

Flexible pedagogy, flexible practice: Notes from the trenches of distance education. 2011. Edited by Elizabeth Burge, Chère Campbell Gibson, & Terry Gibson. Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press, Publishers. xi & 348 pages. ISBN 978-1-926836-20-1

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Introduction

'Flexible learning' which gives learners choice and control in aspects of when, how and what they learn, 'open education resources', 'virtual learning environments'- these terms, and their implications, have become part of many programs in higher education. Whether the practices of flexible education are embraced or avoided, or some measure in between, members of the academy should address flexible learning. Independent of the course objectives and knowledge of technologies supporting flexible education by the instructor, student expectations, administrative pressures and an ambiguous societal expectation have facilitated conditions in which flexible learning is now seen as a necessary feature of many programs in higher education.

Computer and communication technologies are facilitating, if not dictating, the implementation of flexible learning, yet the relationship between flexibility and technology is not straightforward (Bigum & Rowan, 2004; Sappey & Relf, 2010). How one views flexible practice and the role of technology has both positive and negative implications for instructors and for students (Laurillard, 2007; Palmer, 2011; Willems, 2005). For example, while technology may free us from being in a specific place at a specific time, it can also be a restriction for participants who might not have ready access to a computer or a reliable connection to the internet, and may increase the amount of time invested on the part of instructors and support staff designing courses and responding to the needs of the students. Flexible learning will likely continue to be part of the landscape of higher education and given this, it is important that informed discussions of the theory and practice of flexible education take place (Natale, 2007).

Flexible Pedagogy, Flexible Practice: Notes From the Trenches of Distance Education (2011) is an edited text comprised of a series of essays from diverse writers, theoretical perspectives, and backgrounds which provides considerable insight and a thorough critique of flexible learning. The overall writing style of the book is informal, and each of the essays is succinct, often posing more questions than answers.

Potential Audience

Palmer (2011) suggests that one of the most significant challenges of flexible education is that “even within a single institution there may be significantly different perspectives on the theoretical meaning and practical implications of flexible education” (p. 2). This may not be a volume for the neophyte distance learning educator seeking instruction and guidance in the “how” of distance learning (as it is not overly technical), so much as an affirmation of the challenges, strengths and weaknesses of flexible education. For those less experienced or less confident in the various aspects of flexible learning, and yet with the same pressures to adopt flexible learning practices while juggling the many other demands of academia, this edited book offers an extremely readable overview and examination of the components and issues associated with flexible education. Additionally, it serves as a provocation to consider the future development of teaching and learning in flexible, distance delivery of instruction in higher education.

Scope of the Book

A strength of this edited volume is that the editors have offered through each of the essays a variety of perspectives: positive and negative; philosophical and practical. The authors of the essays provide questions to guide implementation on a number of scales- in individual courses, programs, and within institutions. *Flexible Pedagogy, Flexible Practice* is a resource that would be of great use for post-secondary educators in assisting them to frame their understandings and philosophies rather than for use as a “how to” guide to incorporate flexible pedagogical approaches. It might also serve as a supplemental text for an overview course in educational technology to stimulate discussion regarding the effects of the interaction between technology and education. Also central to this text is a discussion of the larger issues of flexible learning, including how the terminology, concepts and practices might shape higher education in the current context and into the near future.

Content Organization

The edited book contains 23 chapters divided into 5 sections: 1: Clarifying the Concept, 2: Identifying Driving and Restraining Forces, 3: Surviving the Swamps of Everyday Practice, 4: Admitting Compromises, and 5: Voicing Contrarian Opinions, The introduction by editor, Elizabeth Burge, frames the discussion that follows and sets an informal, conversational tone for the book. The concluding chapter by all three editors provides an apt synthesis and challenges readers to reflect more deeply on the theory and practice of flexible education.

Summary

This text is a well-crafted collection which serves to expand the dialogue among scholars and educators with respect to flexible education in higher education institutions. The essays lend themselves, by the approachable language and the length of each chapter (none more than 15 pages long), to discussion by teaching interest groups and graduate students involved in teaching courses with an on-line component. While the overall tenor of the text is a positive

one regarding flexible education, there are realistic messages regarding the strengths and weaknesses of flexible education, which affords a substantial grounding for constructive dialogue.

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