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Book review: Flexible Learning in a Digital World: Experiences and Expectations: Betty Collis and Jef Moonen; Kogan Page, London, 2001, 232 pp, ISBN 0–7494–3371-X, £19.99 (paperback)

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The title of this book resembles the title of 'Tele-learning in a Digital World' by Betty Collis, published in 1996. The earlier book was focused on distance learning, but this one explores how learning can be made more flexible for campus-based students as well as those who are studying at a distance. Flexible Learning in a Digital World is more compact, offering a structured means to understanding flexible learning, along with sets of guidelines that can help in its adoption within an institution. It has a story to tell about institutional change and the main lessons learnt from experiences at the University of Twente in the Netherlands, where both Collis and her co-author Jef Moonen have been working for many years. Indeed, the authors draw on 30 years of experience in the deployment and evaluation of educational technology at their institution, and link to this evidence from broader research literature, which enables them to give a well contextualised account of the changes brought about by Web-based learning over the past decade.

The key points encapsulated in this book are of great practical value, and they are explained in an accessible and interesting way. Before saying more about the content, let me point out two unfortunate presentational aspects that may be off-putting to readers. The first is a very simple diagram, representing four perspectives as bubbles contained one within the other (institution, implementation, pedagogy, technology): this diagram is reproduced no fewer than 12 times in the book! There are a few differences in shading, but on several occasions it is exactly the same diagram with exactly the same shading. Whilst it is a useful visual aid, its obsessive repetition becomes perplexing. A second problem that detracts from the content is the way that the book's 18 'lessons' have been presented. These are formulated as numbered catch phrases, for example 'Lesson 4: Don't forget the road map', 'Lesson 6: Follow the leader', 'Lesson 9: After the core, choose more'. They are explained one by one. The problem occurs in the second half of the book, where the lesson catch phrases are repeated, now out of sequence, whenever a point is made that illustrates one of them. A reader who just dips into the book is likely to become confused.

To get back to the book's substance, the authors begin with an examination of what is meant by flexible learning, with plenty of suggestions about how flexibility can be put into practice, and the technologies that enable this to happen. They explain two contrasting pedagogical models—acquisition and participation—with the aim of showing that learning in higher education should be more than a process of acquiring knowledge. Certain technologies can be used to encourage participation and contribution to a professional community. Resulting challenges for instructors, learners and institutions are discussed.

The other pervading idea here is that technology offers more choice, hence more flexibility. The notion that technology might render a course less flexible is never seriously addressed.

The assumption seems to be that readers are starting from a position where the courses offered in their institution are inflexible for learners. If you already use technology in your teaching, and find that it constrains some of your students, for example, there are access issues or time management issues, you will not find much consolation in this book. At one point the authors paint a scenario in which instructors work round the clock answering student queries ("late in the evening, at their homes, with a cup of tea in hand"). This too, may not bring consolation, if you already know this scenario all too well. I think this would sit in the realm of 'engagement' (personal response to technology and to change) within the authors' proposed '4-E' model. The model predicts an individual's likelihood of making use of a technological innovation for a learning-related purpose. This is a function of engagement, along with three other 'E' factors: environment, educational effectiveness, and ease of use. The personal response should be positive, but the other factors can carry a person along.

The key lesson in Chapter 2 is: 'You can't not do it'—because there is a tidal wave of change. The 'you' is a collective, institutional 'you'. The authors argue that for flexible learning to be meaningful, "it must be more than the effort of pioneers; the institution must commit itself to change." The arguments are clearly set out and in the end, are compelling. There is a shift from 'you' to 'they' as the book moves on to Chapter 3, entitled 'Will they use it?'. The question here is whether individuals—instructors or learners—will be inclined to use the technology. So the perspective here is clearly that of a manager or administrator assessing whether teaching staff and students will take up the technical innovation. This is framed as an implementation problem: how to close the gap between potential and use in practice. There is a special focus on leadership and staff engagement.

Chapters 4 and 5 are mainly for instructors. The useful notion of 'core' and 'complementary' technologies is introduced. Individual instructors can normally make more choices about complementary technologies (the core may have been chosen at institutional level). There should be 'something for everyone', but there are also words of caution about possible overload. The tension is not resolved. According to the authors, aWeb-based course management system, provided it is well designed, can offer a large variety of possibilities for flexible and participative learning. Students should also become more active through the use of before, during and after activities. This is amply illustrated with reference to a U-shape ('the U-turn') that shows how students can move from acquisition to participation, with a less flexible phase of face to face or remote contact during an activity.

Chapter 6 is about return on investment. There is good synthesis of findings from numerous studies, and insights into how people tend to think about the costs of technological innovations. Cost can include time, energy, frustration, and anxiety. There is also sound advice about what can, and cannot, be measured. The conclusion is that technology does not save time or money in the short term. A simplified return on investment calculation focuses on aspects that really matter to the people involved.

The book also contains a detailed account of experiences at the University of Twente. This includes a description of the main components of their custom-built Web learning environment and its use. The system is undergoing continual evaluation. There is good guidance here on what should be in a Web learning environment and data on what parts of the environment are used the most.

The final chapter is on the future, and 'the new economy' for education, which is explained in an accessible way, although understanding of terms such as 'metatags' and 'objects' is assumed. The global, interlinked character of the new economy, and its emphasis on ideas, information and relationships, are explored. Four possible future scenarios are presented, of which the new economy is said to be the most radical.

This book is intended for a broad audience, and indeed it should be interesting for different kinds of people in higher education, especially those in managerial positions and those involved in developing more flexible learning programmes. There is concrete and practical advice in this book, based on carefully examined experience.

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