Preface

πόλλ' οἶδ' ἄλωπηξ, ἄλλ' ἐχίνος ἐν μέγα.

"The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing."

—Attributed to Archilocus, 7th Century BC

It is indeed fitting to introduce *Advancing Library Education: Technological Innovation and Instructional Design* with this thought from an ancient Greek poet about whom little is known, yet who was compared to Homer in his lifetime, and whose work has had an enduring influence. Are we not—as educators and librarians—a bit like him: relatively anonymous individually, but the corpus of our work, and our influence, endures? And are not our technologies like the knowledge of both the fox and the hedgehog celebrated so long ago: multifaceted in variety, yet singular in purpose? At the same time, we know that the “foxes” of innovation, for all their ingenuity, will not be able to make a meal of us “hedgehogs,” who not only persist but flourish in a profession—information and its transmission—that long predates Archilocus himself and whose demise has been anticipated for decades!

This collection of 20 chapters seeks to cover, within the confines of a manageable volume, a number of rapidly developing areas of Distance Education (DE) techniques. They deal in part with the practice and theory of: instruction in MLS programs, professional development for librarians, issues relating to faculty engaged in DE, and the interplay of campus librarian and DE student. As far as I know, this is the first time these subjects have been treated in book form. The publisher and I hope this collection will benefit school faculty, college/university reference librarians, school librarians, and educational technologists. As I have worked with this content consistently for almost a year, I believe the best use for this space is for me to present my sense of the progress made in the field to this point, as well as its current trends and future challenges. At the risk of straining my metaphors with ancient Greece, all the chapters function as tiles of a mosaic to create the whole; each contributes depth and richness to the picture, and no one element outshines another.

Several contributions (notably, Ballard and Tang; Shapiro) relate the transformation of DE, both generally and at specific institutions. From its inception using the postal service through its delivery of instruction by closed-circuit TV or having universities flying their faculty to other parts of a state for Saturday classes and on to Internet-based curricula using course management systems, the driving force...
for improving the experience of distance learners has undoubtedly been to approximate the immediacy of the classroom and the spontaneity of the discussions that occur there. The improvements have resulted, as we can all attest, in an unprecedented shift in enrollment from “seated” to online settings for higher education generally, and professional librarian education specifically. Evidence of this change is that, of the 58 schools currently listed as accredited on the ALA site (http://www.ala.org/accreditedprograms/directory/search), 36 (62%) offer MLS programs that are either fully or primarily online. Given this reality, we are correct to devote a good measure of our professional energy to deepening our knowledge of the means (and their implications) by which so many of our successors are being trained in the U.S. and throughout the world.

The first issue is not technological, but rather the emotional, financial, and academic impacts on professors who prepare online courses. Only recently have these matters received sustained attention. As two chapters (Hodges et al.; Khanova) detail, creating online courses is by no means a straightforward matter of simply transferring material used in the classroom. The emerging tension between what administrators perceive the process to require and what it actually entails seems to be rarely discussed openly on campus, let alone between the two groups. Additional time and training requirements (and their concomitant impact on research output), monetary considerations for extra time spent on the process, and the very real stress of preparing courses on often short notice are just the most pressing of the issues surrounding creating and updating digital classes. Certainly, much of the future success of the entire enterprise of DE depends on an accord being reached by faculty and administration.

At the same time, though, we must remain mindful of the students who look to us for training and assistance. What is the impact of the online experience for them? How can we nurture the elusive sense of community among participants in the virtual environment that is a key for their success and our growth as instructors? These are among the questions considered by two contributors (Cooke; Kazmer). If our students, whether in class or seeking help as library users, are to benefit from the torrent of “ed tech” that sometimes seems to carry us along like so much flotsam and jetsam, we must be able to navigate its currents. The ability to provide students an inviting virtual space in which to pursue learning certainly ranks as another significant issue in our arena and will continue, no doubt, to generate ongoing discussion and innovation.

To assist us with creating more meaningful connections with our students, a panoply of techniques is available. However, the nuts-and-bolts of what is required to effectively use them are not known to everyone. I am therefore grateful that several chapters (Chow; Virkus) tackle the details. It is safe to say that, by and large, asynchronous modalities are now being supplanted by synchronous ones in the DE arena, which provide not only the immediacy of real time but include audio and visual links, as well as standard IM/chat tools. Equally important are the growing trends to use 3D-spaces for instruction (Matzen et al.; Purpur et al.) and professional development (Grassian and Trueman). In addition to applying these technologies to teaching, a growing number of reference librarians are “embedding” themselves in DE courses and work in tandem with the instructor or professor. In so doing, students can create a more seamless approach to assignments by better integrating library-based instruction so that praxis and pedagogy are better aligned (Weissman and Swan). Having this form of librarian participation in courses is rapidly growing and represents another part of the mosaic that is now distance education.

Once a course has been taught, evaluating its effectiveness is customary. However, evaluation is all the more imperative when using virtual formats, as traditional cues from students (such as “body language”) are not available. Therefore, instruments need to be even more thoughtfully constructed and results carefully considered so they can be useful to faculty and regional/national accreditors (Gregory).
The collection rounds out with a number of case studies of DE LIS methods, although a number of the chapters referenced above can also be considered to be examples of best practices in situ.

Blending these various trends into a mosaic that is at once conceptually appealing and functional is the purpose of this collection. We are all feeling our way in this process, of course, and there is no “omega point,” no finality. As such, distance education by virtual means might seem to become both placeless and timeless. A decade ago, though, D. A. Gruenewald (2003) wrote an essay titled, “The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place,” which sought to “analyze and synthesize elements of two distinct literatures, critical pedagogy and place-based education, and argue that their convergence into a critical pedagogy of place offers a much needed framework for educational theory, research, policy, and practice” (p. 3). Without too great a leap, some of the core vocabulary of this piece (such as its emphasis on the “spatial aspects of social experience” and “ecological thinking”) can be appropriated for our purpose.

Virtual spaces were once generally considered to lack “place” and did not evince a sense of “ecology.” However, we certainly can now attest to the contrary: the electronic spaces we create for our students can either promote or deter the formation of community and also instill or discourage thinking of them as place, or having the qualities of “placeness.” In a like manner, these spaces do have unique electronic landscapes and interactions among their components, which constitute an “ecology” that either invites or inhibits those using them for learning.

To the extent this volume challenges readers to redefine their boundaries of what is acceptable practice in the virtual realm and cause them, quoting Gruenewald (2003) again, “to expand the scope of their theory, inquiry, and practice to include the social and ecological contexts of our own, and others’, inhabitation” (p. 10), it will have fulfilled my vision for it. A rethinking or outright metamorphosis of our skills will doubtlessly lead us to become educators and practitioners who are more sensitive to the methods we use, thereby enabling us to better instruct and inspire.

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REFERENCES