

# **Introduction to the Special Issue: Select Papers Presented at the 2021 OLC Accelerate Conference and the 2022 OLC Innovate Conference**

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In the 1990s, a small community of higher education professionals came together to promote the idea that online learning could provide access to a quality education. Beginning as the Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C) with funding by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the organization quickly led the field as a leader in online learning. Sloan-C sponsored 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. An annual meeting of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's Anytime, Anyplace Learning Program grant recipients formed the first Sloan-C event featuring a small group of early online learning innovators. Then, in 2001, the University of Central Florida hosted the first Sloan-C International Conference on Online Learning fall conference in Orlando, Florida. The second yearly event, the Sloan-C Blended Learning Conference and Workshop, quickly followed 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. This past year, OLC Accelerate 2021, was held virtually September 20-24, 2021, and live, near Washington, D.C. October 5-8, 2021. OLC Innovate 2022, was held virtually March 29-April 1, 2022, and in person in Dallas, Texas, April 11-13, 2022.

Each year, *Online Learning* solicits research papers from those who have presented at the most recent OLC Accelerate and Innovate conferences. In this special section, we feature four articles from experts in the field of online learning. Much of the work showcased at our conferences presents case studies and research from faculty and practitioners in the field. The growing focus on online learning due to the pandemic has resulted in many new models, approaches, and applications being deployed to address instructional needs in the virtual classroom. These provide a valuable opportunity to examine how faculty and researchers are adapting their instruction to provide quality online learning across various institutions and disciplines.

In *Effect of Role-Play in Online Discussions on Student Engagement and Critical Thinking*, Laurie Berry and Kristin Kowal discussed their research from the University of Wisconsin Extended Campus. The use of role-play, including written reflections was investigated as an instructional strategy to facilitate critical thinking and student engagement by integrating authentic, real-world contexts in an online, self-paced, biology course. This approach

enabled students to engage with the content to help them discover new knowledge and construct new meaning from examining multiple perspectives. Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (2000) four-phase model of cognitive presence and Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson's (1998) five-staged model of knowledge construction were used to gauge the presence of critical thinking in student discussion post. Evidence of students' knowledge construction increasing was found after their interaction with others' posts, with the highest evidence of critical thinking and knowledge construction in the written reflections. Details on the role-playing exercise are provided for replication and strengths and weaknesses of their instructional approach are thoughtfully discussed. Implications for practice are provided, including the importance of including a student reflection at the end of a discussion activity. Based on this study, Berry and Kowal developed the "Framework for Student Engagement and Critical Thinking in Online Discussions," to guide others in the field. Future research recommendations focus on the need for evaluating this framework and the continued application and examination of this method to other discussion strategies.

Suzanne Ensmann and Aimee Whiteside in "*It Helped to Know I Wasn't Alone: Exploring Student Satisfaction in an Online Community with a Gamified, Social Media-Like Instructional Approach*," discussed the utilization of creating instruction that utilizes a platform called Yellowdig® to facilitate game-like student interactions in courses to foster connectivity and satisfaction. Eighteen courses in various disciplines utilized this instructional tool across four semesters. The authors provide examples to illustrate the class interface and discusses issues around the integration of this approach. Researchers found that students were positive about this new environment, and their analysis found significant differences between Generations Z and Y, with the former rating clarity higher in this approach. Lessons learned are discussed, including critical course design elements that faculty should consider implementing when using this instructional method.

Emily Faulconer in *A Case Study of Community of Inquiry Presences and Cognitive Load in Asynchronous Online STEM Courses* examined the relationship between students' cognitive load and Community of Inquiry presences in an asynchronous, online course in undergraduate physics. The study analyzed student and instructor discussion post content for presence density and compared these measures across cohorts and modules. The NASA Task Load Index® was used to assess students' subjective cognitive workload, and then its impact on students' performance is examined. The authors provide discussion about how the findings prompt implications for course design, specifically the instructional design of discussions, and highlights the need for quality and ongoing faculty development. During the analysis, the researchers found downloading and de-identifying discussion posts to be extremely time consuming, so they developed a Python® script to extract the discussion text, parse the sentence structure, and de-identify the text. The GitHub link to this code is also provided for readers.

Finally, in *Teaching and Learning with AI-Generated Courseware: Lessons from the Classroom*, Kersten Schroeder, Martha Hubertz, Rachel Van Campenhout and Benny Johnson describe a case study where two courses, Microbial Metabolism, and Psychology of Sex and Gender, were redesigned. Acrobatiq®'s artificial intelligence engine was utilized to automatically generate questions from existing e-textbooks to create coursework containing formative practice for students. The researchers describe the course redesign process and how student engagement increased with the integration of the practice into the course. The authors share lessons learned including how they motivated students to complete the practice and they illustrate how that translated into increased student engagement. While more research needs to be

done to determine the link between student performance and engagement, researchers found that the low end of the range of exam scores increased with the new approach, hinting at the possibility for this approach to more help for the most struggling students. Opportunities for future research are discussed.

We would like to acknowledge the hard works of OLC staff and numerous conference support members from the OLC community who gave countless hours to make 2021 OLC Accelerate and 2022 OLC Innovate successful. 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 and to our OLJ reviewers.

To the OLJ readers, we invite you to consider submitting your research for presentation to OLC Accelerate in fall, or to OLC Innovate in spring. Quality research is critical to improving the field and these venues along with OLJ submissions allow others to learn from your experiences. Also, please consider submitting your original research here to *Online Learning* in the future.

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