

Introduction to OLJ Volume 26, Issue 3

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In addition to the papers presented at OLC conferences this past year, this third issue of OLJ for 2022 also contain a selection of papers from our regular submission and review process. These papers investigate a range of issues including the definitions of terms in the field, undergraduate students' anxiety, culturally responsive teaching, social presence, and faculty concerns in online learning environments.

Ask a few people at a conference the meaning of phrases such as online learning, hybrid learning, and blended learning and you will likely get some similar answers, but you may also find some differences. In the research literature, more disputes arise regarding definitions. Interacting with federal agencies raises even deeper differences with divisions within the same agency using different terminology about distance education, for example. This lack of agreement on basic definitions of key terms in the field of online learning is potentially problematic for research, administration, policy, and practice. The first paper in this section, "Defining Different Modes of Learning: Resolving Confusion and Contention through Consensus" by Nicole Johnson of the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association, Jeff Seaman of Bayview Analytics, and Russ Poulin of the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies investigate this issue. The authors review the literature to reveal that there are some basic disagreements. They then describe the development of a questionnaire based on definitions found in the literature which they administered to a sample of 987 faculty and 1,051 administrators representing a full range of institutional types in the U.S. Contrary to the literature they find a relatively high level of consensus around "big bucket" definitions in which learning modes are described in terms of their most basic characteristics. The study provides a footing for instituting common language and shared understandings about online and hybrid learning and course offerings.

The second paper in Section II is "Exploring the Factors Associated with Undergraduate Students' Online Learning Anxiety: Development of the Online Learner Anxiety Scale (OLAS)" by Albert D Ritzhaupt, Muhammad Rehman, of the University of Florida; Matthew L Wilson of Kennesaw State University; and Krista Ruggles of Utah Valley University. Anxiety is a very common phenomena in educational settings and can be especially problematic in online settings that may lack social support. The forced adoption of online learning in response to COVID-19 only intensified the potential for anxiety among learners in an already stressful time. This study investigates the measurement of anxiety in online education settings first developing a conceptual framework then an anxiety scale based on this model. Using a sample of 297 undergraduate students the researchers analyzed data for descriptive statistics, internal consistency reliability, exploratory factor analysis, and correlational analysis. The resulting Online Learner Anxiety Scale (OLAS) produced reliable scores that validly measure online learning anxiety among undergraduate students.

In "Culturally Responsive Teaching in an Undergraduate Online General Education Course" authors Alison Lockman and Barbara Schirmer of Walden University investigate faculty pedagogy that seeks to make learning more relevant and effective for diverse students in online settings. This is an important topic given that culturally responsive teaching has the potential to support success among students who may struggle to persist in college coursework. The authors' note that this is an underexplored area of research and employed a qualitative coding approach to analyze data from 24 online discussion sections across 12 faculty. Findings indicate inconsistent use of culturally responsive teaching strategies in online classrooms. Results reveal non-differentiated responses, overlooked

opportunities for addressing linguistic or cultural differences, and limited encouragement for collaboration or sense of community. The authors note that culturally responsive teaching was employed at times, despite the lack of training around this approach. They conclude that more research and professional development is warranted.

Authors Richard Fendler and Craig Ruff of Georgia State University take on a common issue affecting college students in their paper, “Advising Sleep Deprived Students to Take Online Classes.” Sleep deficiency affects a majority of students and has negative consequences on academic performance. The authors review biological, societal, and technological factors associated with poor sleep and conclude that, for many students, the flexibility of asynchronous online learning may be a solution to better sleep and better grades. Controlling for a number of variables the authors find that perceived sleep deprivation has a significant negative impact on the performance of student in face-to-face classrooms but the same is not true of students in online asynchronous settings. The study concludes that academic advisors can benefit from understanding that sleep issues might be ameliorated by advising students to take more online courses.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted institutions of higher education in different ways depending on the experience and resources to which they had access. There were also likely disciplinary differences in making a successful transition to distance education and the authors of “Transitioning to Online Learning Amid COVID-19: Perspectives in a Civil Engineering Program” Munjed Maraqa, Mohamed Hamouda, Hilal El-Hassan, Amr El Dieb, and Ashraf Aly Hassan outline unique challenges and success confronted by engineering students and faculty in United Arab Emirates University. The authors surveyed both learners and their instructors about barriers to the online transition. Results from students indicated that low student engagement and challenges associated with online exams are significant areas that need improvement. Nonetheless more than half of the students preferred online learning to face-to-face instruction, especially as they grew accustomed to it. Faculty had a difficult time developing and administering tests and struggled with the short period of time to prepare to teach online generally. The authors conclude that more training is needed to address these issues.

Social presence is a complex concept and researchers seem to disagree as to exactly what it means. Based on communications research conducted in the 1960s and 1970s this construct was taken up by scholars in the field of distance learning in the 1990s and continues to be a topic of interest. The next paper in this section is “Creating the Projecting a Social Presence Measure: Self-Rated Behaviors that Indicate Mediated Presence” by Scott Christen of Tennessee Technological University, and Michelle Violanti and Jennifer Morrow of the University of Tennessee. In this study the authors present a new instrument to measure social presence in online education settings. Through two phases the authors describe the development of the instrument and its validity and reliability testing. Unlike previous measure of social presence that typically rely on three domains (affect, cohesion, and interaction) the current paper adds two additional categories to the social presence construct. Affective communication was divided into sharing of emotions/feelings and paralinguistics. Cohesive communication was split into small talk and use of first names while excluding the use of inclusive pronouns found in other measures of social presence.

Numerous strategies exist that may help students to engage in active learning and the collaborative construction of knowledge. The next paper “Using Online Tools to Develop Higher Order Learning Among Tertiary Students” by Angela Page of the University of Newcastle, Australia investigates one such strategy—students in developing their own multiple-choice questions on course content. The author examines an online platform that allows student to both author multiple choice questions on the topic they are studying and engage with each other about the questions and their rationales for answers. Through an analysis of student work, which indicates growing complexity

throughout the period of the study, the author concludes that this platform helps promote deeper learning through scaffolded interaction.

Another strategy for encouraging more active and collaborative learning is through well designed group projects. Despite evidence indicating their effectiveness many students have had negative experiences in group work and therefore may not fully engage in the group activities when encountering them in subsequent classes. In “Enhancing College Students’ Online Group Work Perceptions and Skills Using a Utility-Value Intervention” Alison Kelly, Virginia Clinton-Lisell, and Kendall Klein of the University of North Dakota investigate a solution to this issue. The authors review literature indicating both the value of group projects and the benefits of improving student attitudes toward this pedagogy in facilitating deeper engagement with group learning. Using an experimental design (which prior investigators of this topic have called for) the authors implemented an intervention with one group of students designed to enhance their understanding and appreciation of the benefits of group work. Results of the intervention were promising but mixed with improvement in attitudes but not overall performance. This may not be surprising given the limited duration of the treatment.

Universities depend on contingent labor to function. Part-time faculty provide a large share of instruction in higher education and many institutions employ non-tenured, part-time faculty to teach a majority of their online offerings. Clearly the professional development needs of adjunct faculty are an important issue and are investigated in “Exploring the Pedagogical Struggles and Professional Development Needs of Online Adjunct Professors: A Case Study” by authors Dennis Butters and Courtney Gann of Amridge University. Using a qualitative case study approach the author surveyed and interviewed experienced online adjunct faculty about their challenges and the kinds of professional development opportunities that would help address these. Results indicate that participant responses about professional development were very consistent within this case study. All of the respondents needed more training in course preparation and technology awareness; access to course materials and online resources; and improved communication, interaction, and engagement.

Advisors play an essential role in connecting with students and engaging them with the institution, especially in online settings. In the next paper, “Get Connected: A Scoping Review of Advising Online Graduate Students,” by Holly Meyer and Anita Samuel of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences and Kristi Preisman of the College of Saint Mary, the authors investigate research that has been conducted on this key role using systemic review methods. They reveal that the literature on online graduate advising can be structured into five themes: (a) communication and feedback, (b) building community, (c) program policies, (d) advisee’s personal and academic growth, and (e) technical issues. Three recommendations are proposed including building trusting relationships with advisees, building a community of students, and knowing program policies, requirements, and technology platforms.

Faculty attitudes toward technology and online learning shape adoption, use, and effectiveness of online instruction. In “Faculty Perceptions of Online Education and Technology Use Over Time: A Secondary Analysis of the Annual Survey of Faculty Attitudes on Technology from 2013 to 2019,” Nicole Johnson, George Veletsianos, Olga Belikov, and Charlene VanLeeuwen of Royal Roads University provide a longitudinal view of these important issues. Results disclosed small change over time in some areas and a large degree of change in others such as growth in proportion of faculty who believe that online courses can achieve the same learning outcomes as in-person courses. These findings, collected prior to the pandemic, clearly show increasingly positive perceptions of online learning efficacy across a broad segment of faculty over the past seven years.

We hope that these recent investigations provide direction for researchers and practitioners seeking insights about how students and faculty learn, teach, and assess in online environments. Please read, share, and cite this work and consider submitting your own rigorous original research to OLJ.