Foreword

User-Centered Design for Quality in Online Learning Communities

This collection makes a valuable contribution to the already large literature of online learning communities. The 16 chapters come from diverse international sources, but they are satisfyingly narrow in their focus on user-centered design, analysis, and evaluation.

The opening chapter provides a role model for what follows: good reviews of the literature, description of technology, compelling principles, and evidence-based reports. It is gratifying to see that this community of researchers has made the transition from controlled experiments to strategies that blend quantitative, qualitative, and ethnographic methods. The multiple strategies, ranging from observations and interviews with small groups to automated logging and surveys of multiple courses, seem well matched with the high-level goals of these researchers, even though there will always be questions of adequate controls and replicability.

These authors are deeply interested in intention, self-reflection, creativity, and community, and they demonstrate admirable attention to contemporary topics such as trust, privacy, empathy, and personal responsibility. Several authors applied advanced interfaces concepts related to collaboration strategies, visualization tools, and social network analysis, thereby contributing to progress in those fields.

Readers will be pleased to find that this group of chapters emphasized practical implementations in functioning classrooms and online courses. This demonstrates the advancing nature of the online learning research community, which has moved from utopian promises of what might be implemented to realistic field studies of interfaces in use. As a result the design principles and usage recommendations often have greater authority and utility than earlier work. There are helpful, and numer-
ous take home messages for teachers, guidance for implementers, and provocative questions for researchers.

Of course, some themes might have been more prominent, such as universal usability. By applying methods that enable easy usage with small and large displays, as well as fast and slow networks, the goal of broad dissemination is more effectively supported. Other universal usability issues include ease of conversion across languages, accommodation for multiple platforms, browser independence, minimal use of plugins, and user control of font size, color, and contrast. As universal usability becomes a design expectation, the good news is that software development tools increasingly facilitate the process, thereby reducing the burden on developers. The other good news about planning for universal usability is that with a modest additional effort by developers, they can achieve better interfaces for all users while gaining greater flexibility in accommodating modifications.

Overall, this collection presents positive progress on the state of online learning communities, leaving us to consider what aspirations we have for the next generation of projects. I believe that powerful technologies enable online educators to raise their expectations of what students can do. These educators in technology-rich environments can set ambitious goals for their students to write poems, paint murals, compose music, and perform plays. Some educators are already pushing further to have student teams design Web sites, edit videos, develop animations, build robots, and conduct research projects. In the best situations, students are engaging in meaningful environmental research, promoting neighborhood improvements, or supporting school activities in sports, theater, music, or hobby groups. These active learning tasks are gaining acceptance as service-oriented projects. They give students opportunities to practice planning carefully, collaborating effectively, and communicating constructively. They also help students develop their social skills in forming teams, resolving differences, and mediating disputes. These experiences build self-confidence, raise awareness of what is important, and help our students to contribute to their families, communities, and countries. It also makes them more ready to enter the workplace, take on leadership responsibilities, or become politically engaged.

As educators and interface designers, our roles include the noble goal of making the world a better place. We have the opportunity and responsibility to guide students as they develop their personalities and intellects. By giving students the experience of working with and helping others, we shape the directions of their lives.

Among educators we can accelerate the acceptance of these goals by discussing the values we see as important and writing about how we have designed our courses around our values. Then with a clear mind and confident tone, we can convey them effectively to our students.

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