I was delighted to receive Jon Dron’s invitation to write some words of welcome to his first book. My response to the invitation was affirmative even before I saw the manuscript because of what I knew about the author’s previous work. A couple of years ago, one of my doctoral students introduced me to Jon’s writings about transac-tional distance and self-organisation in network-based learning environments. I was very impressed, and concurred with my student’s opinion that she had discovered a source of some inspirational scholarship. We initiated a correspondence with Dr. Dron, and one of the consequences was his request that I write this foreword.

I felt it appropriate that I take this on, for I see in this work the sweet beginning of the closing of a circle, the connecting of disparate domains that is long overdue. I refer to the quiet and often overlooked domain of distance education theory, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the ebullient, energetic, indeed, brash, new domain of practice referred to as e-learning. What Dron does in this book is show how the future success of the latter will be more assured as a consequence of better understanding of the former. This theory is not simply about the technology that makes e-learning possible. It is primarily about the relationships of learners to teachers, to each other, and their responsibility to themselves. This is, in other words, an important study of pedagogy in the post-modern context.

Reference to post-modern context compels me to admit that it is more than thirty years since I also was first intrigued by questions regarding the ways in which relationships of learners and teachers are mediated through communications technologies. Especially, I was intrigued by all the anecdotal evidence of learners who managed their own learning, more or less autonomously, either without the help of a teacher, or drawing on teachers through technology, more or less as one might hire a consultant, to help achieve their personal objectives. During a decade as an adult educator, most of that time spent in Africa, I had met people of all educational levels who individually (and also collectively) were self-directing learners (though
I probably did not have a label for that behavior at that time. I remember the old man in Kwale in Kenya who wanted to learn to read and write so he could make a history of his tribe, and the 92-year-old Open University student in England who wanted to graduate before the “honours’ stage,” so he could get on with writing a history of the primary school he had once been a teacher in. As a student myself, being more of a loner than a mixer, I noted how much more I enjoyed time passed in a library than time spent in the classroom, which seemed to be an environment more suited to grandstanding by either teacher or certain students, or both, than the disciplined effort of study or research. It was not until I met Charles Wedemeyer at the University of Wisconsin, and became his student and colleague that I found a philosophical justification for this “learning alone”—what he called “independent learning.” In those days, for those independent learners who needed it, the correspondence course provided the kind of structure and the opportunity for cool dialogue with someone who knew more about the subject, which made the difference between “study” and serendipitous learning.

What I had noted in cases like those referred to above was what Wedemeyer’s friend and colleague, Cyril Houle, in his study of the adult learner’s “inquiring mind,” famously described as the adult’s “itch to learn,” an idea pursued by his student Alan Tough in a string of empirical studies that unearthed for the first time just how much adults are able to do for themselves when they really want to learn. As it became more obvious that not all learners need or desire the same degree of help from teachers, it became apparent that the research question was how to get the right balance between giving independent learners the expertise that professional teachers acquire over a lifetime (e.g., setting achievable objectives and knowing where to look for resources that will help achieve the objectives relatively efficiently) while, at the same time, not asserting such control that we impede the learner or reduce learners’ capacity for self-management, or indeed de-motivate them. Recognizing this as a question took time, and, in my own case, years of analysing and thinking about hundreds of mediated teaching-learning programs. This led to a crude model that conceptualized a continuum of different degrees of autonomy that educational programmes might allow a learner in deciding what would be learned, how it would be learned and what would be evaluated, or conversely, the extent to which control is held by teachers. The hypothesis derived from the model said that the more teacher control was desirable for a particular learning project, the greater the extent of mediated dialogue between teacher and learner and the more highly structured in terms of objectives, learning strategies and evaluation the teaching program would be.

The book you are about to read takes this theory, and others related to it, including particularly work of Saba, Saba and Shearer, T. Anderson, Candy, and Garrison and Baynton, and pulls it into the 21st century. It deals with some of those same issues about learning and teaching—though in a much more refined way—in the context of learning environments using communications technologies that were literally unimaginable thirty years ago. Then, I worked with printed correspondence texts, and this book talks of wikis and blogs. At that time, I could only conceive of dia-
logue between instructor and learner, mediated through the postal system, and now we can observe the dynamics of virtual groups interacting in global cyberspace. PLATO was the last word in educational computer technology, and now we have multi-user, interactive, multimedia environments and more. What is so impressive, however, is not only how different the technologies are, but also how robust and perennial the learning management challenges that face the thoughtful teacher and administration are, and yet also notable is how much more differentiated, less gross, more specific, these questions have become. That surely is the mark of a maturing field of study, as well as reflecting honorably on the students and researchers who have taken those early, simple conceptualizations and broken them apart to reveal the complex, internal mechanisms and dynamics lying within the distance teaching and learning relationship, particularly in the modern, highly sophisticated, technological environment.

I repeat, “teaching” and “learning,” for that is what is commendable about this book. The book is certainly about new technology, but the questions it asks press far beyond how to make technology work within conventional pedagogical structures. The questions are always about how to teach, how to learn, but—more importantly—how to change the ways we think of teaching and learning so as to take advantage of the special attributes of the new technology. It is this focus on pedagogy and change that makes this book stand head and shoulders above many others that deal with so-called “e-learning.” The whole idea of “e-learning,” so helpful in attracting the attention of the general public to the merits of distance education, does sometimes have the unhelpful effect, because it is associated with technology that is new, of leading to the idea that the issues regarding teaching and learning communicated by technology are themselves new phenomena. This might not be important, except that it frequently results in research questions being posed that disregard the substantial body of existing data, and practices being tested that disregard previous experience, both being a waste of resources.

Because it is soundly based in theory, this book makes no such error and will help correct any such imbalance, as it asks its readers to consider such issues as the changing role of the teacher, the project as a learning strategy, the nature and nurture of self-directed learning, managing dialogues of learners with learners and learners with teachers, changing concepts of learning structures and teaching systems, with each of these issues based on sound theoretical referents. For example, Dron builds on Tough’s seminal work as he develops his own innovative idea of the learning trajectory. To disarm those who would have us devalue the role of the teacher, he finds a delightful quotation from Bruner: “Learning something with the aid of an instructor should, if instruction is effective, be less dangerous or risky or painful than learning on one’s own.” Taking Dewey’s idea of the key importance of the learning environment and the transactions that occur among the many forces in that environment, he poses the central theme of his book, how environments should be constructed and used in the Internet age. To do this he draws further, and deeply, from systems theories and the implications of Senge’s maxim that “struc-
ture influences behaviour.” It is indeed the author’s sophisticated understanding of educational theory that empowers the author to offer so many stimulating and challenging insights into the impact of new technology on both teaching and learning. Lest my reference to dead (some of them!) theorists gives the impression that I think of this book as backward looking, let me re-emphasize that nothing could be further from the truth. It is neither stuck in past theory, nor marooned in a theory-barren doldrum of new technology. Instead, it draws on the theory to make bold predictions and hypotheses about future applications of new technology. As such, it is a perfect book for its time, a time when for example: “A message on a discussion forum is not just the information that it contains, but contributes materially to the way that the environment is presented to all other participants. A discussion forum reifies the discussion.” This “seemingly trivial observation,” says Dron, “will prove to be central to understanding the promise of e-learning.” That, I believe, is Dron’s significant achievement—to link his sound understanding of the theoretical roots with his mastery of new technology—and thus, to project the future of new environments in which learners who are able to exercise autonomy will have control, without denying support when needed to those who need support. This would be significant progress towards a learner-centred pedagogy and a learning society.

As a final comment, I would like to encourage readers to reflect on how they might contribute to the further unraveling and elaboration of the ideas discussed here, through their practice certainly, but also through research. Just as I see the ideas developed in this book as breaking open some of my own primitive ideas, so I hope the variables that constitute Dron’s model will in turn be taken and subjected to closer examination, and thus lead to further advances in the evolution of the theory and practice of e-learning specifically and distance education in general.

Michael Grahame Moore

Professor, The Pennsylvania State University, USA

Michael Grahame Moore is a professor of education in the Graduate School at The Pennsylvania State University (USA), where he supervises doctoral research and teaches post-graduate courses in distance education, both in the classroom and on the Web. Widely known in academic circles for developing the theory of distance education, he is the founder (1986) and editor of The American Journal of Distance Education. More than a hundred publications include Distance Education: A Systems View (with G. Kearsley), also published in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, and The Handbook of Distance Education (2nd edition, 2007). With a list of appearances in more than 30 countries and as many U.S. states, he remains in demand, as a conference and workshop presenter. From 1996-1998, he was a visiting scholar with the Department of Human Development at the World Bank, and besides continuing as consultant at the bank, he works for many national and international agencies, including UNESCO, the International Monetary Fund, and the Commonwealth of Learning.