Foreword

The thoughtful and timely chapters in this book remind me of my last wedding anniversary. My wife and I dined at a nice restaurant to celebrate and while we were waiting for our food, both of us were independently on the Internet with our smartphones to investigate an upcoming vacation. An elderly couple paused as they walked by the front of our table and said very loudly and clearly, “Look! They are both with their phones and not talking to each other.” I was amused and somewhat embarrassed by the truthful observation, but I also felt appreciative because it redirected our attention back to traditional conversation. As a digital immigrant, researcher, and educator, I have observed many similar instances of younger students and presumably digital natives. As several authors in this volume note, we are undergoing a communication or digital revolution in all aspects of our civilization. Indeed, we now have refrigerators that allow us to surf the Internet, play digital music, and chill our food! Yet, education is predictably slow to respond and teacher education remains painfully antiquated when compared to how our students and many around us now interact and learn using digital technology.

This cutting-edge book will benefit any educator interested in knowing more about the emerging field of online education. The chapter authors highlight innovative research, theory, and practice and visibly recognize the shortcomings of their work. In an extremely short time span, millions of new students will learn through online or virtual avenues with educators who have limited or no training, resources, and tools to guide their evolving practice. Understandably, with such revolutionary and rapid changes to our social interaction, educational research and practice are still evolving, albeit at an agonizing pace. The chapter authors and book editors are commendable for not attempting to hide the many natural gaps in the nascent literature and content of this book. For example, although decades of research and practice on simulation games are available, the very recent changes through digital delivery have also radically affected the online educational potential. In other words, few empirical studies in K-12 education exist to guide practice, which may explain the absence of digital simulation games from this volume.

The chapter authors explicitly discuss similar gaps in the literature and they emphatically argue for clearer definitions and further empirical studies of effective online pedagogy. This impactful book will serve as an invaluable resource to examine online teaching and learning. Many unanswered questions remain and more research is necessary to identify high quality online teaching and learning. As clearly noted in several chapters, large gaps exist in teacher education research and practice. Undocumented numbers of educators and teacher educators never learned or experienced how to teach online, which is not terribly surprising since this is an emerging field. A key challenge for online education scholars is to research and identify best practices and ensure current and future educators learn how to be effective online educators.
I agree with Heafner and Plaisance and other chapter authors that the traditional form of educational delivery must change. Several authors in this book emphasize a blended or hybrid approach to online education that adapts emerging approaches to education, such as EduTexting, unbounded text reading, and 1:1 iPad integration. If we truly desire to engage our students to promote deeper and more relevant learning, education must evolve and take advantage of similar digital technologies that many of our students have already embraced and fully integrated into their lives. More importantly, Boboc and other chapter authors detail the potential of virtual learning to promote equitable learning opportunities for students previously not engaged through formal education.

The knowledge and skills developed through virtual learning are essential to function successfully in our digital and globally interdependent society so education must adapt. As more virtual schools develop without consulting with essential readings such as this book, critical research is necessary to examine equity of access and impact of learning for impoverished students and schools. As argued in several chapters of the book, scholars must address the socio-economic, cultural, racial, and gender inequities as well. As online learning in K-12 contexts becomes more pervasive, embracing the benefits of these new educational contexts and technology-supported learning is only one aspect of change. Identifying what is quality online learning in virtual K-12 schools and classrooms is a challenge that must be met. This book serves as an excellent start point for examining central attributes of highly effective virtual K-12 schooling.

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