamification is the incorporation of game design concepts into non-game contexts (Deterding et al., 2011). Games are generally understood as challenging activities, constrained by rules, with a known objective or winning condition (Deterding et al., 2011; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Educational gamification applies game-like elements to learning outcomes in order to stimulate learner motivation to acquire knowledge and develop skills (Kapp, 2012). Gamified activities include ‘interactive learning events’ that use game design principles as a way to encourage, motivate and influence learner behaviour (Kapp et al., 2014). Elements of gamification can include virtual goods in the form of badges and trophies, progress tracking through the completion of levels, and social aspects like leaderboards and group challenges (Kapp et al., 2014; Antin & Churchill, 2011). While individual and group competition stimulates learners to complete activities (Banfield & Wilkerson, 2014), challenging and competitive tasks, such as those found in games, can help to reinforce skills like problem solving, communication, and collaboration (Dicheva et al., 2015).

### **III. Evaluation Criteria**

#### *Innovation*

Gamified learning is still in its infancy, and, from our search of the literature to date, has no precedent in the context of supports for student learning. Arts 100 is innovative because it ensures that all students have access to information/tools to succeed. Further, the gamified environment applies learning psychology and motivational theory to incentivize behaviours on the part of students that while valuable, are ultimately voluntary. Arts 100 will be integrated with student records in such a way that the Faculty will have assurance that students are fully exploring the options and resources available to them.

#### *Collaboration*

ATLEC, a committee that includes representatives from all departments in the Faculty of Arts, student representatives, and the FoA teaching and learning unit, will work with the RA to provide input and needs assessment. Once the platform has been chosen, Arts 100 will be developed with the input of all FoA departments, undergraduate student services, and other units offering student support services or program enhancements. Arts 100 will be a central part of the faculty's BA Renewal process, presently underway.

#### *Evaluation*

The overall aim of this project is to develop an actionable, evidence-based plan for the development of Arts 100. In this sense, the project itself is an evaluative study. The study will identify the best platform and gaming elements to achieve the goals of Arts 100. The accompanying literature review will identify the criteria that ought to inform a good design for Arts 100. The criteria will also be used to monitor and evaluate students' course experiences.

#### *Sustainability/Impact on Students*

Although considerable investment is required upfront to design and implement the Arts 100 learning experience, once it is established, it will be easy to modify and update its components as access points, services, program requirements and program enhancements change. Arts 100 will be a very cost-effective and proactive way to offer student supports, and to encourage them to take an active, informed role in building their programs of study.

#### *Dissemination*

Findings from the study will be presented in a formal report to the Arts Teaching and Learning Enhancement Committee. ATLEC members will take the lead in presenting the findings to their own departments. APRIL, the Arts Pedagogy Research and Innovation Laboratory, will host a campus wide presentation, and present the findings at the CTL Festival of Teaching.

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