

Luther Rice College and Seminary Guide to Regular and Substantive Interaction in Distance Education

Introduction

Instructor-student interaction is a key component to learning, and this is no less true for distance education and online education. Therefore, students at Luther Rice can expect instructors to be responsive to their questions or concerns. On weekdays, a student can expect a response within twenty-four hours, and forty-eight hours on the weekends. Instructors also will initiate contact with the student, so it is essential that the student monitor his Luther Rice email daily, review comments and feedback on assignments, and remain actively engaged no less than several times a week in his course(s). The student's grade in the course depends on his attentiveness to the instructions and directions given by the instructor. The student is responsible for knowing the syllabus, deadlines on assignments, school policies, and all communication from the instructors to him individually and to the class as a whole.

Regular and substantive contact is required for all course sections taught using Distance Education (DE) at Luther Rice College and Seminary, that is, any course section where "seat time" is replaced by other forms of contact with students, including completely online and hybrid course sections. Faculty are encouraged to share with each other new best practices as they develop in the future from available technologies.

Luther Rice recommends that DE instructors use the ideas contained here, or others that are similar, to initiate and sustain contact with students. This best practices document was developed through collaboration with the Vice President of Academic Affairs and Academic Deans. The following was developed using the Riverside Community College District's *Guide to Recommended Best Practices to Achieve Regular and Effective/Substantive Contact in Distance Education*.¹

¹http://www.opencampus.com/downloads/faculty/RCCD_guide_to_best_practices.pdf, (accessed May 19, 2015).

The responsibility for constructing, maintaining and updating this list of best practices resides with academic administration. Academic administration will review this document regularly and make recommendations to the faculty as significant changes are required.

Definitions of Terms

Definition: Instructor-initiated Interactions:

Unlike correspondence education, in which students are responsible for initiating contact with the instructor, instructors using DE are required to actively initiate interaction with their students as a group and individually.

Definition: Frequent and Timely (i.e., Regular Interactions):

The measure of “regular interactions” is based on a standard that is at least the same as it would be in a traditional face-to-face class. Instructors may exceed this minimum at their discretion. The number of asynchronous or synchronous hours that an instructor is available to students enrolled in a DE class must be at least equal to the number of hours of availability as required for face-to-face classes of the same courses.

Instructor initiated interactions with DE students is understood as distributed over the course of the “instructional week” (seven days) and the term of the course (expressed in weeks).

Instructor-initiated interaction will occur as often as appropriate for regular contact, as defined by regulation.

Definition: Substantive/Non-trivial Interactions:

Substantive/Non-trivial interaction with students and delivery of course content includes instructor interaction with the entire group of students in the course section based on a well-defined schedule of availability, deadlines, feedback, and exchanges that are included in the instructor’s Syllabus. Instructors define their schedules in the Syllabus and in other appropriate locations within the course management system.

Course sections taught using DE are considered the virtual equivalent of face-to-face classes. Based on the notion that “a student cannot hide in the back of the room” in an online or hybrid class, substantive/non-trivial interaction between students and the instructor is, in many cases, more likely in an online class than in a traditional lecture room.

Examples of Regular Interaction for Distance Education Courses

Means of Achieving “regular” Interaction Include, but are not Limited to:

- Threaded discussion forums with regular and appropriate instructor participation based on course topics and specific content of the course addressed to all students and/or to individuals publicly.
- E-mail and/or messages within the course management system.
- Regular “Announcements” posted in the class.
- Regular deadlines, distributed throughout the term of the course, for assignments and other student participation.
- Regular, timely, appropriate feedback and evaluations of student work.
- Virtual online office hours in real time, such as chat, during announced periods of time, and/or asynchronously during announced days and hours.
- Instructor-prepared online e-lectures, podcasts or other forms of addressing course content and topics, presented in an appropriate format for the subject, such as written documents, audio and/or video files, and/or introductions and explanations for any publisher created materials (written, audio and/or video, etc.) that, combined with other course materials, creates the “virtual equivalent” of the face-to-face class.
- Instructor-prepared Syllabus, specific to each distance education course section, to document how regular contact between the students and the instructor is achieved.
- Guidelines for frequency of contact at least equivalent to contact in face-to-face classrooms.
- Defined response time for student questions and assignment feedback.
- Establishing an active presence in the class.
- Frequent and substantive feedback throughout the course.
- Include course policies defining student-initiated contact (e.g., where to post questions, and examples of types of questions) in the instructor’s Syllabus.

Examples of Substantive Interaction for Distance Education Courses

Means of Achieving “substantive/Non-trivial interactions” include, but are not limited to:

- Instructor-guided introductions, especially at the beginning of the class, or at important intervals.
- Daily or weekly assignments and projects that promote collaboration among students.
- Questions posed on the discussion board that encourage critical thinking skills and promote interaction among all course participants.
- Regular participation by the instructor in discussion activities with students, perhaps to provide a summary, to correct errors of fact, to keep the discussion on topic, and/or to add expertise to the content of the discussion.
- Monitoring student interaction and activity to ensure that they participate fully.
- Create a specific forum for questions regarding course content.
- Asking students for feedback about the course on a regular basis and revising the content as needed to address issues identified.
- Varied types of interaction, such as instructor-student, student-student, student-content, and student-instructor, and other interaction between and among the students and the instructor as part of the course design.

Miscellaneous

In Case of Interrupted, Regular Interaction:

Interruptions in instructor contact as defined by the instructor’s Syllabus (such as illness or an emergency that takes the instructor offline) require notification to students via class announcement, email, and/or Discussion Board, or another course tool, stating the duration of the interruption. In the event that “regular” contact cannot be resumed according to the definitions of regular contact on the Syllabus, the appropriate academic dean should be notified.

Examples of Regular and Substantive Interactions:

Regular Interactions:

Example of an email statement indicating an estimated time for response to student emails:

“Your instructor will respond to emails within 24 hours on weekdays and 48 hours on weekends.”

Example of a feedback expectation statement:

“Assignments are due on Sunday night by 11:59 pm. Your instructor will begin grading them on Monday and all grades will be posted by Wednesday evening.”

Example of a discussion board post expectation:

“Your instructor will respond to discussion board questions within 48 hours. Questions posted after Friday at 12 pm will not be responded to until Monday morning.”

Substantive/Non-trivial Interactions:

Example of an email statement to correct an error of fact or comprehension:

“The point you made in the last discussion post was accurate, but the dates of the conflict were slightly later, perhaps around 1776. Read the earlier posts of the first group to get a better sense of the issues surrounding the conflict and the time period required for completion of the war.”