Epilogue

As the original, French-language, edition of this book went to press, the design model continued to evolve. So, in order to give readers an update on developments, I have decided to add this epilogue to the English-language version of the book.

Indeed, I am indebted to MERLOT and the editors of the Journal of Online Teaching and Learning, Number 4, Volume 4) for allowing me to use the Discussion and Conclusion sections of my Dec. 15, 2008 article below. This section will bring the reader up to speed with regard to the latest developments of the design prototype which I am now calling the Blended Online Learning Environment.

This study demonstrated that, for a successful design prototype to be successfully implemented in a traditional university setting, it had to be based on low “structure” and high “dialog” (Moore, 1993) and must emulate traditional university practices and operations. This is supported by Jaffee’s (1998) conclusion that:

The receptivity and perceived legitimacy of new educational delivery modes is strongly related to the extent to which these instructional technologies reinforce or retain the central

This suggests the need for university administrators to adopt an online learning (OL) deployment model which is closely linked to traditional university course delivery operations rather than a classical, distance education (DE) design and development-focused model, essentially foreign in its functioning to traditional universities (Keegan, 1996; Rumble & Harry, 1982). Faculty would thus not only have access to a feasible means of teaching online in a manner to which they are accustomed but, more importantly, they would utilize a socioconstructivist-enabled learning environment which would be in stark contrast to the sorely criticized, behaviorist-associated, lock-step ID model as implemented worldwide by open and DE universities (Evans, 2001: Masie, 2000). Henceforth, by accessing a delivery-focused model offering both synchronous and asynchronous opportunities for exchange, students and faculty would benefit from asynchronously-accessible, Web-based tools and resources in addition to synchronously interacting in a fashion quite similar to the on-campus experience, accessing powerful audio-, video- and screen-sharing and Web browsing functions to do so (Hamilton & Cherniavsky, 2006). Moreover, faculty would experience a resumption of quality control over DE/OL which has either been delegated to surrogate actors in higher education or even quietly extirpated from the hands of faculty by increasingly prevalent and highly influential corporate interests (Magnussen, 2005; Noble, 2002).

The realization that this study brought to the author, that DE under the guise of online learning was fast approaching mainstream higher education, also brought with it, paradoxically, an insight into the decline of DE as it had been known. In its stead, OL appears to be fully emerging as a viable successor. However, the ID prototype emerging from this study was different from OL as it had been known for most of its short lifespan, i.e. the online continuation of a DE-based, pre-designed, anywhere-anytime, asynchronous, individual student-paced learning environment (Harasim, 1995; Hiltz, Teles & Turoff, 1995; Hiltz & Goldman, 2005). The emerging prototype was a blend of the past and the future, on the one hand hearkening back to an era when teaching and learning always occurred simultaneously in time and in space (in
the classroom) but, on the other hand, reaching forward under its new guise to an era of borderless, networked, online communications freed from the limits of space, indicative of a reported shift from structural to relational considerations in OL (Garrison, 2000). In experiencing new freedom from old limits, it was observed that faculty became cognizant of their reassertion of direct ownership of their teaching and student support duties which, in the classical DE model, had been typically delegated to tutors (Mason, 1979).

Throughout this study, the design and technical team had to balance concerns expressed firstly by administration and their concern for increasing levels of cost-effective outreach and, secondly, by faculty, primarily concerned with instructional quality, technical support and overall workload management issues. As the asynchronous and synchronous components of this environment were fully integrated and an understanding of the implications of doing so matured, the author realized that the simultaneous blending of a synchronous environment with an asynchronous course management system produced a variation of the campus-based, blended learning model, as defined by Garrison & Vaughan (2008):

The basic principle [of blended learning] is that face-to-face oral communication and online written communication are optimally integrated such that the strengths of each are blended into a unique learning experience congruent with the context and intended educational purpose (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008: p. 42).

The completely online solution – termed online e-learning by Piskurich – was subsequently termed the blended online learning environment, it being the natural extension of both blended learning as defined by Garrison & Vaughan (2008) and online learning as defined, for instance, by http://www.aln.org/. In Figure 10, the blended online learning environment design model is described as the completely online, simultaneous and complimentary integration and implementation of an asynchronous-mode, partially system-managed, partially faculty-led learning environment (i.e. a course management system, or CMS) and a synchronous-mode, partially
system-managed, partially faculty-led learning environment (i.e. a virtual classroom environment).

In more detail, the traditional, faculty-led, campus-based course teaching/learning model (in the bottom left-hand corner) is juxtaposed, on the x-axis, with the asynchronous online teaching/learning model (in the top right-hand corner). Along the y-axis, faculty-led instruction, usually synchronous and taking place on campus (bottom left-hand side of the figure), is juxtaposed with asynchronous system-led instruction, i.e. online, tutor-supported instruction, common in open and distance university course delivery models (top right-hand side of the figure). The circles “traditional on-campus learning” (including teaching) and “online learning” represent, respectively, the width and breadth of each system within its own sphere. Blended learning is seen here as bridging both spheres, increasingly existing in numerous and varied forms (Bonk & Graham, 2006; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Mortera-Gutierrez, 2006). Finally, blended online learning is seen as bridging both asynchronous and synchronous forms of instruction, thereby occupying the whole of the OL space.
This environment represents a series of trade-offs between high-level and high-quality but equally highly-priced, front-end-designed Web courses and high-level dialogue, albeit cost-prohibitive, videoconferencing-delivered courses. As such, it combines faculty attainable- and sustainable-level structure via the asynchronous learning environment and sustainable-level, faculty-student dialog via the synchronous learning environment. It also represents a low learning curve approach to faculty online migration and an administration-friendly, cost-effective approach to increasing university outreach.

As a result of these developments, the author began reflecting on changes occurring in the entire field of distance education. In Figure 11, the emergence of the blended online learning environment is set in the overall context of DE and OL. It is posited here that DE as a field is currently undergoing a major shift in impetus and expansion. For well over a century, DE, a subset of mainstream higher education (Moore & Kearsley, 2004), is now emerging as a major force worldwide, but under a new guise. OL is seen as the successor of DE, the natural outgrowth of the field, fuelled by the Internet and by increasingly pervasive, available and cost-effective information and communication technologies (McGreal & Elliott, 2008). It is furthermore posited that first-generation
OL, after a decade of trial and error during which time it was known mainly as an asynchronous-based form of education (Hiltz & Goldman, 2005; Twigg, 2004), is currently entering its second generation, that of blended online learning, a generation characterized by the redesign of university courses (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). As a result, increasingly numerous forms of blended learning are currently being implemented on campuses throughout North America (Park & Bonk, 2006), combining various kinds of OL activities and culminating in what is termed the blended online learning environment. It should be noted that the so-called fifth generation of DE (Taylor, 2001) has intentionally not been included here as it is felt that it might better be described as first-generation online learning.

To sum up, the results of this study suggest that, in short, 1) faculty are increasingly encouraged to support university outreach by their administration (Dudestadt, Atkins & Van Howseling, 1999); 2) as they do so, they are encountering obstacles which prevent their applying the classical DE model (Sammons & Ruth, 2007) and 3) new technological means are reacquainting faculty with “continuity of practice” in their pedagogy (Power, 2008b). Because synchronous-mode, virtual classrooms are not yet mainstream in higher education (Keegan, Schwenke, Fritsch, Kenny, Kismihok, Biro, Gabor, O’Suilleabhain, & Nix, 2005; Ng, 2007), more research, especially field research (Abrami & Bernard, 2006), into this promising field of inquiry is important. This study, based directly on field observations and documented case studies, introduces the blending online learning environment concept and identifies its import to higher education, alluding also to possible positive effects on the field of instructional design and technology. It is felt that this study contributes to sparse yet necessary research for sustainable and cost-effective university outreach as well as to effective human and material resources deployment.

More specifically, this study addresses a need for a teaching and learning environment that accurately reflects faculty realities, providing both a resource-rich structure and multiple opportunities for both real-time and differed dialog between learners as well as between learners and faculty. It suggests that there is a need for balance between the aims of administration, faculty limits and learner needs and it establishes bottom-line requirements for structure and dialogue in a workable
teaching-learning environment. It is posited that this can be achieved by blending newly-available information and communication technologies (ICT) to provide online learners with a complete OL environment, faculty with a feasible alternative to restrictive on-campus teaching and administration with the means to manage responsible outreach. Despite some research design-related limits (limited sample, on-going studies), the findings and related theorizations in this article may enable designers, faculty members as well as administrators to better understand and act upon some of the basic issues surrounding the design, redesign and delivery of blended online learning.