One limitation of the predominant interpretations of flexible learning is the presumption that flexibility is “good” and that it has specific aims, efficiencies, and outcomes, such as enabling access to learning. These presumptions, however, are not fully substantiated by research and other literature. Another limitation is the lack of consideration of the need to install new or to revise entrenched organizational structures to achieve the desired flexibility. We suggest that a modified concept—structured flexible learning (sFl), situated within a structure/agency dialectical framework—would be a productive move beyond the current discourse on flexible learning.

We write partly from the perspective of our personal experiences of teaching in institutes of higher education both in the East (China, Taiwan, Singapore) and the West (Canada, USA, New Zealand). We have observed that many people still regard the teaching process as relatively structured and based almost entirely on the presumed omniscience of the educator’s planning and on what teachers decide is good for students. Higher-education structures are often criticized as inflexible and not conducive to learning. Our empirical work has, however, convinced us that structures (that is, rules) can play a legitimate role in facilitating class discussions, although both teachers and students need to play their part in devising these rules (Chen, Wang, and Hung 2009). We will address this issue in more detail below.

An earlier analysis (Chen 2003) of the varieties of flexibility associated with specific instructional modes revealed that they were inevitably coupled with inflexibilities, provisos, or the structural limitations of a particular form of flexibility. In order to make one aspect of the instruction
flexible, other aspects usually have to be more structured (Chen 2003). One example lies in synchronous locational flexibilities such as video conferencing, which allows for interaction beyond spatial constraints but brings logistical inflexibilities such as the requirement that the student report to a fixed broadcast station or the need for specific technological infrastructure, human support, and other resources. A further example concerns the temporal flexibility in online classes: while participants do not have to gather at the same time and the discussion may be more in depth and thoughtful without the pressure of immediacy (as in a face-to-face discussion), the learning pace must be established to ensure that everyone stays focused on the topic(s) at hand. Otherwise cognitive threading may be reduced and the discussions will have little or no commonality.

We recommend, then, that the flexible-learning discourse be redirected from the removal of inflexibilities—as far as that may be possible—to the design of more helpful structures for distance and online learning. Our own context calls for such a move. In seeing flexible learning as SFL, we do not wish to commit ourselves too hastily to the “goodness” of any particular form. We see SFL as a social process, with purposeful choice and informed decision making shaped by the context that students bring to their learning. We therefore call for a more rigorous examination of the concept of flexible learning.

We offer for critical analysis a modified concept that is grounded in a structure/agency theoretical framework. Before we explain, however, we return to aspects of the original term, flexible learning.

### Flexible Learning versus Structured Flexible Learning

The commonly accepted definition of flexible learning sees the provision of flexible access to learning experiences in terms of at least one of the following factors: time, place, pace, learning style, content, assessment, and pathways (e.g., Macquarie University 2001; Browne 1999; Ling et al. 2001). Such a view acknowledges that learning requires students’ active engagement and more independence and responsibility for their own learning than normally occurs in traditional learning. Flexible learning is
intended to be student-centred rather than teacher-centred. Other characteristics include student collaboration with peers and/or practitioners in the field; provision of ample resources; a context-sensitive learning experience; greater emphasis on generic skills such as thinking, metacognition, and problem-solving; and a shift of the teacher’s role from a source of knowledge to a facilitator throughout the student’s learning journey (e.g., Bridgland and Blanchard 2001; George and Luke 1996; University of Sydney 1999).

In broader referential terms, flexible learning refers loosely to various terms such as distance education, open learning, e-learning, technology-based learning, and blended learning. The term structured flexible learning (SFL) includes all the descriptors noted above for flexible learning, but we argue that flexibility is necessarily formulated in a structure-agency framework. We will outline key concepts of this framework, especially the dialectical components, and suggest some practical possibilities and challenges.

THE STRUCTURE-AGENCY FRAMEWORK IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Structure-agency discourse identifies the questions to be raised about the nature of social existence and reality, and about the influence of structure and agency on social action. Social theorists have assumed different approaches to understanding this relationship. One approach (Althusser 2005; Clarke 1978; Durkheim 1982) argues that structure or culture should be viewed as determining social existence, social reality, and human social action. This approach assumes that students are unable to make any decisions related to their own learning. Therefore, for example, assigned projects need to be broken down into simplified and manageable tasks and the many interactions between student teams prescribed by the person in power over the students: the teacher.

In another approach (Blumer 1969; Garfinkel 1967; Homans 1974), the focus is on agency, which highlights the capacity of agents (individuals) to shape social existence, social reality, and human social action. This approach assumes that students, as agents, should be given as much
freedom as possible to excel in any direction they desire. Some alternative schooling approaches based on this approach have been tried, but most have not survived, and even those that have survived have for the most part been transformed into the third approach, described below. To our knowledge, the purist practice based on this agency approach does not exist.

We support a third approach, which argues that social structures strongly influence human behaviour and that humans are capable of simultaneously inhabiting and changing structures. We contend that this approach, with its insistence that structure and agency are co-linked in a dialectical fashion, provides a more productive understanding of flexible learning. This structure-agency framework draws on the work of Giddens (1984), Sewell (1992), and Hays (1994), who argue that structure and agency are co-determined and co-evolving. While their work was conducted in previous decades, these theorists drew attention to a continuing theme in the fields of sociology and other social sciences. Unfortunately, only recently have educators begun to appreciate their relevance to today’s contexts. We believe that the structure-agency framework has particular relevance for elaborating our practice in twenty-first-century online flexible learning.

SOCIAL SYSTEMS

Central to this structure-agency framework is the concept of social systems. We highlight two of its features. First, social systems, such as a course, are composed of social activities/practices that link persons across time and space. Through such activities, structure and agency are inter-related: for example, an online discussion (social activity) of an SFL course (social system) carries with it rules (structure) that guide how students should act (agency) (Chen, Wang, and Hung 2009; Salmon 2002, 2004). In other words, social structure is not external to action but internal to the flow of action that constitutes social practices (Layder 1998).

The second feature of social systems is their layering into manifold, interconnected levels. These levels can range from two people in social interaction to progressively larger units, from peer, to family, to...
community, to national, regional, and global social groupings. When conducting an SFL course (a social system), we thus need to consider how other social systems impact the online social system. For example, most students try to relate to culturally diverse classmates in respectful ways because they have learned values and social relationships of multiracial living from their families, communities, and schools. This disposition is supported by a political discourse on the importance of valuing diversity, a founding principle of countries such as Singapore and New Zealand, and is reinforced by associated discourses that are regional (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2003) and international (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2001).

SFL may therefore be conceptualized in a similar way: as a micro-level social system, a learning system (a course) is composed of social and learning activities. But SFL is not a self-contained system. Rather, it is interconnected to other levels of systems and subject to their differential influence. For example, a student may place other more pressing personal goals or values above those group-related values espoused in a course.

On the surface, our view of SFL as a social system appears similar to the traditional way of relating the social system and its interactions to a multi-level context of interacting influences (so-called variables). At a deeper level, however, the SFL approach is more integrative in orientation and highlights the importance of interweaving these multiple, overlapping influences into the learning system in qualitative rather than quantitative ways.

**How the Dialectic is Applied to SFL**

The dialectical relationship between structure and agency is mindful of social process and focuses on the evolution of aspects of a community (Giddens 1984). In the same way, SFL may be viewed as a social process in which the course facilitator as a knowledgeable agent designs a flexible-learning system (a course of study) in a specific way and students negotiate its implementation in a way that leads the facilitator to maintain or change the course design. For example, due to unique characteristics of each batch of students, group size can range from five or six to a dozen.
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SFL course designers will initially need to make the decision about group size. However, they will be sensitive to student feedback and possibly adapt to the group’s consensus in subsequent activities. Such feedback and respect given to student opinion are part of the social process by which students and the course facilitator co-evolve and co-constrain their social system.

Such ongoing engagement of both student and facilitator may involve them in questioning the very structure of a conventional course and the concept of what is meant by a course. These considerations can lead to novel course designs supportive of a genuine learning community. For example, we were involved in the design of a program in which the graduating competencies of the eight required courses of a postgraduate diploma program in teacher education were already identified. The program became flexibly structured in that the students assumed the initiative to craft their own projects and to seek collaboration and commitment from other students to participate in each other’s projects. Students were also allowed to negotiate their learning in their own time and at their own pace. However, these strategies require participants to dialectically negotiate structures that lead to good results, such as sustained commitment to fellow classmates’ projects once the decisions have been made. Depending on the progress of the various projects, these previously negotiated structures (or commitments) usually have to be renegotiated, in our experience at least. Another example of the dialectic at work is the mode of synchronous textual communication using Chat software. This communication mode offers flexibility in where students learn (although not when students learn, given the real-time requirement) and allows for some interaction. However, it is linked with certain inflexibilities and constraints such as the need for typing skills, technological infrastructure, and low to moderate demands on resources, technology, time, instructional design, and/or administrative support.

Structure-agency dialectics may also be seen when individuals make purposeful decisions. For example, a course facilitator may design rules to facilitate fluent dialogue so that students can experience how effective discussion can lead to deep learning. However, as a result of overwhelming postings, students ask for fewer interactions, so the facilitation rules are modified accordingly.
CONCLUSION

In summary, we view the best SFL as a dialectical process within a multi-layered social system, with purposeful choice and informed, negotiated decision making. Of course, what we argue for is not easily accomplished, especially when the time and intellectual energy demands place extra burdens on teachers. We have also learned that other challenges lie in changing the mindsets of both students and teachers, as well as existing institutional structures, which are formalized based on assumptions supporting traditional teacher-focused models of pedagogy. Questions therefore need to be asked in order to test the practicality of SFL across various international contexts. Here are some questions that we hope are useful:

1. How do we help students to better understand the structure and the social system in which they and the course are embedded? Once they are more knowledgeable about the structure, can they become more effective agents in effectively altering the structure of the course in constructive ways?

2. How willing and able might teachers be to invest in the work required in SFL? Which cultural contexts may help or hinder work toward respectful negotiations on class process?

3. In our recent work attempting to understand how SFL can be actualized, we engaged students in negotiating discussion rules (Chen, Wang, and Hung 2009). Results showed that the more we engage students in negotiating these supporting rules, the more productive their learning is.

4. Taking the above considerations further, how far might the structure-agency dialectic be empirically researched? How practical is SFL within the current constraints of institutional hierarchy, politics, and efficiency needs in schools and universities? For example, how might SFL courses be financially sustained? How might teachers give “fair” grades when SFL is intentionally designed to cater to individual needs? How do we three authors, as course facilitators, best balance our wishes for flexibility against competing institutional agendas and politics that do not subscribe to SFL ideals but see virtue in standardized, highly efficient operations? Why must a course be
defined by a fixed overall time frame and prescribed pace? Why can it not be seen as a community of learners in close interaction with each other? Have we asked enough questions? We look forward to hearing from you.

REFERENCES


**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Der-Thanq (Victor) Chen has been geographically challenged since his youth. He once visited a friend in the northern part of Singapore and ended up in Malaysia without a passport! He now drives with Wency, his wife, who navigates while he holds the wheel. For this reason, he is a true follower of distributed cognition. He has leveraged this challenge by enjoying whatever shores he has landed on—Taiwan, USA, Singapore, New Zealand, and back to Singapore. Fortunately, he has found an anchor in cyberspace. Having experienced such challenges in the face-to-face environment, he decided to pursue a career in education, which allows him to help those students needing directions in life as well as those who may be lost in online spaces. He is now Head of the Learning Sciences...
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Rose Liang began her undergraduate study in zoology but found that it didn’t seem to provide answers to many questions. Instead of dissecting animals, she decided to “dissect” society by studying sociology. She became interested in issues of culture and ethnic relations, but eventually realized that sociology did not provide all the answers. Her move to education started in Canada, where she became involved in several projects, one of which involved creating distance-learning materials—but in a traditional, not an online, mode. Given this background, she considered herself computer-phobic. But she is now undergoing an identity transformation as she plays games on Facebook and speaks with her children via Skype—it’s all about learning in the new media space. She is a research scientist at the Learning Sciences Lab at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, in Singapore. http://lsl.nie.edu.sg/people/researchers/liang-yee-hing-rose

Yu-mei Wang took two weeks to learn how to double-click a mouse and was thoroughly embarrassed when she wrapped a disk label over the metal shutter of a floppy disk (a dinosaur compared with today’s flash drive). Her talent for doing unusual things with the computer often elicited inquiries from her fellow students as to why she was pursuing a degree focused on computers in education. Just when she was about to be overwhelmed with self-doubt, she found her niche in email. She took an immediate liking to human connections across distance via machines. Human connections worldwide have since been her sustenance as she has pursued a career as an educational technology educator with an emphasis on and fascination for designing and delivering online courses. Yu-mei is an associate professor in the Department of Leadership, Special Education, Foundations, and Technology, at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. www.ed.uab.edu/ymwang/