So you want to be a successful online teacher—you are to be commended! Being a great teacher comes naturally to a select few. Others of us spend years fine tuning our craft, seeking additional learning and education, reflecting on our practice, and trying new techniques and strategies, some more successful than others. Whether you teach online at a high school or university, or design e-learning materials, this text will help you become more successful in your work.

From research and our own practice, we know there are many attributes that make a successful online teacher. Some of these attributes include self-discipline, prompt feedback to students, becoming knowledgeable with the technical aspects of the online learning environment, the ability to send students in the right direction when they are seeking technical assistance, and facilitating individual and group learning instead of lecturing.

Online teachers are more and more becoming facilitators of learning. This role is new for many teachers who are used to lecturing and testing. Others of you may already be facilitators in live classrooms, and now wonder how to transfer that form of teaching to an online environment. This text is grounded in the notion that successful teaching involves facilitating students’ achievement of learning objectives to engage and empower students as life-long learners. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of various online learning tools, and how these tools can be used successfully to achieve specific learning objectives, provides you the ability to become a great online teacher.
There are many texts that provide a general introduction to online teaching (e.g., Elbaum, McIntyre, & Smith, 2002; Ko & Rossen, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2001). This book moves beyond a general introduction to online teaching, and places an emphasis on in-depth understanding of effective use of technology tools in the online learning environment. The tools discussed in the text may or may not be part of a Learning Management System (LMS): chat, discussion forums, e-mail, whiteboards, survey and exam tools, video conferencing, blogs, wikis, instant messaging, and small group features. Our goal is to help you understand the pedagogical strengths and weaknesses of various technology tools and how to apply them in facilitating online learning—not to teach you the ins and outs of how to use an LMS such as Blackboard™, eCollege™, or Desire2Learn™. This book is particularly helpful to those teachers working at the high school or university level. Because the strategies in this book focus on creating learning relationships directly between teachers, students, and peers, this text may be less appropriate for online elementary teachers who mainly interface with parents, although the concepts could certainly be applied toward working with parents in those virtual environments. The activities and examples discussed within are easily modified to accommodate various grade levels or subject areas.

The strengths and weaknesses of each tool are discussed in detail, and educators are taught to match the strengths of the specific tool to the learning objectives they seek to achieve in their courses. Multiple examples of objectives and online learning activities are provided to help instill a deep understanding of the power of each online tool. This leaves you with a long-term ability to adapt your own curriculum over time, because you have learned options for using a variety of online tools to achieve specific learning objectives. Finally, each chapter includes a sample lesson plan that demonstrates how to integrate the tool into the learning experience. These ideas and activities provide tried and true suggestions for creating an online environment that engages and empowers learners for success. And when your students are successful in learning, you are successful in teaching.

In Chapter I, we overview societal and political trends pushing the evolution in online learning, and what it means to be a successful online teacher. Central to that goal are the concepts of student engagement and empowerment to become life-long learners. The terms “engagement,” “empowerment,” and “life-long learning” have become well-used jargon by many educators. What does it mean for students to be engaged and empowered? Are there cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses that come into play when students feel engaged? Is it necessary to empower students to become life-
long learners? Why? How have technological innovations in our society made necessary the ability to learn for life? In answering these questions, we will explore our basic tenant that the ability to match tasks in learning objectives to the strengths of appropriate online tools and activities is a requirement for successful teaching and learning. We are interested in your success as an educator. Chapter I sets the framework for assisting you to be successful teacher throughout your career.

Chapter II begins our discussion of online learning tools, content areas, in particular. The Content Areas inside an LMS include folders for items such as the class syllabus, lesson plans, weekly assignments, course documents and handouts, slideshows and other multimedia, teacher contact information, and subject-area content that may, or may not, be designed by the teacher. The major strength of Content Areas is the ability to organize information for the student and teacher. Organization of information is critical to creating an online class where students feel successful. A well-organized course can provide students a visual schema for thinking about the organization of course and course contents. This visual schema assists the student with long-term retention of knowledge. Time in a well-organized course is spent on learning instead of deciphering how the course works. Disorganized information, duplication of documents, unclear directions about where to locate or post assignments leads to students who are frustrated and have a difficult time focusing on learning.

Chapter III discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the most commonly used tool in online learning, e-mail. The true power of e-mail lies in its ability to promote one-on-one connection between the teacher and the student. An instructor who uses e-mail wisely, and consistently, promotes a sense of connectedness to the larger virtual community. Using e-mail to provide feedback, touch base, and respond to questions in a timely fashion often answers the question many online students have, “Is anyone out there?”

Chapter IV offers an in-depth discussion of discussion forums. Discussion forums have been the preferred whole-class asynchronous communication mechanism since the inception of online learning. Benefits of discussion forums are many. The asynchronous nature of discussion forums provides opportunity for in-depth reflection over time. They also create a sense of community through discussion of course concepts, peer interaction and feedback, making instructor feedback visible to all students, and they also exemplify one of the highly touted benefits of online learning—anywhere, anyplace, anytime.
Chapter V examines the ability to use small groups in online classes. The “Groups” feature offered in many LMSs allows the instructor to assign students to groups of varying size, and provides that group with their own independent tools such as chat, a drop box, e-mail, and a discussion board. Instructors might choose to group students in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. Commonly, groups are arranged around areas of common interest or expertise. For example, the instructor may establish study groups for teachers of various grade levels or by subject matter. Groups might also be established by similar time zone or work habits (those who like to turn in assignments early, for example). The most successful groups are purposeful in nature, and structured by the teacher with specific guidelines and deadlines for interaction. The strengths of online small groups are similar to those experienced by teachers who use cooperative groups in the regular classroom. Properly structured small groups can experience a tighter bonding with individual classmates, and a greater sense of connectedness to the course overall. Groups also promote the development of individual expertise by offering the student a smaller environment in which to discuss their work and developing constructs.

Chapter VI explores the merits of synchronous communication through chat and instant messaging (IM). When used well, chat can be a wonderful tool for promoting in-depth understanding on a topic and also helps to create a sense of connection for the student. Conversely, poorly structured or facilitated chats can have a disastrous effect, turning off students to the use of chat in the learning process. Teens, and many adults, are using instant messaging more and more as a daily means for communication with their peers. This benefit can translate over into the online classroom when teachers have the necessary expertise to understand effective use of the tool. Using instant messaging offers the benefits of the instructor being instantly available to the student to answer questions and discuss course assignments. This instant access to the instructor can alleviate anxiety on the part of the student who might be trying to complete an assignment within a certain time period. Conversely, we have used IM to contact students to ask a quick question or just to “touch base.”

Chapter VII continues our exploration of synchronous tools by looking at video conferencing and whiteboard spaces. Video conferencing is an enhanced version of chat, offering a video and audio feed of the teacher and students, a text box for chatting and private messaging during chat, file sharing and polling capabilities, and a whiteboard area that can serve multiple purposes. In a whiteboard, an instructor or student can present interactive displays of
graphic information such as drawings, brainstorming, slides, or math equations. Whiteboard areas also have the capability to share applications, and browser windows for displaying Web pages during the chat. Most video conferencing platforms also include the ability to record the session—a feature with many benefits! Strengths of video conferencing include the ability to brainstorm in groups of two or more, use of breakout rooms for small group discussion, display Web pages for simultaneous discussion, provide multimedia that enhance the discussion at hand in order to promote long-term retention of concepts, and the ability to view the instructor work out complex math equations. Cognitive psychology informs us that the ability to use visual images in relation to text is a key factor in promoting the development of our schema on a general topic (Gagne, Yekovich, & Yekovich, 1993). Weaknesses of video conferencing include the time involved in teaching students to use it effectively, the slow display time for students who might be working on dial-up, poor video or audio feeds due to old webcams, or inability to even access the video conference due to firewalls. These technical factors often hinder the potential effective use of video conferencing.

Chapter VIII examines the various assessment and survey tools currently available both in LMSs, and online. We find most LMS assessment tools to be somewhat limited at this time, many tools focusing only on multiple choice tests or essay exams. While those types of assessments are useful for some areas of instruction, they provide limited feedback for the instructor who is working to engage and empower students in the learning process. Assessment is a critical component of the learning cycle, and as such, teachers require multiple forms of assessment to facilitate learning objectives for their students. In addition to detailing potential uses of current assessment tools in LMS, we explore assessment options in online classrooms that use other online learning tools. For example, structured peer feedback in discussion forums is a type of formative assessment that offers students the ability to co-construct knowledge. We also examine various forms of assessment such as self-assessment, peer-assessment, assessment of the student, curriculum, and the instructor in the online class.

Chapter IX looks at the use of blogs and wikis as a part of online education. Although most LMSs do not contain blog or wiki tools at this point, these two tools have gained in popularity in the last couple of years, and we are now seeing their uses expanded to the educational environment. Blogs and wikis offer the individual student a worldwide forum for publishing their thoughts, writing, and expanding knowledge base. The blog is then open to comments from the outside world, and the wiki is open to further editing and
expanding from outsiders. One of the highly touted benefits of blogs and wikis includes the empowerment of the author through the writing process. The individual student owns and directs the content of the blog. Unlike discussion forums which might constrain thinking into a hierarchical format, the student decides the direction the blog will take. In effect, the student becomes expert on his or her given topic. This results in an increase of higher-order thinking skills as the student constructs knowledge over time. An additional benefit of the blog is its lack of boundaries for student publication. Discussion forums constrain the ability to view the student’s writing to a single set of classmates. Blogs open up a student’s writing to the world, thus enabling the student as a global citizen.

Finally, in Chapter X, we explore the idea of learning to integrate multiple tool use when teaching online, and discuss several examples where a multiple tool set is required. Teachers are provided insight on how to stay current with emergent technologies, and some suggested tools are provided at the conclusion of the chapter.

Enjoy your adventure through this book, and begin to celebrate your own professional development as an online teacher of excellence!