Flexible Assessment:
Some Tensions
and Solutions

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Introduction

Flexible learning is now well entrenched in the policy, curriculum, and course delivery frameworks of many higher education sectors in the Western world. However, because of the ambiguous nature of the terms, teachers are often faced with ill-defined expectations from their institution to ‘be flexible’—to make choices about where, when, and how they will offer the various elements of their curriculum. The negotiable meanings of flexibility cluster around the divergent perspectives of a range of stakeholders, including pedagogists, managers, and technologists. Teachers are often unsure of the motives behind the push towards flexible learning: Are they being asked to save money by putting their courses online and reducing their face to face teaching? Are they being asked to better meet the needs of 21st century students and therefore increase enrolments? Is it about improving student learning by refocusing on student-centred learning and lifelong learning? Is it about harnessing the educational potential of new technologies? Tucked within this confusing area of higher education sits flexible assessment—a relatively neglected theme in the flexible learning story.
Whilst attempts to define and describe flexible learning remain elusive, essentially flexible learning is about increasing student choice over the time, place, pace, content, learning style, assessment, and opportunities to collaborate with others (Ling, Arger, Smallwood, Toomey, Kirkpatrick, & Barnard, 2001). As such, flexible learning is about:

1. **Pedagogy**: Flexible learning is informed by a number of pedagogies, including the more traditional open learning, student-centred learning, and lifelong learning, as well as more recent pedagogies associated with technology and online learning.

2. **Delivery**: Flexible delivery allows teachers and students to choose the media through which units of study are offered: face-to-face teaching, print materials, online materials and/or communications, audio and video, CD-ROM, and so on.

3. **Institutional policies, systems, and structures**: Institutions necessarily support flexible learning and flexible delivery with policy related to issues such as advanced standing, flexible entry, enrolment categories, flexible course structures; and with systems and structures that support multi-modal delivery (Bird, 2004).

However, teachers who attempt to operationalize even some of these grand claims for flexible learning soon learn that very real tensions can appear between the various elements of flexible learning. A choice to increase flexibility in one domain of flexible learning limits flexibility in another. For example offering online learning materials affords students increased flexibility in time, place, and pace of study, but will not accommodate all learning styles and may not offer opportunities to collaborate with others. Choosing to run and assess online debates or other forms of group work offers opportunities to collaborate with others, but limits choice in time, place, and pace of study (Ling et al., 2001). Teachers, when designing units of study, need to be explicit in deciding which types of flexibility they want to build in and which types they do not.

Inside this perplexing array of choice, teachers must also make choices about the flexibility of their assessment tasks, about what type and what degree of flexibility is appropriate. There is little in the literature specifically about flexible assessment to guide teachers. This omission is odd given the accepted view that student assessment drives learning, and that for students studying at a distance from their institution, “assessment has if anything an even sharper focus in the students’ experience” (Thorpe, 1998, p. 269). Hyde, Clayton, and Booth (2004) conducted a literature review of assessment in flexible learning in the tertiary sector and found that in a number of studies, assessment practices had not changed to keep pace with other changes in flexible learning. These studies showed teachers falling back on traditional assessment methods such as invigilated exams which offer students no choice in the time, place, pace, or content of their assessment. According to Roberts (2002), “despite the fact that across courses assessment methods are likely to vary considerably, students rarely have a choice of how to be assessed in any particular course.”

The following two definitions of flexible assessment offer a starting point for our discussion:
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