BOOK REVIEW

Flexible Learning in a Digital World: Experiences and Expectations. Betty Collis and Jef Moonen (London: Kogan Page, 2001, 192 pp., $29.95). This book is produced as part of the Kogan Page Open and Distance Learning series edited by Fred Lockwood.

The nine chapters of this very practical book are summarized as eighteen short, explicit lessons learned through the authors’ own experiences in leading their Faculty of Educational Science and Technology at the University of Twente, The Netherlands, to more flexible learning with technology. During this process, they developed the TeleTOP Web-based course management software, which, from the description, appears to have many similar features to products such as WebCT and Blackboard.

A quick reading of the introduction gives you a snapshot of all the lessons, captured in brief statements and summaries such as these for Lesson 1: “Be specific” and “We need to define our terms and express our goals in a measurable form or else progress will be difficult to steer and success difficult to claim.” For more depth, you can choose to read the specific chapter where the arguments behind each lesson are developed, illustrated, and supported by extensive references and the authors’ experiences.

Practical considerations for managing the changes needed to incorporate flexible learning at an institutional or program level are grouped under four components of flexible learning: the institutional framework, implementation, technology, and pedagogy. Each chapter has a focus on one or more of the four components. Although implementation methods depend on the institutional context, the chapters on managing change provide practical considerations about required policies to integrate technology into the curriculum at the institutional level so that institutions can meet the demand for greater learning flexibility. Relevant factors influencing the three phases of change (initiation, implementation, and institutionalization) are suggested from research and practice. Appropriate technology selection is presented as central to providing flexibility, and an argument is made for developing or choosing a course management system for the Web.

The idea of flexible learning, defined broadly as providing learner choice in different aspects of the learning experience, is not new. In North America, some may be more familiar with terms such as blended learning or distributed education. Also not new are the five dimensions of flexibility: time, content, entry requirements, instructional approach and resources, and delivery and logistics. For example, these dimensions are discussed extensively in Australian higher-education literature about flexible learning.

Although sections about managing change to provide flexibility in learning contain practical insights, I found the chapters dealing with pedagogy among the most valuable aspects of the book. The authors’ pedagogical model is based on “contributing learners.” The role of the instructor is described as designing activities, providing feedback, and monitoring strategies for learning activities. Using the contributing learner model, a typical
course site on the Web would start with little content, but would gradually fill throughout the term with the contributions made by students and instructors. The contributing learner model, like constructivism, poses challenges in designing a course in advance of delivery. Yet current Web course management options, which allow for hiding and revealing aspects of the course as it progresses and for the ability to have different views of the content stored in a database, now make it easier to consider such approaches.

I find their conceptual model of a Flexibility-Activity Framework very useful as a means to make pedagogical decisions about flexibility. The four quadrants of the Flexibility-Activity Framework are created by a vertical axis of increasing degrees of flexibility and a horizontal axis based on the goal of the learning activity. On the left of the horizontal axis, the goal is primarily knowledge acquisition, and on the right, the goal is primarily student contribution. Two underlying principles are that flexibility and adaptability are key to learning situations and that learners need to acquire skills and concepts as well as learn how to become participants and contributors to a community of learners.

By superimposing a pedagogical approach called the “U turn” over the Flexibility-Activity Framework, a course designer can rethink course design depending on the level of the instructor’s comfort with flexibility and activity. The U turn involves grouping the planned student learning experiences into three phases of “before,” “during,” and “after” activities. The left arm of the U represents the before activities, where the focus is primarily on acquisition of knowledge. The base of the U is the focus for the class, which may or may not be face-to-face, but does involve some sort of learning event. The right arm of the U represents the after activities, where the focus of the follow-up activities should be primarily on learners contributing to the learning materials available for all students and learning to accept coreponsibility for the learning experiences of the group. Examples of some of the more flexible and contribution-oriented learning activities relate to seeking and contributing new and supplementary information, contributing to case studies, creating study resources, creating test items, and summarizing online discussions.

Another useful model from my perspective is the 4-E Model. Four factors (ease of use, personal engagement, institutional environment, and effectiveness of learning) are identified as affecting the likelihood of individuals using technology in a learning-related setting. The idea that these four factors can be used to measure the return on investment for the institution, the students, and the instructors is insightful, but challenging to consider how to implement. Institutions face financial costs as well as costs in terms of resistance to change and the problems associated with change. Using technology and incorporating flexible learning methods requires time and effort investments by teachers and learners. The authors argue that time and effort investments are mitigated by the ease of use, the personal engagement of the individuals, and a supportive environment within the institution. The return measurements are effectiveness of learning in terms of improved quality; improved logistical and procedural efficiencies; and longer-term, strategic gains, such as the improved economic position of the institution because of increased student numbers.

In the final chapter, two dimensions of change, location and quality control, are used to develop four scenarios for the future: Back to Basics, the Global Campus,
Stretching the Mould, and the New Economy. Given these four scenarios, the authors make specific recommendations for planners at the institutional level, implementation level, classroom level, and technology level. Some activities, similar to the work currently being done in North America with learning objects, are suggested as future directions.

As the authors intended, practitioners interested in pedagogy or in technology will find individual chapters relevant. By reading the entire book, administrators in higher education, schools, and the corporate sector will gain a broader understanding of many of the complex issues associated with integrating technology and flexible learning in an organization. This is a book worth reading.

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