Foreword

This book is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature based on the Communities of Inquiry framework.

Full disclosure: I was a member of the small group of researchers at the University of Alberta who developed the Communities of Inquiry framework in the late 1990s. At that time online learning was still a rather suspect innovation in higher education. While it did allow for interaction among groups of learners, which some earlier forms of distance or distributed learning had not, there were still questions about the quality of interaction within online learner groups. "Communities of Inquiry" was our attempt to build a framework within which these questions could be investigated.

Soon after the seminal papers describing this framework were published I "went over to the dark side" – i.e., took on administrative roles in higher education. In consequence, I now spend more time thinking about the macro level background activities that must occur in support of the learning experience. I am currently the President of the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education, which provides a forum for research directed mainly to these broader issues.

However, I am still very much aware that the front line activity of directly fostering learning is the whole point of higher education. And I'm also well aware that the proportion of learning in higher education that occurs online is steadily increasing. So I have noted with great interest the steadily increasing group of scholars, centred around Dr. D. R. Garrison, who have adopted and adapted the Communities of Inquiry framework to study various aspects of online learning.

This theoretical framework is particularly apt for the study of online learning. In this leaner communicative context, student learning is dependent on deliberate actions by instructors (Teaching Presence, in the Communities of Inquiry framework) to build a collaborative and constructivist learning process (Social Presence) that will assist students to achieve the desired learning outcomes (Cognitive Presence). However, I believe that this framework can also be applied to higher education in general, and can inform faculty development even in contexts where most or all of the teaching is done face-to-face. The present collection should, therefore, be of value even to educators whose interests are not primarily related to online instruction.

This book summarizes and builds on the past decade of research using this research framework for the investigation of online learning. It will be a must read for those using or planning to use the Communities of Inquiry framework in their own research. It will also be of interest and value to those of us who are not at the moment on the front lines of teaching in higher education, but who need to understand the overall context of higher education as it incorporates a larger and larger proportion of online learning.

Walter Archer
University of Alberta, Canada

Walter Archer *is currently (2012) Associate Dean (Interim), Engaged Learning in the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta, President of the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education, and Editor-in-Chief of the Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education. From 1988 through 2001 he held appointments in the Faculty of Extension as Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and Professor. From 2001 through 2007 he was Dean of Extension at the University of Saskatchewan before returning to the University of Alberta in 2007.*