

Introduction to *Online Learning* Volume 23, Issue 1

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This first issue of 2019 contains 15 articles reflecting a broad range of topics, research questions, and methods. This collection of studies advances our understanding of cultural, theoretical, pedagogical, methodological, faculty, and professional development concerns in online settings.

The first section of this issue is titled Cultural and International Perspectives and contains the study “Interculturality in Online Learning: Instructor and Student Accommodations” by Gulnara Sadykova of Kazan Federal University in Russia and Carla Meskill of the University at Albany, SUNY. Online learning increasingly connects faculty and students across borders. While the number of online students studying abroad from their home countries is limited, international students who reside in the United States are more frequent enrollees in online courses. This paper examines the experience of one Chinese graduate student who had experienced a Confucian tradition and was adjusting to the Socratic context of an online U.S. graduate course. The study reports on the kinds of accommodations made by both the U.S. instructor and her Chinese student to overcome the twin challenges of the online environment and the complex process of academic socialization. Results indicated that both parties made accommodations in their approaches to both the medium of instruction and academic socialization.

The next section, Empirical Studies, contains six papers, the first of which is “African American Males Learning Online: Promoting Academic Achievement in Higher Education” by Susan Salvo, Brett Welch, and Kaye Shelton of Lamar University. Prior research indicates that racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps found in classrooms are replicated—and in some cases amplified—in online settings. For example, researchers have found that African American students have higher rates of attrition online than they do in classrooms. This study seeks to understand the experience of successful African American online students in order to enhance our understanding of barriers and identify supports needed to address these issues. The authors identify a variety of enabling circumstances and make recommendations to both policy makers and educators that may advance our understanding of how to help African American students succeed at higher rates in online environments.

The next paper in this section is “What if Online Students Take on the Responsibility: Students’ Cognitive Presence and Peer Facilitation Techniques” by Ye Chen of the University of Alaska Southeast and Jing Lei and Jiaming Cheng of Syracuse University. This study continues a tradition of research using constructs from the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, focusing specifically on the development of cognitive presence. Past research into threaded discussion has frequently concluded that learners do not demonstrate high levels of cognitive presence indicative of integration of new knowledge and the ability to apply such knowledge to new contexts. While the answer to this issue may seem to be more guidance from the instructor in such activities, past research also suggests that instructor involvement in discussions can have a chilling effect on student participation. Better structured peer-guided discussion may be a way forward, facilitating

higher levels of cognitive presence while avoiding the sometimes suppressive impact of the instructors on learner dialogue. How best to structure such student-led discussion is the subject of this study. In a close qualitative and quantitative content analysis of more than 700 student posts, the researchers found that the involvement of peer facilitators was correlated with higher levels of cognitive presence and that certain types of initiating questions positively affect the level of cognitive presence.

The next paper in this collection of empirical studies is “Re-Examining the Construct Validity and Causal Relationships of Teaching, Cognitive, and Social Presence in Community of Inquiry Framework” by Patrick R. Dempsey and Jie Zhang of Johns Hopkins University Carey Business School. As the title suggests, this is another study that examines CoI constructs, in this case seeking to verify the constructs, document the relationships between the various forms of presence within the model, and to examine the impacts of other variables on it. The authors conclude that the structure of the model may need adjustment, especially finding (as my own research has indicated) that teaching presence does not cohere well as a single factor. Additional research into the constructs and their relationship seems warranted.

The fourth paper in this issue is “Exploring the Relationship of Background, Technology, and Motivation Variables to Business School Transfer Intent for Two Mixed Course Format Business Undergraduate Samples” by Gary Blau, Mary Anne Gaffney, Michael Schirmer, Bora Ozkan, and Y. J. Kim of the Fox School of Business and Management at Temple University. More than a third of all college students transfer to different institutions in a process that can be beneficial as well as disruptive and expensive. Students can benefit from a better fit with a new institution and realize cost savings from initiating study at a less expensive college and transferring “up.” Transfer can also be disruptive—for example, students lose credits in the process. It can also represent a loss of tuition revenue for institutions. It is possible that institutional commitment is weaker for students enrolled primarily in online courses, who may see the institution in a largely transactional context. Does the availability of online course options shape students’ inclination to transfer? That is the question these authors address. Drawing on a sample of more than 700 business students and using regression statistics, the authors conclude that being male, perceived favorability of online courses, and lower institutional commitment were significant correlates of intent to transfer across both samples studied. The authors suggest strategies for retaining students inclined to depart.

The next paper in this section is “Reflection in Learning” by Bo Chang of Ball State University. Reflecting on learning processes and outcomes is an important dimension of online learner self-regulation. But exactly how does reflection benefit students? This paper sought to assess the impact of reflection on learning in an online environment. The author purposefully designed and embedded reflective activities in online coursework and examined student discourse to isolate five themes on how reflection impacts learning: increasing the depth of knowledge, identifying areas which are deficient, personalizing and contextualizing knowledge, providing comparative references, and building structural connections in knowledge and social connections among learners. The author provides suggestions for designing reflective activities to promote online students’ learning.

Rounding out this section is “Self-Determination: Motivational Profiles of Bachelor’s Degree-Seeking Students at an Online, For-Profit University” by Carol Pugh of Grantham University. The author notes that private for-profit colleges enroll many students and have seen significant growth in recent years. She also indicates that graduation rates are low in such institutions. The study focuses on non-cognitive factors that may shape low graduation rates—

specifically motivation. Using a sample of students, the author measures whether they are primarily intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to be enrolled in college. Contrary to other studies, she finds that the majority of students in this for-profit college are extrinsically motivated. Such motivation is not supportive of the achievement of long-term goals, such as degree completion. There may be a correlation between the motivational profiles of students enrolling in for-profit colleges and the dismal graduation rates such institutions demonstrate. One might also reasonably argue that if for-profit institutions are eager to enroll students without assessing their aptitude for higher education, they should be required to invest in the academic supports and student services needed to ensure the learners succeed. Given their profit orientation, this seems an especially prudent policy direction if we are to continue funding students at such institutions through federal student-aid programs.

The next section in this issue contains five papers on the topics of Faculty, Professional Development, and Online Teaching. The first paper in this section is “Professional Development: Teachers’ Attitudes in Online and Traditional Training Courses” by Egoza Wasserman of Herzog Academic College, Jerusalem, Israel, and Ruth Migdal of Elementary School, Israel. The authors of this paper note that not only have thousands of online courses and programs been mounted for college students across the globe, but an increasing number of faculty professional development programs are also offered this way. The authors sought to investigate teacher attitudes toward engaging in online professional development. They surveyed 469 teachers using an instrument designed to better understand attitudes toward online delivery of professional development. The paper reports significant differences between attitudes toward online and traditional training, in favor of online training. A multiple regression analysis found that the effectiveness of professional development courses can be explained by factors labelled *environment*, *course assignments*, and *attitudes toward ICT factors*. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

The second paper is “Benefits of Online Teaching for Onground Teaching at Historically Black Colleges and Universities” by D’Nita Andrews Graham of Norfolk State University. A substantial body of research suggests that the faculty experience of conceptualizing, designing, and teaching an online course can have a positive impact on subsequent classroom instruction. This paper documents that connection among 12 participants at an HBCU institution in Virginia. Using qualitative research methods, the author documents three themes, including faculty roles and teaching practices, faculty communication strategies, and faculty changes in instruction. The paper provides detail on how participants modified their teaching practices from a traditional teacher-centered model to more student-centered pedagogy.

The next paper is “Teaching to Connect: Community-Building Strategies for the Virtual Classroom” by Sharla Berry of California Lutheran University. The role of community in online learning has been the focus of voluminous research in recent decades. The goal of attending to the social, emotional, and cognitive states of learners is essential in developing effective learning communities. This qualitative study uses faculty interviews to surface techniques used by instructors to promote a sense of connectedness and joint effort in the service of shared education goals. The author identifies four general strategies found to be effective.

The fourth paper in this section is “Award-Winning Faculty Online Teaching Practices: Roles and Competencies” by Florence Martin and Kiran Budhrani of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and Swapna Kumar and Albert Ritzhaupt of the University of Florida. In this study, the authors build on previous research to focus on contemporary roles of online instructors. While much has been written on this topic, this piece contributes the perspectives of faculty who have been recognized by various organizations for their outstanding approaches to online teaching.

The authors identify five distinct roles including facilitator, course designer, content manager, subject matter expert, and mentor.

The final paper in this section is “Integrating UDL Strategies into the Online Course Development Process: Instructional Designers’ Perspectives” by Korey Singleton, Anya Evmenova, Marci Kinas-Jerome, and Kevin Clark of George Mason University. This paper seeks to understand the viewpoints of instructional designers in supporting faculty to make online courses more accessible. There are two basic approaches to improving accessibility, which one might call the “ounce of prevention” and “pound of cure” methods. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) represents the former. UDL is a set of guidelines that encourage instructors to create a flexible, equitable learning curriculum that meets the needs of a diverse body of learners without the “cure” of post-development customization or retrofitting. The paper presents the results of interviews with instructional-design support professionals seeking perspectives on the integration of UDL strategies and how they believe faculty perceived such practices. The authors identified three main themes: instructional designer–faculty member partnership, factors impacting faculty adoption of UDL strategies, and faculty resistance to change. The paper includes recommendations for increasing adoption of UDL in online education.

The next section presents two papers that are reviews of the literature on specific topics related to online learning. The first paper is “Doctoral E-mentoring: Current Practices and Effective Strategies” by David Byrnes of Westchester Community College, and Lida Uribe-Flórez, Jesús Trespacios, and Jodi Chilson of Boise State University. Online doctoral education continues to grow and represents significant challenges with regard to implementing the apprenticeship model common in such terminal degree programs. This paper provides a review of the literature on best practices in mentoring online doctoral students and organizes results into a framework reflecting six categories: competence, availability, induction, challenge, communication, and emotional support. This overview will be useful for faculty at institutions considering whether to offer and how to structure support for online doctoral programs.

The final paper in this issue is “Social Network Analysis and Learning Communities in Higher Education Online Learning: A Systematic Literature Review” by Shazia Jan, Panos Vlachopoulos, and Mitch Parsell of Macquarie University, Australia. As previously noted, decades of research point to the importance of community in online learning. Much of that research depends on time-consuming qualitative coding to identify elements of community important to learning. The purpose of this review was to judge the effectiveness of a potentially more automated and quantitative technique, Social Network Analysis (SNA), for identifying a Communities of Practice (CoP) and Communities of Inquiry (CoI) based on the structural components of each. The review reveals that there is a limited amount of research on this important topic, despite the promise of SNA for advancing inquiry on online communities. The authors recommend additional research and the development of a more fully integrated methodological approach that includes SNA measures and structural components of the CoP and CoI frameworks.

We invite you to read and share this issue with colleagues and to consider submitting your original work to *Online Learning*.