

Foreword

The diffusion of online distance learning environments is an earthquake that has shaken the undergirding of higher education over the past two decades, creating challenges that will fully engage the support and leadership of education at its most basic core (Ellsworth, 2000; Rogers, 2003). As Rogers (2003) suggests, “innovators” ventured into the unknown world of online learning very early, followed swiftly by the “early adopters.” Over the past several years, higher education has supported the efforts of the “early majority” and “late majority” as they slowly considered and subsequently engaged in online learning, while the “laggards” continue to be suspicious of online learning environments. Yet, the growing mandate by learners for online learning environments has begun to suggest the obsolescence of the “laggards” who may desire to maintain the traditional status quo instead of carefully analyzing and embracing the potential strengths of digital learning instructional environments.

While scholars and practitioners have focused upon the preliminary, burgeoning phases of the analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation of online distance learning environments, they must now look toward the future. More established planning and consideration—in organizational change and support, leadership training and experience, and better training of distance learning instructors—is needed for distance learning to thrive. Additionally, social and cultural perceptions must shift, along with a switch from the soft skills inherent in traditional face-to-face environments to those needed in distance learning environments. Many of the basic tenets of successful instruction and learning are being questioned by those practitioners who embrace distance learning environments. This book supports such forward-thinking conversations and case studies associated with quality distance delivery environments.

As the growth of online distance learning environments has exploded, concerns about quality assurance have been acutely felt. Professional organizations were either formed (or further enhanced) to address the cultivation and promotion of professional standards to guide and support the design and development of these environments. Currently, a few of these professional organizations include North American Council for Online Learning (iNACOL); International Society for Technology in Education; The American Distance Education Consortium (ADEC); Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education; Task Force for the American Council on Education; The Alliance: An Association for Alternative Programs for Adults; International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction; and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT). Additionally, subject-specific professional organizations have begun to address the obvious needs of their constituents.

At this point, the proverbial pendulum has already begun to swing away from uncritical celebration and exploration of distance learning environments. The innovators and early adopters who were on the “bleeding edge” of online learning environment design, development and implementation have begun to question the quality assurance and as well as the net benefit of allocating the time and effort neces-

sary to develop, enhance and support successful online communities of learning. Others have raised concerns about the professional development of online instructors, the integration of online training and modeling within teacher education programs, sufficient and innovative support for teacher candidates and inservice educators, the ability to successfully shift from understanding the technology towards the successful integration and modeling of the technology within the instructional design, technical implementation of the course while maintaining a focus upon learning goals, training administrative leadership towards a more fully developed understanding and recognition of the time and effort inherent within successful distance learning environments. These points and other related concerns are now at the forefront of the discussion.

The case studies within this text offer a snapshot of the historical context of online distance learning, the current state and successes of distance learning environments, and potential implications for the future of distance learning environments. Furthermore, they provide insight into the currently inadequately considered organizational and leadership needs which will be essential to the future of quality distance learning. The section *Leadership Issues in Distance Learning* offers a fully articulated vision and mission for distance learning environments, while integrating an understanding of the organizational change sustenance that drives professional development support. It even addresses larger structural issues, including how intellectual property and copyright issues are also part of the conversation, without ignoring the more specific instructional needs within the distance learning environment. This book describes the “grassroots” organizational realm through which the authentic support and sustenance for distance learning environments will ultimately transpire. A parallel, interesting and integral portion of the success of distance learning environments is their impact upon the learners and how they address learners’ needs, which are more fully addressed within the *Teaching and Learning* section. Finally, *The Future of Distance Learning* looks at “how social and technological developments are shaping the future” (World Future Society, 2010, para. 1), offering a “crystal ball” view of the opportunities and intentions which may guide future research and inquiry, and predicts the potential lessons and re-analysis that will guide the developing understanding of distance learning environments. The assembled case studies reflect the strategies and experiences of the untrodden road that innovators travel on the way towards successful enlightenment.

Respectfully,
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Caroline M. Crawford is an Associate Professor of Instructional Technology at the University of Houston-Clear Lake in Houston, Texas, USA. Dr. Crawford has designed, developed and taught several courses during her tenure at UHCL, including the following: *Trends and Issues*, *Advanced Applications of Technology*; *Multimedia design*; *Multimedia Development*; *Analyzing Emerging Technologies*; *Applications of Technology*; *Training Practicum*; *Advanced Grant and Proposal Writing*; *Applications of Java*, *Multimedia for Educators*; *Change Leadership*, *Creating Digital Resources*; *Project Management and Grant Writing*; *Web Development*; *Teaching and eLearning*; *Learning Theory and Instruction*; and, *Performance Technology*. Further, she is in the process of designing and developing *Systematic Design of Technology-Based Instruction*. She has designed, developed, implemented and continuously redesigned no fewer than twelve online and hybrid courses over the past twelve year period, with strong formative and summative feedback from the learners within the courses and subject matter experts in the field. Crawford’s scholarly pursuits are varied, including a minimum of 60 international, national and regional refereed and non-refereed journal articles, as well as edited book chapters. Further, Crawford has presented a minimum of 160 professional conference-focused presentations and thirteen poster sessions, with several invited presentations and a keynote presentation at a regional technology-focused conference, with a history of honored positions as a Managing Editor for the Society for

Information Technology and Teacher Education (SITE) refereed review of conference manuscript proposals, Review Editor for six international refereed journals, and reviewer for innumerable regional, national and international refereed journals. As well, Crawford's book chapter titled *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow's Recognition of Industry Applications within Virtual Worlds: A Meta-Analysis of Distance Learning Instructional Achievements within Virtual World Architectural Environments, and Potential Implications for Higher Education*, recently published in the book *Distance Learning Technology, Current Instruction, and the Future of Education: Applications of Today, Practices of Tomorrow*, has been nominated by the book editor for the IGI-Global's first annual Excellence in Innovative Research Award for Outstanding Book Chapter. The book chapter was nominated, based upon the following criteria: Innovativeness; Practicality of research/results; Potential impact on the field; Thoroughness of the research; Thoroughness of the references; and, Style or clarity of prose. Further, Crawford was awarded the prestigious University of Houston-Clear Lake 2009 Outstanding Professor Award. At this point in Crawford's professional career, her main areas of interest focus upon communities of learning and the appropriate and successful integration of technologies into the learning environment. The learning environment may be envisioned as face-to-face, hybrid and online (virtual or text-driven) environments.

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