Introduction to the Special Issue:
Best Papers Presented at the OLC 20th International Conference on Online Learning

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The International Conference on Online Learning traces its origin to a 1995 one-day meeting of grantees of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's *Anytime, Anyplace Learning* Program held in Philadelphia. Ninety individuals attended this first meeting where several invited speakers presented on the possibilities of online learning. This meeting grew into an annual event for the next five years. In 2001, the event was expanded into a full conference with paper submissions and reviews, workshops, and exhibit areas. The University of Central Florida agreed to host the conference in Orlando that November. It was a fateful decision as the attack on the World Trade Center on 9/11 followed by the anthrax scare in Florida in October of that same year severely limited the number of people willing to fly to Orlando to attend the conference. Never-the-less, three hundred and sixty participants attended to share and discuss research, effective practices, student services, and administrative support for online learning. Since then, the conference has grown and has evolved into the premiere event for presenting current ideas, research, and best practices in online learning.

In 2014, the Online Learning Consortium (formerly the Alfred P. Sloan Consortium) celebrated and held the 20th International Conference on Online Learning. The theme of the conference, *Driving Innovation with Online Learning*, focused on new developments in online and blended learning. More than 4,000 individuals attended this conference either in person or virtually. Seven hundred and twenty presentation proposals were submitted, of which 350 were accepted. The articles selected for this special edition represent the nine best presentations at this conference as determined by the conference track chairs and editorial staff of the *Online Learning Journal*.

The first article by Aimee deNoyelles and Beatriz Reyes-Foster (University of Central Florida) entitled, *Using Word Clouds in Online Discussions to Support Critical Thinking and Engagement,* explores the effectiveness of incorporating word clouds in a passage of text within online discussions. The authors sought to establish whether introducing word clouds in online discussions would result in a higher incidence of critical thinking and engagement. Survey results from undergraduate participants (n=132) revealed that students analyzing text in word clouds reported moderately higher scores on critical thinking and engagement than students analyzing the text in a linear fashion. A positive relationship was found between critical thinking and engagement as well as peer interaction. deNovelles and Reyes-Foster concluded that this strategy can be applied to a wide range of educational environments to stimulate critical thinking and engagement.

The next article, *Student Perceptions of Twitters' Effectiveness for Assessment in a Large Enrollment Online Course*, by Linda E Rohr and Jane Costello (Memorial University of Newfoundland), reports on the perceptions of students who participated in two Twitter events that served as two of the course's assessment activities. In each Twitter event, students were required to post, at a minimum, one original tweet and respond to another student's tweet. The use of a tweet feeder widget in the course's learning management system provided a summary of the dialogue. At the end of the semester, students were asked to complete an online survey that sought to ascertain their experience in using Twitter within the course, including its effectiveness as a component of the assessment, and as a means of enhancing social presence within the class. The survey also inquired about students' previous and current Twitter use, and requested recommendations on how to use it in future courses. Results of this survey indicated that students perceived Twitter as an effective means of assessment and an effective means of integrating social presence in the high enrollment course allowing them to feel more connected to their classmates and the course content.

In *An Analysis of Faculty Promotion of Critical Thinking and Peer Interaction within Threaded Discussions*, Alan Belcher, Barbara M. Hall, Kathleen Kelley, and Keith L. Pressey (Ashford University), examined the relationships among faculty behaviors that promote critical thinking. It also identified specific faculty behaviors that result in the highest levels of critical thinking within peer interactions. Using a concurrent embedded mixed methods approach, 19,595 peer-to-peer responses, coded along a 5-point scale of the Interaction Analysis Model (IAM), were reviewed for 19 different faculty behaviors. Comparing each individual faculty behavior to the IAM scores yielded interesting results. There were six significant correlations between faculty behaviors and scores on the IAM. Two of the correlations involved "negative" faculty behaviors.

The next article, *Online Master's Students Perceptions of Institutional Supports and Resources: Initial Survey Results,* Natalie B. Milman, Laurie Posey, Christine Pintz, Kayla Wright, and Pearl Zhou (George Washington University) presented the findings of an exploratory mixed methods study that investigated: 1) first- and second-year online graduate master's students' perceptions of the importance of, and satisfaction with, administrative, academic, technical, and online community supports; 2) personal factors and grit level; and 3) differences that existed among students in these areas. The study raised several questions important to online graduate education particularly regarding the support needed for student success.

In *An Evaluation of Low Versus High-Collaboration in Online Learning,* David Wicks, Baine B. Craft, Donghun Lee, Andrew Lumpe, Robin Henrikson, Nalline Baliram, Xu Bian, Stacy Mehlberg, and Katy Wicks (Seattle Pacific University) report on a recent study that explored how the use of high-collaboration technologies such as Google Docs and Google Hangouts impacted the level of learning presence students demonstrate while participating in a small group project. The low-collaboration group made minimal use of an asynchronous discussion forum for collaboration. Differences in collaboration were measured using student grades, peer evaluation, pre and posttest, and the community of inquiry survey. In addition, quantitative content analysis and social network analysis were used to assess collaboration by examining learning presence in the two groups.

Daniella Smith's article, *Does Gender Matter? University Library Access and Career Preparedness,* reports on an exploratory study conducted at the University of North Texas that examined how the gender of distance learning students related to variables such as the perceptions of the availability of library resources, technology available at home and work, technology provided by a university for distance learning, and career preparedness. The results of the study indicated that female students felt more prepared by their degree programs when they perceived that library resources were accessible. Females were also more likely to feel library materials were available if they believed the university's distance learning technology was reliable and that the web-based technology provided by the university

was adequate. Based on these results, it is recommended that faculty collaborate with librarians to market library services so that students are aware of the resources that are available to them. Moreover, implementing strategies such as differentiated learning and optional gender based library training sessions that utilize learning styles preferred by each gender may be beneficial for students.

In the next article, Patsy Moskal, Kelvin Thompson, and Linda Futch report on the evaluation of BlendKit, a 5-week course designed by the University of Central Florida in an open, online format specifically for the professional development of higher education faculty and instructional designers preparing to develop and teach blended learning courses. The evaluation of the course provided interesting and valuable information on the success of using an open approach of a MOOC compared to more traditional, highly structured professional development offerings typically seen in higher education.

Jean M. Taylor, Margie Dunn, both of Excelsior College, and Sandra K. Winn (Empire State College), in *Innovative Orientation Leads to Improved Success in Online Courses,* report on a collaboration of the production of short voice-over videos with interactive elements designed to address the most common technology frustrations of beginning students. These videos were used in courses that had a higher than average withdrawal rate and that also tended to have a broad grade distribution for students who completed the course. The videos with voice-over covered basic navigation, such as posting to a discussion board, submitting an assignment to a drop box, reviewing a grading rubric in the grade book, and opening a graded copy of an assignment to view instructor feedback. The orientation videos were available throughout the eight weeks of the course. After viewing the videos, the students were asked to complete a short survey, which included both quantitative and qualitative feedback. The responses to the survey were extremely positive, ranging from 84.48 to 90.67 on a 100-point scale. The team also examined course withdrawal rates and the grade distribution before and after the insertion of the videos. The data for almost all of the pilot study courses showed a drop in withdrawals after the use of the video orientation element. The examination of the pre- and post-intervention grade distribution showed an improvement in grades for almost all of the pilot courses.

The last article, *Design and Implementation of Therapist-Assisted Online Counseling*, by Aaron Owen Thomas, describes the rationale for creating an online program of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for students at the University of Florida who are struggling with stress and anxiety. In addition, the article discusses the instructional design process and unique challenges of creating psycho-educational materials through cognitive task analysis and heuristics. Thomas concluded that the preliminary evidences suggested that higher education institutions may wish to implement similar programs in order to increase efficiency and serve both on campus and distance students.

In closing, the staff and editors of OLJ thank all of the individuals who presented at the 20th International Conference on Online Learning in November 2014. Their investigations and descriptions of current activities in online learning are what has made the conference so important for advancing the field. Congratulations especially go to the authors included in this special issue for the quality of their presentations.

The editors of OLJ hope our readers enjoy this special issue and welcome any comments.
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