Quality Learning Experience Online: What makes an online course good?

Dr. Kerrie Douglas, Purdue University Assistant Professor of Engineering Education, talks about findings from a NSF-funded study to develop an evaluation framework for large STEM online courses. She shares her own quest to find out what makes an online course good.

NSF Award: https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward?AWD_ID=1544259&HistoricalAwards=false

TRANSCRIPT

One of the things our team was finding is that there are a lot of opinions about online learning, and in a lot of cases not a whole lot of evidence to support or substantiate some of the ideas that are out there. For example, as we were asking folks what made for a quality learning experience, we weren't getting a whole lot of consistent answers. So the question I found myself asking was well, “What makes an online course good?”

Just like you can find shoddy courses on campuses across the U.S., you can find shoddy online campuses, and it's really not about whether you're in person or you're online, but it's how you do it. It's the thought that has gone into the type of learning experience that you want to provide for your students. One of the things that I've found is really helpful is to first start with thinking about what do I want learners to actually learn and know or be able to do? What kind of learning experience do I want for them? And how do I already understand them to learn these things and to get these experiences?

I was able to take my every day in-person physical classroom interactions and start thinking creatively about how to provide those kinds of experiences for students using online mediums. And there are so many technologies that are available for social networking and connecting with each other. Learners are collaborating in all sorts of ways outside the classroom already.

Students as young as third grade, maybe even younger are already using collaborative documents like Google Docs and already working in teams remotely. For example, my middle school sons will collaborate on a team project with the students in their class and never even meet up outside of class because they can hop on a Google Doc, do Google Hangouts and go from there to work and get the project done. It's very different than when I was a kid that we would have to schedule and physically get together. As I was seeing that happen while doing our research, I started thinking about all the ways that the students were already connecting, that they were already socially engaged online and how we could just utilize those for learning.
When we think about it, people are learning online all the time already. They may or may not be fully aware that's what's happening, but every time we click on an article that someone else has posted, or we engage in a conversation with someone on Twitter or respond back on LinkedIn, we're in a discourse process and are deepening our understanding. We've all seen good and bad examples of that.