Introduction to OLJ Section III

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Abstract

In addition to the two special sections in this third quarterly volume, this issue also contains 10 articles from our regular submission process. These articles cover a broad range of related themes such as online student retention, online faculty effectiveness, developing community, and some of the longer-term effects of the COVID pandemic on online students. This paper provides an integrated overview of these articles.

Keywords: online learning, online student retention, faculty effectiveness, developing online community,

Shea, P. (2024). Introduction to OLJ Section II. *Online Learning Journal* 28 (3), (342-347). DOI: 10.24059/olj.v28i3.4711

Online learning has been an option in higher education for decades. My own institution, the University at Albany, SUNY began offering an online graduate degree in education in the late 1990s. I have taught in that program, first as an adjunct and now as a tenured full professor for more than 20 years. Much of what we know about online learning emerged from early research conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As Editor of this journal, I am frequently surprised to see "settled" questions and findings being addressed again by a new generation of researchers. Initially I felt that re-examining issue around student satisfaction, for example, was unnecessary – we know a lot about what online students like and do not like with regard to online courses and faculty. However, with the tremendous growth in distance learning in light of the pandemic, the definition of an "online student" underwent a dramatic change. In the past, student opted in to online education – it was a voluntary option especially appealing to students who were older, working, and perhaps also raising families. These students were especially appreciative of asynchronous online options that allowed them to participate in online education when they had the time to do so. The vast majority of online programs in the US were asynchronous, reflecting this need for flexibility.

With the rise of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) in response to the pandemic, the assumptions about who opted to enrol in online courses and programs were violated. The asynchronous "solution" to providing flexibility and convenience to a specific population was not necessary – so the vast majority of ERT courses were built around synchronous modalities – primarily around Zoom and other computer conferencing software systems. Suddenly, we were working with a new population (involuntary distance education students) in a new environment – primarily synchronous online coursework. So, it does make sense to re-examine some of the settled questions given the significant changes in population and learning environment. Some of the articles in this issue do investigate issues that may seem settled, but again the populations and technologies are different. Note – it would be sensible and helpful if authors acknowledged these facts and explicitly sought to discover changes to processes and outcomes in these new environments and populations compared with the more traditional ones.

If we consider approaches to enhancing student retention online, for example, one topic that inevitably arises is sense of community in online settings. When students feel affectively and intellectually connected they tend to do better in online settings (and classrooms). We know that sense of community can be enhanced by developing social presence, one component of which is the immediacy behaviours of online faculty. In "It Helped Push Me through the Class": Community College Student Perceptions of the Role of Instructor Immediacy Behaviours in Completing an Online Course, authors Michelle Orcutt of Amarillo College, and Grant Jackson and Stephanie Jones of Texas Tech University contribute to the literature on online immediacy through an qualitative examination of the perception of online students in an associate's degree program. Using interview methods, these authors gain insight into empirically informed approaches to enhancing online instructor immediacy with a goal of improving student retention.

The next article, "Student Perceptions of Effective Educators in Online Learning" by Erica Kelly, Julia Colella, and Angela Sottosanti-Kusnir, of Lambton College looks more

generally at factors that appeal to online students with regard to their instructors. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative data analysis the authors sought to determine what factors online students found appealing and what online faculty need to do differently from classroom faculty. They found that, especially in post-pandemic learning, students value instructors who are flexible and empathetic. Moreover, findings establish that students value engagement with instructors, content and peers; flexible course design, a clearly organized learning management systems, and regular communication. These result support previous research on similar topics during the pandemic.

At a more specific level is a paper by the authors Minji Kim, Debalina Maitra, Meseret Hailu and Brooke Coley of Arizona State University. In their paper "Never Met Them in Person, But We Help Each Other": Black Women's Experiences in Online Undergraduate Engineering Programs these authors investigate issues of diversity in online education. The authors argue that Black women are underrepresented in engineering programs in the US and ask whether online learning represents a partial solution to this problem. Using used a qualitative exploratory, case study research design to collect data, the authors conducted interviews based on a 31-item interview protocol with 14 participants. The participants were all undergraduate students attending a large public university in the United States who self-identified as Black women. The analysis identified four themes. Subjects reported: (1) experienced isolation, (2) witnessed varying impacts of COVID-19, (3) observed the benefits and limitations of flexibility of online programs, and (4) engaged in virtual connection building. The paper includes recommendations for programs and future research.

As noted above, the pandemic redefined who was likely to be an online student and what kind of learning environment these students experienced. One group that saw a vast increase was, of course, students in high schools and other pre-college settings. Students and teachers in k-12 distance settings were especially unlikely to have experience with online learning and we know that many of these students and their teachers struggled. The next paper, "The COVID-19 Learning Divide: How Demographics Shaped Online Learning Outcomes for High School Students", by Kristine Webster of Northern Illinois University, investigates which specific groups struggled more. Using data from before and after the pandemic with more than 1100 students, she shows that low-income and special education students were more likely to be among the newly struggling (defined as those who received a "D" or "F" grade in two or more classes). Unlike some previous research, this analysis indicates that among newly struggling students, there was not a statistically significant relationship between racial/ethnic minority status and the between-semester difference in the number of D and F course grades.

Again, as noted above, the pandemic changed not only who was likely to be an online student, but also who was now teaching online courses. This change is documented in the next paper, "The Impact and Process of Transition from Face-to-Face to Online Teaching During a Pandemic: A Grounded Theory Approach" by Steven Busby, Elena Wong Espiritu, Marnie Vanden Noven, Jenny Mills, and Julie Hunt of Belmont University. These authors acknowledge that their institution was primarily engaged in face-to-face instruction and that the switch to emergency remote instruction was abrupt and disruptive. Using grounded theory methods to

analyze interviews with 24 faculty members, the paper reveals that faculty preparedness to teach online was dependent on their self-efficacy, which in turn affected their experience of the transition for better or worse. There is much detail here, some of which instructors may find resonant, for example, despite significant hype around the concept of "hyflex" teaching, "Hyflex teaching (half the students in the classroom and half online), proved to be clunky, technologically challenging, and ineffective by every participant who mentioned it."

The next paper in this section is Language Teacher Development in Technology Integration: Exploration, Communication, Collaboration, and Reflection by Jeong-Bae Son of the University of Southern Queensland, Australia, Moonyoung Park, of Jeju National University, Republic of Korea, and Mei-Hui Liu Tunghai University, Taiwan. The paper documents the mechanism by which language teachers enhance their digital competencies. The study sought to explore language teacher development with Son's (2018) ECCR model and investigated how in-service language teachers engage with their professional development in terms of ECCR. A total of twelve in-service teachers (2 males and 10 females; age ranging from 26 to 56 years old) from two countries (Taiwan and Hong Kong) participated in the study. Using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews the authors reveal that the teachers in both countries engage with various ECCR activities with different interests and competencies in their contexts.

Readers of OLJ will recall that Massive Open Online Courses were once predicted to fully disrupt higher education, resulting in consolidation of colleges and potentially closing of many others. The initial hype about MOOCs gradually receded as it became apparent that "free" is not a sustainable business model. One wonders if there are parallels between MOOCs a decade ago and AI now, but I digress. On the bright side (for Harvard and MIT at least), the creators of edX did manage to sell the successful operation to a for-profit online program management company (2U) for hundreds of millions of dollars, putting a seemingly cynical end to the once idealistic vision of free Ivy League education for all. It turns out, however, that the many thousands of online MOOC courses from various MOOC platforms still draw millions of learners and that many of the k-12 students still taking MOOCs have adapted their study to include local support and sharing, a blended learning phenomenon that was reported early on (see for example, Goodwin-Jones, 2014). The theory of Connectivism by Siemens, Cormier and Downes actually originally conceived of MOOCs as a form of open blended learning. The authors of the next paper, "Communities of K-12 Adolescent MOOC Learners from Nepal" Zixi Li, and Curt Bonk of Indiana University and Meina Zhu of Wayne State University investigate these local practices. They note that research on how MOOCs that are designed for adult learners are implemented in K-12 settings is extremely limited. Using a qualitative exploratory interview research approach with 13 adolescent students from Nepal, who had completed from10 to over 100 MOOC courses the authors, the authors reveal that support from local learning communities (i.e., teachers, peers, school, and family) contributed to a robust open learning environment. MOOCs are not dead, but continue to provide value for many students in the developing and developed world.

The authors of the next paper, "Automatic Detection of Metacognitive Language and

Student Achievement in an Online STEM College Course" Hannah Valdiviejas, Renato Ferreira Leitão Azevedo, Nigel Bosch, and Michelle Perry of the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign argue that metacognition is a helpful indicator of much needed self-regulatory behaviours among undergraduate online STEM students. Traditional methods of measuring metacognitive indicators rely on either unreliable student reports or time-consuming analyses of online forums. They also considered how students' engagement, verbosity, and prior knowledge might relate to their metacognition to impact their performance in an online STEM course. They found that metacognition predicted course grade with no significant differences between under-represented and non-underrepresented STEM students. They conclude that the online learning may allow students from diverse groups to engage equally in a critical aspect of self-regulated learning: metacognition. Implications of the results for teaching and learning are discussed.

The next paper in this section is "A Meta-Analysis of Self-Regulated Learning Interventions Studies on Learning Outcomes in Online and Blended Environments" by Mochamad Guntur and Yoppy Wahyu Purnomo of Universitas Negeri, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Clearly online learning demands new forms of self-regulation that is not required in classroom settings. My colleagues and I have written about this is numerous articles dating back more than a decade (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010) but most recently in 2022 (Shea, Swan, Richardson, J., 2022). In that paper we argued that forms of collaborative online learning required new approaches to the notion of regulation in online environments, included consideration of co-regulation and socially shared regulation of learning, a concept we labelled "learning presence" to highlight the kinds of awareness of learning traditionally captured under the concepts of meta-cognition and self-regulation. Guntur and Purnomo make an argument that many authors have recently conducted intervention studies to try to enhance learning processes and outcomes through the lens of self-regulation and that providing a quantitative summary of these studies through meta-analysis may help us better understand the average effects of these interventions. They conclude that self-regulated learning strategies had a "moderate" effect on learning outcomes in online and blended environments. Interestingly, the calculated common effect size showed no significant difference according to the type of self-regulated learning strategy, course type, school level, and learning context. Clearly, more research is needed in this area.

The final paper in this issue is "Skills Needed for Success in Online Teaching: A Qualitative Study of Experienced Instructors" by Mary Ellen Dello Stritto and Naomi Aguiar of Oregon State University. The goal of this qualitative study was to identify the most valued skills online instructors need to teach successfully. Faculty with at least ten years of online teaching experience at a highly ranked intuition for online education were interviewed about their online teaching experiences. Guided by the Community of Inquiry theory, Faculty Readiness and the Technology Acceptance models, six themes emerged from the authors' analysis. These themes include written communication, responsiveness, organization, time management, flexibility and creativity.

Many thanks to Aras Bozkurt and Haesol Bae for their efforts on the AI special issue of the journal and also to Patsy Moskal for her work on the conferences issue. These guest editor dedicated much time and effort to communicating, screening, reviewing, and curating this extensive issue and we are appreciative for all of their work. Also a huge thank you to our other

editors, authors, reviewers, copyeditors and the staff at OLC for their many contributions to support the success of the journal.

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