An elephant’s lifetime and the patience of Job—that’s what it takes to establish flexibility in higher education.

This paper is a personal reflection on flexible learning derived from my professional work as an educational developer and academic with a focus on new technologies. The context is Australia; the time period, from 1978 to 2009. The focus is on three themes that, in my view, characterize the story of flexibility, here and internationally:

- The interchangability from the late 1980s, of the terms flexible and computer-based, and then flexible and online in relation to learning
- The false prophets of flexibility
- The changing structure of the academic workforce

By 1978, in the tiny state of Tasmania, I was using print materials along with audio-taped “lectures” (punctuated with music and questions for reflection—an old-fashioned “mash-up,” I suppose) in distance-education courses in a program in Australian literature. There, the very concept of distance seemed risible to one brought up with School of the Air (www.assoa.nt.edu.au/) in a large mainland state. Although my Tasmanian colleagues resisted “converting” their lectures to print, they reluctantly gave their (hand-written) lectures to office staff to type up and mail out to students, who had to be at least forty kilometres from the campus to enrol as “legitimate” distance-education students. We didn’t call it “flexibility” then, and it was driven by our commitment to access and equity for those encountering difficulty attending classes because of family responsibilities, financial circumstances, or disability.

Over thirty years later, in 2009, I was involved in yet another university learning and teaching plan that directed staff to “adopt more flexible
approaches” to their teaching in order to respond to student needs for flexibility in learning. Now, the driver is student convenience, as more and more students reduce their time on campus in order to undertake paid work. Most of our staff at the Australian Catholic University exhibit the same reluctance to engage with the newer tools of e-learning as those colleagues of thirty years earlier, notwithstanding decades of institutional mandates and plans!

INTERCHANGETABLE TERMINOLOGY

Such resistance stems, I believe, from the conflation of the term flexible learning with computer-based learning and, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, online learning, as the wonder that is the Web rippled out from defence research applications to more general applications in education. Initially, the Web wave grew because of the potential for storage of and access to huge data sets and computational power, but increasingly, it is essential because of its communicative potential to broach boundaries of time and distance. The term flexible now conveys “convenience” with regard to access for the client/customer, and that inevitably means digitalization of resources and processes within the higher-education sector.

Yet early conceptions of flexibility, in the 1980s, encompassed a more holistic notion of how education systems and practices must change to encourage more students to consider “learning for life” and to accommodate difference and diversity in our societies. Typically, Australian and international definitions of flexibility emphasized the elimination of barriers to formal education. This conception, from 1991, characterized the range of practices that were encouraged by educational designers. I quote the following excerpt from a 1992 publication at length to show that technology is mentioned in only two items:

Flexible delivery is an approach . . . which allows for the adoption of a range of learning strategies in a variety of learning environments to cater for differences in learning styles, learning interests and needs, and variations in learning opportunities.
Flexible delivery is characterised by:

- flexibility in terms of entry, program components, modes of learning and points of exit
- learning control and choice regarding the content, sequence, time, place and method of learning
- appropriate learner support systems
- the application of learning technologies where appropriate
- access to information on courses and services
- access to appropriate learning resources
- flexible assessment processes.

Flexible delivery finds expression in many ways including:

- the delivery of learning at a variety of locations including the workplace, the community or neighbourhood and the home
- resource-based learning with tutorial support
- the application of technology to enhance delivery or improve access opportunities
- the extension of educational opportunities through access programs, literacy programs, second and third chance opportunities for obtaining qualifications and bridging courses.

(Flexible Delivery Working Party 1992, 47)

Yet it took little time before higher-education managers seized upon the technological component of flexibility as the “silver bullet” to meet their challenges of restricted funding and competition between providers of higher education: “Strategically, operating flexibility can be seen as both an offensive and defensive tactic” (Kirkpatrick 2001, 164).

Flexible learning thus evolved into educational use of early forms of digital media, and ultimately into online learning.

If those of us working in staff development and educational technology had been more insistent that flexible learning was a pedagogical approach that was learner-centred and built on students’ experiences, and not simply a technological fix to accommodate learners who were increasingly
impatient with the rigidities of university processes and “delivery by lecture,” flexibility might have been achieved within the decade.

*If* granting bodies and governments had not been so dazzled by proposals from the false prophets of the Internet and had not thrown money at virtual universities, embryonic digital forms, and beta-version applications, and *if* programmers had not been more interested in technical innovation than solving teaching and learning problems experienced by the bulk of academic staff, flexible learning may have been accepted as an evolution of higher-education pedagogy.

*If* administrators had not assumed that the efficiencies and effectiveness gained through online administrative applications (such as enrolments, course information, and payment) could transfer easily to the teaching and learning that lies at the heart of universities (resulting in early “learning-management systems” that were simply digital content dumps), flexibility would not have generated the opprobrium that it has in the minds of academic staff.

*If* there had been fewer commercial providers anxious to capitalize—quickly—on the demand for higher education and training, seeing it as part of a globalization and market agenda, online education would have been seen as simply a component of flexibility, not its driver.

Instead, “flexibility” became, in the discourse, the revolution, the paradigm change in higher education.

**FALSE PROPHETS**

If irrational exuberance characterized the stock market of the millennium’s turn, e-enthusiasm infected the tech-bubble years of the late 1990s. Governments in Western countries, as well as granting bodies in North America, poured money into various digital projects that promised greater efficiencies in dealing with the massification of higher education. But such belief in technological solutions began before those heady years.

In Australia, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the advent of video conferencing was touted as the solution to expanding student choice, as it allowed for the teaching of small cohorts on rural and distributed campuses. Of A$2.785 million of the National Priority Reserve Fund in 1990,
A$1.85 million went to video-conferencing infrastructure in rural universities. Only A$50,000 that year went to non-computer-based investment (Australian and South Pacific External Studies Association 1990). In the event, the technology quickly became the mechanism of administrative communication or languished unused, with staff and students alienated by the different presentation and reception skills required and by the clunky technology of the time.

CDs and then DVDs aggregated more and more data, particularly graphics and sound, onto portable discs; universities “converted” their print materials into digital forms. Post office charges dropped for those universities offering distance programs; non-distance providers saw expansion into distance as a financially viable option, with little outlay for increased student enrolments in an increasingly stringent public-funding era.

Then, in the early 2000s, m-learning (mobile learning) became the next new thing—studies into the use of mobile technologies, specifically mobile phones, extolled the notion of the borderless campus and ubiquitous contact with students (Peters 2005), as education moved into the workplace. Online learning arrived—initially also data dumps for static text but more recently, a cornucopia of possibilities: synchronous chat (not so “flexible,” but “live”), discussion forums that overcame the loneliness of the long-distance student, video clips, animations, links to rich resources, and “mash-ups” (as in Web 2.0 jargon).

Social-networking tools and Web 2.0 are today’s addition to the list of tools that will change higher education forever. Advocates promote commercial applications such as MySpace, YouTube, and Twitter—although the potential of the last to contribute to meaningful knowledge construction with a 140-character limit suggests a degree of inflexibility! Podcasting of lectures has been proposed as the next big thing in freeing students from the campus timetable (as cassette recordings of lectures were touted in the 1980s).

None of these technologies, of course, would have gained the traction they have within higher education without the prophets who sang the song of the education revolution. Often, these were commercial vendors intent on finding a market for new and increasingly sophisticated applications. John Chambers, CEO of Cisco Systems, famously announced that e-learning was the “killer application” of the Internet and would make email use look like “a rounding error” (quoted in Henry 2001).
The reality in 2011 is that both online materials and email have become integral to higher education, but we still have no definitive studies on the value of each to higher-education learning; we just know that they are inextricably bound into our contemporary experience of higher education. For students on campus, online resources and email are integral to their study; for those off campus, at least in the Western world, online learning may be the only means of access to formal education. Yet return-on-investment studies are rare.

In Australia, in 2001, Dale Spender, an early enthusiast for immersion in the digital world, warned that students would desert an ossified university sector in droves for private providers because “customers” would be given what they wanted: “service and career enhancement,” along with excitement and enthusiasm (Australia Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs 2001, 20). Instead, both on-campus traditional universities and private providers have flourished. Eight years on, prophets such as Nolan (2009) were still predicting the demise of campus-based education, not only because of a lack of flexibility in timetabling but because lecturers do not make time for students (but that’s another issue entirely).

Consider a roll call of just some of the online prophets and projects that have fallen into the “www” (What Went Wrong?) category. In Australia, spectacularly, the University of Melbourne had Alan Gilbert. Gilbert touted Universitas 21Global, which partnered with Thomson Corporation to take prestige university online education to the world (Ryan and Stedman 2002). With initial funding of £50 million, the model was to have a standardized curriculum (e.g., Maths 101) developed by a star professor in gaming format. The mode of delivery would appeal to digital natives through immersion modalities and would be supported by a global network of young tutors operating in each time zone and flexible enough in their work commitments to provide 24/7 help. Ten years after this visionary online global university was announced by Gilbert, U21Global had shrunk to a graduate business school (Indian-owned) mainly offering certificate-level courses in the sub-continent and Southeast Asia. Millions of pounds of investment were lost by the four UK university partners alone. Thompson Learning, following the lead of News Corporation, the original commercial partner, pulled out in 2007. Enrolments languished;
course quality was questioned. The University of New South Wales and the University of British Columbia withdrew.

Grassroots academics rightly wince at such losses when many warned against the model, as indeed many cautioned against the UK e-University, which ignominiously closed in 2004, having squandered £50 million to attract nine hundred students.

Other failed schemes need recording: NYUonline, Scottish Knowledge, Fathom, the National Technological University, and the University of Illinois Global Campus. The latter had projected 9,000 students by 2012 and 70,000 by 2018; in early 2009, it had 500 after a US$7 million investment over two years. Kolowich (2009) reports that faculty resistance to having their courses “sold” for profit and delivered by adjuncts doomed the project. That relates to my third theme, explored below—the changing structure of the academic workforce.

Of the fifty or so “virtual university” companies listed in the various “borderless education” reports (Australian and UK-based) of 1998 to 2006, over 80 percent folded because they were starved of state funding or commercial investment and failed to attract paying students (Ryan 2008). Part of the problem was the extravagance of the claims made by e-proponents—Chambers on the millions to be made from online education, Spender on the death of the printed text, and Gilbert on the putative attraction of prestigious universities moving into online education and of an immersive-learning model.

Academics are notoriously skeptical of such rhetorical excess. Witness some of my own paper titles on e-learning:

“The Tiger’s Tail: The Convergence Dilemma” (Ryan 1997a)
“Virtually There? The Global Electronic University” (Ryan 1997b)
“Higher Education: Infected with a Millenarian Bug?”
(Ryan and Tapsall 1999)
“Borderless Education After the Dot.com Crash” (Ryan 2002)
“Do You YouTube? Wanna Come to MySpace?” (Ryan 2007)

By training, academics are skeptical creatures—they know it takes the university time to digest the technologies it ingests. To enthusiasts, this
attitude is merely denial: “For some teachers, the technology revolution of the last 30 years was, and is, an epiphany, but for some faculty it remains an enigma, at best a fad, and at worst a threat” (Batson 2009).

While I have met more than my share of King Canutes in academia seeking to turn the tide against technology, it is not merely denial. Another factor is at play, which leads me to my third theme.

THE CHANGING STRUCTURE OF THE ACADEMIC WORKFORCE

It is the extraordinary convergence of pressures in the late postmodernist, neo-liberalist world we have inhabited since the emergence of mass uptake of the Internet—which in turn coincided with micro-economic reform and management drives toward more “flexible” workforces—that has also stymied the uptake of flexibility. Part-time, casual, fixed-term contract staff became common in North America, the UK, and Australia during the 1990s. Half of the US’s tertiary teaching is now undertaken by casual staff (Chronicle of Higher Education, 23 October 2009). In Australia, the estimate is between 50 and 80 percent. Economic “reforms” and decreased funding for higher education drove this move to contingent staff, but it coincided with the dramatic increase in online resources. When the term flexible gained this neo-liberal connotation of expendable, contingent, and casual staffing, the positive aspects of the term flexibility as applied to student convenience were undermined. If to management, flexible meant a casualized workforce, why would flexible learning be embraced positively and enthusiastically by staff for the benefit of students? And why would academics, convinced (unrealistically) of the value of their intellectual property in curriculum and the ideal of university decision making as a consultative, deliberated process—the equivalent of the slow-cooking movement, to my mind, honoured more for nostalgia than for practicality—support such flexibility, when its own workforce was atomized? Herein lies a related problem for sustained flexibility in higher education.

It is not merely the “not invented here” syndrome that prevents staff from using online resources, although there is some evidence otherwise. The open educational resource, or oer, movement (see Andy Lane’s
chapter in this book), while heavily promoted in the UK in particular, has not been overwhelmed with demand—or resources, for that matter. Fewer than 10 percent of visits to MIT’s OpenCourseWare website are from teachers—85 percent are from students (http://ocw.mit.edu/about/site-statistics/). Merlot resources are routinely “unrated” by other staff, and I have yet to persuade one academic to integrate them in their teaching—and see Caris 2004. In Australia, neither edNA (Education Network Australia, www.edna.edu.au/edna/go) nor Ron Oliver’s online resource bank for ALTC (www.altcexchange.edu.au/) has been swamped with voluntary offers of materials (www.altc.edu.au/resources). Indeed, edNA closed its higher education resource bank in 2009 owing to lack of use.

What is neglected in calls for all academics to reuse others’ resources is the fact that teaching is as much a creative act as a transmission of certain knowledge/skills/values. We speak today of a “constructivist pedagogy” wherein our students construct their knowledge of the world out of theory and experience in order to create knowledge sets specific to them (although, as Laurillard [2001] reminds us, within the bounds of received and tested disciplines). Why would we not wish our academics to construct their own resources and approaches to their expert knowledge?

CONCLUSION

Batson (2009) argues that educators cannot be resistors to the disruptive paradigm consequent on digital technologies. Certainly, there is some element of Luddite resistance evident in our universities, but I don’t know anyone anymore in universities who rejects the lure and lore of Web-based treasure. Bemoaning the additional load created by email, we could not live without it. Mobile phones with email and Internet access are essential for those like me whose work stretches over six campuses and four states and territories.

So I return to my original question: how long will it take to embed flexibility in higher education? Batson concludes that with Web 2.0, “we have yet to find a new stasis, nor will we for perhaps another century or more.” So we do indeed need an elephant’s lifetime, the patience of Job.

One final point. Personally, I do not separate the “e” from learning anymore. The technologies are changing so fast that it is not even useful
to make predictions about how we can use Web 2.0. I prefer to revisit those typical early definitions of flexibility, the ones that emphasized learner-centredness, more choice over entry pathways, information on courses and services, and second- and third-chance opportunities. There the student, not the technology, is the pedagogical driver. That’s a principle worth our patience.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An early childhood in remote western Queensland with female relatives who had little formal education left Yoni Ryan with a lifetime commitment to distance education as a means of access to learning, especially for women. As technology has evolved from mimeographed notes to social networking, she has been forced to question whether the technology is driving education policy and processes, rather than being a tool for learning. She has become deeply skeptical of technophile claims and the delusions of institutions about the profits to be derived from online education but remains committed to the principle of access. She is now Professor of Higher Education at the Australian Catholic University, with responsibility for flexible delivery policies and practices. http://apps.acu.edu.au/staffdirectory/?yoni-ryan