Foreword

As a companion to the first volume, the chapters presented here focus on the issues that have been the centre of my career: design, interaction and learning. Yes, we have the technology to effectively bridge geographic and temporal boundaries, but do we also have the skills, the knowledge and the understanding to create learning environments that will privilege the diversity of the emergent global community of teachers and learners?

Institutions around the globe are encouraging students to enrol in their programs, regardless of their geographic location. To make these programs more attractive, they may be offered in an accelerated mode or admission criteria may be waived. Learning, for some of these institutions, has almost shifted to commodity-status, where it is marketed to those who can least afford it. Certainly more and more students are entering these programs, but are they learning? Can we learn without time to reflect, analyse, synthesise? Has this new wave of immediate access to information resulted in acceptance of surface rather than deep learning?

As a designer, the explosive growth of educational providers seems like a tsunami drowning opportunities for programs constructed on a foundation of pedagogy with courses sold for convenience and cost. More recently this has been exacerbated with the rise of MOOCs (massively online open courses), capturing the attention of traditional and online institutions as well as the corporate sector. While there is inherent value of multiple interactions as a means to learning with access to open-resources I also have the frightening vision of accountants’ eyes lighting-up at the thought of one course, 10,000 students and one teacher!

While we have to be patient to see what the future holds, this volume provides directions in three key areas of distance education.

From the design perspective, while technology has enabled global expansion of educational offerings, the same cannot always be said for the traditions of educational (or instructional) design. I have observed a mindset among many course producers that “learning” is about content and memory – as much material as can fit on a screen or page, and a test to determine what can be recalled. The consequences of this mindset are courses that require students to “read, post, respond”. Fortunately there is a growing trend that is de-emphasising content in the design process, and emphasising the activities in which course participants (teachers and learners) participate, an approach which is far more aligned with the online environments that are dominating much of the learning space. Design using this approach enables students to focus on learning outcomes, with the content (in the form of OERs) as a means to achieve those outcomes. Design must focus on doing, not reading.

Through enlightened design practices we can activate more meaningful interactions between course participants, making the learning experience more enjoyable. At the same time, designing for the in-
individual rather than the group becomes critical as it allows the distributed student cohort to apply the
knowledge they learn to their own context and interests.

Given the themes in this volume, my mantra goes something like this:

- Design for activity
- Interact with people
- Apply knowledge in my context

Many students today are choosing a form of distance learning (online, external) to suit their personal
needs, and this will be the driving success factor for those in educational design, delivery and administra-
tion. As I noted in the Forward to Volume 1, I have had the opportunity to watch changes in technology
over the past 30 years and the message that keeps returning: pedagogy, not technology.

Our challenge is to ensure we know what that pedagogy is.

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