How can assessment practices be used to assist and improve the learning process? This book attempts to answer this question by bringing together 13 contributions from prominent researchers and practitioners actively involved in all aspects of self, peer, and group assessment.

Two factors—the rapidly increasing use of computers in education in general and the provision of courses online via the Web in particular—have caused a resurgence of interest amongst educators in nontraditional methods of course design and delivery. In addition, greater curiosity than ever before is being shown in more student-centered methods of teaching and learning, as evidenced by the number of books, journal articles, and conference papers devoted to topics such as problem-based learning, collaborative and cooperative learning, and CSCL (which originally stood for computer-supported collaborative learning, but now seems to be an acronym used in its own right).

We might call this an example of convergence, the coming together of two or more disparate disciplines or technologies, or, perhaps more properly, synergism, where two apparently disparate factors combine for increased effect. In this case, the greater use of online technologies would seem to provide an ideal environment for students to become more actively involved in their own learning. One of the ways that this greater involvement can be encouraged is by the more widespread use of self, peer, and group assessment.

There is a growing emphasis on students helping each other with their learning. The use of both group and collaborative work, especially as they can be employed in an online Web-based environment, has been the central theme of two earlier books (Roberts, 2003, 2004). This current book concentrates on the different forms of noninstructor-based assessment that can be usefully employed in an online environment.
As with much educational literature, there are significant problems with the definition of key terms. Does the term *assessment* mean the same as *evaluation*? Are there significant differences? Do both terms relate solely to student learning, or are they equally applicable to the instructors, the materials, and the course delivery? Is *assessment* only really assessment if marks counting towards final grades are involved? What if peer feedback provides qualitative guidance, but not quantitative scores, to the instructor, who nevertheless decides upon the final grade based at least partly on such feedback? Is *e-learning* the same as *online learning*? How much of a course must be online before it can be considered to be Web-based? Can on-campus students sometimes be *e-learners*, too?

This book takes a liberal attitude to such matters, recognizing that definitions are liable to change from culture to culture and with the passage of time. Hopefully, though, the wide variety of experiences and case studies reported here will serve to benefit readers eager to explore the possibilities provided by non-traditional methods of assessment in the still relatively new world of e-learning.

As is inevitably the case in any book resulting from the contributions of multiple authors, the alert reader will find some duplication: There are two chapters about the LENTEC project, for example, and many of the authors draw similar conclusions about the benefits and problems of peer assessment. There are also significant differences, however, in terms of course content and audience, and how self, peer, and group assessment techniques are used and administered.

Much of the interest in alternative forms of assessment has tended to be concentrated in fields ranging from the arts to the softer sciences, such as the studies of creative writing, language learning, and education. It would be wrong to overgeneralize from this, however, and conclude that such methods cannot be applied in the harder sciences—one of the case studies included here describes the use of peer and group assessment in an engineering course, for example.

Chapter I, *Self, Peer, and Group Assessment in E-Learning: An Introduction*, has a modest aim: to explain what is meant by each of the terms, list some of the commonly experienced advantages and disadvantages of each, and provide some guidelines for effective implementation, based on both research and practice. Many references are provided for readers interested in some of the more recently published books and articles in this area.

In Chapter II, *A Case Study in Peer Evaluation for Second Language Teachers in Training*, Pamela L. Anderson-Mejias, of the University of Texas - Pan American, describes a case study of master’s-level second language teachers in training who used self and peer evaluation within a capstone course in their program. Various instruments for students to evaluate their peers are described, including online quiz instruments, immediate chat feedback quizzes, and peer
evaluation rubrics. A significant component of each final grade in the course was determined by peer evaluation.

One particularly interesting finding reported by the author was that greater honesty was elicited by the use of quizzes and surveys submitted online, rather than paper-based ones submitted directly to the instructor in a face-to-face setting.

In Chapter III, *Peer and SelfAssessment in Portuguese Engineering Education*, Natascha van Hattum-Janssen and Pedro Pimenta, both from the University of Minho in Portugal, describe the implementation of peer and self-assessment in two first-year engineering courses. The first section of the chapter pays particular attention to learning and the influences of peer and self-assessment, while the second describes the case study and illustrates how students assumed responsibility in their own assessment processes. The chapter discusses some of the advantages and disadvantages of peer and self-assessment and concludes by highlighting some of the lessons learned from the case study.

While lending weight to the belief that the move to more student-centered assessment can work well, van Hattum-Janssen and Pimenta stress the need for clear and transparent criteria to enable a fair and unambiguous interpretation and grading process and say that ill-defined criteria can lead to significant difficulties when trying to attribute a fair grade.

In Chapter IV, *Learning and Assessment: A Case Study—Going the Full Monty*, Mary Panko, of Unitec New Zealand, reflects on the lessons learned by the developers of a course about self, peer and group assessment for adult educators, in which online discussion forums played an integral and essential role. The chapter examines the ways in which the learners used online discussion forums and also looks at particular exchanges to show how the group projects were developed in an e-learning environment.

As the author notes, there is always a potential for relationships to become destructive and for learning opportunities to be lost, but, as is commonly found to be the situation, the groups in this case study tended to be very supportive of one another, thus effectively becoming productive learning communities.

In Chapter V, *A Case Study of the Integration of Self, Peer and Group Assessment in a Core First-Year Educational Psychology Unit through Flexible Delivery Implementation*, Rozz Albon, from Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Australia, provides a case study of one lecturer’s approach to innovative assessment in a first-year unit of university study of 188 students. Many insights are provided into the training, preparation, and assessment experiences of self, peer, group, and lecturer assessments bound together by technology for flexible delivery.

By contrast, the target audience for Margaret Riel, from Pepperdine University, in California, and her colleagues James Rhoads, from Citrus College in
California, and Eric Ellis, from Treasure Valley Community College in Oregon, could hardly be more different: In Chapter VI, *Culture of Critique: Online Learning Circles and Peer Review in Graduate Education*, they explore a strategy for helping graduate students develop their own authority and trust in evaluating research and a respect for the authority of their peers. The chapter evaluates the use of learning circles for group work in graduate online education, explores the type and form of peer feedback from within this collaborative structure, and poses the question: Under what conditions are students willing to be critical, and to accept criticism from their peers as legitimate?

Two chapters follow on a particularly noteworthy example of involving students in their own learning and assessment—the European Leonardo Project LENTEC, carried out from 2001 through 2003. The project involved upper secondary vocational school students from six different European countries and used problem-based learning (PBL) methods to improve their English language skills in an online environment.

In Chapter VII, *Learning English for Technical Purposes: The LENTEC Project*, Anne Dragemark, from Göteborg University in Sweden, describes the project, and finds that moving the responsibility for assessment to the students themselves not only motivated the students but also gave them added time for actual language learning.

One finding reinforces what has been found in other research: More advanced students tended to underestimate their ability somewhat, while those with lesser skills tended to overestimate.

In Chapter VIII, *Self and Peer Assessment in a Problem-Based Learning Environment: Learning English by Solving a Technical Problem—A Case Study*, Bernarda Kosel, of the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, uses the project to offer some suggestions on assessing student-centered groups, and shows how self and peer assessment can complement teachers’ assessments. Many readers new to student-centered methods of assessment might find the “Tips for the Teacher” at the end of Kosel’s chapter particularly valuable.

In Chapter IX, *Evaluating Designs for Web-Assisted Peer and Group Assessment*, Paul Lam and Carmel McNaught, both from The Chinese University of Hong Kong, look at the use of e-resources, e-display, and e-communication in the context of six cases of teachers using peer and group assessment. The chapter provides an analysis of evaluation data gathered from student surveys, focus-group interviews, teacher surveys, analysis of forum postings, and counter site logs within the various designs of these courses, and concludes—while at the same time stressing the need for careful planning—that Web-enabled peer and group assessment activities can produce positive results.

In Chapter X, *How’s My Writing? Using Online Peer Feedback to Improve Performance in the Composition Classroom*, Vanessa Paz Dennen, of Florida State University, and Gabriel Jones, of the University of California in San Di-
ego, present a case study showing how online peer feedback was used as a formative learning and assessment activity in a required, university-level composition course. The authors argue that such activities, if designed effectively, contribute significantly toward a student’s sense of audience, authority, and empowerment as a productive member of a larger discourse community.

Particularly worthy of note is that the online e-learning environment provided students with the time to think and reflect as they engaged in asynchronous critiques and also enabled permanent documentation of their efforts.

In Chapter XI, *Interpersonal Assessment: Evaluating Others in Online Learning Environments*, Aditya Johri, of Stanford University, introduces and discusses the concept of *interpersonal assessment*—that is, the act of assessing what other participants in an online learning environment know and how they behave. Lack of face-to-face interaction, mediated cues, and unshared contexts mean that such assessment is often difficult in an online environment, and in collaborative groups students need to know what others in a group know and how they act to be able to work them; but, is this difficulty critical for successful learning outcomes?

In Chapter XII, *A Framework for Assessing Self, Peer and Group Performance in E-Learning*, Thanasis Daradoumis, Fatos Xhafa, and Ángel Alejandro Juan Pérez, all from the Open University of Catalonia in Barcelona, Spain, propose a framework to support the analysis and assessment of collaborative learning of student groups working on complex tasks in a real Web-based, distance learning context. The aim of their work is to provide a better understanding of group interaction, and to determine some practical steps to best support the collaborative learning process.

Finally, in Chapter XIII, *E-Assessment: The Demise of Exams and the Rise of Generic Attribute Assessment for Improved Student Learning*, Darrall Thompson, from the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia, takes us out with the provocative suggestion that examinations may be on the way out. He provides five reasons for a reduced focus on exams, suggests that exam grades cannot provide accruing developmental information about the students’ attributes and qualities vital for a changing world and workplace, and argues for the integrated assessment of generic attributes. Two e-assessment tools to facilitate this approach are described.

Hopefully, this collection of chapters from international authors working on four continents will prove to be, at the very least, intellectually challenging and thought provoking. If so, then this book will have fulfilled part of its aim. The other part, perhaps more important still, is that some or all of the chapters will provide the stimuli not just for thoughts but also for actions—the introduction of higher-quality learning and assessment practices, ones in which the learners themselves assume a greater responsibility for, and play a more active role in, their own learning.
The editor would welcome feedback. Agreements, disagreements, comments, criticisms, and complaints (of course) can be sent to the address below.

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