Preface

INTRODUCTION

Between the late 1990s and 2010, there were numerous books published across the world about online teaching, learning and course design. Many of these were “how to” type books and texts that focused on how educators could develop online teaching and course design skills. Not many of these books focused on the “soft skills of online teaching” within a research-focused context. Although there have been some recent publications about online education in higher education, none of these have focused intently on the social, emotional and personal aspects of online education, apart from the text by Lehman and Conceição (2010). Accordingly, the purpose of this book is to provide a compilation of recent investigations into the social and emotional aspects of online education that serve to enhance the experience of both the online learner and the online teacher across a range of contexts including higher education, industry and government. By purposefully examining issues such as online presence, emotionality and interactivity, the book presents commentaries on past and current research into the humanisation of online learning contexts. As such, the publication of this book has the potential to remediate some of the reported problems associated with online learning and aspires to contribute to our understanding of best practice theories and strategies in online education, online teaching and online learning. The publication of this book can be seen as a response to Reeves and Herrington’s (2010) recent call for “fundamental pedagogical change” (p. 213) and Salmon’s (2013) call for more focus on “what the teachers and learners actually do online” (p. 12).

The humanisation of online education has been of interest to both the editors of this book, Kevin Gosselin and Maria Northcote, for many years. Although much of their work occurs in different hemispheres, they have found much commonality over the years since they met on a joint research project that began in 2010 (reported in Gosselin & Northcote, 2013). The cross institutional project took place between Texas University in the USA and Avondale College of Higher Education in Australia. Throughout this project, Gosselin and Northcote investigated how online teachers developed various threshold concepts as they transitioned between teaching in on-campus, traditional learning contexts through to teaching in online learning contexts. While the concepts developed by these teachers were important, much of Gosselin and Northcote’s research revealed that the “soft skills” of teaching and learning were often the glue that kept an online course together.
THE STATE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

The field of distance education is growing globally and universities are becoming one of the biggest advocates of distance courses. Subsequently, the research evidence emerging from online education contexts continues to inform our pedagogy and practice. There have been many successes and disasters reported in the field of distance education in recent years which have acknowledged both the affordances and limitations of distance courses within the higher education sector.

For example, online education has been especially criticised for lacking a sense of belonging (Hun Lim et al., 2007), even being characterised as dehumanised (Etherington, 2008), impersonal and disengaging (Kear, 2010), lonely (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003) and disinviting (Paxton, 2003). It is often the lack of human presence, emotionality and interactivity of online environments that makes it difficult for students to achieve their learning goals, leaving them feeling unsatisfied with their online learning experiences. Learners can be discouraged by an apparent lack of feedback from and communication with their online teachers and fellow students. Or, they may feel isolated and without direction. The lack of connection observed in some online courses has been particularly noted when an over-use of text-based communication strategies have been used in place of a more balanced combination of text-based and media-rich communication technologies (Kear, Chetwynd, & Jefferis, 2014). Some examples of online education, regardless of their potential and many affordances, have been condemned for their “limited capability to engage learners” (Hun Lim, Morris, & Kupritz, 2007, p. 28). Overall, the lack of personalised dimensions in online learning environments has presented challenges to online educators and students alike (Dole & Bloom, 2009; Dringus, Snyder, & Terrella, 2010; Jones, Naugle, & Kolloff, 2008; Lehman & Conceicao, 2010).

Notwithstanding the barrage of critical commentary that can be found in research literature over the last two decades about the difficulties associated with some online learning environments, the increasing growth in useful course design frameworks for online contexts alongside the emergence of some world recognised online educators (Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2003; Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2010; Salmon, 2013), has somewhat begun to reverse the negativity surrounding e learning. In fact, some researchers claim that the online context can even be superior to other forms of delivery: “Compared to traditional lecture approaches in higher education, the online classroom offers permanency and perhaps more reflective and rigorous thought” (Garrison, 2006, p. 33). Similarly, Hawkes and Romiszowski (2001) found that “… while the computer-mediated teacher dialogue was less interactive, it was significantly more reflective ($t = 4.14, p = .001$) than face-to-face discourse” (p. 285). The immediacy and flexibility of online education have also been recognised for the advantages of “just-in-time delivery” (Hun Lim et al., 2007, p. 28). Also, the meta-analysis and review of online learning studies, conducted by Means and her colleagues (2010), found that students learning in online or blended learning contexts performed just as well and sometimes better than students in traditional, on-campus learning settings. Thus, while there is evidence of some clearly identified limitations and risks associated with online teaching and learning contexts, the potential affordances of online learning environments can also be made available to learners with judicious use of appropriate course design features, technologies and online presence.

The book is about a range of topics relevant to educators and students who operate in the online space, including interaction (learner-learner, teacher-learner, learner-material), online relationships, application of interpersonal skills in online contexts, online communication, expression of teacher and student personality in virtual contexts and online presence. Discussion of these issues alongside research-focused guidelines and evidence are presented to addresses both the pedagogy and practice of online learning.
TARGET AUDIENCE

Our aim in embarking on this project was to provide a comprehensive, research-informed resource for practitioners, administrators, designers and consumers operating within and across the distance education space. In this age of academic assessment, higher education institutions are tasked with providing evidence of achieved learning outcomes, and are often expected to demonstrate continuous quality improvement. This is important for many institutions and disciplines for not only improving educational practice and meeting the needs of today’s students, but for accreditation, compliance and funding decisions that are linked with the demonstration of educational quality. Accordingly, this book is intended to provide a resource for higher education teachers and course designers in universities, college and technical schools interested in implementing distance education training programs, revising or developing curriculum within distance education contexts, and application of research-based instructional practices. This book may serve as a course text for instructional design or within distance education-focused certificates and programs. Additionally, this book is intended to serve as a resource for the commercial use of distance education in settings such as corporate training and human resource departments, healthcare facilities, and in military training programs. Community-based, educational and professional organizations, providers and agencies with a need to integrate distance learning across multiple sites will also benefit from the information provided. Insights surrounding how principles of humanization within distance learning may provide a resource for improving learning outcomes across the organizations.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book is organized into four sections. Section 1 is called researching distance and online education. This section encompasses two chapters that focus on the framing of distance education through differing theoretical frameworks, and provides recommendations for how these frames can guide instructional and learning practices. These chapters provide a re-examination of theoretical frameworks informing online education. Section 2 focuses on teaching online. Many forms of distance education have been utilized in the last century that range from written correspondence to instruction through modern learning management systems, and this section highlights the unique perspectives of teaching and learning within the online environment. Section 3, called professional development journeys, presents ideas to shape professional development programs for distance educators and developers across a variety of contexts and institutions. Finally, Section 4 explores the attitudes, expectations and experiences within distance education. This section explores the diverse perspectives of student and faculty groups within the online environment. Many of the chapters highlight the interplay between the learner, educator and designer. Undoubtedly, the connection of these areas will continue to be on the forefront of distance education research.

The book is composed of nineteen chapters. A brief description of the chapters and associated sections within the book follows:

Section 1: Researching Distance and Online Education

Chapter 1 examines the theoretical conceptions online educators have traditionally used to frame research and practice. This chapter examines personalization, presence and communication and their associated
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change in response to a broader understanding of the distance learning environment. The chapter sets the stage for the thoughtful examination of the continuous and discontinuous conceptions and how they shape the practice of online educators.

Chapter 2 provides a background context of the existing studies on distance education, and examination of distance education in relation to information and communication technology use, and on overview of challenges associated with social and technological elements in distance education. The author calls for the adoption of a newly defined and shared construct for interpreting and understanding dynamic social and technical systems. Through consideration of organizational structures, the author provides potential advantages of realigning the understanding of shared systems including implementing optimal humanized distance education approaches.

Section 2: Teaching Online

Chapter 3 evaluates the use of online asynchronous discussions as a pedagogical strategy, and highlights the role of the teacher in creating a learning environment that promotes engagement and deeper learning experiences. The chapter provides insights and strategies to promote student-student participation, engagement and self-directed learning through online asynchronous discussions.

Chapter 4 presents findings from a student-led assessment activity within an online course for preservice teachers. The authors discuss affective and emotional perspectives of students as they engaged in authentic participation. They further suggest the need to refine and develop effective online forums and blended spaces in addition to a better focused ideological framework to align teaching practices and authentic participation.

Chapter 5 show the progression through the utilization of aspects of two teaching and learning designs that use a “sense of self” approach in the creation of ePortfolios. The authors present the results of two investigations that support the use of curricula renewal that support the use of the ePortfolio processes for a deeper learning experience.

Chapter 6 considers two autoethnographic case studies of two teachers as they report on their journey towards making online learning more authentic, personal and humanized. The authors contend that technical, pedagogical and administrative support is viewed as essential to transitioning to a healthy online learning environment.

Chapter 7 provides an overview the development of a Bachelor of Construction Management degree program for on-campus and distance learners. Following initiatives and changes to foster flexibility for distance students, the authors present findings and recommendations for how integration of traditional approaches in face-to-face and distance-learning to meet student and employer expectations.

Section 3: Professional Development Journeys of Online Educators

Chapter 8 examines the role of the soft skills of online course design and online teaching that are seen as vital for online educators responsible for the facilitation of high quality online learning. Through examination of three institutional case studies, the authors provide practical recommendations to promote the design of humanized online learning environments.
Chapter 9 highlights the potentially negative perceptions educators have in working with English Language Learners. The chapter demonstrates how online classes on English Language Learner education, and developing online communities of practice, can potentially change mainstream teachers’ methods of instruction and perceptions of English Language Learners through online courses.

Chapter 10 articulates the complexities associated with achieving large scale change in online learning in a way that is humanizing for all stakeholders. Following the launch of a faculty-based Online Course Innovation project to redesign over 280 subjects, the authors offer strategies for humanizing change in online education that take into consideration contextual considerations when adopting change.

Chapter 11 examines the challenges, self-confidence and threshold concepts experienced while engaging in distance education course design. The authors examine how these threshold concepts, attitudes and skills can be used to inform the design of professional development programs for academic staff who teach in online contexts. Results from a six-year investigation are presented to inform online teaching, course design, and learning experiences of students.

Chapter 12 deploys notions of learning, design, and professional development to conceptualize practical techniques for humanizing teachers’ experience in an online course. The author provides a review of literature and case study findings that inform how course design principles can serve to overcome challenges with sustaining social and emotional connections in the online environment.

**Section 4: Attitudes, Expectations, and Experiences within Distance Education**

Chapter 13 sheds light on African American adult learners, and the factors they consider to be important in making online classes more personal, interactive and informative. Through the lens of critical theory, the author recommends the use of precise directions, careful planning, and targeted instructional materials such as PowerPoint slides over potentially limiting technology to facilitate positive outcomes for African American students in distance courses.

Chapter 14 presents instruments which have been used to measure student attitudes toward online education, and reports on studies using these instruments to assess attitudes toward online education. Considerations of design factors and models are presented along with recommendations that support a holistic focus on both attitudinal and technological factors in online education.

Chapter 15 considers key theories and frameworks for using discussion forums, and presents strategies that can be implemented to promote their effective use. The author presents a practical tool to assist with implementing strategies to facilitate student engagement and deep learning.

Chapter 16 consider ways that online quizzes are designed and administered that address potential challenges such as collusion and lack of student engagement. The authors provide easy to adopt for improving the effectiveness of online quizzes and to move these from impersonal computer-mediated assessments to meaningful and personalized forms of learning for all students.

Chapter 17 considers the role of self-regulation within the online learning environment. This chapter discusses students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of different types of learning supports that the authors used in a blended, flipped undergraduate education course to help students with self-regulation.

Chapter 18 aims to further understand of faculty and student attitudes about distance education through examination of psychological processes including excitement and fear. Through an investigation of both faculty and student data, the authors found support for feeling of excitement and fear in explaining both why and to what degree experiences with distance education relate to attitudes. Recommendations, including the use of carefully executed communication plans, are articulated by the authors.
Chapter 19 explores the author’s quest to enhance a community of inquiry to make it more responsive to international students, skeptical about online distance learning and acutely focused on writing their undergraduate dissertations. The author further presents an innovative approach to facilitate mentoring, guidance and support within the virtual learning space.

CONCLUSION

The book is about a range of topics relevant to educators and students who operate in the online space, including interaction (learner-learner, teacher-learner, learner-material), online relationships, application of interpersonal skills in online contexts, online communication, expression of teacher and student personality in virtual contexts and online presence. Discussion of these issues alongside research-focused guidelines and evidence are presented to addresses both the pedagogy and practice of online learning.

The publication of this book has the possibility to influence the field of online education by focusing on research associated with the humanisation of online teaching environments. This issue, although clearly identified by Palloff and Pratt way back in 1999, has yet to be fully realised on a global scale in the higher education context:

*In any setting, whether academic, organizational or corporate, it is critical to remember that people are using the machinery that makes the course go. The human element, therefore, will inevitably play a role in the electronic classroom. Human concerns should be welcomed into the classroom, not feared, and should be worked with as they emerge. (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 45)*

REFERENCES


