Foreword

by Mimi M. Lee

As educators in the 21st century, we are well aware of the growing prevalence of and subsequent focus on online education in recent years. Regardless of one’s view on the rapidly increasing employment of digital technologies in various learning environments, we have come to a point where every educator has to recognize the possibility of offering some form of online instruction. Today’s young generation is growing up in an information age where the lines between online and offline are constantly crossed and frequently blurred. From K-12 to college and beyond, learners are demanding quick and flexible access to multimodal ways of teaching and learning. K-12 schools and institutions of higher learning are responding, in part, by making greater numbers of classes and classroom experiences available online. So how much do we know about providing effective, meaningful online instruction and experiences, both for such a wide range of learners and their instructors? This volume offers more than a dozen perspectives of successful online professional development practices today with glimpses of where such training is headed tomorrow.

While there has been a significant amount of discussion addressing various issues of online learning, not enough has been researched about two questions tugging at the heart of anyone involved in online learning environments. First, how do teachers learn how to teach online? Second, what can their institutions and surrounding professional development programs and initiatives do to support effective online teaching and learning environments? To this end, the issue of professional development that includes training should be explored in depth with research results disseminated in myriad outlets including momentous edited volumes like this one. When discussing professional development for teachers, especially those that teach online courses, additional questions emerge. For example, just who are the people teaching millions of children and adults who either prefer to learn online or have no other choice but online course outlets? Are they experienced teachers who are brand new to online teaching or have they been experimenting with online technologies for some time? Alternatively, are they teaching assistants who are assigned to teach online courses without the full organizational support available to fulltime faculty members? What are the content of the professional development and the delivery format of the training for such teaching populations? Will they experience online or face-to-face training about teaching online? Or will they be offered online training about teaching face-to-face?

With each new delivery format springing to life, there are increasingly complex options and challenges. Part of the solutions will depend on the unique characteristics of these adult learners. At the same time, the types of online professional development will vary for teachers in rural area schools where the impact of such personalized training may be quickly noticeable and impactful.
The contributors to *Virtual Mentoring for Teachers: Online Professional Development Practices* provide models and real-life cases that are crucial to answering these questions. From Las Vegas to Atlanta to Wisconsin to New Zealand, the authors detail the evolution and refinement of their respective professional development models. Best practices find their way in online case scenarios, Second Life experiences, social networking exchanges, asynchronous support group discussions, and various other experimental as well as more traditional online technology tools and support structures. This is a timely and informative work for any educator who is interested in improving one’s practice online as well as helping students and other educators. These contextualized stories of lessons learned provide situated knowledge using theoretical frameworks such as experiential learning and adult learning theory. They become a key component of a collective dialogue that is essential in helping us understand the current issues related to online professional development while simultaneously providing us with new models of online professional mentoring that will be pervasive in the near future.

**Mimi Miyoung Lee** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Houston. She received her Ph.D. in Instructional Systems Technology in 2004 from Indiana University at Bloomington. Her research interests include theories of identity formation, sociological examination of online communities, issues of representation, and critical ethnography. Recently, she was a co-investigator on a five year, $3 million grant project from the Greater Texas Foundation, iSMART (Integration of Science, Mathematics and Reflective Teaching), an online Master’s program for middle school mathematics and science teachers in the state of Texas.