

A JOLT of New Energy for the Scholarship of Online Teaching and Learning

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I warmly welcome our readers to a fresh issue of the newly expanded journal, *Online Learning* (which we are now abbreviating as OLJ). As many of you know we recently merged OLJ with the Journal of Online Teaching and Learning (JOLT), published by the MERLOT organization with which the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) is a frequent collaborator. This merger brings with it a new wave of energy and enthusiasm as we join forces to continue to enhance scholarship and research in online teaching and learning. I offer a special welcome to our new authors, reviewers, and readers from JOLT and look forward to the many opportunities that the combined resources of the two publications will offer us. We have already seen some of these opportunities realized with a recent expansion of submissions to the journal. Fortunately with more than one thousand new reviewers from the ranks of MERLOT we will be well prepared to handle the greater volume.

This issue of OLJ reflects our recent growth with an expanded selection of new articles. These papers examine a range of related themes crucial to conceptual and practical development of online learning. These themes include further defining and expanding our understanding self-regulated learning, investigations of lecture, video, and the establishment of forms of presence, community, and collegiality in online environments.

Community of Inquiry, Avatars, and Video

In the first article Suzanne Hayes of Empire State College, Sedef Uzuner Smith of Lamar University and Peter Shea (yes, that's me) of the University at Albany present new work on the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). In this paper the concept of "learning presence" is further articulated to describe regulation of online learning processes. It is nearly universally recognized that collaborative online learning environments present challenges for the regulation of learning. This paper provides some much-needed guidance including a broader framework for understanding not only self-regulated learning, but also co-regulation and socially shared regulation in the kinds of small group activities commonly designed in a Community of Inquiry-based instructional approach. This work reflects the sophisticated thinking of my colleague Suzanne Hayes, supported in this paper by her collaboration with Sedef Uzuner Smith, both of whom I have worked with for many years. I thank them for taking up the effort to further develop the concept of learning presence developed in our

previous collaborations and to advance the CoI framework. Any investigator using CoI as a theoretical foundation would do well to read this piece as the study represents a nuanced and informed conceptualization in the very large and sometimes uneven field of CoI research.

A second paper examining components of the CoI model authored by Jennifer Cunningham of Kent State University seeks to investigate the role of digital avatars in supporting social presence in online discussion forums. Hypothesizing that avatars might help to recreate some of the lost dynamics of face-to-face interaction the researchers, using grounded research methods, examined student responses to survey questions reflecting dimensions of the social presence construct. They found little direct evidence that avatars enhanced the salience of interpersonal relationships or the sense of interacting with real people, but rather affirmed the importance of the role of the instructor and teaching presence, in developing an environment conducive to positive social presence. However, additional research methods and approaches may be needed to confirm these findings and other designs may disclose that the potential of avatars for supporting forms of online presence may be mediated through other processes.

Mediating processes featuring other research methods are aspects of two other studies in this issue both of which look at the use of video as the medium of instruction in online discussion environments. Investigating additional dimensions of the CoI framework Cynthia Clark, Neal Strudler, and Karen Grove of the University of Nevada examined asynchronous video posts and synchronous video conferencing in comparison to the largely text-based discussion platform currently used at their university (and many others). Utilizing a randomized experimental design and self-report outcome measures the researchers found that perceptions of both social and teaching presence improved with video-enabled instruction. Unlike the previous study of avatars, the use of video-enabled discussion, both synchronous and asynchronous, has positive effects not only on social presence but also on other related measure of sociability and social space. These findings should prove important to other researchers with interest in the use of technologies that lead to better collaboration in the service of online knowledge construction.

Another related study in this issue, authored by Jennifer Hegeman of Missouri Western State University investigates the use of video in online mathematics instruction. The author notes that institutions of higher education continue to struggle to improve student outcomes, that online outcomes especially at the community college level are often worse than classroom outcomes, and that mathematics is a particularly difficult content area for online delivery despite ongoing growth of such courses. Given this constellation of challenges, we must welcome efforts to investigate course designs to improve online math education. Hegeman's study indicates that increased teaching presence, as opposed to what might be called "publisher content presence", has positive effects on learner outcomes. These findings are in alignment with conceptual models advanced by work conducted previously indicating the direct and indirect benefits of teaching presence on significant learning. Hegeman's work adds specificity with regard to the benefits of faculty generated, video-based, direct instruction in the mathematics context. A good linking between theory and empirical research is reflected in this article and the work represents a fertile base for additional investigation.

Blended and Experiential Learning

Two related articles discussing blended learning also appear in this issue of the journal. The first of these by Cheryl Murphy of the University of Arkansas and John Stewart of West Virginia University again examines the use of video but in a different context. This study compares the provision of choice of

either recorded video or face-to-face lectures with physics students. Using a within-group design with 168 students the authors allowed students to choose to continue to come to class to view lectures or to watch them online with a subsequent reduction in classroom seat time. Results suggest that this increased flexibility was accompanied by no serious downsides with solid support for the efficacy of video lectures, even in a demanding introductory physics class. With regard to initial difference between students the authors conclude that initially high achieving students remained high achieving, while lower achieving continued to struggle, though to a lesser degree. The study finds that students self-selecting higher levels of video lecture were lower achieving and less engaged before face-to-face lecture was replaced by video. These students were somewhat more engaged and slightly higher achieving after the video option was made available. This result suggesting an aptitude-treatment interaction deserves further study perhaps with additional considerations for the needs of the less engaged lower achieving group, the duration of the treatment, or other design considerations that get at “why” questions.

The second paper examining blended learning is by Robert Heckman, Carsten Osterland, and Jeffrey Saltz of Syracuse University. Experiential learning is on the minds of many these days, for example in New York State the current executive budget makes experiential learning a requirement for graduation from both the State University of New York and the City University of New York, systems that together provide higher education to almost one million learners. The work of these authors applies boundary theory to explore how online and blended environments can bridge academia and the workplace in order to facilitate experiential learning. This paper identifies three principles for creating internships that leverage blended learning by creating productive boundary spaces between work and school. These principles hold much promise for improving internship experiences from both academic and industry perspectives. This insightful model provides a vehicle for assessment and communication that is difficult to achieve in the absence of blended learning. SUNY and CUNY officials responsible for the many thousands of internship experiences that may be soon be mandated for graduation should take note as should other researchers of blended learning, experiential learning, and boundary theory.

In another article that addresses the relationship between technology-mediated instruction and workplace learning Ingrid Provident, Joyce Salls , Cathy Dolhi, Jodi Schreiber, Amy Mattila, and Emily Eckel of Chatham University employ transformational theory to examine the context of post-professional doctoral students in occupational therapy professions. Consistent with the theory the authors document the process these learners experienced traversing phases reflecting disorientation and dilemma, critical discourse with peers and instructors, and new meanings and intentions to act based on their experiences with the curriculum. Interesting parallels exist between this theoretical framing and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model. The stages of transformation identified here seem conceptually related to the phases of inquiry in cognitive presence component of the CoI model. For example disorientation/dilemma resembles the triggering event in the early stages of inquiry in CoI. Other elements of the two models are also consistent, including exploration, integration, reflection and resolution of the initial triggering event/dilemma. Yet no references are made to CoI in the work of Provident and her colleagues. One wonders if a productive conversation might be on the horizon between those working with transformational theory and Community of Inquiry researchers to better articulate the commonalities and distinctions between the two models in the context of online learning.

Faculty Issues

Aimee LaPoint Terosky of Saint Joseph's University and Chris Heasley of Drexel University also investigate challenges related to community in this issue of OLJ but this time from a faculty development perspective. Faculty attitudes toward online learning remain problematic with numerous studies indicating a majority of college professors continue to hold negative opinions (e.g. Allen & Seaman, 2010; Jaschik & Lederman, 2014). Terosky and Heasley argue here that a stronger focus on developing a sense of community and collegiality in faculty development efforts would help engage faculty more deeply in online instruction but that the seven professors in their research setting found such community almost non-existent. No doubt there are many colleges where faculty development efforts for online teaching are not a high priority and the sudden growth in the online programs reported at the institution in this study may not have been accompanied by additional faculty support resources. However, the deeper questions that are raised by this paper relate to developing meaningful social support for the consideration of authentic teaching philosophies and coherent teacher identities brought on by the transition from classroom to online teaching. What does it mean to be an online educator? Are authentic faculty roles inextricably linked to the dynamics of the classroom? Many would argue that they are not but much opportunity remains to be realized in this area of scholarship.

The next study in this issue presents inquiry into fertile issues of a different sort; these are related to stereotyping in online education settings. While a broad spectrum of opinion exists with regard to the dynamics of online communication at least one viewpoint suggests that the relative anonymity typical of online interaction may help reduce some of the negative dimensions associated with bias found in face-to-face settings. Although a host of caveats must be mentioned (flaming anyone?) some would suggest that the elimination of physical cues that may trigger stereotypical responses could have beneficial effects in redressing longstanding issues related to, for example, the Pygmalion effect (e.g. Rosenthal & Jacobsen; 1968) and extensions to this (e.g. Boser, Wilhelm & Hanna, 2014; Rubovits & Maehr, 1973) in education. Such effects include negative prejudicial associations that shape subsequent disadvantageous instructional choices with both immediate and longer term outcomes. While not always acknowledging the full complexity of the aforementioned online interactional dynamics, Wendy Conway and Sonja Bethune of Ashford University present an interesting investigation of implicit racial bias among online instructors in which they utilize a well-known and validated version of the Implicit Association Test with a convenience sample of online instructors. They found that their sample of online faculty do reveal some of the same kind of racial bias that is found in the general population using this same instrument. The additional insights and evidence here are that the anonymity of the online environment may not inhibit racial bias. These results are important for the same reason cited by Rosenthal and Jacobsen in the 1960s, Rubovits and Maehr in the early 70s, and Boser et.al more recently. For example, Boser and his colleagues found that secondary classroom educators believed African American and Hispanic students were 42- 47 percent less likely to graduate from college than their white peers. Volumes of research indicate that such biased beliefs can lead to lower expectations among educators that negatively shape actual outcomes. We need to be aware of the ongoing existence of potential racial bias in online settings to begin to understand and address it to avoid the same issues that confront education more broadly beyond online settings. This piece contributes to that awareness and much more work needs to be undertaken to address it.

Review of Literature

The final paper in this issue examines interaction, a central theme in online education. The main focus of this review by Hong Zhou of the University of Texas is on the characteristics of the literature examining formal interaction in what are commonly referred to as “threaded discussion” boards used in most online courses. Zhou systematically searched peer-reviewed literature for articles from 2000-2014, located more than 500, and reviewed 42 that met her eight inclusion criteria. The findings here provide a snapshot of common variables investigated in online discussion and some general findings that span multiple studies. This review is helpful in that it is a launching point for others conducting studies investigating this very common instructional tool. This paper contributes to efforts going forward with nine categories of replicated findings upon which progress can be made. The critical opportunity is to apply theories, especially those that foreground dialogic and socio-cultural approaches to understand the value, opportunity, and challenges associated with the use of computer-mediated interaction in support of learning.

Once again, welcome to our new partners from MERLOT and the Journal of Online Teaching and Learning. We look forward to our expanded and combined efforts to improve the field of online learning through peer-reviewed research. Please share this new issue with colleagues!

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