

II. 2024 OLC Conference Special Issue

Introduction to the Special Issue: Select Papers Presented at the 2023 OLC Accelerate Conference and the 2024 OLC Innovate Conference

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Abstract

Each year, the September issue of the *Online Learning Journal (OLJ)* highlights select articles showcasing research presented at one of the past year's Online Learning Consortium (OLC) conferences. OLC Accelerate 2023 was held both virtually, October 2–5, 2023, and in person in Washington, DC, October 24–27, 2023. OLC Innovate, presented jointly by OLC and MERLOT, was held both in Denver, April 10–13, 2024, and virtually, April 23–25, 2024.

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This dedicated section presents four articles highlighting current research in the field of online and blended learning. The increased interest and focus on online learning, driven by the pandemic, has led to the development of numerous novel models, strategies, challenges, and applications tailored for teaching in a virtual environment. These initiatives offer a critical chance to observe how educators and researchers are investigating and modifying their methods to ensure effective and high-quality online learning across different educational establishments and fields of study.

In “The Development and Validation of the Pre-Service Teacher Online Teaching Motivation Scale (PST-OTMS),” Bennett et al. developed and validated the Pre-Service Teacher Online Teaching Motivation Scale (PST-OTMS), a survey instrument to measure motivational constructs related to online teaching among pre-service teachers and derived from the Online Teaching Motivation Scale (OTMS) for K–12 educators (Wiles et al., 2023). The researchers note that while online learning opportunities have increased, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a gap in teacher preparation programs for developing online teaching skills. The PST-OTMS aims to address this by assessing pre-service teacher motivation across four dimensions: self-efficacy for online teaching, perceptions of online teaching and learning, online teaching professionalism, and anticipated administrative support.

The study employed a thorough validation process, resulting in a 31-item survey. The researchers collected data from pre-service teachers enrolled in an introductory educational technology class at a large midwestern university. They conducted an exploratory factor analysis to examine the underlying structure of the survey items.

Results demonstrated strong reliability and validity for the PST-OTMS within the research context. The instrument showed high internal consistency across the four dimensions. The findings suggest the PST-OTMS can be a valuable tool for teacher preparation programs to assess and improve pre-service teachers' motivation and readiness for online teaching. The authors note future research should aim to administer the PST-OTMS more widely to explore its reliability and validity in additional settings and with more diverse demographics.

Tanya Custer, in “Preparing Health Professions Educators for Online and Blended Learning Environments: A Mixed Methods Study,” evaluated the feasibility, acceptability, and influence of an online professional development course for health professions educators transitioning to online and blended teaching. The study aimed to address the growing need for effective online education in health professions, especially considering changes accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The research focused on assessing educators' readiness to teach online and the impact of professional development on their knowledge and skills.

The study used a convergent mixed methods approach, collecting data through pre- and post-intervention surveys measuring faculty readiness to teach online, a pre-and post-

intervention knowledge-based test, and post-intervention focus group discussions. The Faculty Readiness to Teach Online (FRTO) (Martin et al., 2019) instrument was used as the primary quantitative measure. Participants were faculty and instructional designers from a midwestern academic medical center.

Results showed statistically significant improvements in faculty readiness across all FRTO domains (course design, communication, time management, and technical skills) and increased knowledge scores. Focus group discussions highlighted advantages of the intervention, such as improved understanding of online teaching frameworks and gaining a student perspective. The study identified barriers to completion, including time constraints. Findings indicated that university support, acceptance, and meaningful relationships with faculty and staff were pivotal factors in online teaching readiness. The study provides actionable strategies for institutions to enhance their online teaching environments and support faculty development in health professions education.

“Collaboration, Connection, and Culture: Understanding the Impact of Institutional Culture on Online Teaching in Higher Education” by Kenna Vowell examined the impact of institutional culture on the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) among online higher education faculty at institutions in the southeastern United States. The research aimed to understand how specific dimensions of institutional culture affect TPACK levels, focusing on post-traditional students in applied science and computing disciplines.

The study employed a nonexperimental quantitative, correlational design. Data were collected through an online survey that included the Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ) (Marsick & Watkins, 1997), measures of TPACK, and demographic items. The researcher used multiple linear regression to analyze the relationships between dimensions of institutional culture and TPACK.

Results indicated that two specific elements of institutional culture—collaboration and team learning, and connection between the organization and its environment—had significant relationships with TPACK. The findings suggest that higher education administrators should focus on creating opportunities for faculty to participate in professional development and collaboration and connecting the institution to its local and global community to enhance online teaching effectiveness.

Xu and Brown in “A Sense of Belonging in Online Post-Traditional Students: What Matters?” investigated the sense of belonging among online post-traditional students at a Hispanic-Serving Institution. As online education continues to expand, understanding how to foster belonging for diverse learners is critical for student success. This study examined factors influencing belonging and differences based on academic discipline, gender, and ethnicity.

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The researchers employed a mixed methods approach, surveying online learners using the University Belonging Questionnaire and conducting focus groups. Quantitative data was analyzed using statistical tests, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. The study sample included 51 students, predominantly from computing and applied science programs.

Key findings indicated moderate levels of belonging overall, with university support, acceptance, and relationships with faculty and staff as pivotal factors. No significant differences emerged based on academic program or gender. However, Hispanic students reported a higher sense of belonging compared to White students. Qualitative data highlighted the importance of teaching presence and cognitive presence in fostering belonging. The authors suggest strategies to cultivate a more engaging online environment, including normalizing challenges, providing support, and promoting meaningful interactions

Sincere thanks go to the OLC staff and numerous helpers from the OLC community for their dedication in making both the 2023 OLC Accelerate and 2024 OLC Innovate conferences a success. The recent conferences have managed the post-COVID challenge of conducting both online and in-person formats, which effectively doubled the workload for those who planned, supported, and operated these events. We deeply appreciate their unwavering commitment to ensuring that our community has valuable and high-quality venues to convene, exchange ideas, and present our research despite such obstacles. Additionally, thank you to Peter Shea, the editor of *Online Learning*, for his ongoing support and assistance in maintaining our focus on OLC conferences, to Anthony Krizel for his fast and professional copyediting, and to our many *OLJ* reviewers who make this and every issue possible.

To our *OLJ* audience, we extend an invitation to showcase your work at one of the OLC conferences. We particularly encourage those engaged in significant research to contribute to these events, which support the growing demand for scholarly inquiry into the rapidly evolving domains of instructional technology and online education. High-caliber research is essential for the advancement of the field, and these conferences offer excellent platforms for disseminating your findings, engaging with peers, and building collaborative networks. By submitting to *OLJ*, you also enable your peers to benefit from your insights and you secure a reputable outlet for your publications. We look forward to considering your original research for inclusion in *Online Learning*.

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