Reflecting on Swamp Life

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The charge has fallen to me to provide comment on the foregoing “swamp” chapters in order to draw out some of the themes of flexibility and power in practitioners’ experiences in developing flexible-learning systems. The editors of this volume asked me to conduct what they referred to as a “meta-analysis” of the practitioners’ accounts. At first I demurred because I did not feel qualified to comment from an academic perspective in a rigorously scholarly manner, but the editors assured me that they were more interested in my observations as an adult educator on the theories and practices of flexible learning.

So let me begin with a disclaimer. I am neither a student of flexible learning nor a scholar of distance education. But as a practicing adult educator in several settings, such as adult-literacy education, adult-education staff development, continuing professional education in several professions, and adult higher education, I have been involved with various forms of distance education and flexible learning. I well remember, for example, in the early 1970s in the rural state where I first began working as an adult educator, helping to make audiotapes of lesson plans for adult basic education and General Education Development (GED), a high school-equivalency test preparation. There was a centre that managed the tapes and a toll-free telephone number for people who wanted to learn but could not get to the adult-education learning centres. As I became more involved, I learned about early efforts in the 1960s in Canada using television in rural areas to create access to adult education. I even remember some very crude versions of distance education in the United States at that time. Televised GED preparation programs became a significant phenomenon in the 1970s. These early experiences got me to thinking about the question of access, although it was many years before I was able to put form to the thought. The ongoing question of access is a persistent one in
the swamp chapters; I hope to show that there are continuing tensions in
the understanding and deployment of the concept of access.

In the 1980s, and more so in the 1990s, I had experience with various
forms of teleconferencing through closed-circuit, two-way interactive tele-
vision as well as taped versions of actual classroom activity for later tele-
vision broadcast. One of the insights of the swamp chapters is that flexible
learning is not simply a function of making learning materials available
or of videotaping educators doing what they do in front of a live audi-
ence, a lesson I clearly learned as well. Of course, by the 1990s, the World
Wide Web was increasingly available. Who remembers hyperlinks? I have
had experience with both synchronous and asynchronous online educa-
tional activities. My latest experience was to try to design and implement
a distance-education program for a professional master’s degree using
synchronous broadband teleconferencing with asynchronous mediated
interactions with actual face-to-face classroom experiences. We designed
a very good program for working professionals so they could study while
continuing to work. But it got scotched because I did not read the insti-
tutional politics around flexible learning correctly, another profound
insight of many of the swamp chapters.

Relations between technologies of distribution and adult educa-
tion have a long history. Canada, England, and the United States have
all developed many uses for whatever the currently available technology
for access and distribution might be. Autodidacts in the seventeenth and
eighteenth centuries depended on learned correspondence, subscription
libraries, and coffee house newspapers. The nineteenth century saw the
advent of correspondence schools and public libraries. Electronic commu-
nication began above all with the advent of the telephone in the twentieth
century, which has led to the highly digitalized world we now inhabit—
the subject of the swamp chapters. So I would say adult educators have a
long and involved history of using evolving technology to foster access for
adults to education and learning.

I offer a few more comments by way of introduction. First, I’m sure
readers will agree that these swamp chapters are fascinating accounts of
real practice. Despite long-standing academic perceptions of educational
practitioners as “non-thinking,” these accounts are the work of fully
reflective, analytical, and insightful professionals. The well-established
myth in academic disciplines like adult education is that practitioners need academics to do their thinking for them. Well, it simply ain’t so.

Second, allow me to explain how I arrived at the observations I will make. Upon first reviewing the chapters, I read them with an eye to recurring themes, and I found many that had merit: collaboration and participation; student/learner interests; social dimensions of flexibility; the conflation of knowledge and information; the tendency to think of technology only in technical terms; the question of what e-learning is; the attempt to embed e-learning into traditional institutions; dependence upon Roger’s diffusion of innovations as chief explanatory effort; a keen awareness of organizational context; an understanding of power, politics, and what John Forester (1989) has called the “people work” of institutional change; and finally, the question of flexibility itself. This is in no way exhaustive—another reviewer would clearly see other themes—but those I have listed reflect my orientation described above. Yet I lack space to elaborate upon them all, and furthermore, there is not equal presence of the various themes throughout the chapters. While they are all interesting to me, I am choosing to focus on the last three because of the predominance of their presence in the chapters and because I think the authors of the swamp chapters have the most significant insights about the themes of context, power, and flexibility.

**FLEXIBILITY**

The editors asked the contributors to this volume to pull readers right into the heat of the action and its context before stepping back to reflect. I think readers will readily agree that all of the authors produced poignant accounts and keen reflections. The chapter authors were also directed to provide their “personal definition of flexibility.” All did so, some quite extensively. So I turn first to highlighting the sometimes similar, sometimes differing notions of what these authors think flexibility means, as well as to noting two concerns expressed by chapter authors.

Andy Lane opens with and returns frequently to the question of just what flexibility is. He begins by asking whether open educational resources (OERS) will actually add flexibility “to how teachers can teach and how learners might learn.” If educational resources are truly open, he asks,
“will they create significant change and greater flexibility in educational practices? By *flexible*, I mean that learners around the world are able to construct their own learning paths to suit their own learning styles, [and] teachers from all continents are able to draw upon high-quality resources and learn new strategies and tactics for teaching their chosen disciplines.”

Then Lane throws a dart right at the heart of what I think is really at stake in such provision. Will distance education, open access, computer-based learning, flexibility, or whatever the current term, actually provide educational entry in non-traditional ways or will it “just reinforce existing educational practices and divides, with the educationally and technologically privileged gaining more than those who suffer multiple deprivation and who currently have little or no access to higher education or appropriate technologies?”

The phenomenon Lane marks is, to me, one spectre haunting the alleged democratizing of knowledge, education, and learning that digitizing supposedly promises. In the United States, where undergraduate tuition at elite colleges and universities can top US$50,000 a year, this likeness of an undemocratic digital divide is referred to as “click” and “brick.” Those who can afford to will continue to gain higher education face to face in actual “brick” institutions. Those unable to afford such access will be driven into lowered-tiered “click” institutions, where access is mediated digitally, thus furthering educational divides rather than democratizing access. Lane asks two very important questions: will flexibility really create access to new ways of knowing and learning, and/or will flexibility help to engender a new type of inequality?

Lane refers frequently to other more functional and technical aspects of flexibility such as “creating different spaces for different functions,” “mixing and matching the free and open provision” of learning and knowledge with more traditional studies, enabling students “to communicate by whichever means they prefer,” and making it “possible to do lots of different things.” Other authors articulate similar descriptors and possibilities. Kay MacKeogh and Seamus Fox describe flexibility “in terms of location, duration, timing and pacing of study” and “developing information skills and literacies, widening access, increasing flexibility, increasing quality, and reducing cost and improving cost-effectiveness” in order “to reach students in different geographical locations and at different stages in their learning lives.” Darien Rossiter describes flexibility as “information
literacy” and “multiple levels of subject granularity.” Mark Northover and Andrew Higgins write about “transforming teaching toward a more flexible or blended approach,” which they call “blended learning, that is, a blend of new digital technologies with older teaching strategies.” Darcy Hardy notes that flexibility is “all about access . . . about a deliberate attempt to think about students’ circumstances, about how, when, and why they learn. It’s about truly taking educational opportunities to a level that implies that the institution is willing to do whatever it takes to make these opportunities available to students.” Non Scantlebury and Gill Needham take a similar approach: “As librarians, our vision of flexible learning focuses on the opportunity to enrich, enhance, and diversify students’ experience as truly independent learners through access to increasingly rich and sophisticated learning materials,” which they call their “garden of learning delights.” Later in their discussion, Scantlebury and Needham describe how important it was to develop “the skills learners needed not only to find and access the garden but also to toil within it, manage its resources, and propagate it further, extending its depth, breadth, and richness.” As these comments show, flexible educators are a very committed lot, with access being one of the chief hallmarks of building and sustaining flexible systems. Despite their enthusiasm, however, as Lane points out, access is a problematic concept. We must continue to ask, access to what and for whom?

Clearly, though, flexibility has changed access. While it strikes me that creating gateways to otherwise previously unavailable knowledge and learning has been part and parcel of all of the previous technologies I mentioned earlier, the digital world is metamorphosing that access. I turn to one final observation about flexibility that I think is as profound as Lane’s concern about flexible divides. Yoni Ryan has had more than a generation’s worth of experience with the “new technologies.” She starts with the observation that before it was called “flexibility,” providers were “driven by our commitment to access and equity for those encountering difficulty attending classes because of family responsibilities, financial circumstances, or disability,” a commitment well evidenced in the other accounts. From this starting point, Ryan constructs a more critical reflection on how flexibility has progressed and what its consequences may be turning out to be. She argues that “the term flexible now conveys ‘convenience’ with regard to access for the client/customer.” Making the case
that initially flexibility was not about the technology, that “flexible learning was a pedagogical approach that was learner-centred and built on students’ experiences,” she notes that flexibility became “simply a technological fix to accommodate learners who were increasingly impatient with the rigidities of university processes.” Ryan argues that education programmers have become too interested in solving technical problems—pouring funds into “digital projects that promised greater efficiencies in dealing with the massification of higher education”—and less interested in using technology pedagogically.

I find the enthusiasm of these authors inspiring. Their commitment to access and their awareness of the ever-varying vagaries of human learning is likewise inspiring. But I am left troubled by the questions raised by Lane and Ryan: is flexibility contributing to an ever more inequitable world, and is the technology itself (in its ever-evolving guises) supplanting pedagogy? I must say that in my own area of higher education, and with my earlier disclaimer still in play, I find these proclivities persistent and perhaps even pernicious. I find that the focus of discussion is less and less about who can learn what and how, and more and more about “flow” and distribution, as if all any of us ever really needs is information.

CONTEXT: RELATIONS OF POWER AND THE “PEOPLE WORK” OF ORGANIZATIONS

Flexibility does not come free or without burdens, costs, challenges, and constraints. Everyone knows that. But actually understanding your context—that is, understanding your organizational setting well enough to create possibilities of/for flexibility—is another matter altogether. Knowing how to work with and within highly complex organizational contexts is absolutely essential for anyone who wishes to be successful in educational development. And providers of flexible access are no different. As much as we might want flexible access to be just about the provision of technology, providing access always also involves money and differing intentions about what must be done. The authors of the swamp chapters provide a plethora of insights about their organizational understanding and the political work of initiating, managing, and sustaining
flexible educational provision. First, let me take a look at some of the institutional contexts presented in the swamp chapters by way of framing a discussion of the authors’ political insights.

All of the authors are keenly aware of their individual organizational settings. One thing that experience quickly teaches is that what works in one setting rarely transfers wholly to another. Each of the organizational contexts is unique, but Kay MacKeogh and Seamus Fox describe a broader environment in which many flexible programs operate. After setting up their chapter with the dire news that their funding had been eliminated—a message that no one wants to hear but is too often a reality in higher education these days—they describe the broader context of reform in European higher education. Describing their “often-difficult path to implementing flexible teaching and learning approaches in traditional universities,” MacKeogh and Fox discuss the “wider context of the wholesale reform and modernization of higher education in Europe,” which is “moving to a curriculum guided by learning outcomes as well as developing a transparent, flexible system that allows students to move between institutions and countries.” Darien Rossiter focuses on what she calls the “supply-chain process.” In this context, in the face of “increasing demand for greater flexibility in course delivery,” academic staff “tend to adopt a minimalist approach, typically a course conversion model,” which turns out to be online lecturing with PowerPoint slides. Rossiter describes how in this setting, “the sort of assistance these academic staff seek from support units is primarily administrative . . . with the expectation that the learning ‘product’ will be churned out at the other end, preferably with minimal impact on academic staff time,” which in turn indicates “limited appreciation of the professional skills or production processes required to complete the work.” I am sure there is not a flexible provider anywhere who is unfamiliar with these organizational conditions. Mark Northover and Andrew Higgins amplify the insight: one of the chief lessons they learned was that the university needed “to allocate clearly defined roles and responsibilities to staff, with enough mana (a Polynesian term for standing, respect or personal qualities that serve to inspire or lead others) in the system to ensure that decisions were acted on.” Darcy Hardy shows how complicated such a directive can be: “Most people, administrators included, have no idea what it takes to develop and nurture a unit such as the uT TeleCampus.”
This is where I shift to a more political telling of the swamp stories. Nearly every author clearly recognizes and attempts to address the politics of his or her particular setting. And nothing can be more political in higher education than funding. Kay MacKeogh and Seamus Fox begin their tale of “the rocky road to flexibility” with a recounting of a “disruptive event which threatened the future of our distance-education centre: our state funding was withdrawn. To say the least, this situation placed significant demands on the flexibility of the university to react in a way which protected the interests of staff and students, as well as its mission to widen access.” Money and interested parties can often be counted on to conflict. As MacKeogh and Fox wryly observe, “institutions may pay lip service to the flexibility agenda while signalingly failing to adopt any initiatives that might actually achieve flexibility. As we have found, the pace of progress involved in changing a traditional university is slow: there are so many competing interests and traditions and so many levels of decision making.”

Darcy Hardy continues the theme of power and politics with “stories about how administrators’ perceptions can be more influential than reality on a flexible-learning project, how massaging egos can bring about buy-in for a new movement, and how alarming it can be to find out how little many people care about the nuts and bolts of collaboration.” She also calls attention to “the part that economics and politics play” in developing flexible-learning systems. Mark Northover and Andrew Higgins put it this way: “The strategic success of any substantial innovation will be determined by the politics of the process rather than by the inherent value of the innovation itself.” This is what I am getting at with the “people work” (Forester 1989) phrase in the heading of this section. Hardy describes the people work of program development this way: “For me, the key was to find the most skeptical but influential people on each campus and build relationships with them. It’s really all about relationships. Once established, they open the door for honest and respectful discussions. They build trust. . . . Building those relationships has had a major influence on the success of the TeleCampus.” Gaining “access to people with power” was a major determinant of her success. She uses an image that I find especially resonant, encapsulated in the phrase “working the planning table” (Cervero and Wilson 2006): “I think one of the biggest mistakes that people in senior leadership roles like mine make is to not bring the right people to
the table at the right time.” As Hardy says, “it was the people at the table themselves—yes, the very people who pushed back at the beginning—who came up with the solution. This is how you make changes that stick.” She is really arguing for a collaborative approach to organizational development, but she does so with a keen sense of organizational power and politics.

Such table working is not limited to major institutional decision makers, whether resistant or supportive. Darien Rossiter offers a related but different aspect of power relations among students, flexible staff, academics, and sponsoring units. She describes how in flexible settings, there is a shift in the “locus of control from teacher/instructor to student/learner,” which is typically resisted by those more empowered by “instructor-led, learner-dependent” cultures. Scantlebury and Needham, in their extended metaphor of the garden, offer a similar observation: many academics “were not at all sure that they wanted their students to enter that garden.” Northover and Higgins describe how the “actions and expectations around new teaching models alienated some staff, particularly those who saw themselves as guardians of the old ways.” Rossiter warns of the risk that “a negative tension will take hold among the various stakeholders, undermining the quality of educational courses and the relationships of those who develop and deliver them.”

Above all, it is the astute political insights of these authors that I find most compelling. As I have argued elsewhere (Cervero and Wilson 2006), educational development work is never simply technical. It is never just a matter of following an invariable set of procedures to a foregone conclusion. Rather, development always involves people, and people always bring their own and selected segments of their institution’s interests to the planning table, acting with varying degrees of power to achieve their interests. Nowhere is that better embodied than in these chapters.

BEYOND THE TECHNOLOGY

Here are a few last thoughts to consider about these compelling accounts of real practice. We now know that technology—all the different systems of delivery and access described here and elsewhere—can be, and indeed needs to be, thought of in terms of its “toolness.” I don’t mean tool in the
conventional terms largely used in these discussions, that is, the ability of Tool A to accomplish Task B, in the way a particular type of wrench is used to unlock or lock A. bolt, or how a particular database is appropriate to a particular purpose, or how a public library in the nineteenth century was a tool for accessing knowledge. Far too often, technology capable of widening access is thought of in such instrumental ways, as it seems to be generally presented in the swamp chapters. I want to suggest that we see these multiple, mediated mechanisms of interaction as fundamentally shaping human cognition and interaction, as well as being shaped by them. There are intimations throughout the chapters about this socio-cultural phenomenon, but the discussion rarely goes beyond references to Web 2.0 and social learning sites. Just as a book shapes the way we think and how we think shapes the formation of the book, so too such reciprocal shaping occurs in the digital age. Anyone of my age with children in their twenties or thirties knows that people who grew up in the digital age—psychologically, socially, culturally, politically, economically, literarily—think and act differently than those of us who came of age when the printed page reigned supreme. This is no small matter. There are lots of technical academic terms to describe this phenomenon, which I won’t belabour here. But if I have a disappointment in the chapters, it is that while many of the authors are on the cusp of grasping this profound change, they do not yet seem to understand it well enough to really take advantage of it. Although some have fought hard to institutionalize new access and communication technologies, if we do not grasp how fundamentally human cognition and interaction are changing, we will fall short of meeting the goal of enhanced access and ever more genuine flexibility.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arthur L. Wilson remembers watching instructors on television in the early 1970s teaching the subjects necessary to pass the US General Education Development (GED) test to earn an equivalent high school diploma. Little did he know then that he was soon to become an adult basic education (ABE) and GED teacher himself, although the television part did not come until years later. Before he became an ABE/GED teacher, his first job in adult education was driving the van transporting students who had no transportation to and from the ABE/GED adult-learning centre. His practice since then has included literacy education, staff development, continuing professional education, and adult education in higher education. He is currently a professor of adult education and chair of the Department of Education at Cornell University. Some days he wishes he were still driving the van. vivo.cornell.edu/individual/vivo/individual8750