

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, OLC Innovate, or this year's new conference, OLC Elevate. We also target research submitted to Online Learning and encourage them to present at OLC Accelerate 2026, November 16-19 in Orlando, Florida. This special issue continues this tradition by presenting 5 studies that demonstrate the breadth and depth of current scholarship in online and digital learning.

The Online Learning Consortium Quality Scorecard for K12 Blended Learning by Kaye Shelton (Lamar University) addresses the absence of a K12-specific framework for evaluating the quality of blended learning programs. While tools such as Quality Matters and iNACOL offer course-level design rubrics, no comprehensive scorecard previously existed for the broader design, leadership, implementation, and administration of K12 blended programs. Using a four-round Delphi methodology, the study convened a panel of 20 U.S.-based experts in K12 blended teaching, administration, and research to evaluate 65 quality indicators adapted from OLC's 2023 Quality Scorecard for Blended Programs (originally developed for higher education). Panelists voted on relevance, proposed new indicators, and refined language for a K12 audience using a 6-point Likert scale, with consensus defined as a mean of 5.0 or higher and 70% panel agreement.

The resulting OLC K12 Blended Learning Scorecard organizes quality indicators into eight categories: School District Support, Technology Support, Course Development and Instructional Design, Course Structure, Teaching and Learning, Teacher Support, Student Support, and Evaluation and Assessment. Findings show that quality blended learning in K12 settings depends on the interplay of organizational leadership, infrastructure, instructional design, pedagogy, and ongoing evaluation, rather than any single, isolated intervention. This study contributes a practical, research-informed tool to guide K12 educators, administrators, and policymakers in designing, implementing, and evaluating blended learning programs, and it lays a foundation for future research on scorecard implementation, blended teacher training, and program evaluation.

Doing It All: Exploring Roles and Responsibilities of and Support for Online Program Coordinators by Yvonne Earnshaw (Kennesaw State University) examines the roles, responsibilities, and support needs of online program coordinators, a common but under-researched and largely informal administrative position in U.S. higher education. Through semi-structured interviews with 16 online program coordinators across institutions and disciplines, the study found that responsibilities varied widely and were rarely defined by a formal job description, encompassing enrollment management, curriculum and program infrastructure, faculty support, student support, personnel-related tasks, and open-ended "other duties as assigned." Grounded in role socialization theory, the findings reveal that coordinators frequently

experience role ambiguity, overload, and conflict as they attempt to balance these quasi-administrative duties with their standing faculty responsibilities in teaching, research, and service.

The study also identified the types of support coordinators receive—including emotional support, shared workload arrangements, and financial incentives such as stipends or course releases—and found that this support is often inconsistent or insufficient. Coordinators expressed a need for greater administrative recognition of their workload, fairer compensation, additional resources, and formal onboarding or mentoring for the role. The findings offer practical implications for institutions, including recommendations for formal review processes, structured onboarding, and clearer job descriptions, along with directions for future research across a broader range of disciplines and institutional types.

Making Generative AI Expectations Visible: Extending the TILT Framework for Transparent Assignment Design by Andrew Wiss (George Washington University), Karen Singer-Freeman (George Washington University), Jennifer Pattershall-Geide (George Washington University), Kyle Dobbeck (Montclair State University), Christina Heminger (George Washington University), Scott Quinlan (George Washington University), Joy Volarich (George Washington University), and George Gray (George Washington University) extends the widely used Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) Framework to address generative AI (genAI) in assignment design. The authors introduce the TILTai Framework, which applies TILT's three pillars—Purpose, Task, and Criteria—specifically to genAI use and describe a pilot faculty development program built around it that drew over 80 participants from a school of public health. Building on this work, they developed and piloted the TILTai Scale, an 11-item instrument for measuring students' perceptions of assignment transparency regarding genAI, administered across eight graduate-level courses in public health and health administration (N = 70).

Exploratory factor analysis identified three reliable subscales—Purpose (Support Learning), Purpose (Role and Future Success), and Task Criteria—with good overall scale reliability. Regression analyses linked higher perceived transparency, particularly around an assignment's purpose and its connection to students' future success, to reduced student concerns about fairness, accusations of academic integrity violations, and grading uncertainty related to genAI use. Qualitative responses reinforced these findings, though they also surfaced persistent worries, such as fear of being wrongly flagged for AI use or being disadvantaged by classmates' undisclosed AI use in group work. The authors conclude that the TILTai Framework offers a practical, adaptable tool for faculty development and assignment design, while calling for further research with larger and more diverse student populations and pre/post study designs.

Online STEM Education Before COVID-19: An Integrative Review and Thematic Framework for Higher Education by Alejandra M. Pickett (University at Albany) synthesizes 33 studies published between 2011 and early 2020 to establish a historical baseline for online STEM teaching and learning in higher education prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Using an integrative literature review methodology and searches across EBSCO, ERIC, and Web of Science, the study identified scholarship dispersed across 31 outlets and used inductive thematic analysis to organize it into eight categories: online STEM learner support, integrated online STEM education, course quality and design, learner engagement strategies, communication in

online STEM environments, equity and inclusion for underrepresented learners, workforce development, and faculty preparation.

Across these themes, the review found that learner experiences and outcomes were tied more closely to the intentional integration of instructional design, interaction, facilitation, authenticity, assessment, learner support, access, and equity than to instructional modality alone. The synthesis also revealed uneven methodological rigor and theoretical grounding across the literature, along with a persistent gap between STEM reform initiatives and preparation for online teaching specifically. The author argues that this pre-COVID baseline offers a lens for interpreting pandemic-era and post-pandemic developments in the field, and calls for future research with stronger theoretical grounding, more diverse and rigorous designs, a cross-cutting focus on equity, and attention to the emerging role of artificial intelligence in online STEM teaching and learning.

Beyond the Thread: Reimagining Online Discussions for Authentic Learning by Diane Johnson, Kelly Brown, and Kaye Shelton (Lamar University) and J. Kenneth Young (Tarleton State University) presents a collaborative self-study in which five graduate faculty members at two Texas universities reflected on their shift from traditional threaded discussion boards to collaborative discussion formats in fully online programs. Drawing on the Community of Inquiry framework (social, cognitive, and teaching presence), the researchers met regularly over several semesters to document their experiences, finding that threaded discussions consistently felt performative and compliance-driven, producing shallow, deadline-driven participation rather than genuine intellectual exchange.

In contrast, collaborative discussions—in which students chose their own platforms, meeting times, and conversational approaches—were associated with deeper critical thinking, stronger relational bonds among peers, and greater student ownership of the learning process. Faculty described richer, more sustained dialogue, increased student comfort and engagement, and unexpected benefits such as reduced grading fatigue and lower reliance on AI-generated text. At the same time, the format required iterative refinement to address challenges like verifying citations in spoken discussions, balancing participation within groups, and managing scheduling logistics. The authors conclude that carefully scaffolded collaborative discussions offer a promising alternative to threaded discussion boards in graduate-level online programs and call for future research incorporating student perspectives and measurable learning outcomes.

These studies provide valuable contributions to illustrating effective practice and providing actionable insights for practitioners who focus on improving educational outcomes in digital learning environments. We invite readers to consider submitted to OLC conferences and Online Learning to disseminate your future research.

Thank you to the OLC community, conference organizers, authors, peer reviewers, and presenters whose work makes these important scholarly exchanges possible. A special thank you to the OLJ copyeditors for their hard work at getting these articles online as well as the OLJ Editor-in-Chief, Dr. Peter Shea, and Managing Editor, Dr. Carrie Miller, whose expertise helps us maintain the quality of the research published in OLJ. We encourage readers to reflect on these findings and consider how they can inform future practice, research, and scholarship in the evolving field of online and digital learning.