7 Things You Should Know About RSI

You are teaching an online fully asynchronous class. There are no required virtual meetings, but you have established due dates for homework assignments. Your students participate in a weekly discussion forum. Sometimes they email you with questions using college email and you respond back. You post important reminders about due dates prior to major course assignments. Does your course meet the requirements for regular and substantive interactions or RSI? If you are now you wondering what RSI is, keep reading to find out more...

What is RSI?

The regular and substantive interaction or RSI requirements refer to the minimum level of engagement that must occur between students and instructors in quality online learning environments. According to the U.S. Department of Education, institutions offering more than 50 percent of their total course offerings via online education programs eligible for financial aid (Title IV) must comply with the RSI requirements.

How does it work?

The regular and substantive interactions are part of the U.S. Department of Education definition for quality online education programs. Quality online courses must have both "regular" and "substantive" interaction between students and instructors.

"Regular" means that interactions occur on a predictable schedule. "Substantive" is about the nature of instructor-to-learner interactions. Such interactions should contribute to the learning experience.

In online teaching and learning environments of any kind, (asynchronous, synchronous, blended/hybrid), regular and substantive interactions must be:

- initiated by the instructor,
- scheduled and predictable,
- academic in nature and relevant to the course,
- between the learner and the instructor, not learner and content or among learners only.

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Who is doing it?

The U.S. Department of Education requires that online courses and programs for which students may use federal financial aid include the RSI components. Therefore, RSI is not an optional component of online education programs, rather it is a federal requirement and an important criterion for school's financial aid eligibility.

Why is RSI important?

Regular and substantive interactions between students and their instructor are essential for effective teaching and learning. Quality interactions between students and their instructors are even more important in an online environment where there is a physical distance as well as time difference. Incorporating RSI components into course design and course delivery can help online instructors close this gap. In this sense, RSI components focus on reducing distance in online education and creating more formative experiences for learners that are equivalent in quality and rigor to onsite programs.

How does OSCQR align with RSI?

Quality course design rubrics, such as OSCQR (The SUNY Online Course Quality Review Rubric), that use research to identify pedagogical best practices in course design include the components of RSI.

OSCQR rubric specifically has standards that directly address RSI. These are standards related to course orientation, overview and syllabus (2, 3), standards addressing content and ways to engage with it (29), standards related to the clarity around communication with the course instructor (38, 39) and with peers (41), and opportunities for co-creation of knowledge (43).

OSCQR rubric also includes other standards that will support RSI and help instructors develop quality online learning experiences. For example, standards 44-47 outline best practices related to grading policies and communicating expectations for grading, self- and peer-assessment.

How can RSI improve my course?

Quality teaching takes time. Incorporating the RSI components into your course design and delivery will take some time, but as an outcome, your learners will have richer online learning experiences, and, ultimately, they will do better in class.

Where is it going?

There have been a few high-profile cases in recent years when Higher Education institutions owed money back to the federal government as they were not able to demonstrate quality components in their online programs.

Another important point to consider is the implications for the accreditation requirements. College accreditation agencies now pay more attention to the RSI regulations as well. When schools go through the accreditation process, it is important to be prepared to provide evidence of RSI components in any online course offering.

Examples of RSI and insufficient RSI components

Non-RSI	RSI
a weekly course announcement with only assignment due dates would not be considered a "substantive" interaction	a weekly announcement with due dates as well as additional information on assignment completion steps and, perhaps, additional resources to help students complete the assignment could be considered both "regular" and "substantive"
scheduled office hours where students can come in or join virtually when they need to would not be considered as "initiated by the instructor" or "substantive"	a reach out to students to encourage them to attend office hours and an individualized approach to scheduling such meetings would be considered as "initiated by the instructor" and "substantive"
posting of numeric grades in the course grade center would not be considered as "substantive" similarly, receiving auto-graded exam results in Blackboard is not "substantive" learner feedback	providing individualized feedback on student performance (either in written form or audio/video) would be considered as "substantive" and "initiated by the instructor"
providing weekly discussion prompts on the course discussion forum would be considered "regular," but not "substantive" in nature	facilitating discussions by asking probing questions and extending the discussion, as well as providing additional clarifications on course concepts would be considered as "substantive" and "initiated by the instructor" interactions in course discussions
posting a welcome announcement and another one prior to a major assignment would not be considered neither "regular" nor "substantive" and such communication does not establish a connection with individual learners	daily interactions are not required, but online instructors should plan to interact with each student at least once per week, this can be through individual email reach out, discussion board posts, review sessions, etc.