

Introduction to the Special Issue: Select Papers Presented at the 2018 OLC Accelerate Conference and the 2019 OLC Innovate Conference

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Each year, *Online Learning* publishes a special issue containing selected research articles presented at the past year's Online Learning Consortium (OLC) sponsored conferences.

The fall conference of OLC, Accelerate, was held November 14-16, 2018 in Orlando, Florida. Accelerate is devoted to "driving quality online learning, advancing best practice guidance and accelerating innovation in learning for academic leaders, educators, administrators, online learning professionals and organizations around the world." Held each fall, this flagship OLC conference celebrated its 24th year as the premiere conference devoted to online learning.

OLC Innovate, a joint conference by the Online Learning Consortium and MERLOT was held April 3-5, 2019 in Denver, Colorado. In its fourth year, Innovate provides a place to learn about innovative practices and research in higher education online, blended, and digital learning.

The papers contained here present research from selected presentations from both Accelerate 2018 and Innovate 2019. They represent a variety of topics and issues and continue to stretch the boundaries on what we know about online and blended learning.

The first paper in this conference issue, by Vanessa Dennen and Lauren Bagdy, *From Proprietary Textbook to Custom OER Solution: Using Learning Feedback to Guide Design and Development* presents formative evaluation results from a university-funded project investigating the use of an open educational resources (OER) electronic textbook that replaced a proprietary text and provided learning materials at no cost to the undergraduate students enrolled in an educational technology course. Dennen and Bagdy describe their development of this OER solution for the Canvas learning management system. Their initial needs analyses indicated that students felt that free, mobile-accessible and printable course materials were critical and that they preferred less text

and increased use of course relevant, non-text media. Students utilizing the OER solution for class found it useful to help them better prepare for class activities and complete assignments, and that their rate of use was higher with the OER textbook than proprietary texts. This study highlights students' critical need for cost affordable materials and points out their preferred methods for engaging with course content. With student debt rising, research on OER can provide valuable information on resources that can help students with the cost of higher education.

In *Using Debate in an Online Asynchronous Social Policy Course*, Elissa Mitchell describes a preliminary study examining student reactions to how she used debate in her online asynchronous social policy course. Survey results indicated that students felt that using debate helped improve their critical thinking, and increased their collaboration with other students. Debate helped them learn better than lecture or reading alone and more than half of students felt it also helped in other courses or in work. Recommendations are provided by the researchers for other online faculty considering this instructional method.

Learning analytics is a quickly growing topic and Priya Harindranathan and James Folkestad describe their research in *Learning Analytics to Inform the Learning Design: Supporting an Instructor's Inquiry into Student Learning in Unsupervised Technology-Enhanced Platforms*. Examining data for 133 students taking an undergraduate Microbiology course, they investigated what variables extracted from the Canvas quiz-log data were related to students' productive learning behavior and whether these variables (and associated behaviors) were related to improved exam grades. Student learning analytics captured included total time spent, off-task time, proximity of first attempt to quiz due date, number of quiz attempts, and time space of quiz attempts. Results indicated that off-task behavior and closeness to the due date were significantly correlated to the exam score. Implications for intervention and future research are discussed.

In the fourth paper in this set, *The Collaborative Mapping Model: Relationship-Centered Instructional Design for Higher Education*, Jason Drysdale describes the theory behind his developed and pilot tested Collaborative Mapping Model (CMM) of instructional design, developed to conceptualize the collaborative relationship that is critical to effective instructional designer/faculty partnership. Results of the faculty survey indicated that, when working with an instructional designer utilizing the CMM, faculty better understood the relationship of the instructional designer and were positive about the value it provided to their course design process. The Collaborative Mapping Model provides a good framework for institutions that want to address challenges in the instructional design relationship with faculty or who are establishing online faculty development.

The final paper in our conference set is *Impactful Leadership Traits of Virtual Leaders in Higher Education* by Erin Alward and Yvonne Phelps. This phenomenological study examined the concept of virtual team leadership. Ten leaders of virtual teams in online higher education institutions were interviewed regarding their perceptions and experiences on guided trust, activities and tools used for employee engagement, leadership theories and beliefs, and job preparation and training. Results indicated themes related to readiness for virtual leadership: training and development, trust, emotional intelligence, and higher education virtual leadership competencies. In addition, responses indicated themes related to virtual leaders' activities and leadership: communication and team building, technology, employee recognition and leadership style. The authors discuss commonalities with leaders (virtual or not) and provide recommendations for virtual leadership in higher education. More research is needed in this area.

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The editors of this special issue would like to acknowledge the contributions of the OLC staff and the numerous conference volunteer committee members and support personnel who helped to make OLC Accelerate and OLC Innovate a success. We are also grateful that the Online Learning journal continues to recognize research presented at the conferences and appreciate the guidance and help from journal reviewers and staff including Peter Shea, editor, and Sturdy Knight, managing editor.

We hope you find the articles in this special issue of interest to your work and consider submitting your research for presentation at OLC Accelerate or Innovate. And, consider submitting your original work *Online Learning* in the future!