Foreword

The problems that beset colleges and universities today are enormous. In the face of government budget cuts and increasing costs, many institutions have raised student tuition and fees, increased faculty work loads, and/or thrown open their doors to blatant commercialization (Bok, 2003; Kirp, 2003). In the USA, national surveys report dismal levels of student engagement in academic work (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2003), rampant grade inflation (Johnson, 2003), and the very value of the degrees issued by universities and colleges is being questioned (Lasson, 2003).

While lip service is paid to the importance of teaching in virtually all institutions of higher education, the reward system in most universities remains primarily based upon success with respect to publications, research funding, and entrepreneurial ventures (Amacher & Meiners, 2004). Instruction remains teacher-centered and textbook-driven, even in the most elite institutions. For example, after investigating the integration of educational technology at Stanford University, Cuban (2001) reported that "Lecturing still absorbs more than half to two-thirds of various departments' teaching practices… These traditional forms of teaching seem to have been relatively untouched by the enormous investment in technologies that the university has made since the 1960's" (p. 129).

Meanwhile, in physical as well as online classrooms, tenure-track faculty members are being increasingly replaced by adjunct instructors who have few of the rights or benefits of traditional academics (Dubson, 2001). Many of these part-time instructors are teaching face-to-face and online courses for such low pay that at least one authority has suggested that they would make more money selling burgers and French fries at fast food restaurants (Johnstone, 2004). Other adjuncts may attain a significant income, but only by teaching so many courses that the value of their contributions to student learning cannot possibly be substantive.

In the wake of these challenges, what does a book on authentic learning environments have to offer? The answer is a lot! I am convinced that a great deal of practical benefits for higher education will be derived from widespread adop-

tion of the types of innovative teaching strategies described in these pages. After reading this book, you will likely share this conviction.

Although the need to adopt more student-centered, problem-based, and technology-enriched learning environments has been recognized for many years, few academics seem able to comprehend what it means to teach and learn in fundamentally different ways. To change their mental models of teaching and learning, academics need exposure to strong rationales and practical examples. This book provides just the right prescription through the clear description of underlying theories and the portrayal of realistic case studies.

The time for significant support for the development of more authentic learning environments throughout higher education is now. The critical characteristics of authentic learning described in Section 1 of this volume can be implemented in traditional classrooms, the real world, online, and through blended approaches. Furthermore, as so richly illustrated in the chapters of Section 2 and Section 3 of this book, they can be applied to virtually any discipline.

My personal experience of teaching undergraduate and graduate students for the past 25 years has been that the more authentic the tasks and activities in my courses are, the more students are engaged, the more they learn, and the more they retain. My own perhaps idiosyncratic style of designing learning environments boils down to: "It's the task that matters most — make it authentic."

In the 21st Century, most university and college academic staff members must continue to devote their energies to all three of their traditional roles of research, service, and teaching. We must continue to contribute to advances in science, provide our expertise in the service of social causes and the humanities, and provide our students with opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values required to lead meaningful, productive lives. There are many signs that while we in the professoriate continue to excel in research and service, our teaching role has been slipping. Fortunately, authentic learning environments provide an unparalleled opportunity to revive the precious practice of teaching.

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