

Introduction to the Special Issue: Best Papers Presented at the AERA 2016 Online Teaching and Learning SIG

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The American Educational Research Association (AERA), founded in 1916, is the premier association of educational research professionals. AERA has more than 25,000 members and is international in scope, with members representing over 85 countries world-wide. It is concerned with improving the educational process by encouraging scholarly inquiry related to education and evaluation and by promoting the dissemination and practical application of research results. To that end, AERA's annual meeting includes thousands of juried presentations of substantive research findings across a range of disciplines.

AERA supports 12 divisions and 150 Special Interest Groups (SIGs). One of the latter is the Special Interest Group on Online Teaching and Learning (SIG-OTL). SIG-OTL is a multi-disciplinary community of scholars focused on the creation, use, and evaluation of online learning environments. (For more information see the SIG-OTL website at: <http://www.aera.net/SIG035/Online-Teaching-and-Learning-SIG-35>.)

At the 2016 Annual Meeting, SIG-OTL sponsored 58 presentations of research in a variety of formats, from a set of over 120 proposals. The papers in this special issue were selected from those accepted papers.

The seven articles selected represent some cutting edge topics and a wide range of designs including single-case exploratory design, descriptive comparative research design, and grounded theory approach, with multivariate analysis, structural equation modeling, critical discourse, social network analysis, and quantitative content analysis among the methods. Frameworks engaged in the studies include the Community of Inquiry Framework, Self-Regulated Learning, and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Of the articles, four are specifically related to higher education and three from studies conducted at the K-12 level; we have grouped them accordingly, yet we caution you to look beyond the level examined as most have direct implications across those boundaries.

Students' Perceptions of Learner-Learner Interactions that Weaken a Sense of Community in an Online Learning Environment, by Phirangee, uses a grounded theory approach with graduate student participants to determine the types of learner-learner interactions that can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation in online environments. Phirangee argues such feelings weaken not only a sense of community but affect perceived learning. After identifying seven types of interactions, she explores how “participants indicated these negative interactions with others affected their learning by causing them to avoid participation in the discussions”. She goes on to provide some strategies for instructors to help strengthen the sense of community among learners as well as some strategies for the learners themselves.

Exploring the Effect of Scripted Roles on Cognitive Presence in Asynchronous Online Discussions by Olesova, Slavin, and Lim uses a quantitative content analysis to investigate how assigned roles (e.g. starter, wrapper, skeptic) can effect learners' levels of cognitive presence. They also explore how types of discussion questions and course duration can affect such levels. Their findings indicate that assigning roles can be an effective instructional strategy to facilitate learners' development of cognitive presence, especially when the strategy is clearly defined and supplemental materials including rubrics are included. Additionally, they found that certain types of discussion questions better aligned with the use of scripted roles as a strategy.

Culturally Responsive Teaching Knowledge and Practices of Online Faculty by Heitner and Jennings involves the development and pilot testing of an assessment for online faculty to measure culturally responsive teaching knowledge (CRT) and culturally responsive educational practices (CREP) in teaching and advising students of color; military students; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students; religious minority students; and international students. They describe the face, content, and construct validity procedures employed for the assessment. Results “revealed significantly higher scores for Value/Importance of CRT vs. Knowledge of CRT, indicating that while the online faculty in the sample recognized the need for culturally responsive teaching, they also recognize that their knowledge may fall short addressing this need”. Implications for faculty training, professional development, mentoring, and support are discussed.

Using critical discourse and social network analyses, Ruane and Lee examined an online peer mentoring site for preservice teachers. Their article, *Analysis of Discussion Board Interaction in an Online Peer-mentoring Site*, discusses how students acclimated to the peer mentoring process, adopted the *Discourse* of their profession, and formed mentoring relationships. Students also engaged one another about pragmatic issues - which “provided the students with a system of support to learn, develop, and strengthen their understanding and knowledge of the teaching profession”; they were “not simply learning about the teaching practice (content), but they were also learning about the teaching practice through participating as a community member”. The authors conclude with some recommendations for effective peer-mentoring sites.

Following up on prior research that suggested male and female students may approach their online courses differently, Lowes, Lin, and Kinghorn conducted a study to further explore gender differences in the interrelationships among LMS behaviors and course performance. In *Gender Differences in Online High School Courses*, they used multivariate analysis to examine 14 online courses for high school students. Interestingly enough, the online behaviors accounted for a

larger percent of the variance in course performance for males than for females. They go on to discuss the implications of this finding, implications that could well go beyond the high school setting in which the study was conducted.

In *Online Teacher Work to Support Self-regulation of Learning in Students with Disabilities at a Fully Online State Virtual School*, Rice and Carter used a case study approach to provide a view into the actions and thoughts of four teachers and how they managed the challenges of supporting self-regulation of learning among students with disabilities. They found that while the teachers wanted and intended to support self-regulation strategies for students, they were largely unable to do so. Implications for online teacher professional development and the incorporation of reflective elements in online courses are discussed.

Finally, in *“More Confident Going into College”: Lessons Learned from Multiple Stakeholders in a New Blended Learning Initiative*, Whiteside, Garrett-Dikkens, and Lewis examined how blended coursework can help students regulate their own learning through a blended learning initiative in a large suburban high school. Further, they looked to the experiences of multiple stakeholders with the initiative. Highlights of their findings include teachers’ perspectives that “students learn as much or more in the blended classes as compared with students in the traditional face-to-face” class while a majority of teachers also agreed “that their blended students seemed to demonstrate higher levels of self-regulation than their traditional students”. Additionally, most students preferred the blending learning approach and indicated they felt they had more control over their learning. An implication of their study is that blended learning helps students feel ready for college.

The editors of this special issue hope our readers enjoy the articles selected and welcome any comments.

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