

Special Issue on Supporting Students in K-12 Online and Blended Learning Environments

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K-12 online learning has grown dramatically the last decade. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that this growth has occurred despite course completion rates and standardized test scores that tend to be lower than those found in face-to-face classrooms (Freidhoff, 2015; Miron, Gulosino, & Horvitz, 2015; Woodworth et al., 2015). Although these comparisons can be an important metric when evaluating the overall performance of online courses, the results do not help to identify what specifically is not working in online learning. Ferdig, Cavanaugh, and Freidhoff (2015) challenged our field to move beyond simple comparisons of online or blended and face-to-face programs and to ask instead, “Under what conditions can K-12 online and blended learning work?” (p. 52). In fact, Rose, Smith, Johnson, and Glick (2015) asserted that with enough support any student can succeed in an online or blended environment. As a result, they argued that instead of asking “Will this student succeed?” we should ask “What do we need to have in place to ensure that this student *will* succeed?” (p. 75).

Online learning can be especially challenging for new students because they “not only need to learn a subject online but need to learn how to learn online” (Lowes & Lin, 2015, p. 18). As a result, many students require a high level of support and interaction from online teachers, on-site facilitators/mentors, parents, and peers (Borup, West, Graham, & Davies, 2014; Harms, Niederhauser, Davis, Roblyer, & Gilbert, 2006). The level of support that is required is also determined by individual student attributes.

There is a large variance in the level of student support that programs provide, and at times they rely on parents and others to fully meet students' needs. More research is needed regarding student support systems and interactions in online and blended learning environments. In this special issue we address this need by sharing five articles that examine student support in K-12 online and blended learning. As co-editors, we were thrilled to have received both the quantity and quality of submissions. We believe the articles published in this special issue have the potential to provide important insights to both researchers and practitioners.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ISSUE

Oviatt, Graham, Borup, and Davis analyze survey responses from 1,088 students who enrolled in an independent study course. Independent study programs provide students with a high level of flexibility in the pace of their learning. This flexibility can be important to many students—especially those who need to finish courses relatively quickly for graduation—but it also significantly reduces the level of human interactions that programs can require. As a result, independent study programs focus largely on learner-content interactions with a content expert available to assist students as needed. Because high levels of human interaction are not provided within the course, many assume that students are alone during their course work. In fact, the independent study model has come under attack, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) no longer recognizes credits earned in these types of courses because they believe that they are not “academically sound” (Brown, 2010, para. 5). However, just because support structures are lacking in independent study courses does not mean that students are not supported in their learning because students can organize their own support system with those in their proximate environment (e.g., parents, peers, teachers and coaches in their brick-and-mortar schools). However, students are unlikely to seek support if they do not first recognize the need and value the support that others can provide. Oviatt and his colleagues find that the students they surveyed recognized a need to receive support from those proximate to their location and that students taking the course to recover credit perceived a greater need than students taking the course for other reasons.

While Oviatt and his colleagues' survey research provided a summary of over 1,000 students' perspectives, Barnett provides a rich description of seven at-risk students who successfully completed online courses with high attrition rates. Guided by a hermeneutic approach, Barnett conducted student interviews to examine their perceptions of care and non-care. She finds that students' experiences with non-care were motivating factors in their

decision to enroll in an online class, but also found that they could feel isolated, judged, and alone online. Despite these challenges these students were able to persevere and pass their course work in part due to the support that they received outside of the course from parents or from school staff and faculty. Practical implications are discussed concerning the need to create a caring school community that validates students and their life problems to empower students to learn and feel a sense of belonging as they move towards graduation.

Although the first two articles focus on understanding online students' perspectives and needs, the next two articles in this special issue focus on online teachers' abilities and strategies for providing students with the support that they need. Zweig and Stafford surveyed teachers at three supplemental online learning programs and consortium. Survey items focus on teachers' pre-service and in-service professional development, the challenges that they encounter when attempting to recognize and respond to online students needs, and their perceived need for additional professional development. Of the 283 teachers who responded to the survey, only 20% had received professional development related to online instruction during their pre-service education which supports previous research that has found teacher preparation programs fail to address the skills that teachers need to successfully teach online (Archambault & Kennedy, 2014; Archambault, Kennedy, Shelton, Dalal, McAllister, & Huyett, 2016; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012; McAllister & Graham, 2016). However, 57% of teachers received professional development after their pre-service education but prior to teaching online. The largest percentage of teachers (75%) received professional development while teaching online. The large majority of teachers also agreed or strongly agreed that they would benefit from additional professional development. Teachers indicated that the most common challenge that they faced was maintaining a high level of student engagement (i.e., getting students to complete assignments and interact with each other) that echoes cyber charter school administrators concerns reported by Gill et al. (2015).

Zweig and Stafford also learn that online teachers show a preference for unstructured professional development as compared to structured professional development. One type of unstructured professional development that has the potential to increase online teachers' capacity to support their students is electronic learning communities—the topic of Linton's article in this issue. More specifically, Linton examines how teachers' electronic learning communities at a state virtual high school support teachers' ability to form relationships with their students. Linton analyzes several types of data including interviews, emails, synchronous meeting observations, and asynchronous exchanges in shared documents. She finds that teachers'

participation in electronic learning communities are particularly helpful for new teachers because it helps them to gain access to valuable resources, allowing them to communicate with and learn from more experienced teachers, and become fully participating members of the teaching community.

The last article in the special issue by Stevens and Rice is unique from the other articles in that it focuses specifically on blended learning—an area of research that is especially lacking. The first author, Stevens, is a practicing teacher in a blended classroom used as the setting for this research. Stevens and Rice conducted a year-long narrative inquiry examining how Stevens established and used his classroom presence to maintain student engagement and ensure students spent sufficient time-on-task while also being given a high level of flexibility in their pace of learning. The authors share two stories that highlight many of the themes they identify in their almost bi-weekly discussions during the academic year. Results indicate that Steven's teaching presence supported learners in making better use of their cognitive development opportunities.

We believe that the articles in this special issue have the potential to inform future research and provide insights to practitioners seeking to improve the support they provide to students in online and blended environments. Both Oviatt et al., and Barnett highlight the importance of support systems proximate to students. Additional research that examines how programs can better facilitate those types of communities would be valuable. Additionally, research examining the support practices of parents and brick-and-mortar school faculty and staff would help to understand the specific types of support that would assist students to succeed online. It would also serve to provide insights to online programs regarding the types of support they should encourage. The findings from the other three articles indicate that informal professional development and communications among teachers can help to identify effective practices for supporting students. Additional research is needed that examines ways that teachers can effectively increase their capacity to support students in their online and blended learning courses. This type of research agenda, while difficult, has the potential to improve student engagement and lower course attrition rates for the growing number of students enrolling in blended and online courses.

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