What Happens in the Stretch to Flexibility?

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In the previous three chapters, the authors made it clear that flexibility in learning is potentially problematic. It can be taken up in a variety of ways, bringing changes that are not always expected. Adrian Kirkwood concludes that increasing flexibility in one aspect of learning may close down the possibilities for flexibility elsewhere. Nor is it often as cost-effective as it is sometimes suggested to be. Alan Woodley argues that it is not necessarily the panacea for the individual, either, in terms of success in learning or in personal or economic terms. David Harris reflects on whether it might be worthwhile to return to traditional forms of learning and to consider lowering the barriers to that learning.

Here, I take the discussion in a slightly different direction. I suggest that flexibility in learning might do things quite other than its name suggests. Thus, although you and I might pursue flexibility in learning in institutions of learning and teaching, and we might bring about changes in those institutions as well as changes in how our students learn and how we teach, we may not always know what effect these changes have in a wider sense. To understand the significance of flexible learning is therefore also to explore changes that are wrought through it, in the name of flexibility. To better understand flexible learning is to see how these wider educational changes connect with wider changes in the economy and society in quite complex ways. Furthermore, these wider societal and institutional changes and shifts in educational practices help to raise a question about whether we want our societies to be reconfigured in these ways. If the answer is yes, then by whom? And how? Here is where the stretch toward flexibility carries big implications.

The institutional and societal change that is effected by flexible learning suggests two opposing dynamics. On the one hand, staff in educational institutions are focused on doing things by increasing flexibility in
learning. On the other hand, policy and wider meanings and rationales of flexibility seek to bring about specific kinds of educational change. These different concerns and goals are important to examine because they may combine to produce some unexpected changes: “People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does” (Foucault, quoted in Fejes and Nicoll 2008). As changes in educational institutions are bound up with wider changes in society, it is important that we as educators think through the wider implications when we make decisions about what to do. To know about flexibility is therefore to have some idea about what happens through it. It is to consider what happens—or at least, what may happen—in the stretch toward flexible learning.

There is something happening through this stretch that we as educators, researchers, administrators, managers, and policy makers might need to think about a little further. Of course, insights from various instances and analyses cannot be generalized, since we work in very different settings, but where discourses may come into alignment quite similarly, similar changes might be quite likely. By getting a feel for what has been happening in different settings, it may be possible to consider what goes on in your own in a different light.

Across all these differences in the discourses of flexibility and lifelong learning, there are two main foci. First is the focus on the educational institution, particularly within the university, but also in other education settings where people are entwined with practices of open, distance, or flexible learning. The second focus is on wider social and economic settings. Let us scan these two foci before I draw some conclusions and propose some questions.

A FOCUS ON THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

Here I briefly characterize three meanings of flexible learning: increasing learning efficiency and effectiveness, using the “just in time” production approach, and changing disciplinary knowledge and learner and teacher subjectivity.
Flexible learning has been represented in a relatively unproblematic way. Early on, the open and distance learning (ODL) literature argued that flexible learning was the migration of ODL to institutions that had little or no previous experience with it. Earlier ODL practices were said to have been renamed “flexible learning” in the course of this migration. Flexible learning was therefore relatively undistinguished from ODL in these instances (Kirkpatrick 1997). Discussion in the ODL literature at that time revolved around how flexibility in learning, provision, delivery, or institutional organization could be achieved (e.g., Bottomley 2000; Hawkridge 2000; King 2000; Thorpe 2000). But what seems to have been left aside was any consideration of the increasing and widening participation in tertiary learning that was taking place in many settings where flexibility was promoted. Only a very few writers, it seems, discussed increased participation as a goal of flexible learning. Flexibility in learning was therefore not being connected to wider discussions of the need for it or to its wider significance or consequences.

Discussion was, and often still is, focused on how better to implement flexibility, leaving out any consideration of its wider effects. Many writers seem to assume that flexible learning will create an increasing and beneficial focus on the learner and/or an increase in the possibilities for student choice in learning. A reorganization of the institution as a whole is needed to support this new focus. The writers also argue that increased flexibility means wider and increasing access to learning within programs and new capacity for programs to reach markets. I have argued elsewhere that this kind of discussion is restricted by a “technicism” (Nicoll 2009). By technicism, I mean that flexibility is taken quite generally to be a beneficial characteristic of learning and of its provision and organization in that it increases the efficiency and effectiveness of learning, its provision, and its organization. How far you and I may agree with those assumptions remains to be seen.

Institutional explorations of the rolling out of programs for flexible learning indicate that discourses of flexibility may well be accepted within educational discourses that emphasize progress according to the individual’s role and aims. Thus, academics may understand flexible learning as
increasing access to and equity in learning, managers as increasing institutional income and wider markets, and general staff as meeting student needs more effectively (Taylor 1997). These discourses become “accommodated,” or accepted, by individuals according to their roles and existing workplace discourses.

A “Just in Time” Approach to Production
Of course, dissenting and critical voices from within the institution have always existed. During the first half of the 1990s, flexible learning was discussed in terms of a shift from Fordist to post-Fordist principles of production within the economy and education (see, for example, Edwards 1991, Campion 1995). The terms Fordism, post-Fordism, and neo-Fordism had been used for some time as descriptors of wider patterns in production processes and as distinctive phases of capitalist production. Neo-Fordism described a new process of “flexible production” within the automotive industry in the 1960s and 1970s. Post-Fordism denoted a turn toward leaner production and a disaggregation of the supply chain—a kind of outsourcing and “just in time” approach to production that directly responded to consumer demand. It was also known as “flexible specialization.” This kind of discussion within the ODL literature allowed us to engage with questions of how the education institution serviced its markets. Flexibility in higher education thus denoted a turn to flexible specialization, a decentralized organizational structure focused on relatively autonomous and flexible production teams, and a “just in time” approach to production. Here then was a discourse that began to describe flexibility in learning in its relation to the market. This debate was itself criticized as focused on mechanisms of production rather than alternative possibilities, such as consumption, and for drawing on limited theoretical framings (Field 1994; Nunan 2000). But perhaps I digress here . . .

Changing Disciplinary Knowledge and Student and Lecturer Subjectivity
I argue here that practices of flexible and e-learning disturb previous pedagogic practices that form and maintain the disciplines as bodies of knowledge. Both disciplinary knowledge and the “subjectivities” of students are reconfigured (Nicoll and Edwards 1997). By subjectivities I mean
the way in which students are addressed, represented, and acted upon as if they are “selves” of a particular type (see Rose 1996). I am concerned to see how knowledge and students both change, in part as an effect of flexible and e-learning.

As practices shift toward more flexible forms of learning and e-learning, the “architecture” of the university as an organized learning environment is reconfigured. This architecture is designed to shape—to “discipline”—subjectivities in a particular way. The architecture of a traditional university might include a set of physical enclosures—for example, the lecture theatres, seminar rooms, and library—that require the physical presence of a learner. The student is required to be a particular kind of person: organized to attend on time, listen, take notes, engage in particular forms of talk, and so forth. This architecture also includes specific practices through which students are organized and arranged for “normalization” through learning. Here students come to know the forms of knowledge that are appropriate to work with, the literary conventions that must be observed and rehearsed, the forms of critique that are appropriate, and so on. These are “norms” of the discipline that students are expected to learn. The architecture also includes specific practices through which students are regulated, monitored, and observed in their progress—for example, formative assessment and administrative procedures. And it includes specific practices of examination (tests, essays, practical demonstrations, and so forth) through which learning of knowledge is assessed as lying within or outside the norms of the discipline being studied (history, science, philosophy, etc.). As practices shift toward more flexible forms, this architecture changes and overlaps with those in workplaces and e-sites and other places (Nicoll 2008).

It is understandable, therefore, to talk about the student as potentially “freer,” as having more autonomy in flexible and e-learning. However, when you look closely, the architecture for normalization does not disappear. The student is made “open” to disciplining effects from elsewhere, and in potentially less predictable ways (Nicoll 2008). Knowledge and subjectivity is constructed outside the bounds of previous disciplines. David Harris points to a move away from disciplinary knowledge as a positive factor. But I see problems with seeing less strongly disciplined forms of knowledge as a clear “good.” Opening the boundaries of disciplinary
knowledge makes other knowledge forms and subjectivities possible, but there are losses in this. We might want to notice the wider effects.

There is then an important question about the student subjectivities that are shaped in the process. Here, the flexible and e-learning student becomes governed at a distance (Miller and Rose 1993). In his essay in the present volume, David Harris talks of this student as the “individual, self-managing learner.” The modern bounded and educated person is displaced by a multi-centred learner, produced at the intersection of many architectures and across the boundaries of various knowledges. Our learners today have diverse capacities and the potential to construct alternative knowledges, legitimated at least in part elsewhere, not in traditional classroom settings.

It is not only student subjectivities that change through flexible and e-learning; the subjectivities of lecturers and other professionals who work to support learning also change. Some have suggested that lecturers may become “process- and system-oriented professionals” (Miller and Xulu, cited in Harris 2006, 98). In their contributions to this book, Adrian Kirkwood and David Harris indicate that such a shift in the role of lecturers as teachers will be difficult to achieve. But where it is achieved, the traditional role as arbiter, “keeper,” and transmitter of the discipline is also lost as this role is taken up elsewhere in multiple and fragmented forms. Even our subjectivities as researchers in the discipline of education are reshaped by the new relationships required for the construction of new forms of knowledge (Solomon 2008). New knowledge of flexible and e-learning is thus also bound up in change, through its own practices.

There is an increasing focus on workplace learning through moves toward flexibility in some programs. One move involves workplace mentors and assessors of learning who help to decide what is to count as knowledge. In his chapter, Adrian Kirkwood writes regretfully of the difficulties of a “legacy” of institutional forms for “gatekeeping” and the transmission of knowledge. He talks about a difficulty of “structural inertia” that makes change in knowledge production and recognition very difficult. However, as professionals in universities work hard to remove these difficulties, their activity may well help to move the responsibility for verifying knowledge from the university to other sites. Where such verification decisions are made externally, the traditional role of the university is reshaped. There is
then a question of wider societal consequences, which I feel is important to explore.

**Wider Societal Consequences**

It is uncertain what the wider societal consequences of this change are. But it is clear that the universities’ role in the reproduction of societies, the shaping of subjectivities, and the allocation of people to social roles is reconfigured as knowledge becomes less “certain,” less based on a single authoritative source.

This change is, however, connected with a potential for societies to lose their capacity to critique knowledge. Changes happen in how people in discipline-based societies learn how to construct and critique their disciplinary knowledge. Tom Popkewitz (2008) has noted that, in the United States, a turn toward greater access to learning has allowed a pedagogy of participation and problem-solving to be promoted in the science classroom. This new and more flexible way of constructing knowledge, he argues, prevents students from learning how to question the authority of scientific and mathematical knowledge and thus ultimately weakens a society’s capacity for critique. It gives science a “latitude” that we may not want it to have.

As I said, exactly what the wider effects of flexible and e-learning are is uncertain. A discipline-based society’s capacity for managing science and other disciplined knowledge may be diminished, along with its capacity for critiquing that knowledge. We need further explorations of this question, given that our disciplines have been powerfully productive in realizing the societies that we live in. Clearly, a relationship exists between our traditional mechanisms of knowledge production and our institutions and pedagogies. We do not know what effects flexible and e-learning have had or will have on knowledge production, institutions, and pedagogies when practices become joined and exert their influence more widely.

**A Focus on the Social and Economic Setting**

For this second focus in the discourses of flexibility and lifelong learning, I discuss the shift toward post-welfare social conditions as presented in education policy literature because I think an understanding of this shift
is useful for our analyses of the changes wrought through flexibility on a wider societal scale.

**Changes from Welfare to Post-welfare Social Conditions**

The policy studies literature shows two main discourses of lifelong learning (Griffin 1999a, 1999b). In the first, lifelong learning is considered a “function” of social welfare reform. These discourses are analytic and contain critical explorations of policy proposals for lifelong learning. They draw on a social-democratic model and examine what happens with state action in welfare reform. This strand focuses on exploring the breadth and patterns of participation and redistribution of social and economic resources in society. The second strand considers lifelong learning as a “strategy” of policy. It identifies lifelong learning as contributing to the shift to post-welfare societies and post-welfare policy conditions. In this shift, action is increasingly required by people in civil society rather than through the direct intervention of the state.

It is less obvious how policies exert their influence in bringing forth discourses of flexible and lifelong learning within education arenas. Policy analysts have noted the emergence of flexibility and lifelong learning at various quite specific points in time in national and intranational policy as well as in differing locations around the globe. In the policy analysis literature, writers argue that the flexible and lifelong learning discourses have migrated from discourses of capital accumulation, theories of production and of the market, to economic and education policy. They identify flexibility and lifelong learning as metaphors that are deployed within policy and that reconfigure the discourses. Such reconfigurations may indicate quite radical changes in the social aims and purposes of education, in how we teach and learn, and understand what it is to engage in such practices. But how do they work?

Over the past two decades, flexibility has migrated into national and intranational policy as a rationale for the transformation of organizations in order to make them more competitive. Pedagogically, this goal of flexibility has been pursued through policies that place increasing emphasis on lifelong and flexible learning. Politically, it has been pursued through deregulation and the legislative transformation of labour relations. The multi-skilled, flexible worker, who is able to move from task to task,
team-working, solving problems, and learning, has been promoted as paradigmatic of the economically successful organization. Accompanying this change has been a downsizing and casualization of much employment, changes in the age and gender structure of the labour force, the development of the concepts of core and periphery workforce, and the growth of insecurity and absolute and relative inequality. Organizations have pursued their own flexibility through a range of strategies—numerical flexibility, functional flexibility, distancing strategies, and pay flexibility. In the process, they have attempted to develop new workplace identities. Educational institutions have turned toward practices for the flexible delivery of learning and pedagogical discourses. In particular, we see the emphasis on student-centredness and lifelong learning. Thus, we can see that in part through the stretch to flexibility in educational institutions, it becomes possible for organizations to develop the new workplace identities that they require.

Flexibility as a concept used in national and intranational policy forums has therefore migrated from discourses describing what is happening regarding production practices and regimes of capital accumulation to discourses that suggest what should be done within other contexts, including education. This migration is an infection across domains of discourse. Flexibility and lifelong learning are not unified in this migration; they are differentiated and dispersed in complex ways. Discussions of flexibility and learning have emerged and migrated between the realms of economics and other areas, such as industrial sociology, cultural studies, management, education, and training. As the influence of economic policy has been exerted increasingly on other domains, the emphases and issues themselves have shifted. Neither flexibility nor lifelong learning therefore denotes a single thing. We now live in very complex and multi-referential discourses within our societies.

However, the increasing dominance and distribution of flexibility and lifelong learning within education policy discourses has been paralleled by an increasing commodification of educational goods and services. This commodifying of education has been incited in part through policy strategies to open institutions up to competitive pressures and by discourses of participation, student-centredness, and choice. Commodification occurs where social domains and institutions that were not concerned with
producing commodities come to be organized and conceptualized in this way (Fairclough 1992).

CONCLUSION

I have said that the wider societal and institutional changes and the shifts in educational practices that I have been talking about help to raise questions about how our societies are meant to be reconfigured. National policies intended to encourage flexibility are increasingly global in reach. Arguments for flexibility and e-learning emerge from the wider economic policy domain and “require” us to change. These arguments connect up with discourses of flexibility and e-learning within educational institutions, where they are thought about in quite different ways, but they begin to bring about change by their acceptance.

Here the stretch toward flexibility in learning carries with it big implications.

I have suggested that flexibility in learning does other things than its name suggests. Thus, although you and I might pursue flexibility in learning in institutions of learning and teaching, we may not always know what these changes do in a wider sense. To understand the significance and implications of flexible learning is therefore also to explore further changes that are wrought through it, in the name of flexibility, and sometimes with quite other kinds of arguments from other places. We need to see how these wider educational changes connect up with wider changes in the economy and society in quite complex ways. In a small sense, I have wanted to politicize flexibility and lifelong learning in my reflections in this chapter by focusing on what happens through them. This allows us to ask questions that we might not usually think to ask.

What happens in the stretch? I am not suggesting that there should or indeed could be some unified understanding of what goes on in a stretch to flexibility. Meanings and practices of flexibility in learning are powerful, but not equally powerful, nor are they the same. Differing meanings of flexibility are embedded through differing rationales, analyses, and settings of practice. They are dispersed, fragmented, and overlapping. They do, however, form productive alliances in certain locations, and these can
systematize effects, although in ways that produce change in a complex and unpredictable manner. Discourses of flexibility and flexible learning are embedded within policy rationales for change and are deployed, in part, through policies that try to govern society or institutions. They are constructed and deployed within institutional settings in relation to educational practices. They are also—and we shouldn’t forget this—constructed and deployed in and through the media, research and scholarship, and everyday places. Even our own research and scholarly writing on flexible learning are connected in relatively systematic ways to the changes that take place more widely. The media and our everyday talk and practices are also connected in the sense that it is through the repetitions of our talk that we “make” our identities and the worlds in which we live.

What happens, then, through flexible learning? I have argued that discourses of flexible learning within the education institution are constrained by their focus on change in a relatively limited sense. To consider what happens—or, at least, what may happen—in the stretch toward flexible learning requires us to look across domains of discourse to see how they become articulated and systematized. It is to see how they do things through these interconnections. Discussions of flexibility and learning in educational locations are connected with other discussions in other places. As the influence of economic policy has been exerted increasingly in other domains, the emphases and issues themselves have shifted. However, in many of these domains, what happens is that education becomes connected with the economy through its requirement for new forms of flexible, lifelong-learning workers. However, neither flexibility nor lifelong learning denotes a single thing. We live with complex and multi-referential discourses within our societies. What goes on in our stretch to flexibility in educational institutions—within our local and national settings, and across the globe—becomes an important question to answer, as flexible learning helps to realize the societies in which we live and our global interconnections.

I have only written a little of what could be written, as theorizing and politicizing is always ongoing and is necessarily born out of what I can articulate from where I am and the resources available to me. Allow me then to leave you with some questions that might be useful for your own work setting—from the resources available to you:
What happens through flexible learning when you look at the ways in which discourses connect up in your setting and more widely?

Do you see changes that occur well beyond the immediate learning and teaching arena? If so, which of these do you wish to accept or reject?

What characteristics of education that are not related to flexible learning might be important to promote?

Which flexibilities might realize a society and global interconnections that you want to live with?

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**About the Author**

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