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ABSTRACT

This paper considers a new way of framing the changes currently being pursued in higher education course provision. The introduction presents two propositions: that lifelong learning and the notion of the learning individual is becoming a central consideration in our society; and that those who work in institutions should be striving to build a learning organization or learning university. The first section describes emerging attributes of flexible learning; a chart lists host institution(s), award/degree(s), period in existence, typical enrollment numbers, and flexible attribute(s) for several discipline areas. The second section addresses lifelong learning and the learning individual. The third section considers learning organizations and learning universities, including five themes that lie at the core of a learning organization, i.e., personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. The fourth section discusses the notion of a learning profession or learning discipline, including attributes of the "learning to learn" dimensions of professions and disciplines. (Contains 13 references.) (MES)

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Flexible Learning in Higher Education: Examining the Case for the 'Learning Profession' and the 'Learning Discipline'

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Proceedings

Flexible learning in higher education: examining the case for the 'learning profession' and the 'learning discipline'

Chris Trevitt

Introduction

Why might librarians be interested in 'flexible learning in higher education'? In short, I suggest that one key reason centres on the profound changes that are implied by the term. Librarians have for some time concerned themselves about the consequences for their profession of the pressures for change in education provision, including those associated with the increasing proliferation of communication and information technologies (CITs) (eg Bundy, 2000). Undoubtedly these changes have important ramifications for those librarians working in the higher education sector. From my perspective, the very nature and direction of these changes ensures they will also be of central concern to many more members of the profession, no matter where in society they are working. My purpose in this paper is to explain how I arrive at this conclusion.

Many of us have encountered the term 'flexible learning', even if we do not work in the higher or further education sector. The term is increasingly widely used, and some institutions of higher education have even created 'flexible learning centres', thereby explicitly institutionalising the term. But do we have any idea of what exactly is meant by the notion of 'flexible learning'? As a goal, or for direction setting purposes, our shared notions may well be adequate. As an established and proven mode of operation however, our collective perspective is still largely evolving.

My co-speaker, Janice Rickards, Pro-Vice Chancellor at Griffith University, notes that while the term 'flexible learning' means 'different things to different people', some institutions at least (and hers is one) have developed a comparatively advanced level of collective understanding of the term. In her paper, Rickards provides a useful summary of some of the attributes or characteristics of flexible learning, and the increasingly central part being played by CITs (in particular, the world-wide web). Peter Taylor, from the same institution, has elaborated these ideas for internal educational development purposes (Taylor and Joughin, 1997; Taylor et al., 1998).

My perspective is that the term 'flexible learning' signifies that change is underway, is imminent, or being demanded, as noted above. The term 'flexible learning' signifies that change is the norm rather than the exception in Australian universities at the start of a new millenium, and there is an increasingly relentless pressure for more and more change in the provision of post-compulsory education options and opportunities.

In this paper, I want to consider briefly a new way of framing the changes currently being pursued in higher education course provision. I want to start with two propositions, namely:

- that lifelong learning and the notion of the 'learning individual' is becoming a central consideration in our society (or at least, it certainly is in the 'knowledge worker' world inhabited by the librarian and the academic), and
- that those of us who work in institutions should be striving to build a 'Learning Organisation' (or 'Learning University').

Then I want to examine the idea of a 'learning profession' or 'learning discipline' as a concept intermediate between the notion of a 'learning individual' and 'learning organisation/university':

- that is potentially much more central to academics' and others collective professional identity, and

- that exhibits attributes central to a deeper understanding of the nature and direction of the changes being wrought under the rubric of 'flexible learning'.

Before doing this however let me give some examples of university courses that I am acquainted with, and, I believe, exhibit some of the emerging attributes that are coming to characterise 'flexible learning'.

Flexible learning - some emerging attributes

Table 1 lists a very small selection of courses that exhibit some emerging attributes of 'flexible learning' programs. These courses are chosen not so much because they are exemplars as because I have some first hand knowledge and experience of them. A key feature shared by them all, is that even while students are enrolled, the course design is in transition, evolving to meet changing needs. Note the overwhelming emphasis in Table 1 on graduate courses, and on comparatively small enrolment numbers. These courses do not seek to emulate the UK Open University approach where enrolments can exceed thousands of students per course.

Many of the practical attributes of 'flexible learning' are still at a very early (immature) stage. Course evolution and course provision is by no means entirely geared to a world of constant and rapid change. For some institutions, if not at Griffith University, 'flexible learning' may exist at the margins for sometime to come (and hence characterised by small enrolment courses, national niche market courses, etc).

The shift in emphasis that all these examples portray is a shift away from both a 'traditional residential education' and a 'traditional distance education' (see Figure 1). Course design and development thus entails more of hybrid approach that aims to retain some of the best features of each approach, but also requires the development of new approaches and methods. There is likely to be a diminished role for 'face-to-face' lecture and tutorial activities (that tend to dominate traditional residential education), and a diminished role for a separated 'materials' and 'student support system' (that tend to dominate traditional 'distance' providers). The shift is toward an integrated approach to provision of materials and student support (via computer-mediated conferencing, etc). Increasingly sophisticated models of student learning support are seamlessly incorporated into a structured but modular sequence of learning activities. Models embrace practitioner support (eg NCEPH work-based Masters program), peer support (eg AGSM MBA program) as much as institutional support (eg Education at Deakin University), in addition to program-level in-house academic/teacher support.

Discipline area	Host institution(s)	Award	Period in existence **	Typical enrolment numbers	Flexible attribute(s)
Higher Education	University of NSW (UNSW)	Certificate; Diploma; Masters	Many years	Small (eg few 10s)	Started with a 'traditional' distance education approach (ie print based study guide and 'reading brick'); evolved some online attributes in some modules.

Business (MBA)	AGSM* (UNSW, University of Sydney)	Masters	Many years	Medium to large (eg 100s)	Currently operating as a 'traditional' distance course; preparations underway for online development.
Education	Deakin University	Diploma; Masters	Many years	Medium (eg 100 +)	Roots are in 'traditional' distance provision; hybrid print and CDrom resources used (eg 'Hathaway' School)
Clinical trials management	University of Canberra (with ANU)	Certificate; Diploma	Less than 5 years	Small	Started as a 'traditional' distance course; online development underway.
Public health; epidemiology	NCEPH*, ANU	Masters	10 years	Small	Originated as a 'distributed' model, with a focus on workplace learning (based anywhere in Australia), and some 10 weeks 'residential' during 4 blocks over 2 yrs.
Legal practice	ANU, + others (in negotiation)	Diploma	Less than 5 years	Medium (eg 100 +)	Originally a fulltime on-campus course with local clientele; then became a 'distance' course catering to off-campus students; now moving online.
Hindi language	ANU (and University of Sydney)	Undergrad	Less than 5 years	Small	Initial emphasis on videoconferencing between the two institutions; recent developments involve creative, interactive online support materials and activities.

Table 1. Some examples of emerging flexible learning programs in Australian Higher Education.

(Note:

* AGSM is the Australian Graduate School of Management; NCEPH is the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health;

** The period referred to is the period during which the 'flexible attributes' listed have been evident).

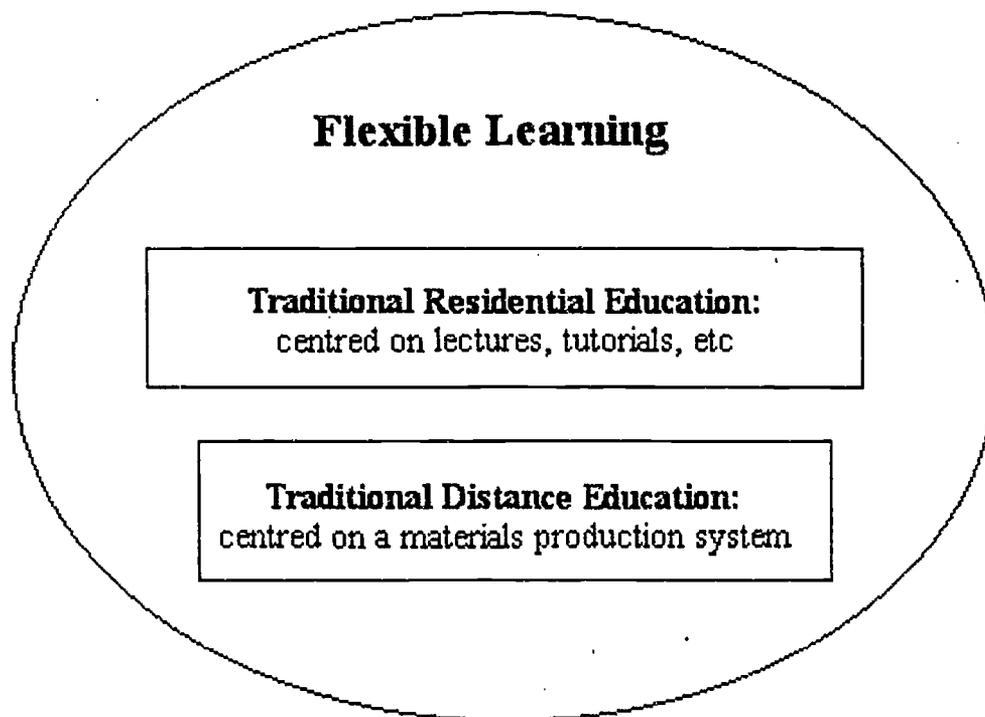


Figure 1. My concept of 'flexible learning' denotes a superset of attributes that draws on traditional residential and distance approaches.

The term 'flexible learning' thus denotes a superset of attributes that both absorbs and builds beyond those attributes that characterise the educational traditions that have prevailed. It demands that we pick the eyes out of what is good in residential face-to-face courses, and what is good in 'distance' courses. It also demands that we invent other attributes, as we need them, in order to meet changing needs.

This invention requirement poses fundamental developmental challenges, since the invention process, by and large, is not yet part of the institutional fabric for many universities. The concept is central to the notion of a 'learning profession' or learning discipline' however, as I discuss below.

Lifelong learning and the 'Learning Individual'

The bulk of the demand for courses such as those instanced in Table 1 comes from individuals engaging in lifelong learning - what I term the 'learning individual'. These are people pursuing further studies, often additional to a first degree. They may be competent independent learners, and they may be preparing for a second or third career. As suggested by the examples instanced in Table 1, the courses sought are often at a postgraduate rather than undergraduate level.

According to the management consultant Peter Drucker, such individuals who are 'knowledge workers' will tend to outlive their employer organisations (Drucker, 1999) and so, increasingly, lifelong learning will become the norm. He suggests we each need to learn to think like a

'one-person CEO' and this means asking a number of key questions, such as:

- What are my strengths?
- How do I perform?
- Where do I belong?
- What is my contribution?

Learning organisations and learning universities

At the other end of the scale is the idea of the 'learning organisation'. This concept underpins the work of Argyris and Schon (1978) and was popularised by Senge (1990). 'Learning organisations' acquire and develop the attributes necessary for survival in a world characterised by rapid change. Garvin (2000) has examined some of the practical matters that need to be addressed when implementing the concept.

Senge identifies five themes that lie at the core of a 'learning organisation', and some or all of these may be applicable to the notion of a 'learning profession' or a 'learning discipline':

- Personal mastery -- developing a personal vision and having faith in your own ability to make a difference within the organisation;
- Mental models -- understanding the way you and your colleagues think and reason;
- Shared vision -- aligning your own aims and ambitions with those of your colleagues;
- Team learning -- working with colleagues to go beyond your own way of seeing; and
- Systems thinking -- seeing your own work as a unit in the systems of a larger whole and understanding how what happens in one affects what goes on elsewhere.

Elaine Martin from RMIT University has explored Senge's ideas in the context of universities (as one particular type of organisation). Martin (1999) suggests that, if universities are to embrace change in the way they think about and manage themselves, they need to manage and balance the various tensions involved, and support their staff through the provision of appropriate tools. Key, she suggests, is a three-stage structured approach to grieving (letting go of the past) managing the transition, and making alternatives visible and publicly established. Coaldrake and Stedman (1999) argue that for universities addressing these challenges ' - it is not ... sufficient to shift the onus of learning to university staff; it is also necessary to foster a culture that supports and rewards initiative and performance in the interests of both the institution and individual.' Again, these issues and ideas may have relevance to the notion of a 'learning profession' or a 'learning discipline'.

Toward a 'learning profession' or 'learning discipline'?

In their essay on the changing nature of academic work, Coaldrake and Stedman (1999) devote an entire sub-section to the 'Diffusion and blurring of [staff] roles', noting that, in contrast with general staff, 'many academics see their primary loyalty as being to their discipline, rather than to the institution'. This suggests to me that the notion of a 'learning profession' or 'learning discipline' might have merit as a way of labelling and thinking about the changing world of university education and learning.

Inserting the word 'learning' in front of 'profession' or 'discipline' implies, for me, something dynamic and action-focussed. It is important at this juncture to distinguish two separate periods when this dynamism impinges on individuals working in a discipline or profession. The first is the initial period of induction into a discipline or professional community (usually through taking a university-based degree). The second is the subsequent period working in that discipline or profession. While there is usually at least some opportunity and incentive for graduates to subsequently engage in on-going professional development of some description, my concern here is the extent to which the initial induction period (undergraduate degree) prepares them for this

activity and more importantly generates a hunger for it. If lifelong learning becomes increasingly central and Drucker's prediction that we each need to become our own CEO holds true, then there will be increased demand for individuals to benefit from more explicit preparation for these 'learning to learn' action-focused career demands.

So what are the likely attributes of the 'learning to learn' dimensions of professions and disciplines? Ellis (1992) provides one perspective on what he terms an 'action-focus curriculum' for the interpersonal professions (eg Nursing, Social Work). Some probable attributes of a 'learning profession' are exemplified for me by the activities pursued by participants in the NCEPH Masters program listed in Table 1. For example, the bulk of this two-year program involves field and work-based placements, interspersed with blocks of time at the ANU. Accordingly there are both professional (work-based) and academic supervisors for each participant. More importantly, part of the curriculum for this program requires participants in their second year of study to 'learn to teach' the new participants who comprise the subsequent intake. This requires a structured action-focus approach centred on a two-day program. The second-years responsible for planning and conducting this structured two-day program are introduced to a number of guiding principles during an externally facilitated 'Introduction to Teaching' workshop that is conducted some months before the two-day program actually takes place. Following graduation the participants from this course are expected to become leaders within their profession, and to engage in further 'learning leadership' roles and activities, modelled after the formative experiences in the course.

Concluding discussion

This ANU example epitomises for me exactly what Donald Schon was driving at in his 'Change' magazine article entitled 'The new scholarship requires a new epistemology' (Schon, 1995). Schon challenges universities to shift their prevailing culture. He wants us to extend our collective culture beyond the 'norms of technical rationality' which are 'built into [our] institutional structures and practices'. Likewise, Brown and Duguid (2000) argue that '... a knowledge-delivery view of education overlooks the process of "learning to be", ... which is such an integral part of university life. "Learning to be" involves enculturation - engaging with communities of practice and of concepts.' Schon (op cite) suggests that: '... higher education institutions will have to learn organisationally to open up the prevailing epistemology so as to foster new forms of reflective action research. This, in turn, requires building up communities of inquiry capable of criticising such research and fostering its development.'

The challenge for all of us working in 'flexible learning' in universities is to find practical ways to address the desire for a 'new epistemology', to find ways to appropriately broaden curricula, and to foster a balance between theory and practice. These are all developments that underpin the concept of what I term a 'learning discipline' or 'learning profession'. Ellis (1992) suggests we advance this agenda by pursuing partnerships with relevant agencies (as in the NCEPH Masters program discussed above). This implies that librarians serving in these agencies are eligible to be drawn into the support structure for such flexible learning programs, in addition to the librarians based in the relevant campus libraries. Such developments, of course, would simply characterise librarianship as a case in point of a 'learning profession'.

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