The term flexible is itself used pretty flexibly, at least in the UK. It does not seem to refer precisely to any particular kind of educational system but acquires its meaning only from its location in particular discourses. Those discourses often criticize particular aspects of existing educational systems as being “inflexible” and introduce new alternatives that are allegedly more flexible in comparison. Skeptics like me are fully entitled, I believe, to feel suspicious. Discourses are used to engage in political struggles of various kinds between contending parties who are trying to explain, justify, and rationalize their particular positions. Among the contending groups, we find patterns of variable enthusiasm for both flexible and inflexible practices.

In what follows, I will examine and analyze the paradoxes that accompany flexibility in higher education and that are responsible for uneven uptake and variable practices. Specifically, I’ll explore key factors and behaviours such as student flexibility, student “aesthetics,” and the managerial turn in academic life, all of which produce paradoxes that undermine flexibility. Actor-network theory, used in my analysis, provides one conceptual frame to explain these paradoxes and contradictions, one that can be useful to those wishing to uncover paradoxes and contradictions in their own contexts. One implication of the overall analysis is that intervention by practitioners is essential to clarify and manage the paradoxes in order to achieve maximum flexibility in higher education.

Flexible students

As the system shifted from an elite to a mass clientele, “non-traditional” students seemed to offer particular problems, with contradictory results. One solution involved “active teaching,” the purpose of which was to
ensure that the audience was given a chance to interact with the teaching material. Any move toward a learner-centred environment was limited by the development of particular approaches to “study skills” demanding greater student conformity (Harris 1994).

Simple conformity was itself initially challenged by research on learning styles. Sadler-Smith and Smith’s (2004) comprehensive account of recent work, particularly relevant to flexible learning, yields an impressive list of different models and approaches. However, another paradox soon presents itself: there is so much variation in student learning styles that even flexible-learning systems, as currently implemented, are not capable of accommodating them. Visual learners might be better involved with some minor adjustments, and flexible-learning systems might be tweaked to permit both holists and analysts to follow their preferences, but Sadler-Smith and Smith eventually realize that it might be better, after all, to restrict the available styles. They call for “the reduction of individual differences (through strategy development) rather than for their differential accommodation” (2004, 406).

This rather uneasy combination of flexibility and training appears in a number of other commentaries. Hill (2006, 189), for example, begins by arguing that “providing flexibility in terms of what is learned and who decides what is learned is a primary tenet of constructivist learning” (and everyone knows that constructivist learning is an excellent thing). Yet not all learners will be entirely comfortable with such responsibility. As a result, they may have to be (fairly inflexibly) trained into deciding what they want to learn. The article proceeds from offering “support mechanisms in order to help the learner become comfortable with the flexible setting” (190) through to a fairly conventional set of the usual admonitions to students to be disciplined and well organized, more or less as in many standard study-skills packages—“Be Willing and Able to Commit Time to the Course” (193).

**Social Limits to Flexibility**

However, students also bring with them what Bourdieu (1986) has called sets of tastes or “aesthetics.” In particular, the “popular aesthetic”—with its emphasis on immediate identification, emotional involvement, and bodily pleasures—almost inevitably contradicts the unconscious
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aesthetic of higher education, with its opposite values—detachment and calm, unemotional discussion. We see the unconscious aesthetic at work in Bourdieu (1988), where teachers in an elite French educational institution fleshed out and operationalized formal assessment criteria with a number of unconsciously held social and cultural judgments about their students that involved such matters as style, accent, and even non-verbal language—criteria relating to how students stand, control their bodies, regulate distance between themselves and tutors, and so on.

The important issue of the impact of flexible learning on social mobility or social exclusion has been addressed by Selwyn, Gorard, and Williams (2001). They focus on certain social factors governing access to information technology (IT), which led to a considerable unevenness in access and uptake, at least in the United States. Thus, “the stark delineation between those who currently have access to IT and those who do not, in terms of age, socioeconomic status, race, and gender, has led to growing concern over an emerging ‘digital divide’” (260). This divide is produced partly by a simple matter of expense but also by what might be called tastes. Factors affecting the likelihood of participation can be conveniently classified as “situational (to do with lifestyle), institutional (related to the opportunities available), and dispositional (personal knowledge and motivation). . . . What IT cannot do by itself is to change the dispositional constraints or alter the social determinants of participation” (264).

Selwyn, Gorard, and Williams go on to point out that “there is growing evidence of a relatively stable learning identity for lifelong learners formed by school-leaving age and stemming from family background, initial educational experiences, and informal episodes” (265). Furthermore, underlying values in IT point toward the groups that always benefit: “information and communication technologies are ostensibly White, middle-class, Eurocentric, male artifacts in terms of their language (predominantly English), technical development, and users’ values” (267).

ACADEMIC WORK AND MANAGERIALISM

A new inflexibility elsewhere affects academic work; it is associated with the “managerial turn,” the increasing regulation of standards, course
design, and assessment through various “quality” agencies (see Harris 2006). Anyone working in contemporary UK higher education can provide many examples of the arbitrary rules introduced by “quality” mechanisms. My personal favourites turn on issues such as the awarding of extenuating circumstances for the late submission of student work. The first stage was to make this a matter for quality management and to take it away from the discretion of tutors. The next stage was to regularize the situation, with a list of acceptable and unacceptable extenuating circumstances. All was well as long as it was a matter of a sports injury or sudden illness, the default cases. However, students might also report being adversely affected by bereavement. The response was to attempt to define categories of bereavement. Would students be legitimately affected only by the bereavement of a close relative? What would be meant by a close relative? What about honorary relatives? What about beloved pet animals? Many a quality committee has spent hours discussing these questions, often resulting in a truly substantial document listing acceptable and unacceptable extenuating circumstances and requiring a substantial clerical effort to manage. Ironically, in my case, the inevitable ambiguities remaining were solved only by subjective judgments made by a tutor and offered as “evidence.”

There are many other examples. I have been amused to see Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives reborn and rendered as a mere list of verbs that must be used in writing learning outcomes—not actually used to guide course design, that is, but deployed instead to meet standard requirements for a well-formed declared learning outcome. (For a schematic guide to the new Bloom, see Overbaugh and Schultz n.d.) Course proposers have run into serious difficulties by not using such lists of approved words. In one case, the learning outcome expressed the hope (for, despite their objective appearance, that is what outcomes express) that students might develop critical insight into the material they were being taught. This caused problems because “critical insight” was not accepted in learning outcomes until the third level of undergraduate study, allegedly as Bloom had suggested. Flexible learning seems to be curiously compatible with these authoritarian trends.

Hill (2006) complements her stern advice to students with mirror-image advice for staff, who should make themselves available, get committed,
check their electronic materials frequently, and so on. Kirkpatrick (2001, 174) writes that despite her best efforts, backed with some managerial clout, “a larger proportion of staff were yet to demonstrate an interest in the capacities of new technologies.” She ruefully notes that “the introduction of flexible learning through information technologies is accompanied by serious challenges to the identity of academics, the construction of the notion of teaching and learning, and places strong demands on the culture and expectation of academic practice and higher education” (175).

**ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY**

Actor-network theory (ANT) offers one approach to explaining these paradoxes and apparent contradictions. (For a useful list of resources, see Ryder n.d.) The networks to be analyzed include as active agents both machinery and collective agents, since these play a crucial part in effective operations.

One example would be to analyze the well-known problem of moving from laboratory-based studies to field-based studies. In the case of some important early work at the UK Open University, for example, an excellent system of conversational learning was developed in the laboratories of Professor Gordon Pask (see Harris 1987). Pask illustrated how learners could be granted a great deal more autonomy to explore whole networks of concepts, and how tutors, including pieces of intelligent software, could guide explorations, test the acquisition of knowledge, and even prompt learners into making innovative discoveries. The whole experiment assumed that networks of concepts could be conveniently delimited. The main problem, though, lay in moving from laboratory experiments involving volunteer psychology undergraduates to a mass teaching system working at a distance and, crucially, insisting that participants be graded and credentialized. In those circumstances, there is a strong trend toward strategic orientations, students pursuing the best possible grade by following the most direct and obvious route. Even a conversational stance can be “technified” (Entwistle 2000) and thus simulated: even reflective logs can be strategic, especially where students feel that they have been “forced to reflect” (Hobbs 2007) by assessment requirements.
Advocates of conversational learning simply did not realize that the modern university is also integrated into other networks. It is linked to political and economic agents and offers not just effective teaching and learning but also the efficient regulation and credentializing of people. It is highly misleading to insist that these functions are absent or secondary and can be ignored in discussions of assessment techniques designed to promote more flexible learning. The need to credentialize remains marginal to those working in the design region of the network.

Double functioning is often represented in the hierarchical arrangement of assessment bodies. At the lowest level, tutors might assess students as best they can on the basis of their perceived abilities and talents, officially at least. However, once those assessments are represented as grades on a spreadsheet, they become more abstract data and are exported into more rarefied assemblies of managers and senior academics operating in other regions, who have different agendas. Sometimes, those agendas include being responsible for producing an agreed-upon distribution of grades or making a particular institution’s grades comparable to those of others. The original participants are powerless to stop this and sometimes a fatalistic acceptance steals over the most idealistic academic who finds it simply too much effort to take on the massive objectivity of the examination process at the higher levels, with its notion of the expected distribution.

FLEXIBLE LEARNING AND STUDENT IDENTITIES

Edwards and Clarke (2002) also developed an analysis based on ANT, but with some implications for student identity. In modular degrees with flexible routes, for example, students are not enclosed within traditional disciplinary regimes. The good side is that they are not as subject to the power relations of what Bernstein (1971) once called strongly framed and strongly classified forms of knowledge. However, this means that they do not develop strong subject identities either. This is exacerbated when flexible learning includes items like work-based learning modules, where socializing power passes over to other providers like employers. Edwards and Clarke (2002, 156) argue that flexible learning offers students a kind of
competitive individualism, “a supermarket for self-managing individual lifelong learners to pass through, collecting the resources they need to develop themselves in a society of control.” Leaving aside these rather sinister general implications, Edwards and Clarke also note that this kind of individualism can be stressful and unwanted: it offers a kind of limbo that can positively deter a hesitating student. Referring to their study of adult students contemplating entering further education, they suggest that “place, closure and constraint would therefore seem to have a positive value for many of the interviewees” (164).

FLEXIBLE LEARNING AS THE ONLY OPTION IN THE FUTURE

For the enthusiasts, flexible learning appears to be both desirable and inevitable, despite the sorts of problems I have raised. For some supporters, substantial social or economic changes allow flexible learning to emerge as the only available technical fix. The changes cited range from postmodern cultural relativism to predictions of an inevitable knowledge economy.

Postmodernism has already been criticized as an ideology rather than an inevitable future for all of us (Bourdieu 1986; Jameson 1991). The idea of the knowledge economy is also finally coming under criticism, not least in the form of a powerful analysis of actual employer practices by Brown and Lauder (2006). Their main criticism turns on the educational implications that are commonly drawn, especially in the advanced economies. There, people are increasingly urged to develop skill through higher education and lifelong learning, which the enthusiasts assume means support for flexible learning. However, Brown and Lauder note that for global companies, the cost of skilled labour is also crucial and that this cost is considerably lower in places like India and China. The supply of skilled labour from those countries is also increasing substantially. In those circumstances, it looks as if the part played in the global economy by UK and US graduates is likely to be diminished. Already, the economic return of a university degree is falling, and the availability of graduate jobs is decreasing. It will not be long, Brown
and Lauder suggest, before this becomes apparent to would-be students, and there will be precious little incentive to engage in lifelong learning of this kind.

To push the point to its furthest, flexible learning could turn out to be far from the inevitable future form and could appear instead as a characteristic variant of education in the last great economic boom for Western economies.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, flexible learning encompasses as many paradoxes and contradictions as conventional learning. It is important to avoid seeing flexible learning as some panacea and to view it instead as an ambiguous development, one that requires intervention to develop the “good” sides and avoid the “bad.” The provision of interactive technology alone will not solve the existing problems posed by the social, cultural, and professional barriers to participation on the part of both students and staff. The most passionate advocates of flexible learning do seem to recognize this, in a way. Much recent literature starts with a list of benefits that will accrue to staff and students but then moves rapidly on to note considerable reluctance and resistance to becoming involved. Instead of recognizing resistance as an effect of the complex and contradictory demands from whole networks in which real teaching and learning is embedded, advocates hope that a training program will overcome the problems.

It is quite possible that students and staff could be trained to overcome some of the barriers, but it’s unlikely that all of them will disappear—and the cost and effort of training could be considerable. It might be more effective instead to put effort into diminishing the barriers to traditional education. Given the challenges to traditional notions of student identity and the way in which some people might see the result as excessively risky and isolating, it is worth asking how flexible education stacks up against the benefits of traditional education, especially as Tattersall et al. (2006, 391) remind us that “flexibility goes hand-in-hand with procrastination and non-completion.”
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Harris was lucky enough to go to the London School of Economics at the height of the student revolts in the late 1960s, where he saw professors stripped of their charisma in front of his very eyes. After teacher training, his first proper job was as a research assistant at the UK Open University in 1970: it was a very marginal and endangered organization then. Decades of working face to face at a small college ensued: here he tried to explain to skeptical colleagues that the “new technology” might actually be used in teaching and learning. Visits to Australia to see “mixed-mode” approaches proved inspiring and sustaining. His personal website continues to receive a steady flow of visits, in the hundreds per day, with substantial peaks, curiously just before assessment deadlines. www.arasite.org/ncv2.htm