Characteristics of Regular and Substantive Interaction

Initiated by the instructor

- ✓ 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 videoconference 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

Frequent and consistent

- ✓ 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 semester
- × You send a welcome message during the first week of class and a mid-semester message around week five
- × You encourage students to participate in an optional, one-time online review session before the final exam

Focused on the course subject

- ✓ 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 Mariners game in the course's 'Real-World Physics' discussion to illustrate the concept of coefficient of restitution
- × 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 Mariners game

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Recommendations for Promoting Regular and Substantive Interaction in Online Courses

There are as many ways to promote regular and substantive interaction online as there are approaches to teaching face-to-face courses. The following recommendations are general suggestions for incorporating interaction into your course, but you should freely adapt and personalize them to support course objectives, the needs of your students, and your own teaching goals.

Set clear expectations for interaction in the syllabus

The syllabus is a good place to tell your students how you will communicate with them as well as how you expect them to communicate with you. Let students know how frequently they can expect to hear from you, when you will or will not be available to respond to messages, and how quickly they can expect a response to questions and to work they submit. If you have participation expectations for your students, be sure to include those as well—especially if they affect students' grades.

Send course announcements or other messages at regular intervals throughout the semester

Announcements often focus on procedural information, like reminders of course deadlines, but they can also be used to support instruction. For instance, a weekly announcement can: synthesize and then comment on questions from the previous week; note trends observed in assignments; or highlight, contextualize, or illustrate key concepts students will encounter. Try to establish a general rhythm for course communications, using a pattern that is consistent with the structure or thematic organization of the course. Regardless of their frequency, announcements can be treated as genuine invitations into the subject matter of the course rather than mere reminders.

Provide timely, individualized, and in-depth feedback on student work

Research shows instructor feedback is most beneficial when it comes soon after students submit work, so avoid lengthy delays in providing students with comments about their progress. Feedback can take many forms: written comments, audio or video notes, individual conferences conducted in person or via online meeting tools, and so on. In all cases, though, feedback should go beyond simply assigning a grade or automatically displaying pre-written comments or general statements ('good work', 'needs improvement', etc.). Effective feedback communicates to students both what they have accomplished and areas where they may need to improve. It also often offers examples and concrete suggestions for actions students can take in the future to make further progress in their learning.

Actively facilitate online discussions and chats

A common misconception about online discussions is that instructors shouldn't play an active role in facilitating them. While it's true that a hands-off approach can be appropriate in some contexts, there are many benefits to facilitated discussions. Consider posting regularly to course discussion forums in order to: pose guiding questions related to the academic subject; propose counterpoints or alternative points of view that students may not be considering; establish connections among students' ideas; engage in Socratic dialogue; and provide encouragement for students who may be struggling with the complexities of the subject. If the only voices regularly present in discussions are those of students, your course is missing a valuable mode of online instruction.

Conduct regularly scheduled online review sessions, tutorials, office hours, or individual appointments

Online office hours provide a forum for students to ask their own questions, but they can also be used to supplement instruction in more intentional ways. For instance, you might incorporate brief structured lessons at the beginning of an open-ended study session. While it is important not to artificially limit the flexibility of online instruction, it's perfectly appropriate to require students to participate in some regularly scheduled synchronous (real-time) online sessions provided these are clearly identified as part of the course requirements outlined in the course syllabus.

Choose online tools and learning environments that make interactions easy – and easy to document

When selecting online tools or platforms, consider carefully how they are likely to affect ease of communication for you and your students. When possible, select ones that help you document your communications. Email, discussions, chats, or the Moodle gradebook will do this automatically. It is a good idea to apply extra scrutiny to external platforms, such as those operated by publishers. These can sometimes be difficult to access after a course has concluded, making it hard to go back later to retrieve messages or feedback you gave students. If you do use publisher platforms, be sure to have a plan for documenting interactions in the course; this will help ensure you are prepared in case you are asked to provide evidence of regular and substantive interaction in the future.

Other Recommendations

Collect Mid-Semester Feedback from Students

Every course and instructor can benefit from mid-course student feedback. You may already be using mid-semester surveys or other types of formative assessment to find out more about your students' perceptions partway through your classes. If so, consider adding a question or two about interactions in the course. For example, you can ask students whether they feel they hear from you frequently enough, what types of interactions they consider to be most valuable, or whether they have expectations about interaction that are not being met. Once you have had a chance to consider your students' responses, tell them what you learned and what (if anything) you intend to change during the second part of the course.

As with all mid-semester feedback, this is also an opportunity to ask students to reflect on their own contributions to the class. Invite students to suggest one or two changes *they* could make to enhance interactions or to help those interactions contribute more fully to their learning. This will help reinforce the idea that a successful course depends on the efforts of both teacher *and* students. It may also give you a few new ideas for helping students engage more fully with one another and with you.

Ask for feedback from trusted colleagues

One-way to be sure that your online course includes regular and substantive interaction is to have a colleague observe the course and then provide you with detailed, constructive feedback. If you are serious about collecting feedback, consider asking more than one person to observe. Ask a trusted colleague in your department *and* someone from outside your department or division. This will help you gain perspective both disciplinary experts and non-experts. If possible, ask for the observation to extend over a period of a week or more, while the course is in session, to ensure your observers have a chance to see the full range of interactions you facilitate in the course.

The Research Behind Regular and Substantive Interaction

As noted previously, the value of regular and substantive interaction between faculty and students has a well-established basis in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Here is a very small sampling of some of the relevant research:

Baker, C. (2010). The impact of instructor immediacy and presence for online student affective learning, cognition, and motivation. *The Journal of Online Educators* 7.1.

Boling, E. C. et al. (2012). Cutting the distance in distance education: Perspectives on what promotes positive, online learning experiences. *Internet and Higher Education* 15, 118-126.

Dixson, M. D. (2010). Creating effective student engagement in online courses: What do students find engaging? *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 10.2, 1-13.

Fink, L. D. (2013). *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*. Revised and updated edition. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

York, C. S. & Richardson, J. C. (2012). Interpersonal interaction in online learning: Experienced online instructors' perceptions of influencing factors. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 16.4, 83-98.

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