

Introduction to OLJ Section II

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This section of the special issue of Online Learning explores a range of innovative strategies and challenges within online education, with contributions that examine student engagement, faculty support, accessibility, and instructional design. Together, these studies contribute new insights for developing inclusive and supportive online learning environments.

In their article, “An Agile Approach to Collaborative Online International Learning: A Case Study of Virtual Indigenous Food Sovereignty and Public Policy Internships in Aotearoa New Zealand and Ontario, Canada,” authors Tim Fadgen, Tony Porter, Kiri Edge, Chelsea Gavel, Brooke Hayward and Adrienne Lickers Xavier explore the effectiveness of Agile methodologies in fostering international collaboration. Using a case study approach, they examine how Agile project management facilitated virtual internships focused on Indigenous food sovereignty. Their findings show that Agile’s flexible framework supports meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities and offers a model for responsive, cross-cultural online learning.

In “Supporting Tenure-Seeking Faculty in Online Programs: A Critical Discourse Analysis,” Yvonne Earnshaw of Kennesaw State University and Mary Ann Bodine Al-Sharif of the University of Alabama at Birmingham present their findings on the unique mentorship needs of tenure-track faculty in online teaching roles. Through critical discourse analysis of interviews with online tenure-seeking faculty, the authors identify gaps in structured support and advocate for intentional mentorship programs tailored to online faculty’s distinct challenges, emphasizing the importance of both academic and psychosocial support.

Sheri Conklin from the University of North Carolina Wilmington, with Beth Oyarzun and Stella Kim from the University of North Carolina Charlotte, investigate the dynamics of student-instructor connectedness in online learning in their article, “Exploring the Relationships of Learners and Instructors in Online Courses.” Their study, based on a large-scale survey and quantitative analysis, reveals that a strong instructor presence reduces student anxiety and enhances motivation, underscoring the importance of rapport in improving online engagement and learning outcomes.

Another timely study, “An Exploratory Study of Low-Income Minority Students’ Online Learning Experience” by Eugene Kwasi Gyekye and Julie E. Learned from the University at Albany, SUNY, examines the online learning challenges faced by low-income minority students, especially during the pandemic. Utilizing semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation, they document barriers such as limited access to technology and reduced self-efficacy. Using the theory of Cumulative Disadvantage, their findings call for equitable resource allocation and supportive teaching practices to better aid these students’ success.

Amy Lomellini, Patrick R. Lowenthal, Jesús H. Trespalacios, and Chareen Snelson of Boise State University explore the role of instructional designers in advancing accessible online courses in their article, “Instructional Designers’ Perceptions of Accessible and Inclusive Online Course Design.” Through in-depth interviews, the authors highlight instructional designers as advocates for Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, though they often encounter institutional barriers. This research emphasizes the need for systemic support to empower instructional designers as champions of accessibility.

In “Comparing Video Camera, Microphone, and Chat Box Use on Social Presence and Engagement in an Online Group Activity,” Shayna A. Minosky, Nachwa El Aini, Brandon J. Justus, and Tanisha Bali from Kwantlen Polytechnic University examine how different communication tools affect social presence and engagement. Using an experimental design with random assignment to video, audio, or chat-only conditions, their findings suggest that video and audio enhance engagement and social presence, while chat-only interactions result in lower levels of peer rapport and motivation. The study offers valuable insights into optimizing communication strategies for virtual classrooms.

In another study focused on pandemic-induced challenges, “COVID-19 Related Stressors, Cognitive Reappraisal, and Students’ Engagement in Online Learning: A Mediation Model,” Muhammad Ayub Buzdar of Allama Iqbal Open University and Hamid Ikram of Government College University Faisalabad examine how cognitive reappraisal mediates the impact of COVID-19 stressors on student engagement. Using mediation analysis, they find that cognitive reappraisal helps students maintain engagement under stress, underscoring the importance of emotion regulation as a resilience strategy in online education.

The final article, “Student Achievement of Course Learning Goals in an Asynchronous Distance Learning Course Redesigned Using Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning” by Cynthia H. Canan, T’Bony Jewell, Diana Kang, and Molly N. Downing from The Ohio State University, investigates the application of Fink’s Taxonomy to redesign an asynchronous course. Through content analysis of student assessments, they demonstrate that aligning course design with Fink’s framework fosters meaningful engagement and supports diverse learning dimensions, emphasizing the value of intentional design in enhancing online learning experiences.

The final article, titled “Quantifying Social Presence in Online-Based Learning: A Statistical and Pedagogical Analysis of Indicators from Social Network Analysis” by Lisa-Maria Norz, Éva Kaczkó, Michael Netzer, and Elske Ammenwerth of UMIT TIROL – Private University for Health Sciences and Health Technology, and the University of Innsbruck, Austria investigates the measurement of social presence in online learning environments. Drawing on the Community of Inquiry Framework, the authors aim to identify actionable social network analysis (SNA) indicators that can track and enhance social presence in real-time. By analyzing 3,546 student posts from online graduate-level courses, the research identifies key SNA metrics—ties, density, efficiency, nBroke, and in-/out-closeness—as both statistically significant and pedagogically valuable. These metrics provide insights into group dynamics, fostering an equitable and interactive learning atmosphere critical for online education. The study advances

the field by offering real-time assessment tools for educators to adapt course designs and interventions dynamically.

This issue's articles collectively underscore the dynamic complexity of online learning environments, emphasizing the importance of accessibility, relational support, and intentional course design. Each contribution offers valuable strategies and insights for educators, instructional designers, and administrators dedicated to enhancing online education's inclusivity, support, and effectiveness.

We would like to thank the special issue editors Drs Patrick Lowenthal of Boise State University, Robert Ford of the University of Florida and Mary Rice of the University of New Mexico for their exceptional work on the special issue. Also many thanks to the Online Learning Consortium for the support and the home you provide for the journal. Finally thank you to the authors and editorial staff of the journal, we could not succeed without your help.