

BOOK REVIEW

Flexible Pedagogy, Flexible Practice (Notes From the Trenches of Distance Education)

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In the introduction, Burge states the overarching question underlying the book's purpose: "flexible learning is a canonical concept, much discussed and valued as an inherently "good" goal, but just how challenging is it on the rough terrain of practice? (p. 5)". She provides multiple reasons for this volume. First, she notes that in recent years, flexibility in distance learning practice has not been a significant research focus, creating a niche for contemporary analysis. She identifies the second reason as the quick evolution of digital technologies that bring both new possibilities and new assumptions for flexible learning delivery. The third reason is to understand how government policies and economic pressures shape institutional teaching and learning decisions.

This publication is a collection of articles invited from open, distance, and flexible learning practitioners around the world. For this publication, concepts of flexibility are applied to post-secondary education. Contexts include dedicated distance learning institutions as well as distance learning programs within brick-and-mortar environments. The book is ideal for practitioners and decision-makers interested in learning about how their peers have defined and implemented flexible programs, or have navigated institutional and political assumptions and assertions about flexibility that create tensions. Contributors offer rich theoretical backgrounds, but the book is primarily concerned with their lived experiences and personal reflections.

In addition to introductory and concluding chapters, 23 submissions are organized into five sections: *Clarifying the Concept*, *Identifying Driving and Restraining Forces*, *Surviving the Swamps of Everyday Practice*, *Admitting Compromises*, and *Voicing Contrarian Opinions*. With nine articles, *Surviving the Swamps* has the most contributions, befitting the volume's focus on experience in the trenches. This review will touch on a chapter or two from each section, and the conclusion.

The three articles in the *Clarifying the Concept* section tease out multiple dimensions of flexibility from service design, technology, and student perspectives. For example, Willems' article on student perceptions, discusses logistical flexibility and pedagogical flexibility. Service design choices such as 24/7 access, online document distribution, and library access are examples of logistical flexibility, whereas in-course media choices (multimedia, social media) and adaptations for learning styles are examples of pedagogical flexibility. Willems concludes that what is flexible for some learners may not be for others. In their article on design choices, Chen, Liang and Wang further observe that increasing



flexibility in one area may reduce flexibility in another. For example, video conferencing designs provide flexibility in space, but reduce flexibility in time, and perhaps other technologies.

In the *Identifying Driving and Restraining Forces* section, four articles describe legislative, social, and cultural drivers that impact specific institutional and program responses to flexibility. Daweti and Mitchell, for example, recount the desire to use distance education as a force for social transformation in post-apartheid South Africa, backed by legislation and policies. Notwithstanding government direction, the programme faced significant bureaucratic ambivalence and academic resistance to design choices that supported flexibility. Further, although delivery technologies promoted better outcomes, most South African students did not have access to learning technologies at home in 2009. Latchem and Jung point out that, in Asia, there is high variability with Western culture with regard to readiness for certain forms of flexibility. For example, there is often greater comfort with transmission models of learning, students often need to see an image of the instructor, and it is common to remove interactive features.

Of the nine articles in *Surviving the Swamps of Everyday Practice*, the first seven provide case studies covering situations such as continuing when governments pull funding, managing myriad stakeholder relationships, implementing open educational resources, and navigating the politics of power in academic libraries. The final two articles provide reflections on the stories and their associated driving and restraining forces. In the first article, Hardy (*Before the Fall: Breaking Rules and Changing Minds*) recounts his experiences in creating a centralized TeleCampus distance learning service for the multi-campus University of Texas system. Hardy states:

I felt from the start that because this was a good thing to do, everything would just fall into place and all our campuses would sing my praises for heading up this initiative. This was the first of many errors in thinking. (p. 112)

To create the TeleCampus, Hardy learned several lessons: a) a change agent needs access to people in power; b) he needed to prove he could provide assistance and value; c) do not worry about who gets credit; d) when you are not a faculty member, you are not a peer, and need to find champions in faculties; e) stay nice; and f) know which rules to break, which to bend, and which to leave alone. The article includes a postscript – the University of Texas decided, in 2010, to close the TeleCampus and make each campus responsible for its own distance learning programmes.

In the final (ninth) article of *Surviving the Swamps of Everyday Practice*, Gibson and Gibson divide driving and restraining forces into three categories: socio-cultural and economic, institutional, and individual. For each category, they provide examples of driving and restraining forces, and provide mitigation strategies. To manage institutional forces, for example, recommendations include having an understandable vision, sharing evaluation results widely, using learner and employer voices, and being prepared to defend everything.

The three articles in the *Admitting Compromises* section shift from individual swamp stories to higher order considerations of the interplay between historical, political, social, economic, technological, and

ethical considerations and the solutions (even if off the mark) that emerge. Evans and Smith, in *The Fog of Flexibility: the Riskiness of Flexible Post-secondary Education in Australia*, provide a historical perspective on how political changes have at times led to the rise and decline of equity and access values as key drivers for distance learning. Rumble's article, *Flexing Costs and Reflecting on Methods*, delves into the institutional cost drivers associated with flexible learning, and is particularly helpful in explaining why program budgeting and resourcing for distance programmes is quite unlike other tertiary education costing models. For example, more technical support staff may be needed, and operational costs for teachers may shift to capital investments in learning materials that might be used for several years without changes.

The final section, *Voicing Contrarian Opinions*, presents four perspectives on "where the rhetoric of hope and hype meets the reality of expectations and expediencies". (p. 273) For example, Alan Woodley, in *Plenty of Saps*, proposes that flexible learning institutions may be a disservice to students, "essentially, one is dealing with organizations that are self-interested and profit-seeking, and the tool of their trade is part-time study" (p. 301), because most students drop out. Adrian Kirkwood takes on the limitations of various technologies, in *Transformational Technologies: Exploring Myths and Realities*, such as the complexity of scheduling synchronous classes when students are in multiple time zones, and the need to implement forms of pacing when online group work is required.

In the concluding chapter, the editors credibly assemble and reflect upon major themes. Among their observations:

- The world is rife with opportunities "for the informed development of flexible access policies, of learning and assessment designs, and of teaching methods" (p. 327), in spite of political, economic, or practical constraints.
- The diversity among learner groups is huge, and policies that work for one cultural or social context will not necessarily work for others. For example, for some cultures, strongly didactic approaches are more effective than providing learning choices.
- Contributors to the volume demonstrated "skill with narratives that illuminate the stressors that often accompany institutional rhetoric and new policy directives" (p. 328).
- "Flexibility" is a complex and disputed term that requires practitioners to analyze it within context and define its limits in practice. Citing Chère and Terry Gibson from an earlier chapter, the editors note:

The biggest challenge is to define 'flexibility' in the context of your own institution and specific set of circumstances and then to use that definition to frame policies, procedures, and costing models that can be widely communicated....Arriving at the situational definition of 'flexibility' should be a collaborative process, one that involves students, faculty, administrators, and funding agencies. (p. 331)

A potential critique of the book is that time and technology have moved on. The book was published in 2011; therefore the articles reflect trends and technology references (particularly Web 2.0) that dominated educational discourse leading up to 2010. While noticeable, these references should be considered minor distractions. As Yoni Ryan explains her thoughts on e-learning, "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.” (p. 138). Since publication, the predilection has not diminished for governments and institutions to impose top down solutions, to cut budgets, or to over-simplify what ‘flexibility’ means in context. Similarly, for practitioners, the focus remains on designs and purposes for flexibility, with students at the centre. The text reinforces that the complex needs of various learner groups continually require analysis and updated responses as personal, social, economic, and technological contexts change.

The book is of interest to open and distance learning practitioners with responsibility for programme direction and management, because it articulates multiple contexts and possibilities for ‘flexibility’ that should be considered in designing, evaluating, and even re-inventing flexible learning programmes. Practitioners will appreciate the ‘swamp’ contributions as illustrations of potential policy pitfalls and mitigation strategies – Gibson & Gibson’s article, *Mapping the Driving and Restraining Forces on Flexibility in Higher Education*, does this particularly well. Practitioners may also find relief in knowing that others have been down similar (and sometimes lengthy) paths. For scholars of tertiary education administration, the entire volume provides launch points for enquiry in the open and distance learning sub-field.

The book is also useful for distance educators in primary and secondary education contexts. All the chapters reflect tertiary education experiences, but the principle observations about understanding situational and learner contexts to define flexible learning solutions still apply. Aspects of earning and retaining tenure in post-secondary institutions, as barriers to flexibility, will not apply in primary and secondary schools, but similar perceptions and assumptions about the quality and delivery of distance education will appear as other forms of resistance, or as policy and practice directions.

In summary, the publication achieves the editors’ purposes. It delineates the state of flexible learning in higher education, circa 2010, within the context of available and emergent digital technologies. The contributions provide a mosaic of government and institutional policy directions and economic pressures that profoundly shaped specific teaching and learning decisions. The sections are logically sequenced and lead to a thoughtful and comprehensive concluding chapter. The case studies are highly readable and at times visceral, while the conceptual chapters anchor the experiences in principles and research-based practices.

Reviewed by:

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