Online Teaching: Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI)

In a July 2021 rule, the Department of Education declared that "distance education," or online, instructed courses must include regular and substantive interaction (RSI) in order to be eligible for Title IV funding. Institutions must monitor that RSI is practiced within their classes and provide evidence for it upon review by the Department of Education.

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In Brief

The Distance Education and Innovation Rule, effective July 1st, 2021, describes Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI) as "as a key element that distinguishes between distance learning and correspondence education." In practical terms, RSI can be described briefly by the following:

All courses require Regular interaction. This includes

1. Good course design: repetitive and well-documented organization of content and activities.
2. Frequent (ex. weekly) instructor-initiated communications, starting with a course orientation and including weekly communications.
3. Frequent assignments, with individual feedback to students.
4. Use of the D2L gradebook to monitor, and help students monitor their own progress.
5. Course pace enforced with start dates on content and regular deadlines for assignments.
6. Regular office hours (via Zoom or D2L chat) posted on your syllabus.
7. Instructor emails to students who have drifted away from the class.

All courses require at least two forms of Substantive Interaction. This means

- Direct instruction: Synchronous teaching via Zoom, live chat, or similar realtime remote technology.
- Assessing or providing feedback on student’s work. See the third and fourth points above. Frequent, helpful and actionable feedback to students beyond just numerical grade scores is essential. An instructor should monitor student engagement through assessments and participation in course activities.
- Providing information or responding to questions regarding the content of a course or competency. Scheduled office hours (via Zoom), Course FAQs, prompt replies to student emails, course and weekly orientations, and excellent course documentation all contribute to this.
- Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency. Assign regular asynchronous discussions and participate in them yourself.

Substantive interaction may involve many other options than just those above. What the DoE seeks is proactive participation by the instructor during the course, rather than just course-building, caretaking, and answering student questions. In synchronous courses discussion meetings via Zoom can help satisfy RSI although exclusively lecturing via Zoom is insufficient.

Course Design: Regular Interaction

Your course should be explicitly organized so that students can easily identify what to expect, is expected of them, when events happen and assignments are due. The syllabus and additional instructions should be carefully developed so students can spend more time on course substance and less time trying to determine procedure.

See the COLI Guide to Teaching Online: https://sites.google.com/my.canisius.edu/ofdcweek1lesson6

Course Master, Introduction, or Procedure Module
Your first module in the D2L Content area should be a master module containing course-level policies, guidelines, and communications. This may include:

- Syllabus
- FAQ discussion
- Syllabus quiz
- Large-scale assignment instructions
- Asynchronous Discussion guidelines
- Learning Contract

You may have other course-wide instructions, term requirements, or any information you need to include in this folder. On the other hand, if a project requires multiple elements and really needs a standalone module, that's fine, too. Either way, students should know that there is a module or modules separate from weekly, lesson, or learning unit modules where they can easily find course-wide information.

Sequential Course Design: Keep them Focused

Use modules to build courses in a clearly identifiable structure. Pre-program start dates, or use the hidden/visible status for each week's content, to keep students focused on the present topics for learning. Do not serve the entire course content all at the beginning. This prevents students from treating a course like a self-paced training course, and ignoring interactions with other students and the instructor.

Regular Communications

As indicated in a lot on this page, regular communication is essential. Good instructional practice is to have calendar dates or days of the week when students can expect unit, module, or weekly introduction communications, warning emails, scheduled office hours, or feedback. Life intervenes, and just as students might miss a deadline so, too, instructors may miss a deadline for providing feedback on student work. But when both parties attempt to maintain a consistent course schedule, the course is not simply self-paced training but an instructed experience.

Course Orientation

Develop an email, video, interactive lesson, or other media that introduces the course. This is separate from the syllabus, and includes:

- introducing yourself - beginning of teaching presence. Students possibly see you on camera, although voice (over screencast) is as or more important and sufficient.
- what forms of communication are used in the course.
- a basic description or practical plan of how to pass the course.
- Describe your role in the course as an active instructor, mentor, participant, and even colleague. What do you expect to do for students? For example, "You will hear me in occasional instructional videos, and our weekly introduction videos. I will also participate in our online discussions. I try to provide at least some feedback on all assignments, but you'll notice I focus my feedback on a specific area where I think you can build or improve, rather than overwhelm you with comments...."
- Practical expectations for students. For example: "You should expect to spend six to nine hours each week on this course. Please be professional by submitting assignments on time. Please show respect for other members of the class, and commitment to your professional goals, by participating in our online discussions."
- next steps for weeks one, two, or maybe three.
- walk-through of structure, content, and activities in D2L course space.

This was already a requirement, or at least an ask, by Academic Affairs in the 2020-2021 year.

Weekly Update, Reminder, or Introduction

In a short, regular, and predictable communication, provide students with an introduction for the week or module ahead. This includes several things:

- A quick overview of the content that connects it to the bigger picture: how it connects to other coursework, learning goals, fundamental disciplinary concepts or questions, or real-world situations.
- A procedural itinerary: deadlines, synchronous dates and times, appropriate sequence for completion, and list of important things to do or otherwise be aware of.
- Your enthusiasm and presence in the course.

This can be

- A boilerplate-format email sent to students at the same time each week (ex. Monday morning at 10:00 AM).
- A short audio or video clip, posted to the LMS. Keep it under 6 minutes, 10 minutes maximum.
- A web page featuring text, and perhaps screenshots. Keep it brief. Bullet points, vocabulary lists, and other non-prose text are appropriate for brevity.

In this weekly communication you are not teaching content. That comes later, in whatever format. Instead, you are keeping the course in their minds, and providing an easy way to understand what they need to do to learn and succeed in the class.

Some of these messages may have broader overview, discussing how lesson concepts connect with course goals, disciplinary concerns, or the wider world outside the course.

Weekly Scheduled Office Hours
In your syllabus and other course communications, tell students you are available via Zoom in certain hours of the week (ex. 2:00 - 3:30 PM, Monday and Wednesday) each week, and also by appointment on at least four days per week. The latter signals some flexibility, the former helps students who are for whatever reason reluctant to seek help a chance to do so without emailing you directly. Post your Zoom link in your D2L course space, and have Zoom notify you if someone joins the meeting (so you can promptly join.)

Email Communications

Students should expect, in most cases, a response to email inquiries within 48 hours. Exceptions may include:

- Weekends and campus holidays. Instructors can demonstrate professional norms by declaring to students that they cannot expect email replies on weekends or outside of Academic business days as established by the Canisius academic calendar.
- Emergencies. Just as students can expect compassion during emergencies, these may prevent timely responses from faculty.
- When faculty can most efficiently provide a better reply by delaying a bit, such as while grading substantial student work.

You should be able to identify, via assignments and last visited dates in the Classlist, if any students are drifting away from the course. Email them after a week, to urge them to return and get back on track.

Other Good Communication Options

Below are a few ideas that, while not necessary, will foster better communications in your course and support RSI. These can also encourage students to apply themselves, cut down on emailing as a demand on your time, and help you improve your course documentation semester-after-semester.

Learning Contract

A student affirms her or his commitment to working and engaging in the course. This does not take long to build, and operates on it's own. Here's some help with that.

Course FAQ or Questions Topic

A professor can use a threaded discussion system - D2L's discussions work fine for this - as an open space for students to ask questions. The Professor monitors this, answer questions there, and even ask students who email questions if their question can be repeated there with the answer.

You can encourage or incentivize students to post answers there as well.

Current Events or Related News Topic

Create a discussion topic where students can post links to news articles, perhaps with commentary, that are relevant to and connect with course content.

Introduction Discussion Topic

Have students introduce themselves in a discussion topic. Lead the way by introducing yourself first!

Activities

Below are assessment and asynchronous discussion practices that satisfy RSI. With the asynchronous discussions, particularly, you may have alternative methods that work equally well. For example, group annotation applications are just one excellent alternative to message-board discussions.

Assessment and Feedback

At least once a two-week period, a student should:

- Have an assignment or activity to complete by a deadline.
- Receive some sort of feedback on their work from the instructor (not auto-graded.)

Online Asynchronous Discussions

Asynchronous discussions can be a powerful form of interaction but only if the instructor interacts with them. Separate writing assignments can be valuable, but discussions should be more than a writing assignment that other students may happen to read. Instead, craft discussion prompts that support student-student interaction. In response to student activity in message board discussion, faculty should provide more feedback than just a numerical score, suggesting possibilities for improvement where applicable. Moreover, feedback should be delivered so students have time to apply them in future discussions.

When online discussions are best employed, they foster reflection. A student reflects "out loud" so that other students may consider and respond to different perspectives, either from an initial post, or in a reply (including a reply by the instructor.)

Instructor Participation
In almost any course with asynchronous discussions, an instructor should regularly post or reply within the discussion, rather than simply assess student participation. A professor should not respond to every student, or even most students, each week. Instead, an instructor can reply to a few students in order to accomplish several things. Read here for more on this.

Monitoring the Student's Academic Engagement and Success

Below are essentials for RSI, because students should have a good sense of their performance in any course.

Regular Assignment Feedback

Once every two weeks at least, or ideally once a week, provide some sort of feedback on student work. Rubrics may be helpful here. Consult pedagogy guidance on efficient feedback to avoid being overwhelmed by this. Low-stakes, more frequent assignments and frequent feedback better promote student learning. Ideally, most feedback should be given so students may apply it to future assessments in the same course. However, some feedback on final projects or exams obviously cannot do this, although consider how you can suggest improvement on future professional work, or in subsequent courses.

Gradebook

Use the D2L gradebook. This provides students with notifications for posted grades, and a grade report they can consult at anytime throughout the course to determine their performance in the class. Feedback from connected dropboxes, discussions and quizzes is also available there. Grades and feedback via email is possible but less efficient and more work for the instructor.

Follow Up with Inactive Students

Periodically glance at your gradebook and the classlist. If a student is consistently failing to complete assignments, completing them poorly, or not frequently entering the class space on D2L, email that student. Include an offer to meet synchronously to discuss potential troubles, or a few (only a few) specific tips on how to improve their work. This works best with short, frequent assignments and timely grading and feedback.

In asynchronous online courses you may not take attendance as in a synchronous (online or F2F) course. But your students should regularly - more than once a week - interact in some way with your course, its content and activities. In the D2L classlist you see when students last logged in, and in the D2L progress tool you determine which content modules or topics they have at least viewed once. When students fail to submit assignments, or are inactive in your course for over a week, email them. You can set up an Intelligent Agent in D2L to automatically email students (and copy it to you) who do not log in to your course space within a week's time. Your communication should be friendly and supportive: remind them that they are welcome and you look forward to their participation. If they have a special problem or need, they can seek help or advice from you or a student support officer on campus.

A Good Option: Course Reflection Activities

While not strictly necessary, reflection assignments have become popular and can support RSI. When students are asked to consider how they are learning (or struggling), they often do better.

You may also ask students to reflect and comment on the course, its design, activities, content, or modes of communication. This can be done once or several times throughout the semester, and is not to be confused with the end-of-semester course evaluations.

Examples of Courses lacking sufficient RSI

Here are two examples of online courses that would not satisfy the DoE’s requirements for Regular and Substantive Interaction:

Course content and activities consist of video lectures. Instructor has also posted the accompanying slides and even notes. Students take auto-graded multiple-choice quizzes, and three auto-graded exams throughout the semester. The instructor is available to answer student questions, upon request or by appointment only. Students see or hear the instructor lecturing in the videos, but otherwise the instructor does not intervene in the course.

Course content and activities include textbook and article readings, with the occasional video (TEDx, YouTube, or a professional association website.) Students complete a single large term paper and post twice weekly in asynchronous discussion boards. Instructor offers to return term papers with feedback comments, upon request. All but the least complete or appropriate discussion posts receive the same grade, which amounts to a “pass” grade. The instructor does not participate in discussions. The instructor offers to answer questions via email or Zoom, upon student request.

Intersection With Mission

The Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm includes reflection: the student does more than simply consume and memorize content. In the IPP professors are active directors, guiding students toward knowledge and freedom. Dialog and activities oblige the student to consider greater context and their own experience, and to act based on those considerations. Students learn best through direct experience, rather than vicarious experience. The latter includes reading and lecture, but the former includes interactive learning, such as discussions (synchronous or asynchronous) that include the instructor, or assignments or activities that prompt personalized feedback from the instructor.

IPP also cites Evaluation: beyond grade scores, faculty provide concise, actionable feedback to each student so that assignments are not ends in themselves, but opportunities to grow professionally and intellectually.
Instructor-initiated contact can fall under *Cura Personalis*: an effort by professors to recognize that individual students have particular needs and may face special challenges. The professor cannot be a universal problem-solver for all students, but may be able to suggest - remind students about - campus resources that can assist them.

Professors’ commitment to providing actionable feedback supports *magis*, or a commitment by students to become something new or more - their better selves - as a result of the courses they take at Canisius.

*Equity* is not strict equality. Rather, it is recognizing that each student, at different times, may have needs and circumstances that a professor might reasonably accommodate individually.