Flexible Pedagogy, Flexible Practice: Notes from the Trenches of Distance Education
(Book Review)

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‘Flexible Pedagogy, Flexible Practice’ is a compilation of essays written specifically for this book, by learned postsecondary educators, from around the world, on the topic of flexibility in post-secondary education; with a particular focus on distance education. The central theme of the book and of each of the twenty-three articles is ‘flexibility’ in learning and in education. Each of the twenty-three articles provides a unique perspective of flexibility in distance education, as defined within the context of a particular country, political system, nationality or cultural group. The final product is a collection of distinctive, yet interconnected perspectives on the relative importance of flexibility in education.

The rationale for the compilation is to create a shared perspective on flexible learning and in so doing, to highlight the challenges faced by educators who advocate for flexibility in education. A second rationale given for the book is, to determine the utility for and relevance of flexible learning as a canonical concept, from a global perspective. This is partly achieved by presenting a broad range of candid reflections from a diverse group of experienced international educators.

Thirty-five authors representing nine different countries and a broad range of educational perspectives contributed to this compilation. The book is divided into five distinct sections. Section one consists of three essays which explore the concept of flexibility. Section two presents four essays on the challenges, referred to in the book as the opposing forces of flexibility, which exist within postsecondary institutions. Section three consists of actual accounts of seven projects which focus on the challenges, successes and failures of implementing change and flexibility in postsecondary education. Section four contains three essays which highlight the pragmatism of change, the realities of compromise and the trade-offs inherent in affecting systemic change. Section five introduces a balance to the anthology by presenting three perspectives which both challenge and caution those who advocate for flexibility in education. The final essay is an introspective reflection on the significance of flexibility for distance education and lifelong learning. The book concludes with a summary of the issues discussed throughout the book and the future possibilities for dialogue on the topic of flexibility.

The strength of this book lies not within the individual efforts of the thirty-five contributing authors and the three editors. Rather, it is the diversity of opinion and perspective presented that illustrates the importance of flexibility as a relative term, dependent on many factors. As such, a definition of and utility for flexibility as a concept, is situational and context dependent.

This is an important book for distance educators with an interest in international education and the challenges of distance delivery from a global perspective. As you read through each of the articles a single theme begins to emerge unmistakable. Flexibility means different things to different people. The concept of flexibility is evolving and changing at a fairly rapid pace, fueled by recent innovations in technology and the resultant changes to government service delivery, industry, and education and society as a whole. Flexibility is context dependent and, as the articles in the book demonstrate, it is also strongly affected by geography, language, culture, , political ideology, economics and the need for international partnerships and consensus at a global level. As we move ever closer to a global
perspective, the need for societal flexibility and adaptability becomes more significant. The relevance of this book lies in the fact that it attempts to illustrate the complex contextual and variable nature of flexibility. This is in many ways a book about the subjectivity and variability of flexibility in education.

This book also has relevance for education students at the undergraduate and graduate level. It has significance for studies in educational leadership, instructional design, learning theory, and inclusive education practice. The layout of the book is such that it simulates an interactive discussion about the challenges of flexible delivery in education. I would recommend this book for anyone involved in educational leadership in K to 12 and postsecondary education.

It is not within the mandate of this review to provide chapter summaries for each of the 23 chapters or to delineate the numerous definitions and interpretations of the term ‘flexibility’ found within it. Each chapter narrates different story about the need to create flexible educational environments within a given context. This review will focus on one article to illustrate the importance of context, and the relative nature of specific circumstances.

The title chosen is, ‘Cultural Perceptions of Flexibility in Asian Higher Education’ by Colin Latchem and Insung Jung. The article opens with a retelling of the Indian folktale, ‘The Six Blind Men of Indostan, as retold by American poet, John Godfrey Saxe:

\[\text{It was six men of Indostan, to learning much inclined, who went to see the Elephant (Though all of them were blind), that each by observation might satisfy his mind And so these men of Indostan, disputed loud and long, each in his own opinion Exceeding stiff and strong, though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong So oft in theologic wars, the disputants, I ween, rail on in utter ignorance Of what each other mean, and prate about an Elephant, not one of them has seen}\]

Latchem and Jung define flexibility as a willingness to change and the ability to bend without breaking. The article focuses on the challenges of education and the need for flexibility in Asian universities. Asian postsecondary education operates within an international knowledge network and as such is impacted by developments and changes in western educational philosophy and practice. They are also tasked with the responsibility of reflecting and celebrating cultural nuances, local traditions and societal norms. Flexibility in this context means different things to different people.

The social, political and economic realities in many Asian countries mandate a degree of flexibility that allows rapid expansion for education while constraining costs; providing post-secondary education to two-thirds of the world’s population, with less than 3% of the world’s wealth. This disparity necessitates a context for flexibility.

In many Asian countries flexibility can also be defined in terms of a movement away from government control. Government controls over universities often require negotiations and lobbying for changes in legislation. This will impact the University's ability to be flexible. Culture can also impact flexibility, especially those aspects of social engagement that are culturally sensitive. Asian universities incorporate aspects of their particular traditions, cultures and social realities. In such contexts, flexibility can mean different things for different people. The authors state that flexibility may mean, in the case of India’s Indira Gandhi National Open University and the Open University of Sri Lanka, the need for open admissions for students; while at another university such as the Open University of Israel, it may mean allowing students the freedom to design their own programs of study.

Limited access to technology can also be a deterrent of flexibility. Internet penetration rates in East, South and central Asia in terms of a percentage of the population is 14%, compared to 22% for the rest of the planet. The authors conclude that every culture should define flexibility within its own philosophical, theoretical and operational framework, while at the same time allowing the flexibility required to manage sensitive cross-cultural issues; and avoid the conclusions of the six men of Indostan.

The significance of this compilation of essays is that it is the first step in a process to create a much needed dialogue on the issue of flexibility in education, with the intent of establishing standards for universal access to education.