

Introduction

Why Look at Flexibility?

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Dare we question an established canon of practice when it seems so self-evidently good? Yes indeed. The word *flexibility* and its adjective root, *flexible*, have gained such popularity in higher-education discourse and marketing strategies over the past few decades that it is time to dig into these words anew, with reflective and critical intent. Being our own discourse archaeologists should help us to unearth those less-visible and often taken-for-granted dynamics that help and hinder efforts toward flexibility, however we may define the term.

FLEXIBILITY REMAINS A POPULAR TERM

Consider two marketing examples from two world leaders in flexible approaches to post-secondary education. The first is from a university based in the United Kingdom with approximately 250,000 registered undergraduate and postgraduate students around the world.

Want to get a qualification that will help you develop or change your career? Learn a subject in depth? The Open University—voted top for student satisfaction for three years running—could provide the flexibility, the qualifications and the top-class teaching you're after. (<http://www3.open.ac.uk/study/>)

The second is from a university based in Canada, which boasts an annual enrolment of over 37,000 students across 87 countries. Hear Athabasca University explain to potential students one of its four guiding principles, that of flexibility:

Once upon a time, you couldn't use the words university and flexible in the same sentence. Well that's not the case any more. AU is structured to fit the specific needs of your lifestyle. So it's education on your terms, not ours.

There's no need to worry about an old-fashioned application deadline, and all the anxiety that comes with it. With monthly start times and Athabasca's continuous enrolment philosophy, you enter your area of study when you're ready.

AU flexibility also means you can experience all the advantages of a traditional university in a non-traditional setting like your home, office, cabin or wherever you may find yourself.

And once you get started, you can keep right on studying. More than 90 per cent of AU students study all year around. And there's no need to sacrifice your career for your education—81 per cent of AU students work while studying for their degrees. ("Viewbook 2010," p. 6, available for download at <http://www2.athabascau.ca/prospective/>)

Both institutions use the concept of flexibility to guide their operations and to enhance their deserved reputation. They recognize the need to adapt to changing student expectations, especially concerning return-on-study-investments, rapid communication, and career development.

Elsewhere, we also see attention to flexibility, defined in various ways but focusing basically on increased choice. The Higher Education Funding Council for England has evaluated eight pilot models of programming that feature prior-learning assessment, accelerated programs, and flexible teaching strategies (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2010). Earlier, the Council wanted to see e-learning technologies prompting, even "transforming," higher education toward "a more student-focused and flexible system" (Higher Education Funding Council of England 2005). The phrase *flexible learning* has appeared in many descriptions of course design and delivery and training practice across various disciplines and educational staff-development contexts (e.g., Hill 2006; Tait and Mills 1999; Weeks 2000). The Academic Search Premier database reveals many refereed articles about flexible-learning applications in formal and workplace learning contexts. Try an Internet search for "flexible higher education." Explore the Commonwealth of Learning

website (www.col.org) or scan the titles in The Open and Flexible Learning Series, from Routledge (www.routledgeeducation.com/books/series). Australia, another country well known for its distinguished history of innovative distance education, has a well-developed Flexible Learning Framework (www.flexiblelearning.net.au). An extensive inquiry into the “flexible provision of higher education” in non-metropolitan areas of Australia raised key issues and noted six common practical strategies to enable access, logistical convenience, and some accommodation to learning preferences of students (Ling et al. 2001). However, such flexibilities come with a price and some long-term impacts, as the researchers report and as some authors in this book echo. Finally, the Higher Education Academy in the UK released three reports in 2009 on changes needed for increasing workplace-based engagement in learning for career development. Such changes hinge on “greater flexibility” (www.heacademy.ac.uk/news/detail/2009/wbl_reports).

International post-secondary educators have recently signalled greater interest in flexibility. The June 2009 world conference of the International Council for Open and Distance Education, in association with the annual conference of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities, focused on a very ambitious theme: “Flexible Education for All: Open—Global—Innovative.” Here, the word *flexibility* was used to argue for significant change in educational institutions: “Society, the labour market, and individual as well as groups of learners require much more flexibility in their acquisition of (new) knowledge and competencies. This implies a major modernisation of the educational system that can build on our expertise and experience” (www.ou.nl/eCache/DEF/80/137.html). In the same year, the University of Hull, in the UK, used its annual teaching and learning conference to address the challenges regarding four aspects of “flexibility in higher education”—curriculum, delivery, people, and spaces. A year later, New Zealand distance educators titled their 2010 conference “Quality Connections, Boundless Possibilities—Through Open, Flexible and Distance Learning” (www.deanz.org.nz/home/index.php/deanz-conference-2010/2010-conference). With such popularity, one might easily assume that flexibility has reached the state of unassailable conceptual virtue, defying any critique at all.

BUT WHY THIS PARTICULAR BOOK?

First, we see an international niche for current and critical explorations, especially practice-based, contrarian, policy-related, and ethical assessments. Earlier critical analyses do exist (Chen 2003; Cloonan 2004; Edwards 1997; Evans 2000; Kirkpatrick 1997; Kirkpatrick and Jakupec 1999; Moran 1999; Moran and Myringer 1999; Nicoll 2006, 1997; Nunan 2000; Usher 2000; Willems 2005), but we want to update those analyses and include new explorers. As Cloonan (2004, 177) argued several years ago, an examination of the notion of flexibility “is somewhat overdue . . . and should encompass subjecting the concept of flexibility to the sort of scrutiny which it has hitherto largely escaped.” Neither of the two principal handbooks on distance education (Evans, Haughey, and Murphy 2008; Moore 2007) contains, per se, overt and critical interrogation of the concept, other than Peter Smith’s analysis in Evans, Haughey, and Murphy (2008). None of the major refereed journals in the distance-education field, to our knowledge, has recently run a themed issue to unearth the elements and dynamics of flexibility in practice.

A second reason for this book lies in particular aspects of our practice. Digital technologies offer increasing choices for learners in terms of when, where, and how they seek reputable programs and stimulating collegiality. Canada’s leading news review magazine, for example, recently asked, “Who needs a prof?” as a journalist explained how she took flexibility into her own hands for university studies. Like at least one class colleague, she used Web 2.0 resources to escape the boredom and irrelevance of her traditional university course materials and find free and exciting course materials from Yale University via Academic Earth: “It’s instant Ivy League for the masses” (Findlay 2010, 48). No surprise, then, that she used the Yale materials for all her graded assignments and exams. No surprise either that she questioned the value of paying course fees to the local university, which failed to meet her expectations.

How far institutional leaders develop and manage actual policies for teaching and learning choices is quite another issue. How often, for example, might we see “cottage industry” approaches that undermine effective flexible teaching across an institution? The “cottage” (office) often houses a teacher, increasingly a part-timer, who, after a brief introduction

to the latest course-management system, is essentially left to her/his own devices, struggling to manage the resulting extra workload. Fierce inter-institutional competition for enrolment calls for marketing discourses that appeal not only to learners' career aspirations but also to institutional skills in helping learners to manage the multiple demands on their resources. Governments still proclaim the need for flexible workers in adaptive workforces as a contribution to the development of national economies, and educators take notice of such thinking (e.g., Higher Education Funding Council of England 2010; Jakupec and Garrick 2000; Nicoll 2006). As Nunan (2000), Nicoll (2006), and authors in this book argue, the broad contexts of post-secondary education practice promote flexibility as a broad philosophy or as a practical change strategy, especially around teaching activity. But one point that Nunan made (2000, 50) remains relevant now as we see institutions trying to adapt to demographic and economic change: despite the intellectual challenges offered via the "multiple meanings" and "contested terms and concepts" around flexible learning, he argues, practitioners need to decide "whether to support or resist the changes that parade under the banner of flexibility."

One overarching question drives the making of this book: flexible learning is a canonical concept, much discussed and valued as an inherently "good" goal, but just how challenging is it on the rough terrains of practice? Or, as one colleague asked me, "How far does the rubber stretch?" Four subsidiary questions emerge: (1) Who or what is driving the flexibility agenda, and for whose benefit? (2) If the canon is still relevant for many institutions, how might we map its enabling and restraining forces in all their complexities? (3) Where are the compromises, the trade-offs? (4) How might we better problematize flexible-learning discourses as they are used in post-secondary formal education contexts? You will find some answers from seasoned professionals as you read on.

Our final reason for making this book is that we wanted to present relatively frank reflections from a wide range of very experienced international colleagues. Being both frank and reflective is not always easy, so we appreciate the authors being willing to take some risks. Like the earlier, pioneer generation of distance-mode educators, our writers have faced down very challenging dynamics and attitudes.

Before summarizing a few approaches to defining flexibility and outlining the book's structure, I would like to acknowledge some key heritage thinkers.

HERITAGE KNOWLEDGE AS INSPIRATION

Charles (Chuck) Wedemeyer was an American icon of distance education. He pioneered the key principles of flexible learning (1981), as Chère Campbell Gibson, who knew Chuck well, explains:

He felt passionately about these independent, self-directed learners and believed learners should be able to set their own goals; work at their own pace; and at times convenient to the ebb and flow of their busy lives, to exercise a high degree of autonomy as well as self-assessment of outcomes of their learning. . . . The ability to work at one's own time and place and pace requires flexibility that we may unconsciously design out of our educational resources. . . . Wedemeyer recognized living required learning and learning required flexible access to a wide array of resources, access that technology could facilitate. (Gibson 2008, 225)

Chuck Wedemeyer mentored Michael G. Moore, whose concern for "learner autonomy" prompted him to ask, "How flexible is each instructional process to the requirements of the learners?" (Moore 1972, 81). Moore's well-known typology for assessing educational flexibility uses three dimensions: structure, dialogue, and control. "Programs offering greater flexibility," he argues, have "less structure," offer "greater opportunity for dialogue between teachers and learners," and give "more control of the teaching-learning process to the student" (Moore 2006, viii). In the context of today's collaborative technologies, words like *structure*, *dialogue*, and *control* do not feel so unusual, but let us not be complacent. Whose definitions of these terms might prevail in an institution? While Moore recognizes that digital technologies have prompted some increased flexibility, he sees stronger, less visible pressures working against it. He argues, therefore, for substantive changes in attitudes, policies, and operations: "Much more needs to be done. . . . Technological

and pedagogical flexibilities are limited, squeezed, and constrained by highly *inflexible institutional structures and almost totally inflexible national, state, and institutional policies*” (2006, ix; emphasis in the original). Examples of inflexibilities exist in this book, and they are not without irony, given the changing learning needs of adults over their life spans and the changes in society. As Dominique Abrioux, one of the former presidents of Athabasca University, asked, how do we reconcile the relative rigidity of traditional institutions “with the need for lifelong learning? Because lifelong learning means flexibility: you have to be allowed to do it around other activities” (interview: see Burge 2008, 14).

My third acknowledgement is to the generation of pioneers whose work across the second half of the twentieth century epitomized flexible ways to help adults gain a second chance for education. They showed how flexibility could work well in contexts before digital technology. They had to fight significant battles with traditionally minded administrators to change restrictive policies and open up accessibility and choice: they were “changing higher education so that it is more flexible in its attitude to what is permissible,” as Greville Rumble once explained (interview: see Burge 2007, 4). Such “walking the talk” of flexibility needed courage, conviction, and perseverance. Now, this book shows members of the succeeding generation doing similar value-driven and critical thinking.

SOME RECENT DISCUSSIONS OF FLEXIBILITY

Relatively recent literature contains many specific examples of flexibility in practice (e.g., De Boer and Collis 2009; Ling et al. 2001; Mackey and Livsey 2006; Mitchell 2008; Murray, Donohoe, and Goodhew 2004; Taylor 2000; Thorpe 2000). But here I set a broader introduction by referencing writers whose treatment of flexibility has been broad-ranging and grounded in gritty experience.

Ted Nunan’s (2000) discussion of flexible learning as part of post-industrial, post-Fordist societal changes is still worth reading. He prompts us to dig into patterns and outcomes of covert and overt uses of power sheltered inside inflexible institutional practices. As you read the chapters

in this volume, recall Nunan's plea for more rigorous conceptual clarity: "Without an adequate analysis of the term 'flexible', however, institutions and teachers may drift into a confusion of contradictory practices and educationally unsound programmes, which benefit neither individuals nor society" (64).

Betty Collis and Jef Moonen (2001) link their eighteen lessons in educational change and technology application to their multi-layered definition of flexible learning. Arguing that flexible learning applies to many contexts (not just distance education), they focus on choices for learners that revolve around time, course content, entry requirements, teaching models and learning resources, and delivery and logistics (2001, 10). In acknowledging that implementing flexibility is never easy, they identify four "constraints" on flexibility and then analyze how the dynamics that underpin those constraints—institution, implementation, pedagogy, and technology—influence the actual experience of flexibility.

The Australian study on flexibility mentioned earlier (Ling et al. 2001) used seven domains to illuminate the defining concept of "guided choice": time, pace, place, content, learning style, assessment options, and choice about learning alone and/or in company with others. Provisions for flexibility would have to include such policies as credit transfer, open entry to programs, recognition of prior learning, multi-modes for staging programs, and flexible reward structures.

Badrul Khan's later work (2006) also uses a componential approach. He argues that flexibility has to be understood in the context of eight "categories" in which flexible learning may exist: "institutional, management, technological, pedagogical, ethical, interface design, resource support [and] evaluation" (9). Referring to the discourse of "anyone, anyplace, and anytime" post-secondary education, Kahn focuses on flexible learning as "an innovative approach for delivering well-designed, learner-centered, and interactive learning environments . . . by utilizing the attributes and resources of the Internet, digital technologies, and other modes of learning in concert with instructional design principles" (1). He goes on to ask, "Can we do what learners want?" (1). You will find in this volume some very practical, even hard-headed responses to that question.

WHAT THIS BOOK OFFERS

First is the geographical range of the thirty-five authors. Those who accepted our invitation come from Australia, Canada, England, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Scotland, Singapore, South Africa, and the United States.

Second is the opportunity to “flex” your own route through the sections of this book. Three conceptual explorations are followed by four analyses of opposing forces that often attend institutional efforts to become more flexible. Seven “swamp” stories show practitioners tilling their tough territories of practice and offering insights after all the action. I borrow here from Donald Schön’s famous distinction between the low-lying land and the high ground of professional practice (1995). The “swampy lowlands” contain “messy and confusing” problems that defy the high ground’s prescriptive solutions based on more distanced “research-based theory and technique” (28).

When you emerge from the lowlands, pause a while and step into Arthur Wilson’s meta-analysis, which comes from the mind of an experienced adult educator and academic leader in the field of adult education. Or head straight into the three chapters on compromises or trade-offs and discover who really gains the long-term practical advantage after all the struggles. Another meta-analysis, in the chapter by Chère Campbell Gibson and Terry Gibson, uses the well-known Kurt Lewin Force Field Analysis model.

Three bold contrarian voices—those of David Harris, Adrian Kirkwood, and Alan Woodley—reach out to provoke us, each showing the conviction of long experience and challenging us to do some reframing. Katherine Nicoll then takes on the contrarians’ thinking and reflects on what their arguments mean to her in terms of distance- and lifelong-learning discourses. She helps us to interrogate our practice critically. Finally, my two co-editors and I summarize the issues and possibilities that stand out for us and that might encourage a synthesis of some of the many aspects of flexibility.

To our colleagues who have dared to critique the canonical, thank you. To you as reader, enjoy the journey.

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Growing up in a key wine-growing region of Australia, Liz Burge learned how vigneron flex their thinking through the complexities of grape growing and wine production. While tolerating the rigidities of face-to-face baccalaureate part-time studies, she worked in libraries and vocational colleges, where her own flexible thinking had to match that of her clients. Completing master's and doctoral studies at the University of Toronto–OISE while managing two service units there helped her to bend and even flaunt some rules with varying degrees of discretion, especially when the

needs of distance-mode students had to be foremost. Now, almost at the end of professing adult education at the University of New Brunswick in Canada and many years of service to distance education, Liz looks forward to learning new lives and rediscovering that wine region. www.unbf.ca/education/faculty/burge.html.