Introduction

You are a teacher at heart. Your goal is to inspire students to excel professionally in one of the many health disciplines. Your students may be nurses, social workers, dietitians, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, chiropractors, dental hygienists, or radiation therapists, or they may be learners who have not yet entered their chosen health care profession. You teach at least some of your courses online, and you find it challenging to be effective, personally engaging, and “real” to students when teaching via the Internet. If this is your story, this book is for you.

Our aim is to equip health care educators, whether they are new to teaching online or already have some experience in that area, with a variety of effective (and proven) online teaching strategies and learning activities. The book offers teaching techniques that can be put into practice immediately and generally demand little by way of technological skill, the investment of time, or other resources. Teachers who
find themselves at a loss for inventive ways to challenge their students can flip through these pages, scan the activities, and find an idea to suit their purpose.

This book is both practical and theoretical. It is often helpful to understand why certain teaching strategies are effective in engaging learners. The teaching activities and techniques included in this book are therefore presented in the context of contemporary educational theory, supported by scholarly literature. Teachers often struggle to understand how theories such as constructivism or connectivism or transformative learning apply to actual learning situations. By linking specific theories to concrete examples of teaching activities, this book aims to demystify theory. It is our hope that after reading this book, instructors will be comfortable discussing educational theory and may even be inspired to develop their own teaching activities based on educational theories that align with their personal teaching philosophy. Educational theory kindles ideas and inspires us to improve our teaching.

The teaching strategies and learning activities presented in this volume are drawn from the practice of many professors, instructors, and tutors who currently teach online in the Faculty of Health Disciplines at Athabasca University. Athabasca University was Canada’s first open university, and, today, most of its courses are taught online. The Faculty of Health Disciplines boasts about 2,000 undergraduate and 1,500 graduate students, as well as some forty professors, instructors, and tutors who have a combined total of many years of experience with online teaching. (Many of the courses offered in the Faculty of Health Disciplines have been taught online for a decade or more.) When we set out to write this book, we solicited input from colleagues in the Faculty of Health Disciplines, asking them to share their most successful online teaching strategies and activities. We also included techniques that we have developed and found effective in our own teaching. Once we had an assemblage of activities, we
grouped them according to the educational theory with which they were most closely aligned. Of course, in developing teaching techniques, instructors often integrate elements drawn from a variety of theories. For the purposes of this book, however, we assessed the “best fit” in order to illustrate the relationship between practice and theory.

This book is very much a collaborative effort. However, we chose to divide up the primary responsibility for specific chapters according to our individual areas of interest and theoretical expertise. Thus, chapter 1, on instructional immediacy, is principally the work of Sherri Melrose. As she explains, the theory of instructional immediacy holds that demonstrating availability, projecting warmth and friendliness, and taking time to get to know students as individuals all play a major part in an instructor’s effectiveness. Her discussion of the theory is followed by suggested ways in which teachers can encourage collaboration while also supporting individual learners as they progress through the expected stages of development in class groups.

Invitational theory is the focus of chapter 2. In it, Beth Berry discusses “the plus factor,” a way of thinking and being with students that creates a warm and welcoming online educational environment. She examines how trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality exert a positive influence on educational outcomes.

In chapter 3, Sherri Melrose reviews constructivist thinking, a teaching approach that builds on what learners already know. She describes ways in which teachers can provide learners with the scaffolding, or support, that they need in order to progress toward competence and independence.

The theory of connectivism stresses the role of networks in learning. As Caroline Park explains in chapter 4, in a connectivist approach, teachers and students use digital technology to create complex and diverse networks of people who can help them find the information they need. She offers connectivist techniques that can help learners to create informal and perhaps unexpected connections that support
their specific learning needs and interests. In addition to locating information, however, students must learn to organize the information they gather and evaluate it critically.

In chapter 5, Park turns to the concept of transformational learning, which she describes as a process of changing learners’ attitudes and deeply entrenched beliefs and assumptions. When teachers provide learners with opportunities for critical reflection and challenge them to question commonly accepted truths, exciting new perspectives can be gained.

Chapter 6, contributed by Katherine Janzen, concerns the theory of quantum learning. Janzen draws from principles of quantum physics to illustrate how the basic elements of virtual classrooms—teachers, students, and course content—are connected and entangled, just as electrons are. She explains how teachers in quantum learning environments can create virtual classrooms that feel real and alive.

In the concluding chapter, we describe the six principal lessons we have learned about how to make online courses more engaging. Fundamentally, we acknowledge that wonderful online teaching strategies alone do not inevitably lead to success. The teacher matters. Online teachers, however, face special challenges. How can online teachers ensure success? How can they transcend the emptiness of cyberspace to become real to students and create learning environments in which classmates become as tangible to one another as they would be if they were sitting side by side? This final chapter addresses these questions and provides online teachers with important takeaway messages.

We acknowledge that online education changes at a breathtaking pace. With each new technology, fresh teaching approaches become possible. To be on the cutting edge in the dynamic world of online education, we focus here on the most contemporary of learning theories, theories that are likely to remain relevant as Web 3.0 technologies continue to emerge. The importance of social media in online education is also given consideration throughout the book. Some of the
teaching strategies described use social media as the primary platform for learning, and many of the suggested activities can be adapted to employ social media as needed.

Future online learning will undoubtedly be more open, mobile, and flexible than it is today. Open educational resources, the adoption of mobile devices, free online tools and courses, and the rise of cloud computing are four trends that will propel changes in online teaching and learning. This book provides a foundation that will enable you to make optimal use of these and other transformations that will shape online learning in the years ahead.

If you are a novice online teacher, this book is a place to start. If you are a seasoned educator who has just been asked to convert some of your face-to-face courses to online courses, read this book first. If you have been teaching online for years and feel that you are “rusting out” and getting stuck in your old ways, our theory-based techniques and activities may refresh your teaching. If you are a highly regarded online teacher emulated by others, we hope that you will find some hidden gems in this book that will help you to continue to be a leader in online education.

In sum, the purpose of this book is to inspire great teaching by providing you with theory-informed techniques and activities to help make you an exemplary online educator. The end result will be enhanced quality of education, increased student success and satisfaction, and, ultimately, the best possible health care professionals.