Introduction to the Special Issue:
Select Papers Presented at the 2022 OLC Accelerate Conference and the 2023 OLC Innovate Conference

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Every year, the Online Learning Consortium holds two flagship conferences: OLC Accelerate, held in the fall, and OLC Innovate, held jointly with MERLOT each spring. This past year, OLC Accelerate 2022, was held virtually November 1-2, 2022, and live, in Orlando, Florida, November 14-17, 2022. OLC Innovate 2023, was held virtually April 4-6, 2023, and live in Nashville, Tennessee, April 18-21, 2023.

The Online Learning Journal solicits research papers from those who have presented at the most recent OLC Accelerate and Innovate conferences for the annual September issue. In this special section, we feature three articles that showcase some of the research that is being conducted related to online and blended 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, issues, 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 *Institutional Support for Academic Engagement in Online and Blended Learning Environments: Exploring Affective, Behavioral, and Cognitive Dimensions*, Charles Graham and colleagues detail the development and implementation of the Academic Communities of Engagement in higher education (ACE-HE) instrument. Based on the ACE framework, developed by Borup et al. (2020), the original instrument was updated and used to help a Columbian university measured both the affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions of engagement as well as how well the institution was supporting those elements in its online and blended courses. Primarily an in-person campus prior to the pandemic, this university sought to better understand engagement and barriers for blended and online students, given their increase in blended, live-remote, and fully asynchronous online learning because of the pandemic impact to instructional modalities.

The survey was completed by 1,295 university students and the authors detail the structural equation modeling that demonstrated a good fit for the ABC dimensions and for the model of institutional support for ABC engagement dimensions. Both English and Spanish versions of the ACE-HE instrument were provided and ideas were identified for institutions that want to improve their support for student affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement dimensions in online and blended learning environments. They also discussed implications for modifications to the ACE framework.

In the second article, *Using AI to Evaluate a Competency-Based Online Writing Course in Nursing*, Rebecca Wolf and Andrew Wolf detail their research on a 14-week fully online, competency-based writing course examining students' self-efficacy, task value, and writing performance. The Writing Workshop is a Quality Matters® certified online course that provides nursing masters students with a foundation in scholarly writing, critical thinking, and synthesis to improve their ability to make research-based recommendations in the clinical setting. The course pedagogy was based on the cognitive apprenticeship model which the authors describe in detail.

Students received an initial writing prompt the first week of class and a second prompt was administered the last two weeks of the writing course. The pretest-posttest design was used to determine changes in students' writing performance, as well as changes to their perceptions of self-efficacy and task value. An artificial intelligence (AI) based writing assessment tool, IntelliMetric, was used for automated essay scoring (AES) of students' writing, which provided a baseline of students' writing proficiency before and after instruction. The authors discussed the use of this AI tool and its history, quality metrics, and value for instructors of writing. Students' self-efficacy and task value for scholarly writing were based on their survey responses, again conducted at course beginning and end for comparison.

Results indicated significant differences in students' perceptions of their writing self-efficacy and significant improvement in writing skills following the online workshop. Wolf and Wolf discussed the effectiveness of using the cognitive apprenticeship model for teaching writing and include detailed course design elements, focusing on the importance of online instructional design in writing courses. In particular, the study indicated positive results for a competency-based online approach to facilitating nursing students writing and thinking skills and providing the flexibility to engage a wide range of educational backgrounds.

The final paper presented at OLC Accelerate 2022 is from Chuck Dziuban, Patsy Moskal, Annie Reiner and Ady Cohen -- *Student Ratings and Course Modalities: A Small Study in a Large Context*. Dziuban and Moskal have a history of research on the University of Central Florida's anonymous Student Perception of Instruction (SPI) end-of-course rating form (Wang et al., 2009; Dziuban, Moskal, Kramer & Thompson, 2012). How to capture the student voice has long been a critical issue in higher education and the use of high stakes student ratings presents challenges for institutions. This article extends that research, examining student ratings from 2017 through fall 2022, including the impact of the COVID pandemic, to include 664,473 student responses.

The authors examined the impact that modality has on student ratings – a perpetual challenge as faculty often question whether a standardized rating form can adequately capture the voices of both face-to-face students and myriad online course permutations. Dziuban et al presented a careful examination of the properties of the (SPI), finding the ratings to conform to measurement quality specifications and to possess excellent psychometric characteristics. Results indicated that students tend not to assign poor ratings and extensively rate courses on the higher end of the scale where most instructors are very good or excellent with few poor outliers. Findings indicate that course modality had minimal impact, accounting for virtually none of the variation in ratings. In classification and regression tree analysis, researchers found that when students rated the effectiveness of an instructor as excellent on two items alone – helping students achieve the course objectives and creating an effective learning environment – the probability of an overall rating of excellent was .82. This was independent of course modality, term, college, department, or course level. A discussion of the relevance of these findings for

teaching is included along with a charge for the education community, including OLC, to be part of a thoughtful national conversation of good ideas for how best to capture the student voice in higher education.

We would like to acknowledge OLC staff and numerous conference support members from the OLC community who gave countless hours to make 2022 OLC Accelerate and 2023 OLC Innovate successful. These past conferences have continued to straddle the post-COVID challenge of providing both virtual and face-to-face settings which effectively means twice the work for those planning, supporting, and working these venues. We are grateful for their tireless effort to provide effective and quality events where our community can gather and share our practices and research despite these challenges. We are also 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 presenting your work to OLC Accelerate in fall, or to OLC Innovate in spring of each year. We especially call on those conducting quality research to consider these conferences to help support the strong need for research on the ever advancing fields of instructional technology and online learning. Quality research is critical to improving the field and these venues provide a fantastic outlet to share your work with colleagues and form communities of practice. OLJ submissions further allow others to learn from your experiences and provide a high-quality outlet for publication. Please consider submitting your original research here to *Online Learning* in the future.

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