Hennepin Technical College
Guide to Regular and Substantive Interaction in Online and Distance Learning

Endorsed by AASC 1/21/2026

This document contains recommendations for Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI) in online and distance education.

Regular and Substantive Interaction is a key component of quality online and distance education, ensuring that students receive meaningful engagement and support from qualified instructors. In accordance with the U.S. Department of Education's Final Rules on Distance Education and Innovation (effective July 1, 2021), all online courses eligible for federal financial aid must demonstrate ongoing, instructor-initiated communication that promotes teaching, learning, and assessment. At Hennepin Technical College, all online learning opportunities are designed to meet federal and accrediting standards for RSI, emphasizing regular, predictable, and course-focused interaction between instructors and students to enhance academic success.

Background

Definitions of Distance Education and Correspondence Courses

The U.S. Department of Education issued Final Rules on Distance Education and Innovation, which took effect on July 1, 2021. The new regulations update the definitions of distance and correspondence education to clarify the difference between these two modes of delivery. The U.S. Department of Education requires that all online courses for which students can use their federal financial aid include regular and substantive interaction between students and instructors. Hennepin Technical College does not offer correspondence education.

Distance Learning Definition

1. Education that uses one or more of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1)(i) through (1)(iv) of this definition to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor or instructors and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor or instructors, either synchronously or asynchronously.
2. The technologies that may be used to offer distance education include —
    i. The internet;

ii. One-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices;
iii. Audio conferencing; or
iv. Other media used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1)(i) through (1)(iii) of this definition.

3. For purposes of this definition, an instructor is an individual responsible for delivering course content and who meets the qualifications for instruction established by the institution's accrediting agency.
4. For purposes of this definition, substantive interaction is engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment, consistent with the content under discussion, and also includes at least two of the following—
   i. Providing direct instruction;
   ii. Assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework;
   iii. Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency;
   iv. Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency; or,
   v. Other instructional activities approved by the institution's or program's accrediting agency.
5. An institution ensures regular interaction between a student and an instructor or instructors by, prior to the student's completion of a course or competency.
   i. Providing the opportunity for substantive interactions with the student on a predictable and regular basis commensurate with the length of time and the amount of content in the course or competency; and
   ii. Monitoring the student's academic engagement and success and ensuring that an instructor is responsible for promptly and proactively engaging in substantive interaction with the student when needed, on the basis of such monitoring, or upon request by the student.

Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI)

Regular and Substantive Interaction is vital to effective teaching. Research has established that teacher-student interactions are an essential component of learning. Interactions considered RSI have the following characteristics:

- Instructor-initiated and
- The interactions should be regular, scheduled, and predictable, and
- they should be focused on the course subject

Instructor-Initiated Interaction

To help distinguish distance education from correspondence courses, the interactions should be initiated by the instructor instead of the students.

Examples of Instructor- Initiated Interaction:

- Individualized emails
- Instructor-facilitated discussions
- Scheduled virtual office hours
- Personalized feedback on assignments

Design and Delivery Strategies

When choosing course design tools, instructors should consider adopting more than one of the following substantive interaction best practices.

Course Design Tool	Best Practices
The course includes the option and tools for instructors to hold optional virtual office hours.	Instructors can include updates to the syllabus to include optional virtual office hours to include days and times in the course schedule. Instructors could use these hours to provide a forum for students to ask questions and supplement instruction.
The syllabus includes clear expectations for interactions, how frequently students can expect to hear from the instructor, and how quickly they can expect a response to questions and to work they submit. Any synchronous meetings/requirements should be identified in the syllabus and detail the instructor's preferred method of communication as well as participation expectations for students.	The instructor communicates in the syllabus to identify preferred communication methods, expected communication frequency, and information about possible synchronous meetings. Simple Syllabus offers a template component titled, "Instructor Interactions and Responsibilities."
The course includes easily accessible instructor contact information with the instructor's name, email, and preferred phone number.	Instructor's personalized contact information before the course is open to students. Consider adding the instructor widget to the course's D2L Brightspace.
Course Announcements that offer one-way, public communication from instructor to students.	Instructors regularly post announcements. While announcements usually cover procedural information, such as reminders about deadlines, they

	could also be used to support instruction by summarizing the previous week's content and questions that need to be wrapped up from the previous week. Instructors can also note trends in assignments and/or quizzes.
"Ask a Question" discussion form included in the course for students to openly ask questions about the weekly course material to be answered by instructors and other students.	Instructors can encourage students to use the "Ask the Question" Discussion forum and regularly check for questions.
The course includes at least one high-engagement activity within the first two weeks of class, allowing students to get to know each other and build a community within the course. These activities can be an icebreaker discussion or a synchronous session for students to introduce each other.	Instructors should actively engage in this high-engagement activity by posting or sharing their own introductions.
Instructor-facilitated discussion forums are included throughout the semester. The discussions are designed to allow the instructor to engage with students and encourage interactions between students.	The instructor regularly posts to the discussion forum to pose questions to help guide learning in the course subject, propose counter points of view that students might not consider, establish connections among students' ideas, and provide encouragement.
Learning activities/assessments that require timely instructor feedback via detailed rubrics and written comments.	Instructors utilize course rubrics and grade book written feedback comments to provide timely feedback on learning activities/assessments. This feedback could communicate students' accomplishments and where they can improve. This feedback should include concrete suggestions to help students progress in their learning.
The course includes a midway survey that provides the instructor feedback on the content of the course, issues with concepts or assessments, or students' need for additional resources.	Instructors could review these surveys to help them adjust the course to support student learning better.
The course could include recorded lectures accompanied by a discussion forum or other activities to allow	Instructors could participate in learning activities accompanying these recorded

students to engage with the content of the videos.	lectures to provide instruction and clear up misconceptions.
The course could utilize online tools and environments that make interactions easy to use and easy to document.	Instructors could use college-supported technology and tools built within the course to help ensure that all interactions are easy to use and easy to document.