Introduction to the Special Issue:
Select Papers Presented at the 2020 OLC Accelerate Conference and the 2021 OLC Innovate Conference

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Abstract
Each year, *Online Learning* (OLJ) presents a special section devoted to research shared at the Online Learning Consortium conferences. We are happy to present five research articles selected from the many presented at OLC Accelerate, held virtually November 9-18, 2020, and OLC Innovate, held virtually March 15-19, 2021. We invite the readers to consider presenting their research to OLC conferences in the future and submitting to the journal to share their work with others in the field.

Keywords: Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Online Learning Consortium (OLC), OLC conferences, academic conferences, distance education conferences, journal special issues

The Online Learning Consortium (OLC) was formed in the 1990s when a small community of higher education professionals united to promote the idea that online learning could help provide access to a quality education. Originally branded the Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C) and funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, this community sponsored many activities and events designed to promote the concept that the design and implementation of high quality online and blended learning should be strategic and based on sound pedagogical principles.

OLC conferences began in 1995 with what became an annual meeting of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's Anytime, Anyplace Learning Program grant recipients. Out of that small group of early online learning innovators, came the focus of a conference – providing a community for the dissemination of practice and research centered around quality online learning. In 2001, the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Florida, hosted the first Sloan-C International Conference on Online Learning fall conference. A second event, the Sloan-C Blended Learning Conference and Workshop, was held in 2003.

In 2016, the Online Learning Consortium rebranded its two flagship conferences to be named OLC Accelerate, held in the fall, and OLC Innovate, held jointly with MERLOT each spring. The most recent offerings, OLC Accelerate 2020 and OLC Innovate 2021, were converted to virtual events due to the COVID-19 pandemic after some fantastic planning and strategic organization by the OLC team. The virtual conference allowed for many more sessions and attendees, and with more international participants than typically attended when the conference was held as an in-person event.

OLC Accelerate 2020, held November 9-18, attracted nearly 4,000 participants from over 400 institutions and organizations with 14 countries and 43 states, plus the District of Columbia represented. The conference featured over 400 sessions, 20 workshops, discovery sessions, a new Exposition Foundry session format, and workshops for attendees interested in online learning at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Topic-based summits provided deep dives into high demand themes for participants. These summits included instructional design, research, and participation in the annual OLC Leadership Network.

OLC Innovate 2021 was held virtually on March 15-19 with over 4,800 attendees. A variety of registration opportunities resulted in a 149 organizations and institutions taking advantage of an unlimited group package and nearly 4,300 participants registered with a buy 2, get 1 free pass. Nine countries and 48 states, including the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and Guam were represented. Because of the virtual format, sessions were made available for a year, post-conference, resulting in 259 participants registering after the conference occurred – a new phenomenon to investigate for the future inquiry!

Each year, the Online Learning Journal solicits research papers from those who have presented at the most recent OLC Accelerate and Innovate conferences. This year, we selected five articles from experts in the field of online learning. We hope you will find them helpful and informative.

In *Does Mode of Access Make a Difference? Mobile Learning and Online Student Engagement*, Sarah Nichter examined the impact of mobile device use on student engagement and student success in online courses. Online Self-Regulated Learning Questionnaire (OSLQ) scores were used to measure engagement and to examine the self-regulated learning (SRL) constructs of environment structuring, task strategies, and time management.

In Nichter's study, mobile learning was based on frequency of device use (low, moderate, or high). Results indicated that mobile learning had an impact on engagement and that the effect varied with use for the three SRL constructs. Discussion and recommendations are provided related to online course design and pedagogy.

In *Student Performance in Online Classes at a Hispanic-Serving Institution: A Study of the Impact of Student Characteristics in Online Learning*, Rebecca Cottrell used propensity score analyses (PSA) to control for 15 covariates in examining the effect of student enrollment in online courses at a Hispanic-serving institution. Student grades and withdrawal rates were compared by course modality (online vs in-person) from a dataset of 7,765 students, spanning the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic years. The researcher's comparison of three PSA models and final analyses illustrate the use of PSA to account for bias. The near-neighbor 1:2 matching PSA method found no significant difference between online and in-person students' composite GPA, but significantly higher withdrawal rates among those online. Recommendations for practice as well as areas of future research are discussed.

Dr. Jason Drysdale, in *The Story is in the Structure: A Multi-Case Study of Instructional Design Teams,* provided a detailed comparison of the organization structure of instructional design teams at three public, nonprofit universities with both physical campuses and significant online presence. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with instructional designers, online faculty, and online learning administrators at each campus, with a total of 12 participant in-depth interviews. Findings highlighted how the instructional design team with academic reporting lines had clearer role definitions, was empowered by administrators to pursue pedagogical work, enjoyed largely positive relationships with faculty. There was also a perception of more opportunities for leadership. The researcher provides a thorough comparison of the three organizational structures and challenges with each. The recommendations provided are beneficial for those institutions attempting to establish support for online learning or restructuring existing organizational models in facilitating online learning course development.

Suzanne Ensmann, Aimee Whiteside, Lina Gomez-Vasquez, and Ronda Sturgill in *Connections Before Curriculum: The Role of Social Presence During COVID-19 Emergency Remote Learning for Students*, used the framework of the Social Presence Model to examine students' experiences during the transition to remote learning during spring 2020. Analyses of the 507 valid survey responses found that freshmen students struggled more with remote instruction, and significantly more than graduate students. Graduate students better appreciated the flexibility and potential for future online learning possibilities. In addition, many students had less than a year of experience with online education prior, contributing to student stress and dissatisfaction with remote instruction. Analyses of student comments are discussed through the five elements of the Social Presence model: Affective Association, Community Cohesion, Instructor Involvement, Interaction Intensity, and Knowledge and Experience, focusing on the impact that remote instruction had on students. Findings from this study provide insight for proactive planning for future unanticipated emergencies and illustrate how social presence can be used as a lens to better help educators improve the student experience.

Finally, in *Troublesome Knowledge: Identifying Barriers to Innovate for Breakthroughs in Learning to Teach Online*, Lorna Gonzalez and Christopher Ozuna examine difficulties in learning to teach online through Perkins' (1999) framework of 'troublesome knowledge.' They examined 123 unique cases of troublesome knowledge collected through surveying instructional designers, technologists, and educational developers at institutions of higher education.

The analyses from Gonzales and Ozuna will be valuable to those in support positions who are responsible for teaching and/or training faculty to teach online and provide insight for better understanding the challenges new online faculty face.

The editors of this special issue would like to acknowledge the OLC staff and numerous conference support staff from the OLC community who did a fantastic job this year to help make 2020 OLC Accelerate and 2021 OLC Innovate a success. We also are grateful to Mary Rice, managing editor, and Peter Shea, editor, of *Online Learning*, for their continuing guidance and help in continuing this focus on OLC Conferences.

Finally, to the OLJ readers, we invite you to consider submitting your research for presentation to OLC Accelerate in fall, or OLC Innovate in spring as it is critical to share your lessons learned with others in the field. Please consider submitting your original research here to *Online Learning* in the future.

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