Regular and Substantive Interaction

LEAD Tip Sheet

U.S. Department of Education regulations indicate that distance education must include regular and substantive interaction (RSI) between instructors and students—unlike correspondence courses, which lack this and are ineligible for federal financial aid. This tip sheet defines RSI and offers strategies to strengthen instructor-student engagement in your online course.

What is Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI)?

The U.S. Department of Education describes regular interaction as occurring "on a predictable and scheduled basis commensurate with the length of time and the amount of content in the course or competency."

It defines substantive interaction as "engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment, consistent with the content under discussion." At least two of the following criteria must also be present for interaction to be considered substantive:

1. Providing direct instruction;
2. Assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework;
3. Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency;
4. Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency; or
5. Other instructional activities approved by the institution's or program's accrediting agency.

Strategies for Providing RSI in an Online Course

This section outlines some specific instructional strategies that you can add to your course to ensure that you are providing regular and substantive interaction in your online course.

Providing predictable and scheduled interaction:

- Use the announcements forum to post weekly announcements that provide an overview of that week's content, confirm due dates, and point students to important considerations and helpful resources.
- Record captioned overview videos for each week or unit to provide context for content and explain relevance to what has already been covered.
- Add forum discussions for each week or unit to encourage regular interaction and engagement.
- Offer office hours on a set schedule in a set location (i.e.: Zoom), allowing students to drop-in as needed.

Providing direct instruction:

- Record short, captioned video lectures exploring unit content.

- Select relevant and current textbooks and materials that match the student learning outcomes for the course.
- Include information and resources from diverse sources and perspectives.
- Summarize forum discussions or unit content.

Assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework:

- Use rubrics integrated into LMS for assignments and forums to make grading faster and more efficient.
- Make rubrics available to students before they complete the assignment to provide guidance.
- Align criteria in rubrics with student learning outcomes.
- Include some authentic assessments that ask students to relate content to personal experience and have real-world applications.
- Provide feedback within a reasonable timeframe and throughout the entirety of the course.

Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency:

- Include a course introduction section with a welcome video and course syllabus that explains grading policies and criteria. Include tips on navigating course in the welcome video.
- Provide communication guidelines including instructor contact information, expectations for communication, and netiquette guidelines.
- Add a forum where students can ask general questions about the course such as assignment deadlines or clarification and problems with LMS (e.g. links not working or topics not opening); check this forum regularly.

Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency:

- Initiate regular forum discussions to give students opportunities to engage with content and peers.
- Use open-ended questions to encourage critical thinking, different perspectives, and unique interpretations.
- Actively participate in forum discussions that ask students to examine course materials and to relate course content to personal experiences or current events.

Main Takeaway

Instructors should initiate predictable and scheduled interaction with their students; this interaction should be relevant to the course and involve teaching and assessment.

Learn More

- Institutional Eligibility Under the Higher Education Act Of 1965, Title 34 Subtitle B Chapter VI Part 600 in the National Archives Code of Federal Regulations
- Principles of Quality for eLearning Courses in the Montana University System
- Regular & Substantive Interaction from the OSCQR – SUNY Online Course Quality Review Rubric website
- Regular and Substantive Interaction: An Overview for Instructors of Online Courses at Everett Community College

For further assistance, please contact the LEAD instructional designers at LEAD@umontana.edu.