

Foreword

In physical educational settings, the times for learning and teaching are often clearly defined. Students, for instance, know when their lectures, labs, and tutorials are being held and for how long. Teachers, likewise, have timetables of their teaching commitments and activities. In distance education settings, including online education, however, notions of time and the rules and regulations of engagement in relation to time are being reformed completely (Duncheon & Tierney, 2013). In these contexts, students as well as teachers are no longer required to be at any one place and at any one time. Indeed, flexibility in relation to time, place, and pace of study is promoted as an attractive advantage of open, flexible, and distance learning (Naidu, 2008).

Those who could not afford or access fulltime or part-time campus-based education welcomed this opportunity to study independently at a time convenient to them, as well as at their own place and pace. However, everyone realised very quickly that too much flexibility with time, place, and pace of study was fraught with problems. Many distance learners found out that self-regulation of one's study was much harder than they had previously assumed (McElroy & Lubich, 2013). Without deadlines, many learners procrastinated and eventually dropped out of their studies (Klingsieck, Fries, Horz, & Hofer, 2012). Increasingly, large numbers of distance learners began asking for more structure and interaction with their teachers and teaching organizations. Distance teaching institutions also recognised the problem and began to use residential sessions and synchronous and asynchronous interactive technologies to deal with increasing instances of learner alienation, procrastination, and dropout, but how many of these contiguous arrangements would be too much, making distance education like conventional campus-based education?

Researchers and practitioners in the field have suggested that the trick is in getting the mixture right between independence and interaction (Anderson, 2003; Daniel & Marquis, 1979). Maybe we have been getting it right, as models of learning and teaching that afford various levels of flexibility in terms of time, place, and pace of study have continued to proliferate around the globe. Take for instance the Masters in Distance and eLearning program of the University of Maryland, University College, in which I taught a course for many years. Here is a program of study that is completely online. Students of the program are spread throughout the world and so

are their teachers. Nevertheless, there are fixed start and end dates for the course as well as fixed due dates for the submission of all required assessment activities, and there are many programs like it all over the world.

Distance education programs like these, due to accreditation and regulatory requirements, have to have specific start and end dates, due dates for assessment tasks, and clear guidelines on how much engagement and participation is expected of learners in synchronous and asynchronous online learning activities. There are other reasons as well for a reasonable amount of structure in distance learning and teaching. Issues around persistence in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are a stark reminder of the need for some kind of structure around these activities. Recently, I joined a MOOC mostly to find out how a MOOC works. As this course began and the tsunami of emails from fellow participants began arriving in our inboxes, many of us screamed out, “Whoa stop these emails, you are filling up my inbox, please cancel my enrolment!”

The contents of this book are a significant contribution to this discussion about time and its implications for learners, teachers, and teaching organizations in contemporary educational settings. It comprises a rich collection that addresses relevant and critical questions such as: How flexible should flexible learning be? What are the implications of temporal flexibility for key learning and teaching activities including provision of learning support, the management of student learning activities, assessment of learning outcomes, and provision of adequate and satisfactory feedback?

I strongly recommend the book to you. Enjoy!

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