

Regular and Substantive Interaction

The U.S. Department of Education requires that all online courses for which students may use Title IV funds (federal financial aid) “ensure that there is regular and substantive interaction between students and instructors.” Regular and substantive interaction is more than a federal requirement, however. It is also a hallmark of effective teaching. Decades of research have established that teacher-student interactions are an essential component of learning.

Initiated by the instructor

To count as ‘regular and substantive,’ interactions need to be started by you. This doesn’t mean students should be discouraged from contacting you or asking questions – far from it! But you should expect to take an active part in initiating and guiding a range of interactions with your students throughout the quarter. This ensures that interactions are an integral part of your instructional plan for the course.

- ✔ You post a discussion question and actively facilitate the ensuing conversation
- ✔ You ask a student to visit you during office hours or to schedule a phone call or video conference with you
- ✔ You provide personalized comments (in any medium) for an individual student’s assignment
- ✘ A student happens to drop in during your regularly scheduled open office hours
- ✘ You add numeric grades to the course gradebook
- ✘ A student submits a quiz that is automatically graded

Regular and frequent

Interactions with students should be frequent and consistently repeated throughout the semester. The mode of interaction may vary throughout the course, but the regular cadence of interactions you establish should remain as consistent as possible. Daily communication isn’t required, but at a minimum you should seek to interact with every student at least once each week and you should log in to the course every 1-2 days.

- ✔ You routinely post announcement or send messages that you have written specifically for the course
- ✔ You actively facilitate a required online discussion for every course unit
- ✔ You hold a required one-hour online review session every other week during the course
- ✘ You send a welcome message during the first week of class and a mid-quarter message around week five
- ✘ You encourage students to participate in an optional, one-time online review session before the final exam

Focused on course subject

Interactions should be connected to the subject of the course and contribute to the students’ progress toward course learning objectives. Routine procedural interactions, such as reminders of upcoming deadlines, aren’t ‘substantive’ on their own; neither are activities like assigning grades, unless they are accompanied by personalized feedback or suggestions for improvement. This doesn’t mean that interactions designed to welcome students or build classroom community aren’t important, merely that they aren’t sufficient by themselves.

- ✔ You send a message previewing concepts introduced in the next unit and listing questions for students to have in mind when reading the textbook chapters
- ✔ You post an example from last night’s news in the course’s ‘Real-World’ discussion to illustrate a concept
- ✘ You remind students of the course attendance policy
- ✘ You post an announcement about an upcoming assignment deadline
- ✘ You post to the course’s ‘General Topics’ discussion thread lamenting the outcome of last night’s sporting event