Introduction to the Special Issue: Select Papers Presented at Recent OLC Conferences

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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 or OLC Innovate. This special issue continues this tradition by presenting seven studies that demonstrate the breadth and depth of current scholarship in online and digital learning. The selected papers address critical areas including leadership competencies, mobile-assisted language learning, student success factors, instructional design effectiveness, faculty motivation and support, and innovative pedagogical approaches using generative artificial intelligence. These studies offer valuable insights into the evolving landscape of online education and provide evidence-based practices for educators, administrators, and researchers working to enhance the quality and effectiveness of digital learning environments.

This year, however, we tried a new approach. The first 3 papers were recruited from presenters at the 2024 OLC Accelerate conference, held in Orlando, Florida in November, which has traditionally been how we identified research to showcase in the special issue. This year, we flipped our approach, and the last 4 papers were first submitted to *Online Learning* and then will be presented at this year's 2025 OLC Accelerate conference, to be held November 7-20, 2025, in Orlando, Florida.

COLO Profiles & Competencies 2024: A National Research Project about Chief Online Learning Officers by Eric E. Fredericksen (University of Rochester), Bethany Simunich (Quality Matters), and Julie Uranis (University Professional and Continuing Education Association) presents the latest findings from an ongoing comprehensive national study of Chief Online Learning Officers (COLOs). Building on previous research from 2017 and 2018, this study gathered data from more than 500 online learning leaders during summer 2024, examining their backgrounds, experiences, and leadership roles in driving online learning initiatives. A significant contribution of this research is the introduction of the UPCEA COLO Competencies framework, which assesses the relevance of various competencies to institutional contexts alongside leaders' self-evaluations of their skills. The study provides valuable organizational context and comparative insights that illuminate the evolving role of COLOs in post-pandemic higher education, offering guidance for professional development and strategic planning in online education leadership.

Applying the TAM Framework to Inform Faculty Participation in Course Quality Reviews by Efren de la Mora Velasco, Roslyn Miller, Florence Williams, and Aimee deNoyelles (University of Central Florida) addresses the critical challenge of faculty engagement in course quality review (CQR) processes. Using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) as a theoretical framework, the researchers developed and administered a context-specific survey instrument to 119 eligible faculty members. Through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the study revealed that perceived usefulness was the strongest predictor of participation intention, followed by subjective norm, which also significantly influenced perceived usefulness. The findings provide valuable insights into the motivational and social factors that shape faculty engagement in quality assurance processes, offering practical implications for institutional strategies aimed at improving participation rates.

Utilizing Generative AI to Counter Learner Groupthink by Introducing Controversy in Collaborative Problem Based Learning Settings by Andrew Wiss (George Washington University), Mary Showstark (Yale University), Kyle Dobbeck (Montclair State University), Jennifer Pattershall-Geide (George Washington University), Elke Zschaebitz (Georgetown University), Dawn Joosten-Hagye (University of Southern California), Kirsten Potter (Tufts University), and Erin Embry (New York University) explores innovative applications of artificial intelligence in educational settings. This mixed-methods study addresses the challenge of groupthink in newly formed interprofessional student teams by introducing a generative AI-based agent into collaborative problem-based learning activities. The research demonstrates how this novel pedagogical technique can positively influence group dynamics and limit groupthink potential by providing catalysts for engaged discussion through the introduction of diverse and potentially controversial perspectives. The findings offer insights into the strategic use of AI tools to enhance collaborative learning experiences and promote critical thinking in team-based educational environments.

In **Using a Mobile Vocabulary Application to Enhance L2 Learners' Vocabulary Acquisition: Possibilities and Challenges,** Qian Xu (Purdue University), Jennifer C. Richardson (Purdue University), Zhuo Zhang (Towson University), Zui Cheng (Shenzhen University), and Fengping Guo (Southeast University) examined the effectiveness of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) applications for English vocabulary acquisition. Using a quasi-experimental design with 70 Chinese undergraduate L2 learners, the researchers compared outcomes between students using the Shanbay Dan-Ci (SBDC) mobile application and those using traditional wordlists. Through a mixed methods approach, the study revealed that while MALL users showed performance advantages, the differences were not statistically significant. However, qualitative findings highlighted the impact of key learning features such as personalized learning, rich content, and collaboration opportunities. The research provides important insights into the challenges of mobile learning environments and offers directions for future research in technology-enhanced language education.

Competing hypotheses about online versus face-to-face course outcomes: Analysis leveraging the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic by Claire Wladis (Borough of Manhattan Community College and the Graduate Center at CUNY), Alyse C. Hachey (The University of Texas at El Paso), Catherine A. Manly (Fairleigh Dickinson University), and Katherine M. Conway (Borough of Manhattan Community College at CUNY) capitalizes on the

unprecedented natural experiment created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a comprehensive dataset from the City University of New York (CUNY) system, the researchers employed a quasi-experimental fixed effects approach to examine course completion rates across different delivery modalities. The findings challenge common assumptions about online learning effectiveness, revealing that students' original choice of medium was more predictive of success than the actual delivery format. The study also uncovered important differences in course selection patterns, with students more likely to choose elective courses online and major requirements in-person, providing nuanced insights into student behavior and course completion factors.

In **Insights at the Nexus of Instructional Design and Student Success: An Institutional Analysis Using LMS Accessibility Metrics,** Jeff Freels (Southwestern Michigan College) and Rajagopal Sankaranarayanan (The University of Texas at Austin) investigated the relationship between Learning Management System (LMS) course design and student outcomes. Through multiple linear regression analysis of 925 course sections, the researchers examined interactions between course-level failure and withdrawal rates (DFW), enrollment, student satisfaction, and instructor-embedded content within LMS course sites. The study demonstrates that optimal LMS course design supports improved student success rates, with findings contextualized within the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework. The research provides evidence that certain types of instructor-embedded content can serve as measurable proxies for teaching presence, offering actionable insights for designing student-centered digital learning environments.

In **From Burnout to Belonging: A Sequential Mixed Methods Study of Comprehensive Support Structures for Online Adjunct Faculty,** Rheanna Reed, Jennifer Carriere, Laura Pipoly, and Anthony M. Bennett (University of Phoenix, Center for Educational and Instructional Technology Research) present findings that challenge conventional wisdom about online adjunct faculty experiences. Phase 1 of this sequential explanatory mixed methods study (n=101) revealed outcomes that contradicted established literature patterns, including high personal accomplishment scores, low emotional exhaustion, minimal depersonalization, and reduced organizational cynicism. Grounded in Communities of Practice theory, Phase 2 employed case study methodology with participants across all institutional colleges to understand the mechanisms behind these positive results. The research identified four key themes explaining the outcomes: strategic leadership implementation, systematic support infrastructure, structural policy commitment, and genuine community building. The study provides a replicable framework for institutions seeking to improve online adjunct faculty experiences through systematic organizational commitment.

These seven studies collectively demonstrate the field's commitment to evidence-based practice and continuous improvement in digital learning environments. From leadership development and mobile learning technologies to AI-enhanced pedagogy and faculty support systems, this collection addresses fundamental challenges facing online education today. The research presented here offers valuable contributions to our understanding of effective practices in online learning and provides actionable insights for practitioners working to enhance educational outcomes in digital environments. We invite you to consider OLC conferences and *Online Learning* as outlets for your original future research.

We extend our gratitude to the OLC community, conference organizers, and the contributors who present and publish in the field who make these valuable research exchanges possible. We also thank the peer reviewers whose expertise ensures the quality and rigor of the scholarship presented in this journal. To our readers, we encourage you to engage with these findings and consider how they might inform your own practice and research in the evolving landscape of online and digital learning.