Foreword

We all have hang-ups about using certain words because we find their meaning vague. For me *'meta'* is such a word. Attempts to define it, for example: *'a prefix meaning between, with, after, behind, over, about, reversely'* or *'a concept which is an abstraction from another concept, used to complete or add to the latter'* do not help much.

It gets better when you look up *'meta-communication'*. Lexicographers can be ponderous but this definition does illuminate the subject: *'communication that indicates how verbal information should be interpreted; stimuli surrounding the verbal communication that also have meaning, which may or may not be congruent with that of or support the verbal talk. It may support or contradict verbal communication; Communication which is implicit and not expressed in words'*.

The authors of these chapters have accepted a challenge. Online communication is mostly through the written word, so how can non-verbal communication help us interpret it? Emoticons are hardly the answer. I prefer people to make their emotions clear in their writing and do not want to be told what feelings the words are meant to evoke in me.

The inclusion of the words 'reflective' and 'conversation' in the title does nothing to lessen the challenge facing the authors. Reflection is a vital element of learning but in some terms, such as 'reflective practice', it has become a cliché. Conversation theory is an important and difficult branch of learning science, yet we now use 'conversation' simply as a trendy synonym for 'discussion'. Surprisingly, there is no reference to conversation theory in the book, which reminds us how geographically fragmented research on educational technology has become. Although there are contributions from Australia, India, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand, this book mainly reflects work from Turkey and the US. How would scholars from Western Europe have tackled these issues?

The final challenge to the contributors is the sub-title 'models for distance education'. Are they attempting to apply the traditional models of distance education to a new technology or to replace those traditional models with something new?

How do the authors address these multiple challenges and what does the book have to tell us?

Its first lesson is that there is no magic instructional medium and probably never will be. Online learning is merely the latest manifestation of our tendency to invest unreasonable expectations in new technologies. Each new communication medium is hailed for its transformational impact on the human intellect. Yet while McLuhan was correct that each medium brings a new message, we should not exaggerate the change it brings. Online conversations are unlikely, in and of themselves, to lead students to the holy grails of critical thinking, objective reasoning, and constructivist learning. It all depends on how they are fostered. Similarly, we can hardly expect the theory of distance education to usher in a new era of digital democracy.

Professor Demiray and his colleagues tackle these issues in the first chapter of the book. One of the advantages of online courses is that those who develop them pay more attention to instructional design than they would for a classroom course, and therefore include specific strategies for achieving the learning objectives that they value. Since an online discussion among students does not automatically yield anything valuable, the authors explore some techniques for leading them to participate in useful ways.

Some of the later authors refute implausible assumptions about online conversations. Why should we expect online teaching to mute the sub-conscious racist and sexist attitudes of the individuals who write the courses – or make these same individuals more likely to challenge similar prejudices in students' work? Surely the answer is to place online learning within the older tradition of distance education where quality and balance is achieved by having courses developed by teams with diverse viewpoints and having student assignments reviewed by tutors specially trained for this function? The graduate who told me, with a blend of satisfaction and frustration, that after studying at the UK Open University he could not see less than six sides to any question, gave me one of my proudest moments as head of that institution. Inculcating the fundamental academic habit of systematic scepticism does not depend on particular learning media but on how teachers use them.

One chapter finds that online learning expanded the intellectual horizons of female students in Saudi Arabia. Even the limited access to Internet resources allowed in that country gave women a new appreciation of the diversity of views that people hold, not least within their own student group. This gave them more mental independence, just as the ability to study from home and on their own schedules allowed them more physical autonomy. This is the heart of the meta-communication inherent in online teaching. By placing teaching and learning in the ordered chaos of the Internet and by bringing some of the principles of distance education to bear on the design and delivery of teaching, we create, in the words of the earlier definition 'stimuli surrounding the verbal communication that also have meaning'.

The virtue of this book, like Professor Demiray's earlier collection of studies on e-learning across Europe, is that it exposes and explores the challenges of working at the frontiers of practice. Not everything is rosy. An interesting contribution about an attempt by four countries (Indonesia, Laos, Philippines, and Thailand) to develop a joint graduate course is candid about the difficulties of connectivity, low participation, hierarchy, language, and timidity that dogged the project. Other contributions reflect the enthusiasm of novelty. Academics are prepared to work hard to foster reflective online conversations, and it is both churlish and too early to ask questions about the economic sustainability of their approaches.

I commend this book for illustrating the considerable diversity of expectations and practice of online learning. All readers who are involved in e-learning will find much here that they can juxtapose with their own experience in building better practices for the future.

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Sir John Daniel became President of Commonwealth of Learning in 2004 after gaining wide international experience in universities and the United Nations system. He obtained his full-time university education in Metallurgy at Oxford and Paris and later demonstrated his commitment to lifelong learning by taking 25 years to complete a part-time Master's degree in Educational Technology at Concordia University. However, the internship for that programme, which took him to the UK Open University in 1972, was a life-changing experience. He saw the future of higher education and wanted to be part of it. This quest took him on an international odyssey with appointments at the Télé-université (Directeur des Études, 1973-77), Athabasca University (Vice-President for Learning Services, 1978-80), Concordia University (Vice-Rector, Academic, 1980-84),

Laurentian University (President, 1984-90), the UK Open University (Vice-Chancellor, 1990-2001) and UNESCO (Assistant Director-General for Education, 2001-04). His non-executive appointments have included the presidencies of the International Council for Open and Distance Education, the Canadian Association for Distance Education, and the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education. He also served as Vice-President of the International Baccalaureate Organisation. Among Sir John's 290 publications are his books Mega-Universities and Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education (Kogan Page, 1996) and Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All (Routledge, 2010). He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth for services to higher education in 1994 and holds over 30 honorary doctorates, fellowships and professorships from universities and professional bodies in 16 countries. He is a citizen of Canada and the UK.