Preface

I felt compelled to produce this book after reading much of the literature in the field of online instruction, having had many years of experience in designing, authoring, and instructing online courses. My read of the literature was that it reflected hopes more than the realities, visions and advocacies more than experience and practice, and was more idealized than realized. I came to the conclusion that the literature needed a dose of the actuality of doing online work from other than a booster perspective. Too often I’ve read about the great promise of online instruction on the one hand, and about how it would spell the defeat of traditional scholarship and advanced science on the other. We needed an approach that would talk about the realities experienced directly from practitioners who know the ins and outs, the quarrels and the pressures, the imperatives and the impossibilities, through direct involvement in the mundane realities of the online instructional enterprise.

This work is intended to address the reality gap that I perceived. This book of case studies was designed to communicate the challenges of the full range of online work while setting a framework for possibly generalizable solutions. It is itself a challenge to be candid about this greatly ballyhooed pioneering endeavor of online coursework which promises broad, economical access for students, and much opportunity for employment and career development for instructors corresponding to technological and material advances.

There is no intent in this book to condemn this emergent field of online instruction, although a critical perspective is sorely needed. The contributors offer a critical perspective that is constructive and productive while rooted in the values, premises, and achievements of the traditional university system. A critical perspective is valuable no matter how uncomfortable some of the material may prove for some readers. Absent such a perspective, online practitioners function in a self-created world insulated from the conventional academy’s perspective and set aside as a tolerated yet marginal educational endeavor for the also-rans.

While major universities participate in producing online content, there is still some stigma attached to this mode of non-traditional delivery. Degrees obtained online are deemed suspect by many in the more established organizational settings. Faculty who participate significantly in online programming may be looked at
dubiously by many colleagues, and university units devoted to online coursework are frequently separated out from the more conventional programs to maintain the purity of traditional coursework at many established universities. Thus, online higher education is in a moment of struggle for legitimacy, acceptance, and system integration, even though there has been much penetration.

Political leaders, parents, and students, as well as education experts, are pressuring universities to cut costs of higher education while expanding access. Additional pressures to improve outcomes and raise graduation rates are building. Universities are increasingly evaluated in relation to providing foundations for more productive labor force participation, and even employment preparation of graduates. Online education is widely viewed as a means to enable universities to meet these rising expectations. Thus, much is expected of higher education online instruction, while many professionals look askance at the entire endeavor, some with trepidation and many with doubts.

This book does not seek to promote the legitimacy of online instruction, nor does it promote acceptance or integration of online programs into mainline academics. Its intent is merely to describe and analyze selected pieces of the realities of online instruction, with all the smiles, warts, and all. Our authors attempt to move the field forward by offering their best wisdom, recommendations, and solutions, but nowhere do they advocate for the primacy, superiority, or even parity of online instruction, nor do any propose a total transformation of the academy into anything fundamentally different from what has historically worked out quite adequately.

Sure, change is happening and online instruction has its role to play. If anything, its focus on the learning and success of the student is refreshing. The process of facilitated learning where the instructor is more of a supportive mentor than a conveyer of content is a change that correlates with the incredible and explosive growth of opportunities for autonomous, if guided, research and an unparalleled fusion of Internet-based scientific and scholarly possibilities that online instruction supports.

The task set for our authors is to develop and advance more effective ways of addressing the problems and obstacles inevitably encountered in this change process while retaining the quality and character of the best the university has to offer. The need to balance the diversity of interests and imperatives from all sides in the complex interplay of forces shaping online instruction is daunting, yet our authors do all sincerely focus on quality instruction as variously conceptualized. Their perspectives regarding online instruction are not so much on the future structure of the university as on doing a better job of what we do as higher education professionals.

Simply put, we must first know what needs fixing in order to enhance our focus, and then present the most relevant means to move forward. A critical foundation is either implied or overt in these essays in the sense that they point to diverse issues of underlying concern that suggest the need to do things differently. Yet a common
framework of discourse is readily apparent in the commitment to providing a better experience for the students, faculty, and all others involved in the process.

I am personally and professionally very pleased to be the editor of this collection. I have connected with many wonderful scholars and practitioners while developing the content and learned much about this field in which I have so much invested. I’ve taught fully online courses for over ten years altogether. I’ve taught at a public university, a private not-for-profit university, a private for-profit university, and a public community college. With all this experience, I must confess that I learned a lot of new things while developing this collection. I’m sure the reader will gain tremendously by reading these fine case chapters.

Our collection starts off with an introduction where I as editor lay the theoretical foundations for comprehending the structures and processes of online programming and coursework. In this piece, you will find a set of abstract propositions that should prove useful in tying together the disparate analyses of our case chapter authors.

The substantive case chapters are divided into four sections: 1) Getting Going, 2) Conflicts and Challenges, 3) Administrative Cases, and 4) Evaluation. Most certainly there is overlap and this division is almost arbitrary except that there is some focused attention in the case chapters in each category on these themes.

In Section 1, “Getting Going,” our chapters focus on the fundamentals essential for effective online development and instruction. Suriano’s (1) chapter introduces us to the criteria for establishing elearning as a distinctive and artful mode of instruction. Bachner’s (2) essay focuses very usefully on program and course design by focusing on how fundamental learning principles can be enhanced through the application of advanced instructional technologies. Harkness’s (3) article provides a concrete case study of initiating and implementing an online program with valuable lessons to be learned. Hoffman’s (4) contribution emphasizes the importance of enticing qualified faculty to participate in online programs. Reid’s (5) work follows on from this theme by asking how it is possible for faculty to find the time to participate. Rucks-Ahidiana (6) examines how faculty negotiates the complex terrain of the online course with all its pressures and imperatives. Starr-Glass (7) writes about the construction of online learning spaces by examining and mapping the interplay of all the factors that shape the process.

Section 2 takes on the problems and challenges encountered in online program development. The section starts with a penetrating critical analysis by philosopher Davis (8), who identifies the aspects of online instruction that most need attention to avoid degrading the learning experience. Johnson (9) then analyzes conflicts resulting from the effort to integrate honors courses into online programs and helps us to see how to address this challenge. Emery (10) and his colleagues write about the challenges and conflicts encountered in developing a degree completion program at a public university, drawing lessons on how more productive approaches can
be of benefit. Carter-Cram (11) tells us how it was possible for her to develop and implement a foreign language program despite the very daunting issues encountered. Ghibesi and Martins-Shannon (12) describe their efforts against hesitancy and even resistance to foster independent thinking on the part of online students. Weissinger et al. (13) describe how they developed online programming in the aftermath of the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina. Historian Diane North (14) explains how she addressed the challenges of applying a constructivist perspective in creating her online course.

In Section 3, Copeland et al. (15) offer online administrators pathways to grow their programs in response to the range of pressures typically faced by higher educational institutions today. Allen (16) discusses her experience developing online programs with the Quality Matters system and suggests ways to gain faculty support. Endicott and Sherer (17) describe how to administer online graduate programs in very challenging regional environments with limited infrastructure and political instability. Shen and Chen (18) examine online doctoral dissertation work showing how mentorship can facilitate achievement. Fideli et al. (19) show how e-learning can be integrated into broader programs to enhance the quality of the overall experience within an international context.

In Section 4, we engage with the evaluation process. Holstrom et al. (20) provide an assessment construct for determining and measuring quality of online instruction that can be widely and precisely applied. Sherman et al. (21) describe how a team was able to get administrative support for approaches that integrate quality measures into online programs. Hilbert and Mierau (22) discuss how their instructional design team overcame inefficiencies and were able to incorporate quality assessment tools in online programs. Hanser et al. (23) show how they were able to evaluate relative effectiveness between traditional and online instructional modes in criminal justice courses. Nehls (24) explores perspectives on cheating and offers proposals on how to most productively address academic dishonesty. In the final case chapter of the book, Noor Saazai et al. (25) describe an international writing program with a focus on evaluating student performance in a positive and constructive manner.

I think you will find the case chapters highly readable, informative, and provocative. They constitute a collection that provides discussions of the lived experience of the authors, candid explorations of the range of concerns that occupy and even preoccupy the minds of online practitioners, and directions for future growth and enhancement of online instruction. I am confident you will find that your reading will be well-rewarded with valuable lessons to be drawn that are applicable in your professional activities.

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