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K–12 Online Distance Education: Issues and Frameworks

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K–12 Online Distance Education: Issues and Frameworks

We begin our editorial with a profound thank you to Dr. Michael Grahame Moore for his willingness to publish this special issue as well as much gratitude to Mr. Joe Savrock for all his editorial support throughout the process. Although the practice of K–12 online learning is more than two decades old and the literature base is more than fifteen years old, this issue represents only the second special issue that has been published with a specific focus on K–12 online distance learning, and the first to be published by a major distance education journal (the other special issue was Volume 17, Issue 4, of the *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*). It seems fitting that *The American Journal of Distance Education (AJDE)* would be a leader. In an analysis of the previous five years of publication, Barbour (2011) found that *AJDE* has published more articles focused on K–12 online learning than any other journal in the field of distance education.

With increasing popularity and accessibility of the Internet and Internet-based technologies, coupled with the need for a diverse group of students to have various means to complete their education, the prevalence of K–12 online and blended programs continues to increase. Virtual schools have been in existence since the proliferation of the Internet in the 1990s, and they have grown in popularity as a realistic alternative and augmentation to traditional education. Watson et al. (2011) reported that all fifty states and the District of Columbia offer their K–12 students online learning experiences.

Because *AJDE* was one of the first journals to focus on sound educational practice within the field of distance learning, the emerging field of K–12 online education represents a natural fit for this themed edition. The current theme focuses on issues and frameworks for K–12 online distance education. This includes teacher preparation and professional development, successful programs, principled practices in K–12 online teaching, policy formation and implications, and the potential for understanding interaction in online settings with emerging theoretical frameworks. The great promise of this edition lies in its potential to provide articles of interest to a wide and diverse audience, including researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

Although the number of courses and participating teachers and students is growing at a tremendous rate, what we know about this phenomenon empirically and how we understand it theoretically are dynamic and emerging. New knowledge from this field affords tremendous potential for positive feedback into the design and delivery of existing programs as well as future policy making. This special edition positions *AJDE* as a principal forum for the scholarly discourse about this burgeoning field.

Full-time K–12 online learning has seen significant growth over the past decade. One of the populations of students that are often touted as being well served by this model of K–12 online distance learning is students with special needs. In the first article, by Carrie Spitler, Jeanne Repetto, and Cathy Cavanaugh, the authors examine the 5 Cs framework (i.e., Connect, Climate, Control, Curriculum, and Caring Community) and its application to a full-time cyber charter school.

A common research theme throughout the K–12 online distance education literature is the comparison of student performance between the online and face-to-face environment. Many scholars have raised methodological concerns about the selective nature of the online samples, whereas others have indicated that it is time to move beyond asking whether it works and to focus on under what conditions does it work. The article by Sharon Johnston and Michael K. Barbour explores both of these issues. Their contribution examines student performance within the more selective Advanced Placement program while also exploring the factors that have contributed to online students' success.

At the moment, one of the biggest challenges facing the growth of empirical knowledge into K–12 online distance learning is the lack of scholars focused in this area. However, one of the advantages that K–12 online distance learning provides to the practicing teacher is the availability of data collected by the learning-management system and the student-information system that can be used to make evidence-based decisions. The article by Kara Dawson, Nancy Fichtman Dana, Rachel Wolkenhauer, and Desi Krell explores one model of action research that could be implemented by K–12 online distance learning programs, or by individual practitioners, to use data to improve upon the delivery of K–12 online learning.

Over the past five years scholars have begun to examine the separate and individual roles of the virtual school designer, virtual school teacher, and virtual school site facilitator (Davis 2007). One of the shortcomings of this model is that it overlooks the role of the parent. As we saw in the 2007 Wisconsin court cases, the parent often holds the primary responsibility for instruction in the full-time K–12 online learning environment. The article by Jered Borup, Charles R. Graham, and Randall S. Davies explores the role of parental involvement and the nature of parental interaction.

The final article in this special issue was produced by Kathryn Kennedy, Cathy Cavanaugh, and Kara Dawson. In this article, the authors focus upon the preparation of preservice teachers to be able to meet the demands of the online classroom. An often overlooked topic of study within the field, at least until recent years, this is an important aspect to ensuring the effective delivery of online courses to K–12 students. Rice and Dawley (2007) found that fewer than 40% of online instructors had received any training prior to beginning to teach online, whereas Kennedy and Archambault (2012) found that only 1.3% of universities had any aspect of K–12 online learning in their teacher preparation program. Given these realities, the systematic examination of how to provide effective field experience for the K–12 online environment is overdue.

The interview for this special issue was conducted by Tom Clark. Tom is one of the earliest scholars to examine the field of K–12 online learning, and he was responsible for the initial national overviews of the level of practice of K–12 online learning in the United States. He interviewed Joe Freidhoff, the director of online learning research and innovation at the *Michigan Virtual University*® (MVU). The recent passage of *Public Act 201 of 2012 MVU* was directed to create a *Center for Online Learning Research and Innovation*, which Joe has become responsible for implementing.

Finally, in the United States, August 2012 was designated as “Connected Educator Month” (CEM). Although not strictly about K–12 online or blended learning, the focus of many of the activities during CEM did deal with teachers integrating online tools into their teaching to break down the physical walls of the traditional classroom. As such, we felt it appropriate that the book *The Connected Educator: Learning and Leading in a Digital Age*, by Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach and Lani Ritter Hall, should be reviewed for this special issue.

Although each of these articles represents a contribution to the field in areas that were in need of systematic examination, there are still many other areas that require additional research. For example, the past two to three years have seen numerous legislative changes designed to increase the ability of full-time K–12 online learning programs to continue their explosive growth. However, research into student performance in these environments has consistently shown that students drop out at unacceptably high rates and that students perform at unacceptably low levels. This is an area where more research is needed.

Further, this past year the United States Department of Education issued a request for proposals to create a Center for Online Learning and Students with Disabilities. In the request for proposals, the Department of Education repeatedly referred to the potential of online learning to address

the unique demands of students with disabilities by personalizing instructions to the students' individual needs. However, the request for proposals did not cite a single piece of research to support these claims.

Finally, K–12 online and blended learning trade organizations—like the International Association for K–12 Online Learning and the Innosight Institute—report that the most significant growth in the field of K–12 online and blended learning is with the use of blended learning. The fact that none of the articles in this special issue is focused upon blended learning is indicative of one of the major challenges to the field. The ability of scholars to provide evidence-based guidance in spite of the reality that the practice of K–12 blended learning is far outpacing the availability of useful research is a trend that occurred with K–12 online learning in general a decade ago (and continues to occur with full-time K–12 online learning).

These are just three of the many, many areas within the field of K–12 online and blended learning suitable for researchers to examine. It is our hope that this special issue is another piece to the larger puzzle designed to provide guidance to practitioners in the field.

Michael Barbour, Leanna Archambault, and Meredith DiPietro, Special Issue Guest Editors

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