Introduction to the Special Issue: Highlighting AERA's Online Teaching and Learning SIG 2024

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The American Educational Research Association (AERA) is an international society that "strives to advance knowledge about education, to encourage scholarly inquiry related to education, and to promote the use of research to improve education and serve the public good" (About AERA). AERA members consist of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who belong to one or more of the 12 divisions and more than 150 special interest groups (SIGs). They come together annually to share educational research results and discuss implications for practice. The Online Teaching and Learning (OTL) SIG is a group of over 200 members who discuss and disseminate challenges and possibilities relating to online teaching and learning. SIG OTL and the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) have maintained a long-standing collaboration to advance online, blended, and digital learning theory and practice. The AERA annual meeting in 2024 was held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The theme of the meeting was "Dismantling Racial Injustice and Constructing Educational Possibilities: A Call to Action."

Since 2016, the Online Learning Journal (OLJ), the official journal of the OLC, has released a special issue to extend opportunities for SIG OTL members to contribute their expertise in online education research. This year's special issue features eight articles. The first two papers focus pointedly on equity, and the others focus on engagement broadly speaking.

The first article by Nandita Gurjar titled "**Envisioning Hopeful Futures: Designing Racially Just Online Learning,"** is an autoethnography investigating how Gurjar's positionality influences her design of racially just online learning. Using a feminist lens, Gurjar reflects on designing for teaching, social, and cognitive presence that fosters racial justice in online spaces. She describes how she built an online community where learners felt valued and empowered toward a future rooted in justice and dignity through human-centered practices like open educational resources and appreciative inquiry.

The second article by Greta Underhill and Cat Turk is titled "**Signs of Serendipitous Universal Design for Learning in Online Courses**." This qualitative study investigates how experienced online instructors unintentionally incorporate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles into their online courses without any formal training. Using sensemaking theory, the researcher's analysis of 33 interviews revealed that these experienced online instructors often apply UDL's principles of Engagement, Representation, Action and Expression in course design and teaching without even knowing. The study suggests that sensemaking may be a useful way to guide instructors toward more intentional integration of UDL, potentially easing the shift from incidental to deliberate application of UDL strategies.

The next article, titled "**The impact of social media and gamification of a mobile vocabulary learning app: Self-regulation and learning persistence,"** by Qian Xu and Jennifer Richardson, examined the impact of the badge-sharing feature in Shanbay Danci, a mobile vocabulary app, on learners' self-regulation, vocabulary persistence, and self-regulated learning experiences. Using 77 Chinese undergraduates in a College English course, the study found that students in the badge-sharing group showed significantly higher self-regulation—such as improved time management, strategic task completion, and goal setting—compared to a control group. Badge-sharing participants also demonstrated greater vocabulary learning persistence, with a 70% completion rate versus 56% in the control group. Qualitative findings suggest that badge sharing boosted learners' self-regulation and motivation.

After that, in "**Learning Online vs. Learning in Person: A Mixed-Methods Approach to Understanding How Student Preferences and Perceptions Have Evolved Since the Pandemic**," Kristi Bright and Jane Vogler examined undergraduates' preferred course modality (online or face-to-face) and whether these preferences shifted post-pandemic, as well as differences in online self-efficacy and self-regulation skills across preferences. A survey of 1,034 students from 2019-2023 revealed a shift from a strong preference for in-person to a more balanced preference across modalities. Students preferred face-to-face for learning support and human interaction, while online was favored for flexibility. Self-regulation and self-efficacy for online learning were similar regardless of preference. Findings suggest instructors could integrate the benefits of both formats, and institutions may consider hybrid options to accommodate students' needs for both flexibility and in-person engagement.

Next, we have "**Empowering Learning Networks: Insights from Social Network Analysis in Inquiry-Based Discussions**" by Ayesha Sadaf, Larisa Olesova, and Hajeen Choi This study examined the interaction dynamics in inquiry-based discussions using social network analysis. Researchers analyzed how network structures evolved when students engaged in discussions with the Practical Inquiry Model (PIM) and non-PIM questions while also rotating as weekly moderators. Findings showed that well-structured inquiry-based discussions create cohesive, balanced networks, with both PIM and non-PIM prompts generating moderate interaction levels. Although non-PIM discussions seemed more active, PIM discussions led to higher response rates. Individual participation and influence varied across discussions, with no significant impact from the moderator role. These insights offer guidance for designing balanced, interactive networks in inquiry-based learning.

Then, in "**Exploring the Relationship between Motivation and Academic Performance Among Online and Blended Learners: A Meta-Analytic Review**," Andrew Walker, Naomi Aguiar, Raechel Soicher, Yu-Chun Kuo, and Jessica Resig investigated the

role of motivation in online and blended learning, challenging the assumption that it strongly predicts academic performance as seen in face-to-face contexts. While prior research shows a strong link between motivation factors like self-efficacy and academic success in traditional settings, this study found much weaker correlations in online courses. From 94 outcomes across 52 studies, the highest correlation was with mastery avoidance goals ($r = 0.22$), and academic self-efficacy ($r = 0.19$) was notably lower than in face-to-face studies. These findings suggest motivation may be a less powerful predictor in online environments, offering important insights for educators, researchers, and policymakers.

The second to last article, **"The Impact of Different Instructor Participation Approaches in Asynchronous Online Discussions on Student Performance,"** is by Jiarui Xie, Mimi Adjei, and Ana-Paula Correia. This study examines how two instructor participation methods—public replies on discussion boards vs. private comments—affect student engagement in asynchronous online discussions. Results showed that public replies fostered more student-student interactions, though both methods led to connected social networks. There was no significant difference in the quantity or quality of posts between the methods, but both approaches gradually improved post quality over time. When instructors used private grade comments, student focus shifted from social interaction to knowledge-building.

The last article, titled "**MOOC teaching assistants' global-engaged learning in the United States and China,"** is by Yue Li, Anne Armstrong, and Marianne Krasny. This study investigated U.S. and Chinese university students who served as MOOC teaching assistants (TAs). Pre and post-surveys and qualitative analyses revealed that TAs improved in self-efficacy, political voice, conscious consumption, and critical reflection. They developed intercultural skills by adapting their language for diverse audiences and gained confidence in online communication and their ability to impact global communities. TAs highlighted the benefits of online engagement, such as accessibility and forming long-term connections, while noting challenges like limited emotional connection and language barriers. Recommendations are provided for designing online learning that fosters intercultural competence and reflective skills.

Our gratitude goes out to the OLJ editor-in-chief, Peter Shea, as well as the AERA OTL SIG executive committee and all the authors. We hope you'll find these articles as enlightening and informative as we did.

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