The Problem with Flexible Learning: Neoliberalism, Freedom, and Learner Subjectivities

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Through analysis of the relationship between neoliberalism, learner subjectivity, and flexible education, this paper examines the freedom said to be enabled by flexible education. It asks: What is the nature of such freedom, who does it make free, and in what ways? While flexible education is often framed to be liberatory in nature, especially when understood through the freedom to learn and study as one chooses or is able, the institutional assumptions around how one accommodates this education, the economic or logistic reasons one may be compelled to learn in such ways, and the consequent effects on subjectivity of learning in this way are rarely considered together. By laying bare the relationship between neoliberal forms of freedom (as the freedom to choose and the freedom to take responsibility for oneself), and the affordances of flexible education, this paper illuminates the productive nature of flexible education as a tool of governmentality that serves to regulate subjectivity and in fact delimit certain freedoms. Finally, this paper argues that in order for flexible education to better serve learners, normative forms of freedom must be questioned and historicized to support this work.

Keywords: flexible learning; neoliberal education; governmentality; learner subjectivity; freedom

Introduction

Flexible learning has seen a resurgence in the education technology literature and practice in recent years. Though flexibility is rooted in the distance and online learning literature as an approach to free learners from the constraints of time, pace, and place, and enable them to participate in education from "anywhere" at "anytime," practitioners and researchers have recently noted that an array of educational practices can be made more flexible, more accommodating, and overall more sensitive to student realities and needs, thereby expanding the forms of freedom associated with flexible education. Naidu (2017) for instance notes that the breadth of flexibility spans everything from

forms of assessment, content, variations in credit, to timelines for a program. Understood this way, flexibility becomes a value proposition, one grounded in ostensibly more comprehensive measures of freedom, rather than merely a modality as conceptualized in early distance education literature. Recently, the concept of flexibility has benefitted from theoretical interest that interrogates this former approach to flexibility, with attention paid to at times problematic assumptions that inflect the generally positive mobilization of flexibility in online and distance education. For example, our recent research examined the ways in which flexible education, particularly when framed through claims of being able to occur "anytime, anyplace," hinges on a notion of access to time and place that favours an ideal version of the human, namely the independent, white, male, able-bodied human (Authors 2019b), or what McMillan Cottom (2015, 8) calls the "roaming auto-didact." Central to these arguments is that the parameters for how flexibility is both conventionally understood and mobilized are constrained by structural forces that render an individual more or less proximal to such ideals, and thus the particular kind of freedom on offer is itself both ideologically and structurally circumscribed.

In this paper, we continue this critical trajectory with focus on the ways in which the claims around anytime anyplace learning, while initially appearing as mostly beneficial and just (e.g., as enabling the freedom to study for learners who might otherwise be unable to participate in higher education), are thoroughly embedded within the labour demands and market logics of our current historical moment. As such, the particular flexibility of flexible forms of education, i.e., what its affordances enable, and the claims made in the name of these affordances, demand both a degree of skepticism and a careful accounting of the nature of the neoliberal influence upon them.

This critique isn't, as a rule, in opposition to flexible education or meant to suggest that because flexible education itself is imperfect it should be dismissed outright. Rather, we aim to complicate the discussion of this topic, to take the flexibility of flexible education seriously as an object of study worthy of careful scrutiny. Without making this flexibility more complicated, we risk overhyping the possibilities offered by flexible education while simultaneously overlooking both the ways in which it can be exploitative or unjust and, importantly, the ways in which it could become more equitable or liberatory. Understanding these limits, and where we might creatively and justly improve upon them is urgent, due to the prevalence of online and flexible education in general but also in response to the coronavirus pandemic (e.g., Bozkurt et al., 2020), when "educational technologies have been positioned as a frontline emergency service" (Williamson, Eynon, & Potter, 2020, 107).

Coming to understand these limits means first investigating the relationship between the ways in which flexibility is enacted in the context of flexible education, and the larger operations and structures of power that shape higher education more generally, yet directly impact the very possibility of flexible education. Second, bearing this relationship in mind, researchers must reckon with the ways by which the freedom associated with flexible education—being able to work from anywhere, at any time, for example—obscures the production of flexible subjectivities as one of the consequences of flexible education itself. In this view, flexibility isn't something just exploited or accessed by a learner, but is a force that operates relationally between the institution and the individual, something that is in fact imposed upon the learner as much as it aims to support the learner, with significant consequences for how we understand who learners are, what they are expected to do, and why they do it.

Our argument unfolds by first discussing flexible education, particularly as it is normatively articulated within its field of study. From there we situate flexible education within the context of neoliberalism and the neoliberal university to show how education is often understood as a function of economic imperatives, and these imperatives are as present in flexible forms of education as anywhere else. Indeed, the opportunities of flexible education cannot be divorced from the context out of which they arise as it is part of their conditions of possibility. For this reason, flexible education merits the same kind of scrutiny that all forms of education call for, and for which there are rich and ongoing bodies of diverse scholarship (e.g., Freire 1970/2009; hooks, 1994). From there we examine the ways by which flexible education, as made possible in neoliberal regimes, serves to induce a particular form of subjectivity from its students, namely the flexibilized subject as flexible learner, whose identifying qualities typically refer back to the economic order and are visible in the will to self-improve, to self-regulate, and to be driven towards increasing their own human capital. This flexible learner, we argue, is a neoliberal form of subjectivity, and is free only insofar as it operates within the constraints of neoliberal systems of power, and therefore makes legible certain elements of the ideological underpinnings of some (i.e., what we are calling "normative") forms of flexible education. Specifically, we ask: What kind of subject and subjectivity is produced and reinforced by flexible education turning on claims of being accessible "anytime" from "any place?" How can we understand the mobilization of this particular example of flexibility—i.e., flexible education—in relation to larger operations and structures of power, the very structures that continue to shape how we understand what is good and necessary about flexible education?

Flexible Education, Neoliberalism, and the Neoliberal University

Flexibility is a recurrent and persistent theme in the distance and online education literature (e.g., Naidu 2017; Sheail 2018). In an analysis of the literature on flexibility published in the journal *Distance Education* over the last 40 years, we identified six major themes: 'any time, any place' learning; flexibility as freedom; limitations in flexibility especially specific to technology; specific limitations in time, space, and constraints of cultural difference; flexibility as pedagogy; and instructor flexibility (Authors 2019a). In analyzing literature relevant to mobile learning, Grant (2019, 367) notes that some researchers use the term mobile learning to refer to learning unrestricted by time and place, in what he calls the "nomadic nature of learners and learning," which seems to describe the dominant aspects of flexibility while leaving other aspects concealed. Significantly, while the prevailing literature to date considers flexibility to be a mode of learning, one that is free of constraints relating to time, place, and pace (e.g., Butcher and Rose-Adams 2015; Du, Yang, Shelton, and Hung 2019), there is some emergent literature that considers flexible learning as a value, and in particular a value that is desirable to pursue in numerous aspects of education (e.g., Naidu 2017). In practical terms, for instance, asynchronous and self-paced online courses may serve students who work full-time; degrees with flexible start dates accommodate the needs of students as opposed to the needs of the institution; and flexible admission requirements (e.g., such as prior learning assessment in lieu of grades or credentials earned) acknowledge that learning occurs outside of institutions and credentials. In this way, flexibility as an idea condenses into a value to make varied educational practices more flexible, and in the process more accommodating and capable of serving not only more students, but more diverse student populations. In short, flexibility simultaneously becomes both a mode of learning and shorthand for the value of freedom for all to learn.

The roles of educational technology, media, and datafication of education are significant to highlight here, for they often enable (but also shape) flexible modes of learning. For instance, digital learning platforms may make flexible education possible via various means, such as through enabling instructors and designers to create self-paced learning modules and activities, through generating transcripts for video recording such as lectures, and through fostering interaction for geographically and temporally dispersed learners. Further, as learning platforms increasingly rely on making use of learner data (Jarke and Breiter, 2019), algorithmic decision-making becomes relevant to flexible learning. For instance, such technologies may encompass recommender systems that suggest to learners relevant courses, credentials, or potential career paths based on prior interest and use; or may employ predictive algorithms to offer personalised learning paths through a course. Such activities are made possible in part due to large numbers of learners participating on online platforms, generating significant data. Notably, while these data-informed practices are said to support online and flexible forms of education, they also shape learners' participation in online programs. In Dixon-Román, Nichols, and Nyame-Mensah (2019) for example, we observe how a machine learning platform that provides essay-writing assistance—a typical technology used to support students in writing in online and flexible learning settings—relies on the assumption that most learners are alike, and as such may confine what is acceptable and unacceptable writing.

Positioning flexibility as a value enables researchers and practitioners to critically examine educational practices and question the degree to which they are sensitive to students needs and realities. However, such positionality often assumes that flexibility is inherently unproblematic and virtuous, i.e., that flexible education and its affordances, in whatever form they take, are always of benefit. But in the same way that

authors elsewhere have argued that openness makes assumptions that require critiquing (e.g., Edwards 2015), the flexibility of flexible education requires this treatement. Related work on lifelong learning has indeed critiqued some aspects of flexibility, but there the emphasis has primarily been on the drive to produce unendingly flexible labour through continuous education and skills development (Edwards 1997; Olssen 2006). Our research, while similarly interested in the relationship between flexibility and economic drivers, instead focuses on the discourses of freedom implicit in the values of flexible education, which we do so through analysis of the subjectivity of the learner in flexible learning contexts, that is, the subjectivity of the one who is ostensibly made freer by flexible learning.

However, to begin to understand the subjectivity of the flexible learner we need to grapple with the larger forces structuring higher education, the globalized markets with which they contend, which is to say the rise and impacts of the forces of neoliberalism. Historicizing the transition towards deregulation and free market reign over the course of the twentieth century (and now well into the twenty-first), Harvey (2007) characterizes neoliberalism as a political and economic theory that correlates private property, free trade and markets with the advancement of human well-being. Ownership and the ability to generate private forms of capital are understood to be central to how humans can increase individual health and happiness. A consequence of this equating human well-being with economic activity is the moralization of such behaviour, where the capacity to provide and care for oneself is directly tied to one's moral worth (Brown 2003). It should be said, however, that the explanatory power of neoliberalism is not uncontested, which is perhaps unsurprising given the multiple contexts within which neoliberal economic principles are enacted across the world (Jessop 2013). For example, in the context of Western higher education systems, Tight

(2018) suggests relying on neoliberalism as a source of critique risks oversimplifying problems while simultaneously reinforcing the perceived totalizing nature of neoliberalism, a point Hartmann and Komljenovic (2020) take up in their examination of research concerning higher education institutions' responsibilities and relationships concerning student employability. For our part, we agree with De Lissovoy (2015, 49), who takes neoliberalism as more than just an economic system, but a "social and cultural formation," which is to say that when we speak of neoliberalism, we are speaking first of the "colonization of the world and lifeworld by capital and the conversion of almost all moments of social life into occasions for surplus extraction" (50).

And indeed, even in spite of the cautions around neoliberalism as a framework for analysis, numerous scholars have argued that higher education has become increasingly, and even definitively neoliberalized (Connell 2013; Reading 1997). This is to say that higher education is driven by discourses of individual gain and total responsibility for the self in the form of increasing competition, and institutional orientation to economic imperatives at the expense of more humanistic values and concerns, such as social welfare, democracy, and justice. This is especially true in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis (Giroux 2016; Molesworth, Scullion, and Nixon 2010; Pusey 2017; Slaughter and Rhodes 2009). According to Giroux (2016, 162), the university today is shaped by "the privatizing and atomistic values at the heart of a hyper-market-driven society," where, as Connell (2013) describes, education has become an industry directed and shaped by orientation to profit. For his part, Barnett (2014) goes so far as to suggest that terms such as "globalization" or "neoliberalism" are hardly adequate to characterize the depth of the influence of this economic logic on higher education now. And, this is not just a case of higher education being worked

upon by outside forces, but that higher education is simultaneously impacted by *and* actively participating in these neoliberal processes, to the extent that, as Seal (2018 n. pag.) says, it cannot be identified as a strictly neutral site of humanist ideals (if it ever could be said to have been so in the first place), but in fact plays an "integral role in the present economic order."

So while we might imagine higher education as a site of liberation and resistance to oppression (a point we return to later), and as a site of humanist endeavour that the modalities and values of flexible education in turn make accessible to students (through such efforts as personalized recommendations, self-paced courses, and upskilling), the influence of neoliberal market logic, and the attendant ways of being it enforces, must be carefully considered in order to better comprehend the ideologies that shape what flexible education both is and isn't doing. If, for example, flexible forms of education ultimately serve and are reducible to what Lolich (2011, 273) calls an "economic production function," such flexibility risks being at odds with some of the more radical and liberatory aims of education. In other words, just and equitable mobilization of flexibility requires analysis of the larger systems that shape flexible education, as well as those that shape the learner and what the learner seeks, and perhaps more importantly, is taught to seek from their education. We must ask then: What does flexible education make available, and what does it foreclose?

Flexibility, Power & Subjectivity

At the centre of our concern with the ways in which flexibility is mobilized, both in practice and discursively, is the operation of power, and the ways in which power produces forms of subjectivity. Foucault (2007) theorizes several forms of power that help us understand the relationship between power and subjectivity: sovereign power, disciplinary power, and governmentality. The first is understood in terms of the rights of

the ruler, and the second targets the individual through disciplinary mechanisms. The third form, which is where our focus lies, is oriented to populations and the management of populations, operates without the application of force (108, 102), and is exercised through "institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics" (108), or as he succinctly puts it, is the "conduct of conduct" (389). Gorman (2012, 17) mobilizes this framework in the context of higher education to show how for faculty, governmentality "operates not from a hierarchical position of authority, but by regulating or controlling behavior from a distance," and in significant ways. She notes that behaviour shifts in relation to forces of which people are often unaware, and they thus risk becoming unconscious upholders of regulatory systems. Cannizio (2015) remarks upon this governmentality process as resulting in the creation of "new subjectivities" which are directly tied to the operations of power, whether they be those structures in higher education shaping faculty subjectivity, or something larger like the state affecting citizens more generally. In a neoliberal order, with the desires and efforts of the individual acting as its prime justification, self-regulation becomes a central mechanism by which labour and compliance can be smoothly elicited as "actors come to perceive problems in similar ways and accept responsibility to seek ways of transforming their position themselves" (Gray and Harrison as quoted in Gorman, 46; see also Olssen 2006). Governmentality enables, produces, and reinforces this self-regulation in the form of what Foucault calls "responsibilization," or what Peters (2005, 311) describes as "modern forms of self-government" tied to choice "at critical points in the life cycle, such as giving birth, starting school, going to university, taking a first job, getting married, and retiring." In the act of making *choices* about everything from their body to their education, the subject as responsible (and self-reliant) individual comes into being.

Choice and flexibility go hand in hand—the freedom to choose where to study, what to study, when to study, at what pace, in what order, for example, are all hallmarks of flexible education. Higher education institutions employ many educational technologies to influence such choices. For instance, they might employ Twitter to broadcast positive messaging to students in order to influence institutional choice (Author 2017), use machine learning to predict student performance and intervene in order to influence choice of learning activities and paths (see Perrotta and Selwyn 2019), and adopt digital learning platforms that could potentially shape choice of what to study (Hillman, Rensfeldt, and Ivarsson, 2020). And indeed, what also appears true is that choice is an uncontested marker of freedom, a concept in itself so thoroughly normalized as an unqualified good as to seem impervious to critique (Harvey 2007). But the need for caution with respect to this particular embedded form of freedom (i.e., freedom as choice within a neoliberal context) remains, as with it necessarily comes the assertion of a particular form of individual responsibility. In short, freedom is a function of choice, but what choice is considered best is overwhelmingly determined by neoliberal logics about how best to live one's life, and who can make particular choices is further determined by locations of privilege. It may be easier, for example, for a male student to make time for online learning than a female student given the differences found in household responsibilities (Moss 2004). Or, it may be easier for a single mother living in a rural area with strong community ties that may support her child caring responsibilities to study at a distance than a single mother living isolated in an urban area. The reversal of this same thing may be true depending upon community and other resources. Thus, we must proceed with extreme caution around how we mobilize and think about the benefits of flexibility, lest we find ourselves in the situation, as Lolich (2011) observes, where the only legitimized rationale explaining a student's

success or failure is their own capacity as an individual, which is understood to be entirely their own responsibility. Which, to be clear, means at least implicitly adopting a racist attitude that denies the impact of the structural forces and violent legacies of slavery and settler colonialism, for example (De Lissovoy 2015).

The wager is this: the force of the institution, bound up as it is with larger neoliberal market forces that operate through governmentality and responsibilization, is such that flexible learning is in itself productive of subjectivities. In this context, choice means (a certain kind of) freedom (e.g., the freedom to fill one's time with skills acquisition and the subsequent expected freedom to choose how to earn and spend capital), freedom means responsibilization, and in the process of becoming responsibilized, the flexible learning subjects are themselves made flexible through engagement with flexible learning programs, i.e., they are taught to learn the skills needed to learn from any location, at any time, and to accept this as normal. Flexibility, in other words, must come as much from the opportunities made available by the institution through pedagogy and technology, for example, as it does *from* learners, and how learners think of themselves, how they both adapt, and adapt to, their learning requirements. This means flexibility isn't something just exploited by a learner, but is a productive force (i.e., a force with causal effects) that operates between the institution and the individual. Responsibilization reinforces this process because to succeed in flexible learning, one must be autonomous, independent, and with the ability to self-regulate. Once again, such qualities may not themselves be strictly problematic, but once situated within a neoliberal order that then moralizes between those who are deemed to be more or less effective at such things, they become part of structural forms of violence, which bears and reinforces its own forms of unfreedom. This is because those in the position to be more effective in the first place are those that already fit the

ideal of the autonomous, independent person, namely the white male individual, while those who do not fit this ideal become more disposable, and can in turn be blamed for their own disposability, a telling reinforcement of what Davis (2016, 1) calls "the insidious promotion of capitalist individualism." Responsibilization, in other words, is, among other things, a gendered, racialized, and classed process, one which makes people in many ways less free.

Beyond this problematic freedom suggested by certain aspects and consequences of flexible education, the particular irony here is that flexible education, while increasing freedom through choice, simultaneously increases lack of freedom through more obvious and direct forms of control as it permits "education to extend the reach of discipline, normalisation and examination" (Oliver 2015, 370). For instance, to support learners' abilities to participate in online learning from any geographical location (i.e. freedom from location), a patent filed by Proctor U Inc. (Matthew, Morgan, and Millin, 2019, 2) describes a proctoring system that relies on multiple forms of control enforced through "recording the test-taker's audio or video and desktop feed, [in order to] determine if the test-taker is exhibiting questionable behavior." This freedom is further circumscribed by biases inhering in various technologies used in flexible education, given that digital technologies are not neutral and can be loaded with racial bias, for example (Noble 2018). Further concerns about the nature of freedom centre on the problems with data aggregation and accumulation of learner information, which are argued to dispossess and commodify digital lives (Thatcher, O'Sullivan, and Mahmoudi 2016), as well as the neocolonial nature of such tools given that students today are located in a global education market (Prinsloo 2020). For example, massive open online courses, as another example of flexible education, have been described as operating as a form of digital colonialism in Sub-Saharan Africa (Adam 2019). Which is all to say that

the technology made to make learning more flexible itself can reinforce social

inequalities thereby delimiting who and what is made freer in its application. Flexible

education is not simply liberatory. It is simultaneously regulatory in nature.

The Flexible Learner

In 2014, Ronald Barnett produced a compelling and detailed report for the Higher

Education Academy, a major professional organization focused on higher education

needs in the United Kingdom. The report, "Conditions of Flexibility," examines the

nature of, and need for flexibility in today's higher education institutions in a world of

increasing unpredictability, which is a reality made evermore undeniable in the face of

the upheaval associated with the coronavirus pandemic. Notably, the scope of the

report's engagement with flexibility does not lay emphasis on strictly institutional or

program flexibility, but also the need for the development and cultivation of flexible

learners. Barnett states emphatically that the "21st century is calling for human beings

who are themselves flexible, able to respond purposively to new situations and ideas"

(9). And while the conditions of contemporary 21st century economic (and social and

ecological) systems may indeed demand such, we are compelled to ask: what is being

asked of students in the process of requiring this flexibility? Who is and is not able to be

flexible? In Gordon's (2014, 5) related report on flexible pedagogies for the Higher

Education Academy, he notes that there are three main stakeholders in the development

and usage of flexible pedagogies. These operate at the *systems level*, which is where the

enactment of flexible pedagogy by instructors is permitted and supported; in the

pedagogical relationship itself, which includes everything from theory to mode of

delivery, for example; and finally, at the level of the *student*, or what he characterizes as

the ontological level. Importantly, students also perform variations in personal

flexibility, such as how flexibly they deal with pedagogy and structure, and how their

world beyond their studies impacts their work. It is this latter level, that is, the student, that we are especially interested in when thinking about the neoliberalization of education and the contemporary historical moment, and which we see further elaborated in Barnett's work. Writing in the foreword of that report, Levy suggests that Barnett's focus on flexible graduates as part of the conditions of flexibility is appropriate, and this is largely because the world into which these graduates are destined, demands of them the capacity to operate under shifting circumstances, changing demands, and instability. This world is one

> characterised by rapid and incessant technological change, of the proliferation of profound conceptual and value dispute, of near instantaneity (in which, for instance, massive global financial processes occur in micro-seconds through inter-connected and automated computer systems), of digital (social) networking and communication, and of a compression of spaces. (Barnett, 5)

Necessarily then, to meet these intensifying forces, Barnett argues that aspects of flexible education itself today becomes essential if learners are to gain the skills needed "to engage seriously—and flexibly—with the world," which is to say, if they themselves are to become adequately flexible (61).

It's quite evident now that Barnett's prediction about the need for flexible learners has been more correct than possibly even he expected, at least to the degree and with the speed that such a need has arrived. But it is worth keeping in mind that even as this flexibility is necessary, it still works in the service of larger institutional forces and demands than just out of a simple desire or need to learn from any place, at any time. For instance, on a much larger scale than just the individual learner, nation states such as Canada create policies to prepare a future workforce—a world shaped by new technologies that touch the breadth of Canadian life, and will "impact the way people

develop skills and their ability to adapt and take advantage of new opportunities"
(Government of Canada 2019). In other words, the production of flexible labour is
understood to be of increasing significance for states, even understood at times as a
process of securitization (Lolich 2011; Olssen 2006). This need for particular skills is
not necessarily inherently problematic—the aims of education no doubt include
developing the skills to pursue or advance a career—but against the backdrop of
neoliberalism, flexible education becomes blurred with the need to produce a flexible
labour force, and participating in flexible education becomes one way in which this
labour force is created through the responsibilization of learners.

But becoming and participating in flexible labour is not without costs. Peterson
and Willig (2011) put this in stark terms, where to become flexible, they write, is a
process meant to eliminate "resistance to change," and produce "adaptability in reaction
to varying political demands and a rapidly changing market" (343). The emphasis here
is on functional flexibility, which is a flexibility around work, e.g., how to work, when
to work, and where to work, rather than improving worker autonomy. Thinking through
flexibility in terms of large social, political, and economic systems, Bauman (2007, 4)
suggests that more than something like the old rule of conformity, today, flexibility is
the lauded as the most beneficial "virtue" for an individual, and reflects quick
adaptability, a willingness to follow opportunity rather than one's own interests, and
preparedness "to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret." When Barnett
suggests that students need to become personally flexible in order "to face and, indeed,
contribute to a fluid and unstable world" (27), he perhaps inadvertently reinforces a
neoliberal attitude about the nature of work, economies, and the kind of education *and*
subjectivity needed to survive in such a context. No doubt, flexible education is less
foreboding than the call for flexible labour, but as Barnett, and further critical work

about the intersections of neoliberalism, education, and labour make, the two are not inseparable (Edwards 1997; Lolich and Lynch 2016; Lynch, Grummell, and Devine 2012).

Given this connection between flexible labour and flexible education as located in the flexible learner, it behooves us to be mindful of what purpose flexible education is made to serve, and how it is mobilized. For example, if we allow flexible learning to be reduced to, or even primarily in the service of creating neoliberal human capital (i.e. labourers specifically equipped to survive late capitalism), we reduce both humans and education to a logic of economized life. Simons (2006, 532) calls this the adoption of an "entrepreneurial attitude towards ourselves" and suggests that it reduces aspects of human beings to capital. Namely, becoming flexible (which is to say, adaptable, self-reliant, responsible and responsibly autonomous) as a form of capital. He further suggests that education produces this form of capital, the logic of which Barnett's report makes legible.

The trajectory here is quite grim: in an environment where capital appears to be the measure of all things, one's capacity to convert self into capital becomes not just a question of moral standing, but under the auspices of governmentality, risks reducing that life which is no longer seen to be productive to disposability. Flexibility and inflexibility, in other words, become a question of survival. Or, as Simons (2016) says, "when life is totally approached in economic terms, an economic calculation could question life itself" (531). The implications are important when thinking about the different ways in which people can become flexible. For example, as Swan and Fox (2009) demonstrate, flexibility and becoming flexible is itself not neutral, and is a gendered, classed, and racialized process. They cite work that reveals that in the context of employment, women and men are rewarded differently based on how they perform

flexibility. Further, they suggest that various resources of flexibility are not available to everyone, and they emphasize that in some circumstances the use of such resources can come at the expense of others. Flexible education is similar in that it is accessed differentially—that is, with great or lesser ease—by people in different social positions and comes at unequal costs and with unequal pressures. For example, McMillan Cottom's (2017) work makes clear that disparities in the quality of certain forms of flexible education too often fail marginalized students, especially Black students and students of lower socio-economic status. Moreover, the continuance of the reduction of selfhood to human capital risks further trivializing and undermining the forms of labour that resist this conversion. Yet these forms of labor remain integral to social cohesion at multiple levels, such as the domestic work done by caregivers (typically women) in family settings. Notably, it is work like this that simultaneously makes legible the limits of flexible education, given that flexible education programs cannot in fact produce more time or space in which students do their work. So, in light of this fraught context and the unequal ways in which people can participate in education, and the unequal impacts flexible education has on people, what futures can we expect and hope for it?

Conclusion: Radically Flexible Learning?

The question of flexible learning's purpose is a call back to thinkers like Freire and hooks who ask about the purposes of education more broadly, and this is largely because though flexibility enables access to and participation in institutions of education, the very education they provide, as we have argued, can serve varied ends, some of which are more dubious than others. At the core of the emancipatory discourse of flexible education, or the freedom imagined by flexible education, is a tension between, on the one hand, offers of accessibility, connection, and opportunity for development, and on the other, the reproduction of constraints around what makes a

subject free and how that subject understands freedom. This normative form of freedom is that which remains suspect. Lolich (2011) reminds us that freedom is itself, in this context, an obligation, one created by the production of neoliberal subjectivity through neoliberal governmentalities. In other words, such a subjectivity is free only insofar as it operates within the constraints of neoliberal economic systems, and as we have made clear here, is a freedom meant for only some people.

The alternative to this normative freedom is not to be less flexible. Instead, we propose a turn to a more radical form of flexibility which we suggest might begin with two strategies for developing more critical insight into flexible education and for making flexible education less normative. The first is to be accountable to the purpose of education itself, which necessarily means thinking through what is desired for education, what its purpose is, or better yet, what it could be. Is education primarily meant to provide learners with the required skills and competencies demanded by the current economic systems, or are there other purposes for education? For example can flexible education be better grounded in democratic practice, public good, and racial, ecological, and decolonial justice, as many have suggested about education more generally (Bonnett 2007; hooks 1994; Kumashiro 2000; Marginson 2011, Nathani Wane 2008; Stanger 2018; Wagaman, Odera, and Fraser 2019)? Is education meant to foster capacities such as critical thinking, imagination, and curiosity? Perhaps it is some combination of all of these things, all qualities, which as hooks (1994) notes, are qualities of education as a practice of freedom, one not bound to neoliberal orders, but instead is grounded in the self-actualization of the learner as a complex and relational being. Perhaps it would emphasize the realities on the ground in our current economic and social orders, while aiming for something disruptive, where responsibilization is about responsibility oriented to and with others, rather than just for oneself? The kind of

situated responsibility that Potawatomi scholar Powys Whyte (2013, n.p.) writes about when he talks about responsibilities as arising "in part from a profound respect for the differences of all these beings within webs of relationship," rather than just responsibility for one's self? Here we want to suggest that perhaps the nature of radically flexible education might be one that is life-sustaining and accounts for the relational nature of its learners (Authors, 2020), and means asking what kind of freedom are education and educational institutions facilitating, and what kind of freedom might we—as researchers, as teachers, as designers and developers of (digital) learning—want them to facilitate?

Answering these questions necessarily ties into our second provocation. With an understanding of what purpose education serves in mind, the logics that underpin the mobilization of flexible education become more readily apparent, and thereby make more legible the limits, constraints, and biases which shape how we understand flexibility. To deepen the understanding of these logics requires a continuous historicization, which is to say a continuous examination of what flexible education is and is doing now, and for whom. In other words, regardless of what content, this is to acknowledge that flexible forms of education, are inherently political and need to be approached as such. Consider, for example, the reliance of some Indigenous people on flexible education in Canada in order to remain and participate in their communities, which are at times in quite remotely located reserves (Simon, Burton, Lockhart, and O'Donnell 2014). Making education accessible in such contexts is laudable, but when recalling that in the state of Canada, the reserve system itself is a colonial tool meant to contain and constrain Indigenous people and the rights to their traditional territories, flexible education risks becoming at best a solution to a symptom of a problem (remote location), rather than a solution to the problem itself (colonialism), and at worst an

assimilative process that serves the ends of colonialism (Kerr 2014; Simpson 2014). This is not to say that flexible education needs to solve the problem of colonialism, but that critical engagement with flexible education is necessary, and historicization is a part of this process.

This critical work becomes especially important as we face the "world of uncertainty and personal challenge" about which Barnett (2014, 27) writes, which in the six years since the publication of his report, includes such profoundly disruptive historical events as the Trump presidency and an attendant rise in global neo-fascism, the 2018 International Panel on Climate Change's report which gave until 2050 for a total drawdown of global carbon emissions, the global climate strikes which since followed and which estimates put at six million participants (Taylor, Watts, and Bartlett 2019), Brexit, the catastrophic 2019-20 Australian bushfires, human rights disasters from the wars in Syria and Yemen, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, as well as significant political protest against anti-Black racism and police violence against Black people in the U.S. and around the world, all of which suggest a present and near-future of increasing sociopolitical and ecological instability for life everywhere. Education more generally will have to contend with this reality, and flexible education in particular may be one effective way through which this is done; how it goes about doing so, and in the name of what agenda and for what futures, remains to be seen.

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