

BOOK REVIEW

***Flexibility and Pedagogy in Higher Education: Delivering Flexibility in Learning Through Online Learning Communities*, by Chris Dennis, Stuart Abbott, Ruth Matheson and Sue Tangney (Eds., 2020), 216 pp., Brill**

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*Flexibility and Pedagogy in Higher Education: Delivering Flexibility in Learning Through Online Learning Communities* (2020) is a collection of essays exploring the application of pedagogical flexibility as it shapes online learning communities. Contributing authors explore flexibility in online learning as a conduit to promote social justice, develop learners' online study skills, create online peer networks, nurture online learning communities, deliver academic support services, and build academic communities through social networks such as Twitter.

An edited volume of 13 essays, *Flexibility and Pedagogy in Higher Education: Delivering Flexibility Through Learning Communities* explores the application of flexibility in various learning contexts in higher education; these contexts include virtual learning environments, temporary learning communities, student-led online debates, online journal club, and collaborative curation of a Twitter account. Published in the United Kingdom, the cases included in this book are easily transfer-

able to institutions in the United States and Canada. The introduction of this collection of essays begins by exploring the concept of flexibility in the context of online and blended learning, distilling it into the degree of control over which students determine when and where they learn as well as the content of their learning. The purpose of this collection of essays emerges from its laser focus on flexibility in online learning that promotes online learning communities. This focus is also

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expansive, including the perspectives of instructors, institutional staff, and students. For the instructors who create and deliver online and blended courses, flexibility constitutes the guiding principle of learning design that transfers as much control as possible from instructor to student.

This edited volume from the United Kingdom is divided into 13 chapters, in addition to an introduction by the editors and a conclusion written by the first editor Chris Dennis. As stated in the title, the emphasis throughout the book is on various types of online learning communities, including virtual learning environments such as Blackboard (Chapters 1–3, 6–7, and 8), Twitter (Chapters 5 and 11), websites and online tutorials (Chapters 4, 9–10), and live streaming, interactive events (Chapter 12). Harnessing the power of these online collaborative tools, the authors promote two basic types of student engagement: increasing connections to the community (1) inside the university and (2) outside of the university to promote academic, social, and professional skills. Outside organizations include youth offender programs and health and social services.

Most chapters focus on the integration of students into the community life of the institution, promoting the use of university services and support, and improving the student experience. As indicated in the title, the emphasis of these efforts concerns flexibility and providing online opportunities to learn, participate in university life, and access community and academic support. Chapter 1 tackles acknowledging and awarding credit for previous learning, including courses completed at previous institutions and knowledge gained from work experience, by having students take an online, open educational resource module called “Make Your Learning Count.” Chapter 12 also addresses a challenge facing new and returning students by welcoming and integrating new students into the academic community through a live-streamed, interactive event called Student Hub Live. Building on the topic of integration, several chapters focus on delivering

transition support to new students, including online course modules, a cocurated student website, and Twitter (Chapters 2, 4, 10–11). The library’s role takes center stage in two chapters (9 and 11), reflecting the changing nature of librarianship in the age of social media and online learning. Finally, two chapters address the need to facilitate more profound and meaningful learning in higher education through active learning (Chapter 6), an emphasis on problem-based, constructivist learning (Chapter 8), and improving the overall student experience (Chapters 4 and 12).

Although theoretical support for the various projects’ development, structure, and application varies between chapters, a single framework influences all but one of the projects in this book; this framework is Ryan and Tilbury’s (2013) six new pedagogical ideas. The first idea is learner empowerment, which is promoted by involving learners more actively in their learning. The second idea requires a future-facing perspective that empowers students to think creatively about the future, including how people should learn. The third idea prioritizes the need to “decolonize education” by expanding intercultural experiences and understanding of the world. The fourth idea is to challenge learners in ways that push them beyond their familiar capabilities. The fifth idea urges the transcendence of teaching and learning away from the siloed disciplines and toward a more integrative learning experience. The last and final idea emphasizes the importance of cocurricular learning spaces, informal learning, and social interaction as central to the higher education experience.

This book has several strengths that bear noting. First, there is a wide variety of sample projects and initiatives that demonstrate the influence of flexible pedagogy in the context of higher education; in other words, there is a chapter to pique the interest of almost any reader interested in how to improve student outcomes and success. Another strength is that the coauthors provide extensive details about project outcomes and, in many cases, provide data-driven outcomes (Chapters 1, 4, 6–12).

By providing this information, readers can apply the lessons learned in any project inspired by this book. Similarly, these projects offer broad applicability across disciplines and institutions; the social sciences are especially well represented in outreach to community organizations. The contributing authors of this volume were careful to situate their projects within clear theoretical boundaries, including Vygotsky's (1978) work on proximal development, Hercheui's (2011) identification of the motivating factors that can positively impact virtual learning communities, and Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice.

Weaknesses accompanying this book's strengths include the length of time between many of the projects' development and the year of publication; some projects were implemented almost a decade before the editors put the book together. This gap in time compromises the applicability of some of these projects and initiatives because the technology has become dated or even obsolete. For example, Twitter is currently experiencing a series of political and business-oriented crises that may render it radioactive for use in the classroom. Similarly, the authors do not address modality issues related to using cell phones and tablets to access content in virtual learning communities (e.g., learning management systems like Blackboard or Canvas) and create and post

content on social media. Finally, this volume was geared toward British readers and, as such, is situated within the British system of education, health care, and the youth justice system. Readers in the United States will need to distinguish project elements that may need significant reconsideration due to these differences.

As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, the impulse to embrace new pedagogical practices, especially ones that support student flexibility, is hard to ignore. Although written before the pandemic, this edited volume provides well-needed inspiration regarding ways to involve students more meaningfully in their own learning; both students and instructors are likely to reap both expected and unexpected benefits. It is possible to take one or two elements of a project and implement them as part of a class in just about any modality; for example, it is possible to create a module inside the course learning management system that students can develop and manage. The differences between the United States and British higher education systems are not so significant that these creative efforts to build community, extend learning opportunities, and expand educational spaces cannot provide practical inspiration to offer similar opportunities in U.S. classrooms.

