Politics, Pedagogy, and Productivity as Drivers of Flexible Learning

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THE CHAPTER IN THREE VERSES

With long-term investment, high levels of enthusiasm, and great expectations all focused on moving the flexible-learning agenda forward, it is time for a critical review of two long-unanswered questions: Why is it that far fewer faculty than anticipated are prepared to engage with flexible learning, and what barriers exist between strategic intent and the translation of flexible-learning principles into good educational practice?

A recent report from a prominent British organization that supports leadership in the use of information and communications technologies (ICT) in education notes that “policies can drive forward an agenda for change, but the real test comes at the point of use” (JISC 2008, 5). Answering these two questions is therefore critical to the national and institutional implementation of flexible-learning strategies.

In this chapter, I analyze these questions from the perspective of capacity development, and I use the findings from a study of long-term prospects for grassroots flexible-learning initiatives to propose some answers. While my context is New Zealand, these analyses apply elsewhere.

WHY USE A CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK?

In Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating Capacity Development, Horton (2002, 2) describes “an organic process of growth and development by which individuals, groups and organizations improve their ability to perform their functions and achieve desired results over time.” The process involves cycles of situation analysis and monitored change initiatives.
(Tamas 2008). In the context of flexible learning, faculty and organizational development through action learning are key enabling methods, with the core aim being to identify and remove barriers to the achievement of strategic goals. The examination of different perspectives is important because the impact of strategic plans varies according to individual roles, priorities, and experience. It may not be possible to align all priorities of, for example, information-technology services, finance, and teaching; however, it is important at least to understand them.

For evaluating capacity-development initiatives, Horton recommends a holistic approach and flexible definitions of success. Tightly defined targets and quantitative measures, he argues, are unsuitable for the complex and innovative process of strategic change. The flexible-learning community knows from experience how difficult it is to predict outcomes when new ground is being broken (Mason 1998), so it’s refreshing to find a structured method that considers it unnecessary even to try. The goal of organizational learning informed by the collective response to new initiatives is an integral part of any strategic initiative.

The capacity-development framework can be applied in many situations. It provided a useful basis for my recent study of flexible-learning sustainability factors, which yielded powerful insights into why many initiatives fail to meet expectations that seem, on the surface, to be reasonable and well supported (Gunn 2010). My situational analysis drew on three sources: the literature, researcher observation, and interviews with key practitioners. I aimed to review progress on key aspects of the implementation of flexible-learning strategies in New Zealand. The chief goal was to minimize speculation, get all stakeholders talking, and focus on the directions to which compelling, if somewhat obscured, evidence was pointing. I thus had to learn what an informed response to demands for flexible teaching and learning means in practical terms.

THE SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Many national governments and most institutions have some kind of strategy to drive a flexible-learning agenda across the tertiary sector. In this context, the definition of flexible is any learning design or delivery
method that offers an element of choice of place, pace, or mode of study. It does not necessarily involve distance, and while the use of ICT is not mandatory, the word *flexibility* is often used synonymously with *e-learning*. Statements of strategic intent typically focus on widening access, accommodating the needs of a growing and diversifying student population, and, last but not least, articulating social-constructivist learning theories in course and curriculum design. In brief, the stated aim is to respond to changing demands from the market. A rather less explicitly stated intention is to ensure long-term viability of the prevailing institutional business model.

No doubt these are all worthy intentions. The literature is rich with research and case studies reporting successful implementation of flexible-learning principles in campus-based (e.g., Simpson and Anderson 2009; Gunn and Harper 2007) and distance learning (e.g., Meriosotis and Phipps 2000). A range of useful online tools, design models, and reusable resources for flexible learning has evolved in recent years. A notable culture shift is occurring, as many learning designs, software systems, and course materials are made available through open-source, Creative Commons, and share-alike licences. While this model may not please the accountants, it contributes to a growing body of knowledge and reflects the culture of collaboration and the service philosophy central to systems of public education.

With positive signals coming from faculty and students everywhere about the benefits of flexible learning, it would be easy to conclude that strategy implementation has already scored a major success. Yet most courses in New Zealand universities make minimal use of available opportunities beyond content-management and administrative functions. Commercial or open-source online learning-management systems have become more or less ubiquitous. However, their use is often restricted to accessing course documents, circulating notices, submitting assignments, and assessing students’ work with basic online tools. While many creative flexible-learning designs depend on these systems, the truth is that most faculty are not exploiting that potential. The situation bears remarkable similarity to computer-assisted-learning developments since the early 1990s (e.g., Hammond et al. 1992; Gunn, Woodgate, and O’Grady 2005). The seemingly simple but penetrating questions remain: What are
the missing links between policy and practice, why have they proved so persistent, and what can be done to address them?

Part of the answer lies in the barriers identified at the practice level in a study of flexible-learning strategy implementation in six of New Zealand’s eight universities. These fall into three general categories: politics, productivity, and pedagogy. The institutions’ courses are mainly campus based, though many have integrated flexible elements. Specialized postgraduate subjects are increasingly available in flexible mode to accommodate students employed in professions. As institutions, these eight universities may not rank among leading innovators in the global trend toward flexible learning, though some individuals and groups of faculty do work at the leading edge. However, the universities support teaching and learning innovation in many practical ways. This scenario is common to many national contexts. How far these findings relate to others is up to the reader to decide.

Political Barriers
An important missing link between strategic intent and flexible-learning practice at the grassroots level is mutual understanding among people at different points on the continuum between strategic planning and educational practice. The cultural norm of devising strategy at the top of an organization and driving it downwards is useful in many respects, but where it often falls short in the context of flexible learning, or other significant educational change, is in its failure to foster grassroots involvement from the outset. This approach overlooks the value of drawing on the experience of those already familiar with developing flexible-learning programs through a process of experimentation, evaluation, and changed practice. Without this grounding, risky forecasts, sales pitches, and personal or political agendas may become the significant drivers.

Most institutions have committee structures, policy review processes, and management roles designed to facilitate multi-directional communication, but few seem to work very effectively in practice. It is difficult enough for information to filter down, and rare for it to filter up. Strategy implementation fails to overcome the first hurdle if what should be a shared vision is at best an imposed and only partially relevant one. At worst, the imposed vision may seem obscure and irrelevant to many key
players. People making important strategic decisions often do so from a partially informed perspective. Duke, Jordan, and Powell (2008, 2) note that “generally there are significant shortcomings in the capability of senior management teams in [higher-education institutions] to identify and exploit the full strategic potential of technology.” Politically, strong players have significant power to influence. Leading practitioners may not be included in this group, and the average faculty member may not even be in the picture. If there is no shared vision to start with, how can strategy implementation proceed?

The distributive-leadership model described by Lefoe, Smigiel, and Parrish (2007) offers a practical way to overcome this barrier. Within this model, a strategy to increase educational leadership capacity (among other goals) uses action learning, mentoring, and new networks to promote mutual understanding across organizational levels. This largely successful way to facilitate strategic change was initially challenged by slow acceptance of networks that cut across hierarchical levels. There have been, however, positive signs of progress over time. Meanwhile, the conceptual approach, the objectives, and the strategies employed may be useful in flexible learning and other strategic change initiatives.

Beyond individual institutions, national policies and funding initiatives similar to New Zealand’s ICT Strategic Framework (New Zealand Ministry of Education 2006) and eLearning Collaborative Development Fund (New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission 2003) support the trend toward increased flexibility. While these initiatives make a positive contribution, they also add a layer of complexity—in the former case, by setting goals without providing the means for their achievement, and in the latter, by providing seed funding with no support beyond the establishment phase. In principle, these are positive moves. In practice, they don’t always work as intended if, for example, market signals are misread or projects stall at the dissemination stage.

To end this brief summary of political challenges to flexible learning on a positive note, the environment does become more supportive through experience. The same flexibility that is demanded for learning environments slowly filters through to organizational structures and systems that support such flexibility. Concepts of power and leadership are gradually shifting from individual to collaborative models. Such a culture
shift is significant for future developments. Even though people and organizations generally resist it, over time change is inevitable and finds its own equilibrium. One impact of new technology and the social change associated with it is a shifting locus of control in various parts of formal education systems. Regardless of politics, evolving pedagogy will persist as a significant driver.

**Pedagogical Barriers**

Experience shows that the pedagogical knowledge of capable teachers and/or learning designers in a supportive environment is the most effective driver of flexible learning at the level of practice (e.g., Lockwood and Gooley 2001). This is true whether or not a guiding strategy is in place. Collaboration with media developers and others may be involved, but is not prerequisite to success. This statement holds no surprises for anyone directly involved in the development of flexible educational practice. It may be less familiar to the authors of policy requiring all courses to have an online presence within a specified time frame: these policy-makers generally believe that flexible learning can thus be successfully implemented. A common outcome of such a policy-driven approach is the widespread use of a learning-management system as a repository for course materials and administration. While the convenience of online access is welcome, this result represents poor use of the pedagogical potential of even the most basic tools. Thus, conceptions of flexible learning that were formed in the process may limit the scope of further creative enterprise around teaching and learning.

Synergies between educational theory and practice, emergent technologies, and changing demands from learners produce the most notable and sustainable innovations. In an ideal situation, everyone involved in development and dissemination of flexible-learning practice is familiar with all these elements and is motivated and encouraged to experiment in order to find creative solutions to challenges arising in their professional practice context. Participants also need to see flexible learning as a practical way to meet these challenges. These conditions are currently not met as widely as is necessary to drive the flexible-learning agenda into the future. The amount of time and creative effort required acts, for some, as a deterrent to engagement.
Given these barriers, what does make flexible-learning initiatives pedagogically successful and practically sustainable? Typically, successful implementation starts with a problem that acts as a catalyst to innovation. In one common scenario, there is too little time or too many students for established educational designs to work in a traditional face-to-face setting. Many cases demonstrate how integrated online tutorials, formative peer- or self-assessment simulations, and/or discussion-based activities may overcome this problem. Students can spend different amounts of time and use these activities in flexible ways to suit their own perceived learning needs and preferred styles. In solving a problem that is both practical and pedagogical, learner autonomy and choice are also increased.

**Productivity-Related Barriers**

Anticipated increase in productivity is another major driver of flexible learning, perhaps more so than is acknowledged at the strategic level. Where this objective is covert and/or unrelated to teaching and learning enhancement, it can hit barriers at the level of practice. An extreme example is projected economies of scale from large, online courses taught by low-cost graduate students. Many initiatives geared toward productivity gains have failed spectacularly and have resulted in the loss of significant investment that would have been well used by better-grounded flexible-learning initiatives. The few that have survived tend to serve niche rather than mass markets.

Economies of scale are essentially good for flexible learning, as examples from both single institutions and national sectors show. For example, degree programs offered by consortia support specialization and avoid replication. National funding initiatives benefit from cross-institutional collaboration and production of freely available resources. Many teaching departments and individual faculty have produced creative flexible-learning solutions to manage the demands of increasing workloads, student numbers, and diversity. Practical and pedagogical aspects often overlap. Thus, the peer and online assessment, tutorials, discussions, and simulations noted in the pedagogy section above serve the dual purpose of enhancing both learning and productivity for teachers, learners, and institutions. Online enrolment, gradebooks, and communication tools increase efficiency across the system, provided they are well designed.
and effectively used. Many other benefits accrue from the convenience of online access, as instant feedback, open communication, and interaction grow to support teaching, learning, and administration.

**BRIDGING THE GAPS**

It is clear from the evidence summarized here that many positive steps have been made toward answering the opening questions: why is it that far fewer faculty than anticipated are prepared to engage with flexible learning, and what barriers exist between strategic intent and educational practice? The answers change over time, and my conclusions reflect the current situation.

From a faculty member’s perspective, incentives and rewards for engagement with flexible learning may have no tangible link to strategic initiatives. Investment of time and resources carries an opportunity cost that needs to be acknowledged through processes such as promotion, continuation, and awards. Some faculty remain unaware of what support is available and how to access it. Better marketing and communication is one possible remedy.

For the drivers of strategic change toward flexibility, there is a management expectation that investment will lead to desirable outcomes, yet investment decisions are often misaligned with the demands of practitioners. The incentives, checks, and balances used in another area of core business, research productivity, are not applied to flexible or other forms of teaching and learning development. The result is that policy documents related to effective and creative teaching do not always reflect what happens in practice.

Positive action and new lines of communication need to connect these unproductively separate strands of flexible-learning development. Integration into institutional systems and structures is the simple answer. What this means in practice is proving slow to be defined and to permeate institutional culture. The meaning also varies across institutional contexts. The capacity-development framework offers a suitable conceptual approach. However, creating the flexible organizational structures and levels of responsiveness required by the framework remains a challenge.
CONCLUSION

Strategic intent is a powerful force for change, but the evolving demand for flexible teaching and learning environments is what really determines the direction and the nature of response. The statement that “the real test comes at the point of use” (JISC 2008, 5) has an unspoken implication that the change may be something other than what was anticipated. New technologies prove this point consistently, as end users devise useful applications that the developers never dreamed of. Education systems are well placed if they can read signals and respond in an appropriate and timely manner to changing demand from the environment. Such is the law of nature for successful organizations, supported by grounded models and compelling evidence: flexibility, however elusive, is key.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cathy Gunn was enjoying life as a business journalist-turned-travel writer when the publishing industry was taken over by computers. Determined not to let technology make her redundant, Cathy switched to studying computer programming and educational-software development. This was no trivial task back in the Dark Age before usability and user-centred design shone light on the virtual landscape. Too many 4:00 a.m. sessions looking for bugs in her code led Cathy to another change of direction. Higher degrees in computer-based learning led to faculty development and teacher education, and eventually to a leadership role in e-learning and related organizational development. The common thread is helping people to make well-informed choices about the use of new technology to enhance teaching and learning. She is Head of the eLearning Group and Academic Adviser at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. http://cad.auckland.ac.nz/index.php?p=staff_page&staff=cgunn