Preface

With the advent of the Internet and online learning methodologies and technologies, providers of education and training are creating learning materials to fulfill the demand. The Internet and digital technologies combined with appropriate learning strategies help to create open, dynamic and flexible learning environments with implications for countless applications with respect to education and training. Academic institutions, corporations, and government agencies worldwide are increasingly using the Internet and digital technologies to deliver instruction and training.

What does it take to create an open, flexible and distributed learning environment for diverse learners? Well, a learning environment should be meaningful to all stakeholder groups, including learners, instructors, support services staff, and the institution. It is meaningful to learners when it is easily accessible, well-designed, learner-centered, affordable, efficient and flexible, and has a facilitated learning environment. When learners display a high level of participation and success in meeting a course’s goals and objectives, learning becomes meaningful for instructors. In turn, when learners enjoy all available support services provided in the course without any interruptions, it makes support services staff happy as they strive to provide easy-to-use, reliable services. Finally, a learning system is meaningful to institutions when it has a sound return on investment (ROI), a moderate to high level of learner satisfaction with both the quality of instruction and all support services, and a low drop-out rate.

To create a meaningful open, flexible and distributed learning environment for diverse learners, we must explore important issues encompassing various dimensions of e-learning environment. To understand the critical dimensions of e-learning environments, since 1997 I have been communicating with learners, instructors, trainers, administrators, and technical and other support services staff involved in e-learning, in both academic and corporate settings, all over the world. I have researched e-learning issues discussed in professional discussion forums, newspapers, magazines, and journals, and I have designed and taught online courses. Also, as the editor of Web-Based Training (Educational Technology Publications, 2001) and the forthcoming Flexible Learning (Educational Technology Publications), I have had the opportunity to work closely on critical e-learning issues with more than 100 authors worldwide who contributed chapters to these books.

Through these activities, I found that numerous factors help to create a meaningful learning environment, and many of these factors are systemically interrelated and
interdependent. A systemic understanding of these factors can help us create meaningful flexible and distributed learning environments. I clustered these factors into eight categories: institutional, management, technological, pedagogical, ethical, interface design, resource support, and evaluation. I found these eight categories to be logically comprehensive and empirically the most useful dimensions for open, flexible and distributed learning environments.

The purpose of the E-Learning Quick Checklist book is to walk you through the various factors (encompassing these eight dimensions) important to developing, evaluating, and implementing open, flexible and distributed learning environments. This book is designed as a Quick Checklist for e-learning. It contains many practical items that you can use as review criteria to check if e-learning modules, courses and programs provide the level of services that learners (or consumers) should expect. Items in the checklist encompass the critical dimensions of an e-learning environment, including pedagogical, technological, interface design, evaluation, management, resource support, ethical, and institutional. Throughout this book, various critical e-learning and blended-learning factors are presented as questions or items that you can ask yourself when planning, designing, evaluating, and implementing e-learning and/or blended-learning modules, courses, and programs.

This book has eight sections based on the eight dimensions. Numerous factors discussed in sections 1-8 should give you a comprehensive picture of open, flexible and distributed learning and should also help you think through every aspect of what you are doing during the various steps of e-learning process. Within the scope of this checklist book, only some critical items or questions related to each dimension of the e-learning environment are presented as examples; they (i.e., the items) are thus by no means complete. There are a myriad of important items or questions encompassing the various dimensions of an e-learning environment that need to be explored. Please note that each e-learning project is unique. I encourage you to identify as many issues as possible for your own e-learning project under each dimension.

You may be thinking—how many issues do I have to address? how many issues are necessary? It depends on the goals and scope of your project. The more e-learning issues you explore and address, the more meaningful and supportive a learning environment you help to create for your target population.

Designing open, flexible, and distributed learning systems for diverse learners is challenging; however, as more and more institutions offer e-learning to learners worldwide, we will become more knowledgeable about what works and what does not work. We should try our best to accommodate the needs of stakeholder groups by asking as many critical questions as possible along the eight dimensions of e-learning environment. The number and types of questions may vary based on each unique e-learning system. Given our specific e-learning contexts, we may not be able
to address all the critical issues within the eight dimensions of e-learning. We should find ways to address them with the best possible means that we can afford. It is important to ask as many questions as possible during the planning period of e-learning design.

*Who can benefit from this checklist?* I believe a wide range of people can use the book. Here is the list of people who I think can benefit from the issues discussed in the book:

- *Instructors* can use this checklist in courses such as distance education, e-learning, blended learning, online education, Web-based instruction, distributed learning, computers in education, hypermedia, multimedia, educational technology, instructional technology, educational telecommunications, teacher training, corporate training, etc.

- *Instructors, teachers, trainers, training managers, distance education specialists, e-learning specialists, virtual education specialists, e-learning project managers, instructional designers, corporate education specialists, human resources specialists, performance technologists, educational technology coordinators, media specialists, webmasters, writers/editors and technical support staff* can use this checklist to plan, design, evaluate, and implement e-learning and blended learning modules, courses, and programs.

- *Virtual/corporate university designers* can use this checklist to plan, design, evaluate, and implement corporate/virtual universities.

- *School administrators, higher education administrators, department of education staff, ministry of education staff, virtual and corporate university administrators, human resources managers and consultants* can use this checklist to develop strategic plans for designing, evaluating and implementing e-learning initiatives.

- *Providers of e-learning* (schools, colleges, universities, training and other institutions) can use this quick checklist to understand the level of services that learners (or consumers) expect in e-learning.

- *Accrediting agencies* can use this quick checklist to review whether e-learning providers provide high-quality instruction and good support services that learners must have. *Department of education and ministry of education staff* can use this quick checklist to develop criteria for new grant initiatives for e-learning related projects.
Anyone contemplating a career in training and development, curriculum planning, and Internet applications can use this book to learn about e-learning and blended learning design strategies.

Finally, I hope that items encompassing the various critical dimensions of e-learning and blended learning issues included in this checklist will help you understand all aspects of open, flexible, and distributed learning environment and provide valuable guidance in creating e-learning and blended learning experience for your target audience. I would appreciate hearing your comments regarding this book.

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