Foreword

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity of "saying" a few words as a foreword to Badrul Khan's book. Frankly, I was not very enthusiastic when he first invited me; with a second edition of a book of my own under way, an issue of *The American Journal of Distance Education* to hand over, and a full teaching schedule, among other things, one more writing assignment was not what I wanted. However, a quick look at Dr. Khan's Preface to the book resulted in an immediate change of mood, from reluctance to excitement. What caused this was the following, the first thing I read: " In the information age … Learners expect on-demand, anytime/anywhere high-quality learning environments … They want increased flexibility in learning—they want to have more say in what they learn, when they learn, and where and how they learn." This is what I found irresistible. How could I resist a new book that seems to validate a position formulated in earlier times, regarded by one's colleagues as marginal, if not bizarre, that now seems to be entering the mainstream. Well, such was my reaction when I read those opening sentences of *Flexible Learning in an Information Society*—seducing me into reading on through the following chapters, and then gladly letting Dr. Khan know I would write what I hope will be interpreted as a warm endorsement of his publication.

It would be unfairly enigmatic to leave the above reference to the position "formulated in earlier times" without a short explanation, so let me explain that flexibility is a subject that has preoccupied me since the first research that I reported in 1972, when I classified educational programs into a typology according to the extent to which they were more or less flexible. Programs offering greater flexibility were described as having less structure, greater opportunity for dialogue between teachers and learners, and giving more control of the teaching-learning process to the student. Here is exactly what I wrote at that time:

For every program, we seek to identify the relationship between learners and teachers, and where control of each instructional process lies, by asking: Is learning self-initiated and self-motivated? Who identifies goals and objectives, and selects problems for study? Who determines the pace, the sequence, and the methods of information gathering? What provision is there for the development of learners' ideas and for

creative solutions to problems? Is emphasis on gathering information external to the learner? How flexible is each instructional process to the requirements of the learner? How is the usefulness and quality of learning judged? (Moore, 1972, p. 81)

I trust this reference will serve to explain my very positive response to *Flexible Learning in an Information Society.* To be offered a book of 30 chapters on a subject that has exercised me for so long at both micro-levels (course design and instruction) and more recently at macro-levels (institutional organization and policy, of which more later), this is exciting indeed.

In the 1972 report, the term I used to define the learner's flexibility in deciding and directing what to learn, how, and to what extent was "learner autonomy." That term was derived from a sound tradition, a pedagogy referred to for several decades as independent study, which incorporated teaching through the technology of printed text. In spite of considerable evidence that flexible learning using older technologies could be very successful, the question of flexibility has remained on the margin of educators' attention until very recently. The promise of this new book is that now, in the Information Age, with leadership from academics like Badrul Khan, we might see a larger cadre of researchers with better institutional resources address some of the long-standing questions. What, we want to know, are the psychological and learning theory justifications for flexible learning? What are the ethical and philosophical justifications for allowing (or denying) the freedoms of flexible learning? What are the optimally flexible ways of structuring a curriculum and structuring the processes by which teachers and learners enter conversation, interaction, dialogue? The editor of *Flexible Learning in an Information Society* and the other authors in this book have provided a valuable contribution to our search for answers to these questions, the former by providing a structure that enables his contributors to focus on each of the several domains that will have to be mastered, and the latter by providing as rich a variety of topics as could be hoped for in a single volume—including a strong thematic concern with evaluation and assessment, chapters that deal directly with key pedagogical concepts such as "humanizing" (there's a concept with deep roots!), and more elusive core macro- issues such as those concerning intercultural collaboration and ethical challenges. Although there is so much here, one reaction to reading it all is to realize how much more remains to be done. This book indeed exposes the irony of our situation, showing on the one hand the importance of flexibility and progress being made towards achieving more flexibility, but at the same time showing how limited is the flexibility we enjoy, even in this Information Age.

What we are able to celebrate so far is primarily flexibility in use of new technologies. There is also a somewhat increased flexibility in teaching methods in our schools, colleges, and training departments—seen in more flexible course structures and the use of constructivist pedagogical techniques to enhance the frequency and quality of dialogue between learners and instructors. However, these technological and pedagogical flexibilities are limited, squeezed, and constrained by highly *inflexible institutional structures and almost totally inflexible national, state, and institutional policies.* The majority of teachers work in organizations that are governed by academic policies formulated when rigidity, not flexibility was the norm. It is these organizational structures and policies that are the hardest barriers to overcome as we look to extend

greater flexibility through new technology and new pedagogy. The kinds of problems I have in mind are restrictive admissions criteria (which includes tuition fees), rules about time to graduation, and the insistence by long-established institutions on an arbitrarily determined standard period of residence for every student, regardless of the subject of study, or the student's intellectual or personal attributes. Many older universities that are now sufficiently flexible to deliver courses online nevertheless insist that their professors must be resident on the campus, limiting the pool of teaching talent quite unnecessarily in the Information Age when the Internet makes geographic location irrelevant. The allocation of resources and inflexible budgetary procedures are heavily biased towards synchronous interactivity—that is, the classroom, leaving inadequate investment in the pre-active course design process that is at least as important for programs delivered by technology. Inflexible, traditional evaluation methods are often unsuitable for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of programs using distance teaching products and methods. I do not of course criticize restrictions and rules designed to protect the student or to support the quality of teaching and learning, but I do suggest there is a need to recognize and understand more about the effects of policies that are enforced only because of tradition and administrative inertia. Issues of policy that are most obvious in our educational institutions need examination at national and state levels too. The recent (2006) decision to amend the infamous 50% rule that withheld federal funding from some of the more flexible technology-based teaching institutions illustrates the kind of higher level policy issue that I refer to. I was among a group of educators who signed a petition to Congress on this issue—and that was some 10 years ago. Now we can hope that the pace of change is accelerating, and surely will move faster as we develop shared understanding among innovative stakeholders about the need to change the culture and practice of our educational organizations, and to effect change at the state and national levels. For those of us who are committed to the value of giving greater freedom and flexibility to learners, it is the direction we have to go in. Further progress will depend on our acquiring more knowledge as well as mutual, collegial support. Surely both of these needs will be met in some degree from reading the galaxy of global stars assembled by the editor of this book. I invite you to proceed, and hope you enjoy the adventure!

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