For some savvy scholars and industry insiders, fully online learning—where instruction takes place entirely (or nearly so) over the Internet—and blended instruction—where instruction takes place both online and in a traditional physical space—were inevitable at all levels of education. But for many K-12 educators and the universities that prepare them, its emergence seemed sudden and rapid (Graham, 2006). Once it was here, online learning promised opportunities to take courses that were otherwise unavailable at traditional schools, including advanced courses and credit recovery. Online learning also offered the potential to reduce scheduling conflicts (Picciano, Seaman, Shea, & Swan, 2012). However, scholars have also sounded warnings about potential policy and practical challenges for students who need extra support for learning, including those with disabilities, in online environments (Basham, Carter, & Rice, 2016; Meyen, Lian, & Tangen, 1998; Picciano, Seaman, Shea, & Swan, 2012; Rice, 2006; Rice, 2017; Smith, Basham, Rice, & Carter, 2016).

As editors of this issue, we are scholars and educators that support the spectrum of online learning opportunities. Of course, we see online learning’s value, but we are also careful to avoid what noted skeptic Larry Cuban
referred to as *hype language* about learning with technologies, particularly with advanced Internet technologies (Herold, 2017). Hype language leads people to falsely assume that structures like online learning are inherently more educative, inherently time-saving, inherently less expensive, and/or the universal preference. Instead, we prefer to take a more cautious route because we take seriously the responsibility to make online learning available to everyone, everywhere. To ensure that these goals of increased access are met, educators and scholars need to ask important questions about *who* is participating in K-12 online learning and whether *all students* are benefiting (Beck, Egalite, & Maranto, 2014; Rice, 2006; Watson & Gemin, 2008; Xie, Basham, Marino, & Rice, 2017). Some groups of students who might deserve specific vigilance include students who are learning using multiple languages as part of their daily living, students with disabilities and other cognitive and social exceptionalities, students from socioeconomically deprived circumstances, and students from rural and other underserved areas.

We are excited to publish this special issue of the *Journal of Online Learning Research* for 2018. The topic of this special issue is “Diversity in K-12 Online Learning.” Two of the four articles focus on teacher preparation for working in online settings with diverse students while the other two articles focus on blended learning in two geographically distant parts of the world.

Crouse and Rice (2018) begin the issue, offering insight into what teachers in fully online virtual charter schools say they know about working with students with disabilities as well as the sources of their knowing. While the teachers in this study recalled and appreciated many aspects of their pre-service preparation, they were also adamant that it was insufficient to help them over the steep curve of learning to teach students with disabilities on-line. Although they have learned some strategies through their experiences working with students, the teachers would have preferred greater support targeted to their online work that was geared toward meeting the needs of all of their students.

In the second article, Evmanova (2018) offers an example of such support. Her work focuses on teacher preparation for Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in classrooms (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Although embracing UDL principles does not require technology, most of the participants were working in schools with 1:1 technology initiatives. Providing high-quality preparation experiences is the first step to working successfully with students. By the end of the instruction and observations, all participants were able to recognize specific UDL guidelines and checkpoints in the observed lessons across grade levels and subject areas. They also proposed revised
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lesson plans that extended the use of UDL to address specific learning outcomes and learner variability. Such findings bring hope that when teachers return to their classrooms with these lesson plans but without further university support, they can serve a wider range of students than before.

Alvarado-Alcantar, Keely, and Sheerow (2018) demonstrate that when blended learning is understood as potentially beneficial and perceived as accessible to students, it is still not preferable to traditional learning for all students. The authors’ survey of high school seniors, many of whom had previous experience with blended learning in their high school in the deep southwest of the United States, highlights the way in which engaging students in blended learning is a local matter with many components. The curriculum was perceived as accessible, but was it interesting? Did it align with students’ perceptions of what they might need to know and be able to do when they left secondary education for work, further education, or other opportunities? Did their teachers have support for managing the traditional elements? Was student language along with other preferences acknowledged and met? Were there true opportunities to engage with the online curriculum once away from the school? The answers to these questions are critical for educators who desire to move forward with similar initiatives and who have thoroughly mapped the landscape of diversity within their schools.

In the final article, Kandu (2018) offers an essay outlining the virtues of blended learning and its potential to serve the dramatically underserved and underachieving elementary student population in India. Although Kandu is optimistic, his essay offers an extensive description of the many challenges to immediate implementation in his home country. Some of these challenges include building an Internet-supporting infrastructure, attending to a desire for a curriculum that is modern and rigorous but that resonates with traditional values, initiating effective teacher preparation, reducing student attrition, and supporting the simultaneous learning of multiple languages. Without surrendering to those problems, Kundu outlines current efforts from private companies and government legislation that could make an elementary education—the only education many in India receive—a 21st century learning experience.

Taken together, these four articles suggest that serving diverse learners in online learning will be a contest between local movements and large-scale proscribed solutions. They also hint at the close coordination of innovators and leaders in both universities and schools that is necessary to make online learning in all of its forms increasingly more viable for an increasing number of students. We invite you to read and reflect, and to be inspired to consider how the articles contribute to your own understanding and lines of
inquiry related to the topic. In addition, we strongly encourage you to submit your own work for consideration to be included in a future issue of the *Journal of Online Learning Research*.

**References**


