Preface

The current generation of learners continues to prefer online and blended learning environments to traditional transmission methods (Allen & Seaman, 2011). These alternative technology-mediated environments reflect the increasing need to serve a generation of learners who prefer to learn through experience or by interacting with learning tools (Thomas, 2011). The purpose of this book is to further the conversation on the utilization of technology-mediated environments or platforms such as Course Management Systems (CMS) or Learning Management Systems (LMS), as well as models of instruction, to achieve learner-centered instructional practices that offer alternative means of communication for understanding.

A key question that is recurrent in the book is that of appropriateness of technology use. It is the responsibility of current educators to re-evaluate instructional practice relative to the needs of learners. This would require instructional design skills and strategies for faculty to successfully integrate technology tools and models that reflect differentiated instruction values to meet the needs of different types of learners. The proper use of current resources to address critical needs of learners should not only focus on what is outdated but also that which has been proven or has promise to engage learners and lead to desirable learning outcomes (Johnsen & Taylor, 2011). The time has never been more crucial for faculty to be able to transition from traditional delivery methods to technology-mediated methods that allow learners to make meaning through interaction with learning materials.

A persistent factor affecting faculty optimization of technology-integrated instruction still remains with the issue of time. It would require a paradigm shift on expectations of faculty by administrators and a similar shift in focus by technology support centers that assist faculty on technology integration for this expectation to become reality. Technology has always influenced educational practice and opportunities. To this end, in Models for Improving and Optimizing Online and Blended Learning in Higher Education, the chapter contributors establish the benefits of instructional technology over traditional methods and argue for a willingness to embrace the challenges involved.

Chapter 1 examines the need for the inclusion of instructional design principles for in-service and pre-service teacher professional development to assist faculty transition effectively to blended instructional delivery, and Chapter 2 argues that differentiated instruction is worth the time and effort because it responds to individual needs, and responsive teaching maximizes each student’s success.

Chapter 3 posits that delivering instruction using the Rich Environment for Active Learning (REAL) model has the potential to remove communication barriers and draw more students into the social aspect of instruction and truly engage them as lifelong learners.
Chapter 4 explores the need to assist faculty in developing active learning strategies that are learner-centered utilizing technology for online and blended environments, and Chapter 5 offers a rationale for cultivating community in online environments and multiple faculty development models for helping faculty develop a social, teaching, and cognitive presence in online environments.

Chapter 6 presents findings related to the use of online writing modules developed to support English as a Second Language and nontraditional English speaking college students. Participants reported improved content-specific writing skills, transfer of writing skills to other content areas, and increased self-efficacy in writing. This chapter asserts that the need to support non-traditional learners is growing.

Chapter 7 presents an analysis of approaches and models employed by faculty at one institution of higher learning to develop and deliver two blended courses as part of the institution’s strategy of using technology to enhance undergraduate student engagement and retention, and Chapter 8 offers six specific recommendations that faculty, students, administrators, management, and support staff can undertake to assure that students and faculty will have the resources to successfully complete an online academic or training program.

Chapter 9 presents a blended course model, assessment data, and ideas for contextual reflection about how change in higher education paradigms is affecting the humanities in order to address them in a cooperative, non-disruptive way. The unique context, assumptions, and causes for resistance to change in the humanities with regard to technology and blended pedagogy are also discussed. This chapter is intended to help readers anticipate and address particular disciplinary perceptions of blended learning.

Chapter 10 examines pertinent questions that look at some assumptions guiding the choice of instructional models, the three design situations identified, and some characteristics that separate the various design instances, and Chapter 11 discusses a novel model for improving online collaborative learning using Machine Learning (ML) techniques.

Chapter 12 provides an analysis of transcriptions of blog posts for a face-to-face course for evidenced-based or text-based support, and Chapter 13 describes a field director’s revision of a field experience placement system and model for a teacher education program at a two-year institution.

Chapter 14 presents a case of a successful integration of digital curation in a repeating series of blended classroom activities. The chapter describes the activities, the learning design, and the outcomes of a digital curation activity sequence. Chapter 15 provides a portrait of roles and impacts of Web-based authoring tools in online learning environments.

The centrality of blended delivery of instruction and its advantages over traditional transmission methods in traditional institutions of higher education are well established. The role of good instructional design principles as necessary tools are highlighted along with an acknowledgement of the barriers impeding optimal practice. In light of faculty resistance and associated demands for service and publication, the need for different approaches to assist faculty are respectfully placed. There is alignment of thought on the roles of LMS to aid in the achievement of differentiated instruction.

The role of instructional models and the cyclical process of revision relative to design and development is also examined as with the potential to deliver instruction using the Rich Environment for Active Learning (REAL) model for effective communication to produce life-long learning. Perhaps, a fundamental goal of instruction in post-secondary education should contain a substantial reliance on the constructivist paradigm of how learners make meaning for themselves rather than simply absorbing information (Jonassen & Land, 2011).
No grand claims are made for technology as a panacea for problems in education. Rather, this book acknowledges the limitations of traditional (face-to-face) transmission of knowledge and advocates for recognition of a cultural change brought about by technology. For higher education faculty, it means acknowledgement of the centrality of technology in eliminating physical distance between people as manifested by social media, for example. There is focus on the need to recognize learners’ experiences in online and blended environments as being significantly different from traditional transmission and interaction.

Finally, Course Management Systems or Learning Management Systems and Models are pivotal in repurposing learning for the acquisition and enhancement of skills in the 21st century. To this end, the centrality of the distance that the learner experiences as an alternative to traditional instructional delivery is evident in this book. To better serve the current generation of learners, including non-traditional students, faculty in higher education need to reassess what it means to be learner-centered in the design and delivery of online and blended instruction. To achieve this, assisting faculty to optimize technology tools in blended and online learning environments must become a priority for institutions of higher education.

The hope is that these scholarly essays will help forward the agenda and discussion on the significance and the need for a willingness to embrace the challenges involved in the process of optimizing technology tools in blended and online learning environments. Overall, this book provides very useful information for administrators and educators who are interested in the planning, design, implementation, and utilization of technology-mediated environments or platforms such as Course Management Systems (CMS) or Learning Management Systems (LMS) as well as models of instruction to achieve the best learner-centered instructional practices.

Jared Keengwe
University of North Dakota, USA

Joachim Jack Agamba
Idaho State University, USA

REFERENCES


