Introduction to the Special Issue: Best Papers Presented at the OLC 2017 Accelerate Conference on Online Learning and the Innovate 2018 Conference

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The Online Learning Consortium (formerly the Sloan Consortium, or Sloan-C,) started in the 1990s when a small community of higher education professionals came together to promote the idea that online learning could be of great benefit to providing access to a quality education. Funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, this community embarked on a number of activities designed to promote the concept that the design and implementation of online and blended learning applications needed to be well-planned and based on sound pedagogical approaches. The Online Learning Consortium (OLC) has now evolved to become the leading professional organization devoted to advancing quality online learning, to providing professional development for administrative leaders, faculty, and support service individuals and to producing high-level publications and information resources. Critical to achieving its goals, has been the development of quality conferences where individuals from around the globe share research and best practices. These conferences had their beginning in 1995 when a one-day meeting of grantees of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's *Anytime, Anyplace Learning* Program met in Philadelphia to discuss their work and share their experiences. Ninety individuals attended this first gathering. This meeting grew into an annual event for the next five years. In 2001, it was decided that the event be expanded into a full conference with a formal, peer-reviewed call for proposals and workshops, and would include exhibit areas. The University of Central Florida agreed to host the conference in Orlando in November. That was a fateful decision as the attack on the World Trade Center on 9/11 followed by the anthrax scare in Florida in October of that same year severely limited the number of people willing to fly to Orlando to attend the conference. Still, three hundred and sixty participants attended to share and discuss research, effective practices, student services, and administrative support for online learning. Since 2001, the conference has grown and has evolved into the "go to" event for presenting current ideas, research, and best practices in online learning.

In November 2017, the Online Learning Consortium held the 23rd International Conference on Online Learning which was renamed OLC Accelerate in 2016. Over 2,700

individuals attended this conference either in person or virtually. Seven hundred and sixty proposals were submitted for presentation, of which 461 were accepted.

In April 2018, the Online Learning Consortium held its third OLC Innovate Conference with over 1,800 in-person or virtual attendees. Four hundred and ninety-three individuals submitted presentation proposals, of which 284 were accepted.

The six articles selected for this special issue represent the best of the 623 papers accepted for presentation at these two venues, as determined by the conference track chairs and editorial staff of the *Online Learning* journal.

The Articles

The six articles in this special edition represent a wide variety of topics and issues. The findings, conclusions and commentary add significantly to our understanding of online and blended learning. These articles also represent an excellent mix of research methods and inquiry. Scholars, doctoral students and others interested in research may find important insights into methodological techniques as used by the authors of these articles.

In the lead article, "Adaptive Learning: A Stabilizing Influence Across Disciplines and Universities," Charles Dziuban, Colm Howlin, Patsy Moskal, Connie Johnson, Liza Parker, and Maria Campbell, report on an adaptive learning partnership among The University of Central Florida, Colorado Technical University, and the adaptive learning provider, Realizeit. A thirteen-variable learning domain for students forms the basis of a component invariance study. The results show that four dimensions: knowledge acquisition, engagement activities, communication, and growth remain constant in nursing and mathematics courses across the two universities, indicating that the adaptive modality stabilizes learning organization in multiple disciplines. The authors contend that similar collaborative partnerships among universities and vendors is an important next step in the research on adaptive learning.

The second article, "Gamify Online Courses with Tools Built into Your Learning Management System (LMS) to Enhance Self-Determined and Active Learning," by Cheng-Chia (Brian) Chen, ChingChih (Kathy) Huang, Michele Gribbins, and Karen Swan examines the growing field of gamification. The article comments that while "gamified" active learning has been shown to increase students' academic performance, engagement, and to make more social connections than standard course settings, the costs to use educational gaming can be problematic. The first objective of the authors was to evaluate the effectiveness of gamification using existing techniques (e.g., simple HTML-based games) and readily available collaborative tools (e.g., wikis) from a typical learning management system (LMS) such as Blackboard. The second objective was to examine students' attitudes towards gamification (e.g., usefulness). An online survey was given to 80 graduate students who took an entry-level biostatistics course from 2015 to 2017 at a Midwestern university in the United States. This study was conducted in an experimental group (class with implementation of gamification) and control group (class without implementation of gamified activities) that were randomly selected from graduate level statistics courses. A Welch's independent t-test revealed a significant difference ($p < 0.001$) in the mean exam scores of experiment and control groups. A difference favored the classes with gamification. The findings suggested that using built-in LMS tools to design gamified learning activities may enhance students' academic performance, competencies gained, and learning effectiveness, as well as provide more diversified learning methods and motivation, and offer easy modifications for different learning needs.

In "Strengths-Based Analysis of Student Success in Online Courses," Carol S. Gering, Dani' K. Sheppard, Barbara L. Adams, Susan L. Renes, and Allan A. Morotti provide the results of an explanatory sequential, mixed methods study that was conducted in three phases at a public research university to explore personal, circumstantial, and course variables associated with student success. The major assumption of this study was that while online learning provides broader access to higher education, the scholarly literature also reveals concerns over low retention rates in online courses. In Phase One, existing data on student enrollments across four years were analyzed at a public research university. During Phase Two, a subset of Phase One students from a single semester was invited to complete an assessment of non-cognitive attributes and personal perceptions, followed in Phase Three by interviews among a stratified sample of successful students from the previous phase to elaborate on factors impacting their success. Quantitative analyses identified seven individual variables with statistical and practical significance for online student success. Interestingly, the combination of factors classified as predictive of success changed with student academic standing. The impact of differential success factors across academic experience may explain mixed results in previous studies. The themes that emerged from the interviews with students were congruent with quantitative findings. A unique perspective was shared when students discussed "teaching themselves," providing additional insight into perceptions of teaching presence not formerly understood. The combination of a more contextual research approach, a strengths-based perspective, and insights from student perceptions yielded important implications for educational practice.

In the next article, "Student Perceptions of the Most Effective and Engaging Online Learning Activities in a Blended Graduate Seminar," Alicia Cundell and Emily Sheepy examine effective designs of learning activities in online environments. The major data collection activity was a questionnaire administered in three sections of a not-for-credit intensive blended graduate seminar in university teaching. The online course activities included readings, videos, discussion forum activities and other activities using a range of web-based technologies. Students rated each of the activities on four target criteria: alignment with the course learning outcomes, deep learning, engagement, and value. Students also were asked to identify the most useful activities for each of the five modules and evaluate the course as a whole in terms of navigation, expectations, instructions, availability of materials, instructor presence, and technical quality of media. The results suggested that students' perceptions of the activities followed very similar patterns across the four target criteria. The article highlights four distinct design features that characterize the most highly-rated activities.

The fifth article in this special edition is entitled, "Effective Tagging Practices for Online Learning Environments: An Exploratory Study of Tag Approach and Accuracy," authored by Vanessa P. Dennen, Lauren M. Bagdy, and Michelle L. Cates. This exploratory study examined a student tagging activity within a five-week social bookmarking unit. Students in six sections of a course were tasked with locating, tagging, and then highlighting and discussing course-related materials using Diigo, a social bookmarking tool. Three different tagging approaches were tested: dictionary only, freestyle only, and dictionary + freestyle. Analysis focused on accuracy and rates of student tagging, and popularity of different tag types. Findings show that most students were able to tag with high rates of accuracy after a single brief lesson. The dictionary-only approach led to fewer tags overall as well as fewer single-use tags than freestyle tagging. It also resulted in students applying useful classes of tags, such as type of content that did not emerge within the freestyle tag groups' folksonomies. However, freestyle tagging was not without its merits, and provided opportunities for students to include tags that reflect relevant interests and more specific

topics that were not addressed in the tag dictionary. The combined approach, if carefully taught and applied, appears to have the greatest potential for supporting student information literacy skills.

Last but not least, Vicki S. Cook and Rhonda L. Gregory explore various new technologies in "Emerging Technologies: It's Not What *You* Say – It's What *They* Do." The authors note that they believe that learning is not a complete circle when evaluated by what educators do, the technologies used, nor how knowledge is communicated to students. Learning is only successful when it fully assesses the impact of preparations and presentations on student outcomes. Students need the opportunity to actively participate in the *doing* of learning. The authors concluded that modeling the literacies needed to enable us to meet the needs of our future world through strong use of technologies in a heutagogical setting leads to learning success.

In closing, the editors of this special edition would like to acknowledge the efforts of a number of individuals who made critical contributions to this issue, particularly Sturdy Knight and the staff of the *Online Learning* journal *(OLJ)*; Peter Shea, for his guidance as editor of OLJ; Kathy Ives, for her leadership and direction in navigating the Online Learning Consortium; and the OLC staff and program committees for their efforts and dedication in organizing the conferences at which the authors originally presented their research. The editors of this special issue hope our readers enjoy reading these articles and we welcome any comments.

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