Concluding Thoughts

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Technological advances are rapid. The period between 2010 and 2016 has seen an increasing incidence of emerging practices promising to have a significant impact on education. The narrative surrounding these emerging technologies and practices has frequently focused on disruption and transformation. While past waves of educational technology innovations were also promising, their impact has often been disappointing. Yet today’s digital learning environments look much different than the digital learning environments of five years ago, which, in turn, looked much different than the digital learning environments that preceded them.

The ways in which we practice and think about digital education are also changing. The field itself is in an emerging state, being shaped by cultural, social, political, and economic forces that are interacting with the technologies and practices of our time. It is significant in this context, however, to recognize that neither our technologies nor our practices are created in a vacuum. When technology is created, it is built with the developers’ worldviews, values, beliefs, and assumptions embedded within it. For example, social networking sites structure relationships in specific ways (e.g., followers, friends) and perceive privacy in different ways. This is true for technologies repurposed for educational means (e.g., Twitter, YouTube, Ning, Elgg, Facebook, Flickr) as well as for technologies created specifically for educational purposes. Educational technologies espouse certain beliefs about the educational process and their default settings and suggestions may shape how they are used.
In this book, authors examined emerging technologies and practices in digital learning contexts, drawing attention to how the field is changing and may be changing in the future. Whether the result of technological advancements, changing mindsets, or cultural, social, political, and economic forces, educators, researchers, and practitioners are collectively refining digital learning. While the impact of emerging technologies and practices is neither as overwhelmingly positive as optimists expect, nor as poor as critics suggest, the ways that digital education is organized, enacted, and designed is undergoing significant change, in the same way that educational institutions have changed over time within the cultures that house them.

Two issues need to be highlighted to bring closure to this volume.

First, the field will benefit from longitudinal, interpretive, multidisciplinary, and mixed methods research to gain an in-depth understanding of digital learning. A number of emerging approaches influence the design, delivery, and assessment of digital learning. Important areas of inquiry and research include gaining a greater understanding of:

- The symbiotic and reinforcing relationship between emerging technologies and emerging practices;
- The changing role and nature of education and institutions of higher learning;
- The state of learning in networked and non-institutional settings;
- The ways that learning and teaching are enacted within emerging organizational models (e.g., learning in large online courses or in self-organizing groups via social media);
- The changing roles of instructors.

To gain a greater understanding of these issues the field needs to explore emerging research methodologies to understand learning in context. As research into digital learning becomes more and more interdisciplinary, we need to foster and encourage more conversations among learning scientists, educational technology developers, learning designers, data scientists, content experts, and methodologists.

Second, researchers need to examine the purposes of digital learning and the roles of the various actors involved in its prominence. A similar exploration has occurred in the context of schooling, where a number of theorists have examined
the purposes that schooling serves. On the one end of the spectrum, *functional* theorists have argued that schooling serves noble intellectual, political, economic, and social purposes. From a functional perspective, schooling assists in the development of children’s intellectual capacity, cognitive ability, citizenry participation skills, labour skills, and social responsibility. Even though the purposes of schooling appear noble from a functional outlook, these estimations are overly optimistic. In response to this optimism and assumed moral capacity of schooling, *critical* theorists have noted that our society is imperfect. For example, societies appear to be beleaguered by corruption and inequality across race, gender, and class lines. From this perspective, schools preserve and extend the status quo and do little to change current social statuses. Thus, a critical approach to schooling aims to change schools and create more equitable organizations. In the context of digital learning, emerging approaches and emerging technologies are often viewed from a functional and instrumental perspective. A critical perspective on digital learning is desperately needed, and I hope that future scholarship will engage with this perspective, not simply to criticize online learning for being unlike face-to-face learning, but to drastically improve the design and functions of education overall. Scholarship should evoke change, and academics, particularly academics in schools of education, should strive to improve our societies in meaningful ways. By applying research to practice, we can make strides towards creating equitable, effective, and supportive online learning environments.