

Introduction

On behalf of the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) and our Editorial Board I am pleased to invite you to enjoy the inaugural issue of *Online Learning*, the official journal of OLC. This issue marks the transition from our previous title, the Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, and highlights our intentions to build on the nearly two decades of insight and wisdom collected in JALN. With the launch of our new name we retain our goal of bringing the most important developments in online education to our readers. We believe that this first issue demonstrates our commitment toward continuous improvement with eight new articles investigating crucial and timely topics in the field.

Our first article by Fiona Hollands and Devayani Tirthali of Columbia University Teachers College is a much-needed investigation into the goals institutions of higher education have in offering Massive Open Online Courses. While the initial fervor of MOOCs may have abated the possibilities represented in free access to elite college education (even with current caveats) remain both intriguing and inspiring. Based on a review of the literature and interviews with more than 80 higher education representatives from a broad spectrum of roles and institutions, Hollands and Devayani provide the most comprehensive and detailed study of institutional adoption of MOOCs to date. The authors articulate six primary institutional goals, assess how and whether they are being met and provide useful advice to better achieve the large ambitions of MOOCs. This is essential reading for senior leaders, researchers, administrative staff overseeing efforts and faculty involved in MOOCs delivery.

The next article in this issue by Claire Wladis, Katherine Wladis, Katherine Conway, and Alyse Hachey at CUNY investigates the challenge of uneven community college student persistence in online courses and programs. A considerable body of previous research (e.g. Smith-Jaggars & Xu, 2010) indicates that online community college learners frequently struggle to succeed and experience poor outcomes relative to classroom-only peers. Wladis et. al. add to our understanding of online student retention through a different lens. Using a large community college sample the authors document that course characteristics and student intentions account for some of the variance in dropout from online courses. The authors conclude that certain course types and contexts seem to amplify the risk for dropout and suggest that more focused student support for these kinds of courses can help mitigate poorer online outcomes. This well-designed study will be of great interest to those working in online student success units, researchers of college retention (e.g. the PAR project) and faculty and staff supporting online community college students.

Our third article by Fei Gao of Bowling Green University takes on another well-documented and crucial challenge for online education, how can we improve the quality of student participation in online discussion? Many previous researchers have concluded that students contribute to online forums in shallow ways, failing to demonstrate higher order and critical thinking valued and needed for college level learning. While not a problem unique to the online environment the opportunities for investigating and improving the quality of online student discourse is clear, after all, every comment is recorded and available for investigation. Providing support for improving online discourse has been the subject of considerable research and Gao's quasi-experimental study adds to our understanding of effective approaches. She demonstrates that providing instruction that helps students to understand and label their discussion post as instances of elaborating and clarifying, making connections, challenging and building upon others' views, and questioning increases the frequency of these more productive

contributions. This approach also somewhat enhances the overall quality of the subsequent discourse compared to students who did not receive this intervention. This study is an excellent introduction to the topic of scaffolded asynchronous interaction and will be of great interest to others investigating online discussion, as well as faculty and course designers looking to improve the quality of their courses.

This issue of *Online Learning* also contains two practitioner case studies documenting attempts of online instructors to innovate with and improve their teaching. Both pieces reflect efforts to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning by exploring and apply systematic approaches grounded in theory and prior research. These case studies reflect the hard work that researcher-practitioners employ to better understand and improve online education and despite mixed success they deserve our attention.

The first case study by Bruce Johnson from American Public University System draws upon an approach called appreciative inquiry that has been used to enhance organizational change. The author utilized a qualitative method in his work with nine part and full-time instructors to implement an adaptation of appreciative inquiry in which instructors engaged with students to understand and encourage reflection on student goals and aspirations. The instructors were also encouraged to rethink their own course designs to better help students realize their goals. The findings suggest that learner motivation, engagement, and performance can be positively impacted through application of the approach. The work shows promise and will be of interest to others working in qualitative research traditions. The very learner-centered focus will make this article equally relevant to faculty and staff seeking to know more about progressive online pedagogical innovations.

The second case study by Kristi Preisman at Peru State College discusses her own efforts as a “lone ranger” seeking to improve her level of presence in online courses. In this study Preisman invests a good deal of effort to enhance her sense of presence using both technical means (e.g. additional video in which she discusses course content) and through more interaction with students in discussions. Despite these additional instructional investments she did not achieve intended goals of improving students’ grades on assignments. While these may not have been the right interventions given her objectives, the article does investigate the theme of teaching presence in all its real-world complexity and highlights the need for more support and additional research to define, measure, and improve productive online instructional roles.

The final section includes three articles that broadly investigate faculty issues and begins with a paper by Lane Whitney Clarke and Audrey Bartholome of the University of New England. This study, like Preisman’s also uses the Community of Inquiry Framework to examine faculty contributions to online discussions. The authors utilize content analysis as well as questionnaires to better understand faculty participation in these forums. Confirming previous research, the authors found that instructors contributed more social messages and were less likely to add comments reflecting cognitive presence. More importantly they also found recognizable discursive profiles in faculty contributions to online discussions and conclude that students favor instructors who balanced their comments across the three elements of the CoI framework. This paper is intended to spur additional research and to help faculty to improve their own participation in online discussions and will thus be of special interest to new online faculty.

The next article in this section by Christine Lynn Vandenhouten, Susan Gallagher Lepak, Janet Reilly, and Penny Ralston Berg of the University of Wisconsin Greenbay reports on a project designed to

foster a deeper understanding of the collaborative roles and activities necessary for effective online nursing education. At the opposite end of the spectrum from the “lone ranger” approach discussed previously in this issue, this article focuses on the coordinated roles and supports needed to create effective online programs. Using Khan’s flexible E-Learning Framework the authors investigated the six dimensions reflected in that model and conclude that faculty are more familiar with course development and design and frequently use student-centered teaching/learning strategies to engage learners. They found that faculty expressed less certainty about institutional, administrative, and management dimensions of the model suggesting gaps that may need to be addressed. The articles emphasis on the emerging and harmonized roles needed for effective program design will be of interest to faculty as well as administrative and support staff collaborating to develop online programs.

Closing out this issue is a related study by Katrina Meyer and Vicki Murrel of the University of Tennessee, Memphis that reports on their national study of evaluation outcome measures and procedures used in faculty development programs in support of online teaching. In this paper the authors review the research on evaluation of faculty development programs to set the stage for their own survey. They disclose that much of the work in this area does not specify clear outcomes for online faculty development and outcomes are either poorly defined or poorly measured. Among their findings they conclude that most institutions measure faculty satisfaction but very few seek to understand more important impacts such as student level outcomes or improvements resulting from faculty development activities. The authors make seven recommendations based on these findings and the study will be of interest to all working in the field of instructional support for online education.

Once again, please enjoy this inaugural issue of *Online Learning* and share it widely with colleagues!

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