Introduction

Since the concept of flexibility is loaded with various meanings, we asked several writers for their latest thinking. Denise Kirkpatrick is a pioneer analyst of the concept. She uses her work as a senior administrator at the UK’s Open University to carry forward the practical implications of the university’s famous, revolutionary, and forty-year-old mantra: “Open to people, places, methods and ideas.” Today, educators are beginning to understand better the alleged revolutionary impacts of collaborative Web 2.0 technologies. But issues of choice, cost efficiency, and quality thread through Denise’s analysis, leading her to outline a key risk when technology-dependent ways are used to democratize learning. Julie Willems, in contrast, focuses solely on the student view. She knows how students think about their complex needs for choice around course and personal logistics, how they develop their expectations of teaching and learning. The implications for educators? If we are not serious about being perceived as flexible toward student needs, then we face the results of relentless market competition. Der-Thanq (Victor) Chen, Rose Liang, and Yu-mei Wang extend the current definitional discussions. Instead of hoping to demolish inflexibilities (not a productive way to go), they consider the (often covert) influence of embedded cultural/institutional social systems and the limits around personal decision making (agency). After arguing for a more sophisticated view of “the dialectical relationship between structure and agency”—meaning, in effect, that students must feel able and free to negotiate some adaptations of their learning processes with the course facilitator—Victor, Rose, and Yu-mei pose eight questions designed to ground their thinking in daily realities.