Conclusion

We still educate our students based on an agricultural timetable, in an industrial setting, but tell students they live in a digital age. (US Department of Education, 2005, p. 22)

INTRODUCTION

Adoption of the Community of Inquiry principles, which we have explored in this book, is inherently transformational. They represent a new educational paradigm that will be extremely disruptive to those higher educational institutions heavily invested in information dissemination. The CoI paradigm represents significant change—change that better maps onto the needs of a connected knowledge society. It is an approach to teaching and learning that distances itself from the traditional practices of dispensing information either through a lecture or self-study materials. New paradigms such as
the CoI framework have drawn attention as a result of enormous information and technological advancements.

Today’s technological revolution, with its order of magnitude advances that have left little of common life unchanged, presents an open challenge to the University to once again “reinvent” itself. Indeed, it could be argued that the pressure for change placed on the University today is greater than any it has faced in any previous historical epoch. (Amirault & Visser, 2009, p. 64)

The nature and rate of change in society associated with new and emerging information and communications technology represents an enormous adaptation challenge for education. This may be the most significant challenge facing higher education. In particular, this challenge is the adoption of appropriate information and communications technology in the classroom. New and emerging social media technologies are the catalyst for rethinking what we are doing in higher education classrooms. Keeping in mind that technology is only a means to an end (as powerful as it is), we must be clear about our educational goals.

We have argued that blended learning in a community of inquiry context provides a coherent way forward that can capitalize on the structural changes in society. Blended learning provides a thoughtful adoption of communications technologies that can address the challenges of providing more engaged learning experiences in higher education. Once we understand how best to integrate technology in the form of blended learning, we must understand how to lead and manage this inevitable transformation. The key is to guide this inevitable change with awareness and purpose. How we will implement these technologies and define our educational goals must be a collaborative effort.
COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Education by its inherent nature is a purposeful and collaborative enterprise. This has been made clear in the previous chapters. However, the interdependency of the educational community is not often recognized or practiced when it comes to leadership. One of the great deficiencies of the higher education system is the lack of substantive collaboration in establishing a vision, developing strategic action plans and, most importantly, implementing these plans in a sustainable manner. Collaborative leadership instills common purpose, trust, and identification with the institution. These are the principles associated with a community of inquiry that are relevant to higher education leadership. Planning for open communication and reflective discourse, establishing community and purposeful inquiry, and ensuring meaningful resolutions and applications form the template for collaborative leadership. This goes well beyond charisma and public persona. It means working hard behind the scenes to bring people together focused on meaningful change.

Higher educational institutions generally have not shown a commitment to change that is inevitably disruptive. While information and communications technologies (ICT) are being adopted in the classroom, educational leaders have not yet grasped the full significance of the impending changes. A vision must be informed by the appropriate set of principles. Unfortunately, most leaders are not prepared to spend the commensurate time understanding the paradigmatic shift that is upon us, particularly with regard to undergraduate education. We have to ask: To what extent does senior leadership understand engaged inquiry approaches to learning and the impact of information and communications technology in realizing the ideals of higher education? It is to this point that we raise the issue of collaborative leadership required to bring higher education into the connected knowledge age.

Too often leaders hold to views about teaching and learning that are simply at odds with technological developments in the larger
society. Current classroom practices are not sustainable. Leaders must focus more of their attention on matters of teaching and learning and engage in a collaborative, open, and sustained commitment to create active learning communities using the same principles that are the foundation of a CoI. The change that we have described and discussed involves significant technological change but this is simply a means to an end. The real argument is to what purpose is the change directed.

To date, the focus has been on the adoption of technology for administrative services. This investment has failed to reach the classroom in any appreciable manner. Senior administrators do not fully appreciate the effect technology is having on learning and the need to reshape what we do in the classroom. This is not a direct criticism of leadership. Understanding collaborative approaches as reflected in a community of inquiry combined with the complex possibilities of a blended learning design is an enormous demand on senior leadership. However, leaders must be prepared to question conventional classroom practices and to become engaged in and committed to the transformation of approaches to teaching and learning in a digital society. Senior administrators must be participants in digital designs for creating and sustaining communities of inquiry. The challenge is to understand their role.

Collaborative leadership is neither top-down nor bottom-up. It is the fusion of both, just as collaborative constructivist approaches to learning are the fusion of sage on the stage and guide on the side. Collaborative leadership is the rejection of such dualisms and the creation of a unified purpose and effort. Leaders must display characteristics that reflect openness and courage. The lessons of the past have shown us that leadership too often succumbs to insecurity and surrounds itself with sycophants. Its other failing is in avoiding the need for fundamental change and embellishing insignificant change through extensive public relations initiatives that choose rhetoric over reality. Vision and insight are developed through a deep understanding of the organization and its challenges, and most
importantly, they must be informed through sustained collaboration. When vision and courage intersect, real commitment and actual change result.

Leadership also requires sustained commitment and honest feedback. Commitment to assessment and appropriate adjustments over time are at the heart of real change. This means honest and relevant feedback with regard to the strategic vision. It means a critical focus on the progress being made to achieve the strategic vision and actions that can improve outcomes. Inevitably there will be different values and interests that can only be resolved through dialogue. Only through sustained collaborative action over a significant period of time will institutional change be realized.

The kind of change that we have addressed in this book is transformational. It is fair to say that there is a lack of strategic focus and commitment with regard to the need to transform teaching and learning. It has been argued that much of this can be attributed to what Ginsberg (2011) refers to as the “all-administrative university” (p.197) and how it has grown and isolated the leaders from the purpose of higher education: the learning experience. Higher education requires transformed classroom approaches and organizational structures to initiate and sustain these changes. If there is to be an efficient paradigm shift, resources will have to be shifted from administrative purposes to changes in the classroom. There is growing evidence that the leadership and structure of successful higher educational institutions will need to be transformed if they are to realize the full potential of blended learning in a collaborative constructivist paradigm. The key to the transformation of teaching and learning that we have explored in this book will depend largely on a commitment to collaborative leadership and governance structure. Everybody must be onboard.