

# Preface

Growing up in Bangladesh during the 1970s, I used to dream about having access to the well-designed learning resources that were only available to students in industrial countries. In the '70s it was unthinkable that we might have equal access to those resources. In the '90s, it became a reality. We are blessed with the emergence of the Internet's World Wide Web as one of the most important economic and democratic mediums of learning and teaching at a distance. The Internet has become an increasingly powerful, global, interactive and dynamic medium for sharing information. The Internet provides an open, dynamic and flexible learning environment with implications for countless applications with respect to education and training. Internet technologies provide an opportunity to develop new learning experiences for students that have not been possible before.

With the advent of the Internet and online learning methodologies and technologies, providers of education and training are creating e-learning materials to fulfill the demand. Online learning is becoming more and more accepted in workplace. Institutions are investing heavily in the development and deployment of online programs. Academic institutions, corporations and government agencies worldwide are increasingly using the Internet and digital technologies to deliver instruction and training.

What does it take to create a successful e-learning environment for diverse learners? A successful e-learning system involves a systematic process of planning, design, development, evaluation and implementation to create an online environment where learning is actively fostered and supported. In order for an e-learning system to be successful, it must be meaningful to all stakeholder groups, including learners, instructors, support services staff and the institution.

An e-learning system is meaningful to *learners* when it is easily accessible, well-designed, learner-centered, affordable and efficient, flexible and has a fa-

cilitated learning environment. When learners display a high level of participation and success in meeting a course's goals and objectives, this can make e-learning meaningful to *instructors*. In turn, when learners enjoy all available support services provided in the course without any interruptions, it makes *support services staff* happy as they strive to provide easy-to-use, reliable services. Finally, an e-learning system is meaningful to *institutions* when it has a sound return-on-investment (ROI), a moderate to high level of learner satisfaction with both the quality of instruction and all support services and a low drop-out rate.

To create a meaningful e-learning environment for diverse learners, we must explore various important issues encompassing various dimensions of e-learning environment.

The purpose of this book is to provide you with a broad understanding of the emerging field of e-learning and also to advise you on the issues that are critical to the success of a meaningful e-learning environment. It walks you through the various factors critical to developing, evaluating and implementing e-learning. Throughout the book critical e-learning factors are presented as questions that you can ask yourself when planning, designing, evaluating and implementing e-learning modules, courses and programs.

In this book, I present various critical issues of open, flexible and distributed e-learning environments with "A Framework for E-Learning." The seeds for the e-Learning Framework began germinating with the question, "What does it take to provide flexible learning environments for learners worldwide?" After the publication of my book, *Web-Based Instruction* (Educational Technology Publications, 1997), readers began e-mailing me to ask whether I could point them to a Web-based course that I thought was truly Web-based instruction, as I defined it in the book. Unfortunately, I did not have an answer for them. In 1997, the Web was used more for presenting information than for designing instruction; people were still experimenting with the Web. However, the rapid growth of e-learning over the next few years provided a rich climate for further exploration of this question.

Since 1997, I have been communicating with learners, instructors, administrators and technical and other support services staff involved in e-learning, in both academic and corporate settings, all over the world. I have researched e-learning issues discussed in professional discussion forums, newspapers, magazines and journals, and I have designed and taught online courses. Also, as the editor of *Web-Based Training* (Educational Technology Publications, 2001) and the forthcoming *Flexible Learning* (Educational Technology Publications), I have had the opportunity to work closely on critical e-learning issues with more than 100 authors worldwide who contributed chapters to these books.

Through these activities, I found that numerous factors help to create a meaningful learning environment, and many of these factors are systemically interre-

lated and interdependent. A systemic understanding of these factors can help us create meaningful distributed learning environments. I clustered these factors into eight categories: institutional, management, technological, pedagogical, ethical, interface design, resource support, and evaluation. I found these eight categories to be logically comprehensive and empirically the most useful dimensions for e-learning environments. With these eight dimensions, I developed “A Framework for E-Learning.” The framework is reviewed by researchers and practitioners from various countries (<http://BooksToRead.com/framework/#acknowledgement>), and I am indebted to them for their insightful comments that truly improved the framework.

The book is organized according to the eight dimensions of the framework. These eight dimensions would blend together during the planning, design, development, implementation and evaluation process leading to a quality e-learning system. Chapter 1 introduces e-learning as an open, flexible and distributed learning environment; how its various learning features can be designed to address critical issues encompassing the various dimension of e-learning environment. Each dimension of e-learning environment is discussed in detail in a separate chapter. Institutional, management, technological, pedagogical, ethical, interface design, resource support and evaluation issues of e-learning are discussed respectively in Chapter 2 through Chapter 9. Numerous factors discussed in Chapter 2 through Chapter 9 should give you a comprehensive picture of e-learning and should also help you think through every aspect of what you are doing during various steps of e-learning process.

Within the scope of this book, through the lens of the e-Learning Framework, only several critical items or questions related to each dimension of the e-learning environment are presented as examples at the end of Chapter 2 through Chapter 9; they (i.e., items) are thus by no means complete. However, there are myriad of important items or questions encompassing the various dimensions of e-learning environment that need to be explored. Please note that each e-learning project is unique. I encourage you to identify as many issues as possible for your own e-learning project by using the framework. One way to identify critical issues is by putting each stakeholder group (such as learner, instructor, support staff, etc.) at the center of the framework and raising issues along the eight dimensions of the e-learning environment. This way you can identify many critical issues that can help create meaningful e-learning environment for that particular group. By repeating the same process for other stakeholder groups, you can generate a comprehensive list of issues for your e-learning project.

For each section of text in Chapter 2 through Chapter 9 there are corresponding checklist items. I highly recommend that you review checklist items while reading text in each section of the book. Checklist items elaborate issues covered in each section of the book.

You may be thinking — how many issues do I have to address? How many issues are necessary? It depends on the goals and scope of your project. The more e-learning issues you explore and address, the more meaningful and supportive a learning environment you help to create for your target population.

Designing open, flexible and distributed e-learning systems for diverse learners is challenging; however, as more and more institutions offer e-learning to learners worldwide, we will become more knowledgeable about what works and what does not work. We should try our best to accommodate the needs of stakeholder groups by asking as many critical questions as possible along the eight dimensions of e-learning environment. The number and types of questions may vary based on each unique e-learning system. Given our specific e-learning contexts, we may not be able to address all the critical issues within the eight dimensions of e-learning. We should find ways to address them with the best possible means that we can afford. It is important to ask many questions as possible during the planning period of e-learning design.

In Chapter 2 through Chapter 9, I discuss as many critical issues as possible with examples of relevant e-learning cases from around the world. The world of e-learning is constantly changing and evolving. To keep you up to date with resources, FAQs, strategies, best practice examples and any change of addresses for chapter-related Web sites and other corrections, I maintain a Web site at: [http:// BooksToRead.com/elearning](http://BooksToRead.com/elearning).

*Who can benefit from this book?* I believe a wide range of people can use the book:

Instructors can use this book as textbook or reference work in courses dealing with topics such as distance education, technology in education, designing online education, program evaluation of online education, designing blended-learning, e-learning, Web-based instruction, distributed learning, computers in education, multimedia, educational technology, instructional technology, educational telecommunications, teacher training, instructional design, corporate training and so on. This book can also be used as a supplemental to other educational and information technology related courses.

In addition, instructors, teachers, trainers, training managers, distance education specialists, e-learning specialists, virtual education specialists, e-learning project managers, instructional designers, corporate education specialists, human resources specialists, performance technologists, educational technology coordinators, media specialist, Webmasters, writers/editors and technical support staff can use this book to plan, design, evaluate and implement e-learning modules, courses and programs.

Virtual/corporate university designers can use this book to plan, design, evaluate and implement corporate/virtual universities.

School administrators, higher education administrators, department of education staff, ministry of education staff, virtual and corporate university administrators, human resources managers and consultants can use this book to develop strategic plans for designing, evaluating and implementing e-learning initiatives.

Anyone contemplating a career in training and development, curriculum planning and Internet applications can use this book to learn about e-learning design strategies.

Finally, I hope that various e-learning issues included in this book will help you understand all aspects of e-learning environment and provide valuable guidance in creating e-learning and blended learning experience for your target audience. I would appreciate hearing your comments regarding this book.

## **Instructions to Use This Book**

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- If you are designing or evaluating e-learning degree/certificate programs, distance education programs and virtual universities, it is recommended that you start with Chapter 2.
- If you are designing or evaluating e-learning courses and lessons, it is recommended that you start with Chapter 3. Please note that some issues in Chapter 2 may not be relevant to your projects.
- For each section of text in Chapter 2 through Chapter 9 there are corresponding checklist items. It is *highly recommended* that you review checklist items while reading text in each section of the book. Checklist items elaborate issues covered in each section of the book.

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*For a list of glossary terms on e-learning, visit <http://BooksToRead.com/elearning/glossary.htm> and for a list of e-learning resources, visit <http://BooksToRead.com/elearning/resources>.*