Chapter I

Flexible Learning in an Open and Distributed Environment

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Introduction

Advances in information technology, coupled with changes in society, have had a tremendous impact on our educational and training systems. Participants in this educational and training paradigm require rich learning environments supported by well designed resources. They expect on-demand, anytime/anywhere high-quality learning environments with good support services. In other words, 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. They may choose a mix of traditional and new learning approaches and technology; they may want to study at their chosen time and location and at their own pace. Therefore, flexible learning can be defined as an innovative approach for delivering well-designed, learner-centered, and interactive learning environments to anyone, anyplace, anytime by utilizing the attributes and resources of the Internet, digital technologies, and other modes of learning in concert with instructional design principles. Can we do what learners want? Nunan (1996) stated:

Teaching and learning may be created through exploring different ways of delivering education. When ‘delivery’ or ‘learning’ is coupled with the word flexible, the intention to increase for learners both their access to, and their control over, particular teaching and learning environments is implied.
New developments in learning science and technology provide opportunities to develop learning environments that suit students’ needs and interests by offering them the choice of increased flexibility. A mix of traditional and new learning approaches and technologies is instrumental in creating innovative learning environments with increased flexibility.

Meaning of Flexibility in Learning

In any educational system there are several stakeholder groups, including learners, instructors, support services staff, and the institution. The term flexibility can mean different things to different stakeholder groups. Nunan (1996) noted:

*Flexibility is a characteristic which satisfies many stakeholders in education. It can serve the interests of managers and politicians who focus on effectiveness and efficiency and cut-price solutions to the delivery of a service. For students and teachers it can suggest a student-centered approach to learning and the democratization of processes of learning and teaching. For curriculum developers it may mean the availability of a range of approaches to suit student diversity. For those marketing educational services it can mean the production of commodities which can be used competitively in a global educational market.*

(p. 2)

No matter how each stakeholder group feels about or views flexibility in learning, they are all in favor of meaningful learning that is suitable for a diverse population.

Learner-Focused Flexible Learning System

A leading theorist of educational systems, Banathy (1991) makes a strong case for learning-focused educational and training systems where “the learner is the key entity and occupies the nucleus of the systems complex of education” (p. 96). For Banathy, “when learning is in focus, arrangements are made in the environment of the learner that communicate the learning task, and learning resources are made available to learners so that they can explore and master learning tasks” (p. 101). A distributed learning environment that can effectively support learning-on-demand must be designed by placing the learners at the center. In support of a learner-centered approach, Moore (1998) states:

*Our aim as faculty should be to focus our attention on making courses and other learning experiences that will best empower our students to learn, to learn fully, effectively, efficiently, and with rewarding satisfaction. It is the responsibility of our