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A Posthumanist Critique of Flexible Online Learning and its “Anytime Anyplace” Claims

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Abstract

Flexible approaches to online learning are gaining renewed interest in some part due to their capacity to address emergent opportunities and concerns facing higher education. Importantly, flexible approaches to online learning are purported to be democratizing and liberatory, broadening access to higher education and enabling learners to participate in educational endeavors at “anytime” from “anyplace.” In this article, we critique such narratives by showing that flexibility is neither universal nor neutral. Using critical theory we demonstrate how flexibility assumes imagined autonomous learners that are self-reliant and individualistic. Through relevant examples we show how such a framing to flexibility is oppressive, and argue that a contextual, relative, and relational understanding of flexibility may in fact be more liberatory. Such an approach to flexibility, for example, may involve contextual and relational efforts to relax prescribed curricula within courses or programs of study.

Keywords: flexible education; online learning; flexibility; distance education; the autonomous subject; posthumanism; critical theory; anytime anyplace learning

A Posthumanist Critique of Flexible Online Learning and its “Anytime Anyplace” Claims

Online learning is frequently promoted as a flexible approach to education, with flexibility being touted as an aspect of educational provision that is democratizing and desirable (e.g., Blayone et. al., 2017; Serhan, 2010). As enrolment in online courses grows (e.g., Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018) and universities expand their online learning offerings (e.g., Bates, 2018), as online learning essentially becomes increasingly “ordinary,” it becomes ever more urgent to understand the normative discourses that give shape to how we understand flexibility in this context. In particular, under-examined is the oft-repeated claim that online learning happens “anywhere at anytime,” a discourse which suggests that online learning has the potential to be more accommodating, more accessible, and more equitable than face-to-face or blended alternatives. A cursory glance of a wide variety of higher education institutions and platforms, ranging from the University of British Columbia (2018), to the UK Open University (2018), to the University of Wisconsin-Madison (2018), to the University of Pennsylvania (McKenzie, 2018), and to Udacity (Watkins, 2016), to name just a few, shows the degree to which flexibility is reflective of the norm: each one names flexibility as one of the appeals for participating in their particular programs.

Yet scholars’ understanding of flexibility in online learning has been hampered by an implicit assumption that all online learners participate in and experience education in similar ways, including the appeal and normative value of flexibility. Who is and who isn’t able to take advantage of the flexibility designed into these programs and courses? Who does flexibility benefit and in what ways? Asking such questions is to consider flexibility not simply as a quality of online education, but as a symptom of broader forces that shape the design and provision of online learning. In the sections that follow we outline some of the benefits of flexible online learning before enumerating our critique of normative flexibility, which as we show, relies too heavily on the figure of the autonomous subject, or the figure of the human (normatively understood as a white, cis-male, heterosexual able-bodied individual), to be equally responsive to a wide array of subjectivities. Indeed, those bodies that do not have such traits mapped onto them are negatively positioned as the human’s other, be they women, individuals who are transgendered, racialized people etc. As a way beyond reliance on the human, and the attendant dehumanization that necessarily occurs for those deemed not human enough, we suggest a turn towards posthumanism and an understanding of flexibility as a relational process, before using

the illustrative examples of gender and settler colonialism to explore the limits of normative flexibility. This study matters because it questions the assumptions and neutrality of “flexibility,” and like similar efforts in the literature (e.g., see Bayne’s 2015 critique of the term “technology-enhanced learning”), illuminates some of its problematic aspects. Such a critique is necessary in response to the largely unquestioned adoption of flexibility in online learning.

The Benefits of Flexible Online Learning

While flexible learning has a long history in distance education scholarship (e.g., Evans, 2000; International Council for Distance Education, 1985), online learning as a flexible approach to education is gaining renewed interest in some part due to its capability to address emergent opportunities and concerns facing higher education. Specifically, online learning may address the needs of learners who are location-bound due to employment, familial, or other responsibilities, needs, preferences, and desires (e.g., people with disabilities, people who want an education but don’t necessarily want or can’t afford to move to obtain it, etc). In this sense, online learning is flexible and accommodating: it broaches geographical distance and can occur “anywhere” such that a student in the UK can enroll in coursework at a university in Canada, a student in China can enroll in an Australian university, and a student in a rural town in Texas can attend a Texas university which offers online coursework. Flexibility in online learning also eliminates temporal constraints that people face. Thus, adult workers with temporal responsibilities such as full-time work, or work whose hours are irregular, can attend asynchronous online courses and study at “anytime” that works for them. In this way, “anytime anyplace” online learning becomes an equalizing and democratizing force. The temporal and geographic constraints to attending educational institutions are eliminated, offering learners access and opportunity. Flexibility makes educational programming less rigid and more accessible, and in the process circumventing life circumstances that learners may have faced that may have curtailed their educational enrichment. These claims are well-established in both early distance education and contemporary online learning literature (e.g., Anderson, 2008; Daniel, 1998).

While flexibility is often associated with learning modality and provision of education (i.e. online vs. face-to-face), the concept often engulfs a slew of other key educational practices that can be made more flexible (Naidu, 2017). For example, admissions policies can be made more flexible by recognizing prior learning achieved beyond formal education; course attendance can be made more flexible by offering courses in a multi-access fashion enabling

students to attend classes face-to-face or online simultaneously enabling students to choose their mode of attendance depending on their needs; curriculum can be made more flexible by instilling components that enable students to engage with content that they deem most relevant (e.g., through independent and guided-study courses); and learning design can be made more flexible by developing activities that learners can choose from, such as in the case of developing digital badges (representing learning outcomes) for a course and allowing students to self-select which ones they would like to complete. These examples highlight the core benefits that flexibility offers beyond “anytime anywhere” access: Flexibility stands to make education more student-centered, empowering learners to make choices that align with their needs and interests, potentially leading to greater engagement with, participation in, and completion of their studies.

Finally, it behooves us to acknowledge at this stage that flexible learning serves institutional needs as well. Recognizing that higher education is at a critical junction facing demographic, technological, economic, and societal pressures (Ehrenberg, 2000; Schwier, 2012; Siemens & Matheos, 2012; Thelin, 2013), flexible learning and online learning offerings provide practical benefits to institutions such as opportunities to reach new markets (e.g., adult and international students) and address the confluence of factors that contribute to dwindling state budgets and revenues. Flexibility also enables universities to fulfill social missions and address the perception that their practices and programming are divorced from societal needs. By becoming more student-centered and sensitive to student needs, by offering educational opportunities to individuals who cannot afford the luxury of being able to move for example, universities demonstrate that they are adapting to a changing society and the needs of today’s citizenry.

Theoretical Framework

Flexibility as a feature of online education might seem widely beneficial given its aims at broadening access. But, to what degree is this actually true? If it is, for whom, and in what contexts? To deepen our understanding of what we call normative flexibility, we draw on critical theory to complicate the narratives around online education’s “anytime anyplace” claims. Critical theory, in this context, performs what LaCapra (2009, p. 2) describes as “inquiry into, and interrogation of, basic assumptions in practices and forms of thought.” Assumptions, LaCapra says, “set limits to inquiry that may remain unexamined, especially when they are embedded in a habitus or what goes without saying.” In this case, what often goes without

saying, are the parameters around online education's conceptualization and mobilization of flexibility (a term which Barnett (2014) considers to be devoid of content), or the ways in which flexibility is not just an attempt to respond to learners' needs, but simultaneously constructs learners in particular ways. By using critical theory, we can make flexibility, like any habitus, "explicit and open it to questioning in ways that may both validate components of it and ready others for change" (LaCapra, p. 2). In other words, a deeper understanding of what is typically seen as self-evident, is not strictly about pointing out the inconsistencies or oversights within something like normative flexibility, but can also be aimed at developing more equitable and liberatory goals.

Critiques of this sort have become more common in the educational technology literature in recent years, with a number of scholars seeking to examine concepts associated with digital learning endeavours (e.g., Bayne, 2015; Bulfin, Johnson, & Rowan, 2015; Selwyn, 2011; Veletsianos & Moe, 2017). One such effort involved unpacking the meaning of *openness* and examining its unstated beliefs and narratives. In this work, scholars identified that openness too often assumes ideals of democratization and justice (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012) and that it is a contested, often under-theorized notion (Edwards, 2015). Drawing on post-structural theory, Edwards argues that "openness is not the opposite of closed-ness, nor is there simply a continuum between the two," and that "all forms of openness entail forms of closed-ness and that it is only through certain closings that certain openings become possible and vice versa" (p. 253). This analysis argues that openness alone is not a virtue, and foregrounds the following important questions: What forms of openness are worthwhile? Who does openness serve? Bayne, Knox, and Ross (2015, p. 247) further complicate this reading of openness, noting that it "has become a highly charged and politicised term, [and...] in the process, it has acquired a sheen of naturalised common sense and legitimacy, and formed what seems to be a post-political space of apparent consensus."

Flexibility requires this same kind of critical analysis in that we must consider what forms of flexibility are worthwhile and for whom, and what remains, or becomes inflexible, in relation to flexibility as we generally understand it. This is, in other words, to recognize the impossibility of flexibility as neutral or universal. Consider what it means to mobilize flexibility uncritically, as being available and beneficial to all in equal ways. In this mobilization, flexibility appears profoundly accommodating, which in turn may be read as being malleable to one's needs,

thereby making the processes of education and learning easier in some capacity. And yet, as Ross, Gallagher, and Macleod (2013) outline, distance education inherently requires effort as learners both learn and practice forms of “nearness” as a “temporary assemblage of people, circumstances, and technologies,” and which remains a state that “is difficult to establish and impossible to sustain in an uninterrupted way over the long period of time that many are engaged in part-time study.” The capacity to enact and sustain this effort will be determined and constrained by multiple variables, from things like responsibilities in home life, ability, and digital literacies, to financial resources and access to necessary technology. In recognizing what is necessary to mobilize flexibility, we need to ask: Who does flexibility accommodate? Who is in command of literacies, abilities, responsibilities, and resources that serve to make flexibility a possibility to take advantage of and enact?

What grounds our analysis is the recognition that if flexibility is indeed about the so-called possibility of studying and learning anyplace at anytime, it stands to reason that flexibility implies a particular orientation to space and time. As numerous critical geographers have shown however, the ways in which we organize and orient within space and time, and in turn *are* ourselves organized and oriented, are never neutral. Feminist geographers, for example, have long made legible the constraints placed on gendered bodies with regards to freedom of movement and spaces of belonging (Rose, 1993; Massey, 1994), highlighting for instance how transgendered and nonbinary individuals face delimited freedom and accessibility (Doan, 2010). Time is also political: contra conventional understandings and expectations of time, disability theorists propose ‘crip time,’ or what Samuels (2016) frames as living with “a ‘flexible approach to normative time frames’ like work schedules, deadlines, or even just waking and sleeping.” The flexibility of crip time isn’t the flexibility of ‘anyplace, anytime’ learning oriented towards achievement and completion, but is instead defined by the affective and material demands of things like grief, sickness, and joy. Explicitly bridging constraints on both space and time, Nixon’s (2013, p.3) anti-colonial work articulates what he calls “slow violence” as a kind of unspectacular, attritional violence, often a legacy of environmental catastrophe, and which disproportionately affects marginalized people who are often limited in their resources to fight or prevent it. What these seemingly disparate theorists share in common is the recognition that one’s access to particular spaces and time is dependent upon one’s freedom to negotiate larger

forces that would give or would deny that access. Put otherwise, these authors emphasize that access and freedom, and thereby time and space, are shaped by structural forms of power.

In the case of online education, central to its appeal of flexibility is that it would seemingly undo some of the structural limitations imposed by face-to-face instruction. Yet, as Kahu, Stephens, Zepke, and Leach (2014, p. 525) argue, “distance study has not overcome the barriers of space and time; it has merely changed the nature of those barriers.” In this vein, Kirkwood (2000, p. 249) points out that unlike “students attending a university campus, home-based learners need to fit their studies into times and spaces for which there are competing claims,” and that what time students “can devote to their studies is often determined by other people or by more essential activities.” Sheail (2018b, p. 57) takes this further when she notes that in “contrast to the popular rhetoric of ‘anytime, anywhere’ in mobile technology discourse, [distance] students are studying in particular places at particular times,” and that “[u]nderstanding this diversity of context, the associated challenges, and potential inequalities, is a responsibility of the contemporary digital university.” Selwyn (2011, p. 379-380) puts it succinctly: after interviewing sixty learners about their experiences studying at a distance, he reports that “the potential flexible benefits of distance learning were being encountered as a set of ongoing challenges rather than guaranteed freedoms.” In practical terms, Veletsianos, Reich, and Pasquini (2016, p.6) note that online learners participating in their research “described abandoning courses that did not serve their needs, setting courses aside to take care of more pressing needs and returning to them as time allowed, stealing time from friends and family to complete courses, and skipping course activities that they deemed insignificant.”

Flexibility, in all of these critiques, may improve access to education, but rather than eliminating all barriers, brings different sets of difficulties, typically stemming from the need to vie for time and space to study in an already full schedule. Kirkwood inadvertently makes this more legible when he observes that “fitting study periods into the times and spaces available” sometimes requires that students must *exercise* flexibility to “make the most of every available situation” (p. 251). Made explicit in this framing is that flexibility requires effort (in that it is something that requires active exercising), a point echoed by Kahu et al (2014). But left unexamined by Kirkwood is the requirement that *every available situation be made the most of*. Such a position speaks to the perceived need or desire for efficiency and continuous growth or development, which theorists see as a trademark quality of neoliberal exploitation (Olsen,

2006). Indeed, Oliver (2015, p. 371) observes that “discourses of ‘flexibility’ can be understood as forming part of a wider neo-liberal project, one that positions learners as always being in need of new training, new credentialing, in order to fill ‘gaps’ identified in their ‘portfolio of learning’ and make them more employable.” As such, we need to be conscious of the ways that something like flexibility (or openness) might also be a means to draw more labour out of bodies, and that this labour goes unseen or framed as something other than labour (eg. as an individual’s obligation to lifelong learning and self-development in what becomes a never-ending pursuit of betterment, or as an aim for possible increased productivity (Collis, Vingerhoets, and Moonen, 1997)). So, while many theorists, both within (Selwyn, 2011; Sheail, 2018a) and beyond (Buzar, 2008; Nixon, 2013; Samuels, 2016) the study of flexible education, have shown that access to time and space is neither an equitable nor an effortless process, flexible education itself is further complicated by its proximity to, or mirroring of, broader neoliberal demands for constant growth, improvement, and efficiency. Although there have been some adjacent critiques made to address this proximity (Crowther, 2004; Edwards, Armstrong & Miller, 2001; Olssen, 2006; Peterson & Willig, 2011; Raddon, 2007), our work more robustly theorizes one of the root causes and subsequent limitations bound to dominant forms of flexible education, namely reliance on the figure of the human. This figure, as the next section shows, limits how we think of flexibility according to a narrow definition of the human, which includes who the human is, what it can and cannot do, and significantly, what it should be able to do.

Flexible Learning, The Autonomous Subject, and Posthumanism

By returning to La Capra’s call to interrogate basic assumptions, we can begin to see that what ties together the neoliberal tendency in flexible education with the limitations on access imposed by structural inequalities, is a tension around the possibility of responsibility. At the centre of discourses of flexibility resides the figure of the individual subject capable of, and consequently responsible for, making the most of each situation. This is the one who could exercise what Selwyn (2011, p. 369) calls “agentic flexibility.” But in their critique of openness, Bayne, Knox, and Ross (2015) call into question this figure, suggesting that openness, as a process reliant on self-direction, “is only a solution for the imagined autonomous subject, and is only imaginable where education is divorced from the complexities of culture, sociality, and the power of the political” (p. 248). This *imagined* autonomous subject remains central to discourses of flexibility as well, even as both institutions and individual learners themselves reify it as

something concrete. For example, while working with distance students' narratives of their education, Raddon (2007, p. 77, emphasis added) observes that a critical story "is of developing a level of flexibility about when, where and how they engage in paid work, and about *taking personal responsibility* for their development." Raddon (2006, p. 163) notes a similar discourse visible in Roche's (1998) scholarship where distance learning is portrayed as "a way of learning which enables you to manage your own learning. You are in charge. You choose the time, the pace and the place." Here, responsibility, and responsibility in the form of individual control and choice, once again revolve around the autonomous subject.

Yet, this autonomous subject has long been critiqued as a construction, and one mobilized for particular ends, especially through its correlate in the figure of the human. For example, Wolfe's work on posthumanism traces the notion of the human to its roots in the Enlightenment, as in the "Kantian 'community of reasonable beings,' or, in more sociological terms, the subject as citizen, rights-holder, property-owner, and so on" (Wolfe qtd. in Braidotti, 2013, p. 1). Pre-dating Wolfe, Wynter's (2003, p. 263) work calls this same subject the "invention of Man," which she argues relies on the creation of race and racial categories to sustain Euro-Western (i.e. white) dominance. Indeed, from Greek thought onward, the Western image of the human has, for the most part, been typified by the white male body, which Braidotti (2013, p. 13) suggests condenses "a doctrine that combines the biological, discursive and moral expansion of human capabilities into an idea of teleologically ordained, rational progress." Accordingly, the subject is understood through its possibility for reason, ethics, and self-regulation, with its negative mapped as Otherness (p. 15). This Otherness, as both Wynter and Braidotti show, finds form in non-white, non-male, often colonized, bodies. In this regard, the human acts as a "normative convention," that is "highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination" (Braidotti, p. 26), or as Snaza et al. (2014, p. 41, emphasis original) describe in their work on posthumanist education, the human is "a *social and political* category." Understanding the figure of the human in this way, that is as an invented category with social and political clout available to some, but not all, calls us to attend to the ways in which this figure gives definition to how we understand flexible education.

When the practices of flexible education become entrenched in a framework of the responsible individual (i.e. the autonomous subject), flexibility, once seen as a means to liberation, risks becoming oppressive. Oliver (2015, p. 371) observes that in this kind of framing,

“failure is blamed on individuals rather than inappropriate systems of education or employment.” Crowther (2004, p. 126) critically notes that the idea that people “will have some real control and responsibility for ordering their lives” is dubious, given that responsibility remains, both within the context of capitalism and within education, a kind of deception when one acknowledges how different people across a spectrum of privilege and structural oppression will have differing levels of support and control over how they manage their own lives. As such, responsibility becomes a loaded term, one that over-emphasizes self-reliance and “disparages the claims of the needy and the dependent for resources and support” (p. 136).

Rather than remain beholden to an understanding of flexibility as anchored in the figure of the human through discourses of the individual and discourses of responsibility, we call for a posthumanist approach that acknowledges the relational nature of subjectivity and which will open a pathway into far more radical and equitable forms of flexibility. In doing so, we situate our work within a growing contingent of education theorists that argue, as Snaza et al. (2014, p. 42) do, that “the human has been misconceived by nearly every thinker in the Western tradition,” and who also insist upon disrupting “the humanist positioning of the non-white and non-Western as less than human” (Edwards, 2010; Snaza, 2013; Weaver, 2010). Posthumanist perspectives theorize the relational nature of subjectivity as “constituted in and by multiplicity” (Braidotti, p. 49), as “embodied and embedded” with a consequent “partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality, and hence community building” (p. 49). In other words, the posthumanist subject is not isolated, but exists within, and interacts with, systems and others, in specific places and times, which impact said subject’s desires and capacities to act. A theory of flexibility that results from responding to this kind of subjectivity is one that follows from Buzar’s (2008, p. 1076) work on geographies of flexibility that understands flexibility as “relative and relational,” rather than as an inherent quality or property of something or someone. With this understanding in mind, rather than the simplistic approach of “anywhere, anytime” flexibility becomes a shared enactment or co-constitutive practice between learners, instructors, technologies, institutions, communities, and with/in varied spaces, times, places, and knowledge systems. Flexibility in this vein might look like curriculum produced with, within, and for specific communities, or it might look like better state and institutional support in terms of funding and social support in the form of counselling, for example. It may also mean programs themselves become more student-focused and less hierarchical through ongoing feedback and

input from learners. In other words, flexibility won't just be about being able to sit down anywhere with a computer, at any time of the day (after the kids have gone to bed, or one's work day is complete), but will engage learners in more complex ways as more complex beings participating in multiple communities.

Testing the Limits: Who and What does Normative Flexibility Leave Behind

In this section we build on our critique of normative flexibility, or flexibility that remains entrenched in humanistic approaches to learning, through examination of two relevant examples to demonstrate how what is flexible for some is necessarily inflexible for others. By considering the limitations and impact of structures related to gender and Indigeneity on online learning's claim to flexibility, we provide concrete examples of the ways in which flexibility is imbricated in power and privilege. We have chosen to examine these two categories as they represent groups of people who ostensibly might significantly benefit from non-traditional forms of education, i.e., people who are limited in their capacity or freedom to physically attend post-secondary institutions because of social or material constraints. However, it is worth mentioning that these foci are by no means the only ones in need of examination, and that other categories, such as disability, and geographic location (rural vs. urban), for example, are also important to consider in relation to flexibility. Finally, by addressing the limits of normative flexibility, and embracing a more posthumanist approach, we begin to make legible alternate forms of flexibility.

Flexibility and Gender

As we've shown, while the freedoms provided by flexible online education can be liberating, significantly, they turn on the individual learner's capacity to learn how to make time and space for their learning, to remain motivated and determined to continue in spite of competing demands for time and space, and to draw on a variety of resources to make "anytime anyplace" learning possible. In other words, while flexibility is commonly understood as a quality of a program, it is simultaneously a skill learners need to learn and internalize. Kahu et al. (2014, p. 534-35) observe that "students start the semester with fixed ideas about space and time, taking on broad university messages that they can 'simply study when, where and how you want to'," forming inaccurate and simplistic expectations of their studies such as being able to complete their coursework "in their jammies" (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2011). But, given the complexity of students' actual lives, "a major challenge they face is learning how to find the

space and time necessary” (Kahu et al., p. 535). Implicit in the required capacity to learn flexibility then is a need to be a particular kind of subject, ie., one who has the qualities (attitude and ability, for example) and conditions (the possibility of access to technology, to space, and to time, for example) to *become* flexible. However, researchers have established that becoming this kind of subject is not as easy for some as it is for others, and that one determining factor is gender. In this context, gender is understood as a subject category with social and material effects, and which normatively divides between male-identifying subjects and female-identifying subjects in such a way that reinforces and delimits particular ways of being for each group. Moss’s (2004, p. 290) research on the gendered labour of care, and its effects on education, makes this division evident. As she argues, higher education is interrupted by social responsibilities, and consequently, the women students she interviewed “were involved in intense activity and negotiations in order to achieve some control of time and space for themselves, and for their academic studies, in their daily routes through space and time.” Notably, this negotiation is not limited to women; as Kilkey and Page’s (2001) research shows, the greatest barrier reported by non-traditional students regardless of gender was the act of balancing the time commitments required of them as learners and caregivers. But, the research of Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal, and Kilkey (2008) revealed that “given the traditional division of labour, female students were expected—by those in their families and by themselves—to keep their role of carers unchanged when they become students” (p. 630). Echoing Moss, these researchers note that such divisions confirm the “gendered aspects of caring that must be acknowledged in order to develop appropriate strategies to allow all students to fulfil their potential in [Higher Education]” (p. 630). Both the work of Ahmad (2017, p. 205) and England (2010, p. 151) corroborate this point by similarly observing that care work such as child-rearing remains feminized (and therefore undervalued) labour performed mostly by women. In her work on persistence and the adult learner, Castles (2004, p. 169) reported related findings, noting that analysis of existing work at the time reflected a “need for women to be helped at a more practical level in their roles than men, who were more accustomed to being supported by their partners as part of their pre-student lives.” Selwyn’s more recent interviews (2011, p. 377) revealed that “in some instances women’s unpaid household work was raised as a significant issue” for women learners, and that “their study arrangements were often less decisive and guaranteed, with studying being located in spaces which fitted around existing domestic arrangements” (p. 378).

In other words, what a normative framing of flexibility reinforces in the context of gender roles is a disavowal of the labour of women who must occupy undervalued domestic and caregiving roles.

What is made clear by these studies is that flexibility is an acquired skill and practice, and it is not something developed and performed in a vacuum. It is not simply about *making* space and time, but about *working through shared* space and time, and this working through is highly dependent on a learner's subject position and roles beyond that of student in the network of support that surrounds them. For some, this will increase the amount of labour that will need to go into their education. Flexibility in this context is relational and relative because it is always in response to the environments and other people. Thus, even though our analysis here focuses upon women who are students, it becomes clear that *what* requires working through, and *how*, will vary for different roles and subjects. For instance, while flexibility may make one set of demands for women who take on dual roles as caregivers and students, it may make a different set of demands for women who are caregivers and whose partners enroll in online programs; or while it may make one set of demands for people in particular communities, rural communities, for example, it may make a different set of demands for people in others, such as in urban centres.

Flexibility, Indigeneity, and Settler Colonialism

Beyond the question of gender and uneven distribution of labour like familial responsibility, the idealized kind of subject that normative flexibility calls for may be oppressive in other ways. For example, while online education is seen as a necessary, democratizing force even, given its roots within the wider educational system, it is inextricably linked to projects of settler colonialism. Settler colonialism, as Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 5) explain, “is different from other forms of colonialism in that settlers come with the intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain,” and that in “order for the settlers to make a place their home, they must destroy and disappear the Indigenous peoples that live there” (p. 6). This disappearance is both literal and figurative, and settler education systems in places like Canada, the U.S., and Australia, have long enabled this process. Gahman and Legault (2017, p.1) for instance observe that “Canada’s education system has forever been rooted in attempts to coerce Aboriginal people to assimilate” most obviously through its genocidal history with residential schools, but that more broadly “from its outset, the

education system in Canada has always posed a threat to Aboriginal people, whether it be the ascendancy it affords to white settler histories, its attempted erasure of Indigenous worldviews, or the blunt force trauma it inflicted upon Indigenous children” (p. 2). Such a history makes any democratizing or liberatory agenda on behalf of online education projects (and education more generally) in many ways incommensurable given such an agenda’s needed anti-colonial and decolonizing work. This is especially fraught for online education that privileges de-localized knowledge, which can be a means to undermine and undervalue Indigenous ways of knowing.

Still, the picture isn’t entirely grim. Recent work by Simon, Burton, Lockhart, and O’Donnell (2014, p.1), makes evident the complex and political reality of what the flexibility of online education offers for Indigenous people. In the context of remote communities, online education isn’t entirely incompatible with anti-colonial principles as it enables Indigenous students who live in rural communities to remain where they can “contribute to their community’s social and economic capital.” But as their research also shows, Western pedagogical paradigms and objectives can prove insufficient for the needs of Indigenous communities. Referencing work by Russell, Gregory, Hultin, Care, and Courtenay (2005, p. 5), they note challenges described by Aboriginal online nursing students at the University of Manitoba, which included “a loss of personal interaction with instructors, leading to diminished respect for the instructor” and a feeling that students were “not learning but merely being programmed” (p. 6). Lack of familiarity by faculty “with the unique culture of distant sites” was also critiqued by students (p. 6). This latter point is worth expanding upon. Consider the work of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Betasamosake Simpson (2014, p. 6) who compares her childhood education within settler colonial frameworks as “one of continually being measured against a set of principles that required surrender to an assimilative colonial agenda,” with the traditional knowledges and wisdom of her people, which she knows as learning that “lacks overt coercion and authority” and generates “both *from* the land and *with* the land” (p. 7). While Betasamosake Simpson isn’t speaking specifically of online education, but Western education more broadly, her insights are still relevant: if for her as an Indigenous woman, the “land, aki, is both context and process,” (p. 7) for flexibility to be flexible beyond Western norms, it would need to become radically anti-colonial. Recalling the critiques of the students mentioned in the work by Russell et al., this could include flexibility on the part of faculty in the form of some degree of learning about the unique culture of Indigenous students and how that culture and its

practices relate to, and potentially conflict with, the discipline, content, curriculum, and pedagogical approach. This learning on behalf of instructors would model the kind of attention to lived experience Tucker and Morris (2011) suggest is requisite for flexible learning design, and would potentially better attend to and honour place-based and community-oriented Indigenous learning. With this in mind, Simon et al. indicate that their study suggests that distance education needs to account for such realities, particularly in how it is delivered (p. 13).

What becomes legible in both the example of gender and that of settler colonialism, is that for flexibility to not simply be reducible to changing instructional design approaches to things like time or location, online education and instructional design must also actively and intentionally reckon with the broader ideological underpinnings and social stratifications that shape the experience of learners. In other words, radical flexibility requires activities at both the micro and macro level, and it will look different in different contexts. For example, at some institutions it may involve programs of study that enable students working with faculty to create their own interdisciplinary degrees and foci, as a sort of radical departure from a prescribed program of study. At other institutions, perhaps in the context of an individual course, radical flexibility may take the form of exploration of a topic without adhering to a single syllabus for every student, similar to the way the Feminism and Technology Massive Open Online Course was developed (Jaschik, 2013). Yet at other places, radical flexibility may mean developing programs of study that take place at the community or at the workplace, where individuals may work with a supportive community to complete their studies. Radical flexibility is partly dependent upon what is currently inflexible, but insists on posthumanist relationality, that is that no efforts will be *radical* or *flexible* if they remain myopically attached to a reliance on the individual. That is why radical flexibility insists on being relative and relational, occurring at varying levels that impact and influence each other. While we hope that these examples of radical flexibility help paint a picture of what it may look like in practice, it is beyond the scope of this paper to identify the multitude of ways that we can begin to imagine educational practices and systems that embrace radical flexibility at their core. This is one limitation of the paper that future scholarship may rectify.

Conclusion

The goals of flexible online learning are purported to be equitable and liberatory, and at times they might be so. But, as the analysis above shows, flexibility may position learners as

self-reliant autonomous subjects. Such narratives, and the learning designs they enable and encourage, are in stark contrast to foundational principles underlying social learning practices. It behooves researchers and practitioners to consider the degree to which flexibility is in alignment with progressive educational practices such as cooperative learning, learning communities, networked learning, and peer-learning. Significantly, flexibility, though aimed at access and liberation, risks becoming oppressive to the people we seek to serve—our students. It is here that educators, faculty members, researchers, and institutions of higher education have a lot to offer. For instance, systems of learner support need to look beyond the individual to provide support that is person-centered as well as relative and relational. To do so, we need to account for structural inequalities and not just for imagined individual circumstances and opportunities. Such efforts will require radical re-thinking of flexible learning designs, and will necessitate all of us to reconsider our assumptions of flexible online learning.

Statements on open data, ethics and conflict of interest

Open Data: This is a theoretical paper.

Ethics: This is a theoretical paper.

Conflicts of interest: The authors report no conflicts of interest

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