

Running Head: FLEXIBLE LEARNING IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

**An Analysis of Flexible Learning and Flexibility Over the
Last 40 Years of *Distance Education***

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Abstract

In this paper we report the major themes we identified in the literature surrounding flexible education that has been published in *Distance Education* over the last 40 years. We identified six themes: the qualities of flexibility as affording “anytime anyplace” learning; flexibility as pedagogy; liberatory or service-oriented aspects of flexibility; limitations of flexibility, especially in terms of technology, the constraints of time of space, as well as cultural differences; flexibility as a quality needed by instructors and instructional designers themselves; and critiques of flexibility as a concept. These themes suggest a complex understanding of flexibility, and one which could support future teaching and scholarly endeavors.

Keywords: flexible education; online learning; flexibility; distance education; anytime anyplace learning

Statements on open data, ethics and conflict of interest

Data Availability: This paper reports on an analysis of the literature, which can be retrieved using the references in Table 1

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An Analysis of Flexible Learning and Flexibility Over the Last 40 Years of *Distance Education*

The forty years of scholarship in Open, Flexible and Distance Learning that are encompassed in the *Distance Education* journal reveal the rich nature of the field. An understanding of that history, and its trajectory, is important, not only to enrich one's understanding of the field's foundations and recognize what "worked" and didn't "work" in practical terms, but also to be used as a lens through which to view the future of education and a lens through which to interrogate proposed emerging narratives, solutions, and practices pertaining to the practice of education. Selwyn (2010) for example, argues that "a curious amnesia, forgetfulness or even wilful ignorance" permeates the field in that new technologies are expected to have a sizable impact upon education when historical examinations indicate that this is rarely the case.

Over the last forty years of distance education, certain ideas and innovations resurface. For instance, while access to education is a central tenet of the field, technological advances might make it more viable, or at least more efficient, today; or, sociocultural changes might make distance and online learning more widely acceptable now than twenty years ago. In recent years, flexible online learning has been gaining attention from businesspeople, higher education institutions, and governments alike. Yet, flexible learning has a long history in the field, one that, at least in this journal, goes back to its early issues (McDonald, Sansom, & White, 1981). Our aim in this paper is to report and reflect upon flexibility through an examination of the last forty years of literature published in *Distance Education*. As the provision of flexible online learning becomes a pervasive practice and narrative, many universities and education providers tout *flexibility*, and invite learners to participate "on their schedule and on their terms" (University of

Wisconsin-Madison, 2018) and claim that learners “can do it at night, they can do it in the morning around their work schedules, around their childcare” (University of Hawai’i News, 2019). At the same time, some researchers raise concerns about the ways that flexibility is mobilized and the kinds of labour that it requires from learners in order to succeed (Authors, 2019). Investigating the last forty years of writing on flexible learning published in *Distance Education* is important because it allows us to pause and consider whether, how, and in what ways the field has advanced. How might historical writing shed light on that narratives surrounding flexibility and its qualities? What are the dominant themes in the literature on flexibility? What may we learn about the success or failure of flexible learning over the years? And how might a historical understanding of flexibility facilitate research on flexible learning and practical initiatives surrounding it?

Methodological Approach

In this section we describe the methods we used to identify the literature in *Distance Education* examining *flexibility* (data collection) and the analytic approach we used to examine the corpus we gathered (data analysis).

Literature discovery searches were conducted using the key words “flexibility” and “flex*” focusing solely on the journal of *Distance Education*. To be included in the corpus, each document retrieved ought to report upon or examine flexibility in a meaningful way (vis-à-vis for example, as opposed to merely describing a course, practice, technology, or approach as being flexible), and be published or in press by February 2019. These criteria allowed for the inclusion of empirical as well as conceptual and theoretical papers. One researcher identified all papers including the terms “flexibility” and “flex*” and created a spreadsheet that included their citation and abstract. To ensure consensus, two researchers examined all abstracts and discussed which papers should be included in the analysis. If a determination on whether a paper fit the inclusion

criteria could be made by reading the abstract, the paper was added to the corpus of papers to be analyzed. If a determination could not be made, the full paper was read and a determination was then made. A total of 75 papers were examined; beyond this number, search results were no longer relevant to the analysis as the search terms were no longer directly found in the papers. From these, it was determined that 37 papers fit the inclusion criteria for this study, and these are included in Table 1. One was published between 1980-1989, nine between 1990-1999, fourteen between 2000-2009, and thirteen between 2010-2019.

-- INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE --

These papers were independently read and assigned multiple emerging codes describing patterns of how the term was used, such as descriptive use (ie., the qualities attached to flexibility) or conceptual use (ie., as in critiques of flexibility), for example. Other codes described what was being referred to as being *flexible* (e.g., time) and what broader topics the papers focused upon. The coding activity was guided by the constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) wherein researchers compared each paper to each emerging code and revised codes as necessary as new papers were read. Once all papers were assigned codes, researchers discussed findings and explored categories describing codes. Next, they reread the codes and categories and met again to finalize categories describing strands of the identified literature. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved. The advantage of studying the literature in this way includes approaching it with a open orientation as to what it might include and what it might exclude, rather than engaging with it using a predetermined set of categories that might potentially describe it.

Nonetheless, there are two major limitations arising from the research context. First, this study draws from research published in a single journal and may not necessarily reflect the full picture of flexible learning that is encompassed in the broader literature. The understanding of flexibility that we present here therefore may privilege peer-reviewed literature (vs. grey literature, for example) published in a highly-regarded, highly-selective journal that may exclude

certain voices from participating in the conversation. Even though we recognize the significance of this limitation, this special issue focuses upon reflections of writings in this journal, and therefore we narrowed our data selection according to these parameters to maintain the specificity of the dialogue between articles that this issue seeks. Second, our data analysis methods do not seek to judge the quality, trustworthiness, or generalizability of the findings reported in the literature. Our approach is aiming to enhance our understanding of the concept as opposed to evaluate the quality of the research on the topic. As such, our writing should not be taken to reflect an evaluation of the quality of the contents of the papers.

The Themes of Flexibility In *Distance Education*

Several significant themes emerged from this analysis. The most common deployment of flexibility was in terms of the qualities which are understood to increase flexibility as a characteristic of “anytime anyplace” learning. In other words, this is flexibility as it relates to orientations towards time and place. Flexibility was also widely thought in terms of flexible pedagogy, such as through things like delivery modes and course content, for example. Less frequently, though still significant, were the liberatory or service-oriented aspects of flexibility, and then the attendant considerations of the limitations of flexibility, especially in terms of technology, the constraints of time of space, as well as cultural differences. Flexibility was also seen as a quality needed by instructors and instructional designers themselves, marking an instance of flexibility as not uniquely specific to the needs (or expectations) of learners, but as inclusive of the social aspect of teaching itself. The least common framing of flexibility was through critique of flexibility as a concept, as a kind of discourse analysis. This latter theme has mostly only emerged in recent years, and is possibly a response to a longer history of uncritical use of what flexibility offers and to whom. Many papers fit into multiple categories, and these

categories should not be taken as discrete, as they reflect complicated and varied usages of the term.

Qualities of flexibility

Recent editorials by Naidu (2017a, 2017b) centre the discussion of flexibility through the understanding that flexibility is about, among other things, “the time, place and pace of learning and teaching” (2017a, p. 1), and as “a state of being in which learning and teaching is increasingly freed from the limitations of the time, place and pace of study” (2017b, p. 269), with this framing emphasized in his 2018 editorial on openness. Arriving at this perspective of flexibility is no accident as it reflects a long history of literature that emphasizes this viewpoint. Even the earliest literature on the topic adopts this position, grounding flexibility in its so-called “anytime, anyplace” possibilities enabled by distance learning. Consequently, flexibility has long been understood as being about access, as being about learners being able to access education without having to fully disrupt or uproot their existing lives as they would in the event of pursuing education in face-to-face settings. Prior to the advent of the Internet, early work characterized flexibility specifically, for example, through the ability to complete a course over two semesters instead of one in order to overcome some of the challenges created by things like geographic distance, special time requirements (such as seasonal or agricultural workers), and limited immediate access to learning materials (McDonald, Sansom & White, 1981), as well as family obligations (Naidu 1997). Other work, such as that by James and Beattie (1990), echoed this emphasis on malleability in timeframes suggesting it enabled participation for part-time students. Continuing this emphasis on both time *and* place, Tattersal, Waterink, Höppener and Koper (2006) indicated that open and distance learning “offers learners freedom of time, place, and pace of learning” (p. 393). In this latter work, the authors clearly outline what they see as

major time-centric flexible characteristics of distance learning, including lack of fixed periods for courses, ability to self-suspend course participation, a course-by-course (compared to a program) structure, individual control over program enrollment, and the effects of modularization of courses (p. 393-94). This is to say that self-pacing is a significant characteristic of flexible learning, which Lim's (2016) and Sheail's (2018) much later papers also highlight. What's more, focus on place remains of interest today, as Musita and Ogange's (2018) work on adult secondary school dropouts in Kenya makes clear.

Unsurprisingly, this emphasis on malleability didn't lose traction with the increased use of online communication technologies, and the attendant research that followed this growing use. As shifting access to online technologies increased access to asynchronous communication, the limits and benefits of flexibility, still conceived as "anytime, anyplace," were tested through the use of these technologies, such as in Lobry de Bruyn's examination of the benefits and challenges of online discussion forums (2004), as well as the work of Nandi, Hamilton and Harland (2012), which examined the quality of communication exchange in discussion forums. Beckman (2010) added to this line of research by examining the use of mobile technologies in distance education, affirming benefit for students while simultaneously stressing the need for technology to serve pedagogy, rather than the other way around. Beckman emphasized that there are limits to the capacity of online technologies to improve flexibility, such as in the instances of high costs for high speed Internet access.¹

Related to the anytime anyplace promises of flexible education is the implied control for learners that appears to follow, which some research has made explicit. Smith (2000), for example, cites the Australian National Training Authority's National Flexible Delivery

¹ We explore the critique and limits of flexibility further below in a section devoted to the topic.

Taskforce definition of distance learning from 1996, which emphasizes that flexible delivery “gives clients as much control as possible over what and when and where and how they learn” (as cited in Smith, 2000, p. 30). Client control, in this context, becomes the purpose (and appeal) of flexibility. Samarawickrema (2005) similarly made explicit the relationship of flexibility to control, stating that “[f]rom the perspective of the learner, flexible learning and flexible delivery attempt to increase learner opportunities for access and control” (p. 50). What’s perhaps important about noting this direct line between flexibility and control is that it made legible a shift from students as learners to students as consumers. Flexibility in the context of this work was understood as a result of changing market needs, in which post-secondary education was as much, if not more, about professionalization than it was about more traditionally scholarly education (James & Beattie, 1996; Kirschner, Valcke & Vilsteren, 1997).

Pedagogical and technical flexibility

While “anytime, anyplace” discourse is formative for understanding further iterations of flexibility, other characteristics and functionalities have also fallen under the rubric of flexibility, including attention to wider forms of variety, such as variety in delivery modes or in course content itself (Sloper, 1990; James & Beattie, 1996; Robson, 1996; Rogerson-Revell, 2015). James and Beattie (p. 358), for example, listed some of these flexible possibilities, which included “more relaxed admission requirements, greater negotiation of learning outcomes and their assignment, and a wider range of options in modes of teaching and learning” (p. 358). Valcke, Martin and Martens (1997) argued that learning materials themselves can be flexible (e.g., students could select what materials were relevant to them), and that in turn engagement with that material itself could be made flexible via delivery mode. Smith’s (2000, p. 33) findings stressed this latter need for flexible delivery specifically as field learning for vocational

education and training learners; in other words, flexible delivery was understood to be specific to student needs for educational opportunities that spoke directly to the skills needed by vocational or trades employment as experienced in the field. Rennie (2003) developed a similar logic through analysis of teaching resources for the University of the Highlands and Islands Millennium Institute's Rural Development studies programme, which services widely located rural students, and offers variety in terms of delivery, format, and even tuition and assessment style. This proliferation in flexibilities was underscored, once again in Naidu's editorials (2017a; 2017b; 2018), suggesting that today in 2019, flexibility is best understood as broadly encompassing orientations to space and time, as well as things like delivery, content, assessment, and things seen as more typically administrative, such as entry qualifications, course or module completions, and accreditation.

Flexibility as equitable and service-oriented

Another strong theme which has appeared consistently through the decades is the role of flexible education as a liberatory ideal, that is as a quality (or set of qualities) that makes education more inclusive, accessible, and equitable (Burge, 2008). As early as 1981, for example, McDonald, Sansom, and White, noted that Murdoch University's attention to flexible education "emphasized meeting community needs and the needs of educationally disadvantaged people (for example, adults and isolated students) by approaching university teaching in new and effective ways" (p. 189). Sloper's (1990) work specifically targeted understanding the experience of women from developing countries studying at the postgraduate level, with an emphasis on recognition for the important social work that women do, while Walker (1996) examined the potential benefits of flexible education for people with disabilities. Taking a different direction, Robson (1996) highlighted the benefits of flexible education for rural

students as an underserved learner group, while Rennie (2003) emphasized the value of flexible education for remotely located learners, showing how locally-situated flexible learning benefits learners and communities. This latter point applied to development workers in need of education opportunities directly tied to the places in which their work occurred (Beckmann, 2010). Though not explicitly equating the access of flexible education with more equitable access for learners, Rasmussen, Nichols and Ferguson (2006) argued that flexible education serves learners in need of training in multiculturalism, thereby making the case for flexible learning as a factor in education *about* equity. Most recently, Musita and Oganje's (2018) analysis of the effects of completion of secondary schooling via flexible education has the hallmarks of the liberatory perspective, given the improved access to completion of this level of education, and the subsequent social and economic benefit for such learners. Although each of the instances referenced above are mostly quite different in their orientation to what makes flexible education liberatory, this breadth reflects the capacious and wide ranging ways in which flexibility is said to enable access and equitability.

Challenges of flexibility: technology, time, space, and cultural differences

An early theme of flexibility centred on the limitations of distance education's possibilities, shaped as it was by things like geography (e.g., rural versus urban learners) and access to and limits of developing technology, whether web-related or focused on things like video and teleconferencing (Lobry de Bruyn, 2004; Rennie, 2003; Robson, 1996). James and Beattie (1996), for example, noted the high cost of necessary technologies for distance education. Relatedly, another major thread on technology centred the realization that before course content could be effectively taught, both students and instructors required training on the use of new technologies and platforms (Naidu, 1997; Smith, 2000; Grace & Smith, 2001). This latter

concern was shifted in later work examining the limits of flexibility for affluent Western students to questions of optimization (Menchaca & Bekele, 2008; Nandi, Hamilton & Harland, 2012), but remained relevant for schools serving students in developing countries (Chari and Haughey, 2006). Further complicating the role of the limits of reliance on technology, McAlister (1998) examined social and cultural factors that impact successful engagement with distance education. Her ethnographic study detailed the experiences of a single mature student to show how different learners could struggle in flexible education because of complicated social circumstances, rather than simply for reasons of aptitude or lack of previous training. Kirkwood (2000) observed similar findings, pointing out that domestic spaces facilitate complex and differing levels of access to time and space for study, as well as to technology. He noted that “patterns of use of domestic technologies reflect existing social relationships within the household, with differences in terms of gender and age, etc.,” and that these concerns increased when comparing Western and developing countries (p. 250). Smith (2000), and Grace and Smith (2001), also showed a relationship between flexible forms of education and social positioning, as well as the importance of learning how to learn in these contexts. Smith showed that vocational education and training learners were “not well prepared for flexible delivery that requires self-direction in learning,” and thus meta-cognitive learning strategies needed to be taught in order for distance education to work for them (p. 41). In an examination of SouthEast Asian students studying via distance education in Australia, Samarawickrema (2005) argued that things like students’ high teacher reliance and high goal orientation needed to be accounted for in instructional design, otherwise flexible learning would be less likely to be successful, which work by Chen, Bennett, and Maton (2008) on Chinese students appeared to confirm. What all three of these papers share in their critique of flexibility is a sense that while flexible learning brings many benefits, learners

must be prepared and supported in their engagement in ways specific to the mode of delivery, or through what Moore (1973) calls *transactional distance* or the barriers that impede a student's engagement with their learning. In other words, flexible learning is only flexible insofar as it can be adapted to by learners, and this process is not necessarily easy or intuitive.

Flexibility for instructors and instructional design

Another significant thread in the literature considered flexibility not just as a pedagogical approach or an outcome of delivery, but as a skill or attitude needed by instructors who wished to adopt flexible methodologies. Beginning in the early nineties, researchers affirmed the sense that flexibility can be a challenge for instructors. Brigham (1992), for example, specified a kind of flexibility as “faculty flexibility,” which refers to the “willingness and ease at which faculty adapt to the constraints of the course development project” (p. 186), and was a factor in how successful course development was, as determined by course completion rates. James and Beattie (1996) complicated how this kind of social flexibility might operate for instructors by showing that the design and implementation of flexible education well could require more time than conventional methods of teaching, and that one of the risks involved therein was that if teaching was resultantly perceived as less rewarding, workload became a bigger issue. In other words, the demands of flexible education pushed instructors to be more flexible about time and reward, but may have been understood to do so in ways that didn't satisfy instructor needs. Later work by Samarawickrema (2005) framed this work as continuing professional development in the face of “changing demographics of the classroom, issues of flexibility, creative disciplines, and large class sizes,” within a context of inter-university competition and challenging demands on education made by government agendas (p. 63). Similar concerns continued to appear in much more recent work. Gregory and Lodge (2015), for example, suggested that technology-enhanced

learning (TEL) is time-consuming for instructors to integrate into their pedagogy, and required institutions to factor the learning and execution of the skills needed in workload distribution.

This is to say that if TEL was to be used well, *institutions* needed to be flexible and both accommodate and compensate for the time required for instructors to become more flexible themselves. Indeed, as Beckmann (2010) outlined in her research into the relationship between development studies and mobile modalities, “educators are largely required to be their own education technologists” (p. 162). For many, developing the requisite skills was thought to be time-consuming and inefficient if unsupported.

Beyond the outlined shift in technical skills and their acquirement, the apparent roles of educators was also understood to require a kind of flexibility. Naidu (1997), for example, argued that flexible education, especially as mobilized through online forums and the Internet, also required instructors be flexible about the role they perceive themselves to be in, by orienting from instructors as expounders, to instructors as facilitators, “more like an advisor, coach, guide or mentor who not only presents concepts and organises the learning environment but also helps learners study, question, reflect on and relate their experiences to others” (p. 259; see also Rasmussen, 2008). Later research by Lobry de Bruyn (2004) reiterated this perspective, noting that increasing participation in online forums likely required more instructor involvement and modeling, and that it was likely only ensured by “enthusiastic and committed instructors who are prepared to monitor their teaching and to share their successes and failures (learning experiences) with candour and openness” (p. 78). Research findings of this nature were gestured towards in Burge’s (2008) which outlined the qualities experienced distance education instructors felt distance educators needed in order to be successful, including things like respectfulness, responsiveness, and patience, as well as deploying technology appropriately and

having attention to operational detail. In other words, both social and technical flexibility were seen to be required by instructors. An editorial by Bennett et al. (2009) reinforced this perspective through focus on learning design as an iterative and collaborative process which benefitted distance education approaches, an example of which can be seen in Rogerson-Revell's (2015) research into action research study. Addressed as early as 1997 in Valcke, Martin, and Martens work on the development of computer-based systems, engaging with learning design processes was quite labour intensive for instructors in that it requires a strong willingness to meet learners where they are, returning us back to the flexibility demands made by continuing professional development. And while the demands for flexibility may seem obvious, as the research mentioned earlier shows, it can be quite time consuming, a point even Baggaley (2011) concedes in his satirical piece on resisting flexible learning.

Critiques of flexibility

As outlined earlier, much of the attention to the limitations of flexibility as tracked through this paper, has attended to the practical questions of material or physical flexibility (e.g., limitations of technology), as well as how different social factors impact flexible learning. In recent years, another significant thread of literature that queries the limits of flexibility has taken shape with a generative critique of the concept of flexibility itself. Early work in this area didn't necessarily make explicit the critique of flexibility as such, but instead modeled an awareness of some of the challenges brought about by thinking flexibility in narrow ways. For example, work by James and Beattie (1996) "uncovered fundamental tension between the pressure to provide flexible access and the wish to preserve the standing of postgraduate awards" (p. 362). While perhaps not based on an accurate estimation of the quality of education achievable by flexible learning, such a concern did speak to a perceived tradeoff required by flexible learning, ie., that

flexible learning, as conceived or practiced then, might necessarily come at the cost of rigor or other standards. Working in another direction, Samarawickrema (2005) showed that in making education flexible through flexible delivery options, access and control was granted to students, but these same qualities also mean more responsibility for learners: “more flexibility brings with it more independence which in turn calls for learners to be more responsible, more self-directed and more self-motivated” (p. 52). Indirectly then, Samarawickrema showed that flexible education could come at the expense of some important support structures needed for learning, especially when made more reliant on the individual than on the community, and therefore potentially more difficult. Taking a different tack, Burge’s (2008) qualitative study cited concerns from experts that flexible education, though aimed at equalizing education, had not resolved the inequality issues which often shape face-to-face education, and that flexible education was perhaps too business-oriented. In both Samarawickrema’s and Burge’s work, the ideal of flexible education as liberatory was shown to be just that, an ideal, one which could be aimed for but which was not necessarily an easily achievable goal without complications.

Recent trends in flexibility show an explicit turn towards a conceptual critique, perhaps made most legible with the input of Naidu’s editorials in 2017. In the first, echoing Samarawickrema’s concerns about the pressures of responsibility, and citing several studies, Naidu (2017a, p. 1) warned that for learners, “[t]oo much independence... will run the risk of isolating distance learners from their teachers, peers and the educational organisation, causing procrastination, delay and eventually attrition from the program.” Flexibility, in this guise, was not without challenges, and these challenges are complex, ongoing, and indeed inherent to the very things that make flexibility an appealing quality, and mark a line of inquiry which Naidu suggested is worth pursuing. In his second editorial of 2017, Naidu brought this questioning to

bear upon the larger epistemological frame of flexibility, asking how flexible is flexible learning actually, and perhaps more importantly, who decides and to what effect? Sheail (2018) picked up the provocation to rethink flexibility in her analysis of time as an immutable factor in life and learning, noting that time itself is a finite resource and needed to be addressed as such in flexible programming. Central to this scholarship is a recognition that flexibility is perhaps not something we readily understand and can define in a straightforward way. Given their recent position in the history of flexibility as mapped through this journal, these few articles make the case for a new wave of research into flexibility as discourse and conceptual apparatus, rather than simply a term that strictly reflects salient qualities about distance education.

Implications and Conclusion

The research implications of this review are significant. For one, flexibility requires further inquiry. While it is often described as a feature of online, distance, and open education, flexibility as a concept requires study from a variety of angles: What aspects of education can be made more flexible, and how can they be made more flexible? Which ones benefit learners the most? Who benefits from further flexibility and why? What are the limits of flexibility? Is flexibility the future of educational provision as emerging narratives suggest? To what degree are current instructional design models fit with providing flexible approaches to education? Such questions require an interdisciplinary and multimethodological orientation. For instance, ethnographic investigations may afford us to understand how study fits into learners' daily life and data trails learners leave behind on digital platforms might enable us to understand whether learners truly study from anywhere at anytime. Further, it is clear that the narrative promoting flexible learning as an opportunity and design feature to address educational problems isn't new, even though the broader environment that we now face is drastically different than in the past.

While flexibility was regularly described as providing access to underserved populations, it now seems to have become a mantra for enabling learners to pursue learning opportunities without interrupting other responsibilities that they face.

It is only recently, that we have observed critiques of this normative perspective of flexibility through work that questions the common sense and transparent approach to flexibility, an approach too often divorced from power and the larger systems that inform its usage or normalization (Naidu 2017a, 2017b, 2018; Sheail 2018). Such work is suggestive of an important shift in research on open, distance, and online education and educational technology more generally, marking a recognition that it is no longer tenable to use common terminology without first grappling with the way in which historical contexts make those terminologies meaningful, given their imbrication in things like power and privilege. Indeed, as we've seen above, historically, "flexibility" has been deployed in many ways and to many different ends. It is a complex concept that both stands in for our comprehension of distance education through various orientations to pedagogy, space and time, and cultural norms, for example, while simultaneously shaping this comprehension and defining its limits. In other words, it is both descriptive and prescriptive. By tracing a historical account of the way work in this journal has used the term, we can see this usage in effect, where flexibility itself has often been taken to mean a limited range of things, and then been tested for its effectiveness per the parameters of this range. We can also begin to see how taking this narrowness to be the definitive orientation to the term inhibits imagining flexibility otherwise. This 'critical turn' is important not just for flexibility, but for the field as a whole, which is rife with terms that merit this kind of discourse analysis, whether it's to further query what openness means for example (c.f. Edwards, 2015), to consider and test what "enhanced" might mean, or fail to mean, in the context of "technology-

enhanced learning” (c.f. Bayne, 2015), and to examine the limits, narratives, and implications of so many terms that we use in the field ranging from personalized learning, virtual tutors, to competency-based education. In doing this kind of critical work, the field will be better positioned to face the challenges that come with a world of increasing digitization and political, social, and ideological difference.

The practical implications of this work are also significant. They invite us to examine in which ways flexibility could be applied to various aspects of course and program design and delivery, and explore how administrative structures may need to be refined to support flexible learning opportunities. Most notably however, the literature suggests that some practical solutions to challenging problems we are currently facing may be found in the work that has already been published, both in this journal and related ones. In this way, the history of the field, can serve both as a lens to view current practices, but can also be instructive.

Table 1

Articles focusing on flexibility analyzed for this paper

Citation
Baggaley, J. (2011). Flexible learning: a Luddite view. <i>Distance Education</i> 32(3), 457–462. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2011.610294
Beckmann, E. A. (2010). Learners on the move: mobile modalities in development studies. <i>Distance Education</i> 31(2), 159–173. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2010.498081
Bennett, S., Agostinho, S., Lockyer, L., & Harper, B. (2009). Researching learning design in open, distance, and flexible learning: investigating approaches to supporting design processes and practices. <i>Distance Education</i> 30(2), 175–177. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587910903023173
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