Teachers' Experiences of Flexible Learning

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Abstract

Flexible learning as a pedagogical approach has in recent years gained significant attention. At universities all over the western world, attempts are being made to replace traditional educational environments with flexible learning environments. Since the philosophy behind flexible learning differs in many aspects from traditional university methods, it seems possible that the teachers' role will change. The aim of the current study was to investigate how four university teachers experience their new role as teachers in a flexible learning environment, compared with their role in traditional university teaching. The study has a qualitative design. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The results show that all four teachers experienced that there had been a change. For two of them, the change had been dramatic. The major difference was that flexible learning meant a greater need for detailed course planning in advance. Other differences were that they made much more use of educational technology, worked more in educational teams, had less social contact with students and an experienced decrease in workload. The overall opinion was that working in a flexible learning environment was more satisfying than working in a traditional university setting.

Background

Flexible learning as a pedagogical method has in recent years gained significant attention. At universities all over the western world, attempts are made to convert and replace traditional educational environments with flexible learning environments.

What is flexible learning?

Flexible learning (FL) does not have a single adopted definition, but is defined differently by different authors. Van der Brande (1993) for example, defines FL as "an environment enabling learners to learn what they want, how they want, and when they want", while TAFE (1992) views FL as "an approach which allows for the adoption of a range of learning strategies in a variety of learning environments to cater for differences in learning styles, learning interests and needs, and variations in learning opportunities". Moran (1998) discusses FL slightly differently and writes "FL describes approaches to teaching and learning which are learner-centred, free up the place, time and methods for learning and teaching, and use appropriate technologies in a networked environment". In literature FL is actually more often discussed in broader terms, as a pedagogical approach, than something concrete and defined, and the reason for this is probably the complex and shifting nature of FL. Professor Wade (1994) seems to share this opinion when she writes: "FL as a concept can have many different meanings to different individua1s".

What most authors seem to have in common, however, is that they discuss FL as a concept consisting of elements from two different themes; in one way as a student centered pedagogical philosophy and in another as an approach that emphasises flexibility in methods and techniques for teaching and learning. These dual facets of FL have been expressed by Rowntree (1992). He reviewed a number of definitions of open learning and his conclusions are equally applicable to the use of the term flexible learning.

"it seems to me that open learning is two different things. It is:

- a philosophy — a set of beliefs about teaching and learning

- a method — a set of techniques for teaching and learning" (Rowntree 1992).

The pedagogical philosophy behind FL is student centered and focuses on student learning. Effective learning presupposes active students who are responsible for their own learning. The teacher's role is not to transmit knowledge, as often is the case in traditional university teaching, but to facilitate the student's learning. The theory behind this is found within the constructivist's theory of learning (Brown 1997, Jonasen *et al* 1993). According to constructivists, learning is an individual process and appears when the student constructs his or her own knowledge. "In order to 'gain knowledge', learners need to construct their knowledge by acting upon it, reformulating it, making their own personal interpretation of it, sharing it with others and building upon these ideas and concepts through the reactions and responses of their peers" (Harasim 1990).

The other aspect of FL, i.e. the emphasis on flexibility in methods and techniques, focuses on the need for flexibility in both the delivery of learning materials, and especially then techniques related to information technology (IT), but also the need for student choices in learning. For effective learning and deeper knowledge the student must be able to influence where, when, how and to some extend what he or she shall learn. Some students may prefer face to face communication, daytime on campus, while others prefer web-based materials and small group discussions, preferably during nights and weekends. This is where flexibility is needed.

In this paper it is suggested that FL should be understood as a pedagogical approach consisting of elements from these two different themes, i.e. from a student centered pedagogical philosophy and from an approach that emphasises flexibility in methods and techniques. Once this is understood the difference between FL and traditional university teaching (both on-campus and distance education) is clear. FL focuses rather on learning than on teaching and rather on constructing knowledge than on receiving. And also, for learning to be effective, flexibility in pedagogical methods and techniques is emphasised.

FL at Logan Campus

At the beginning of 1998, Griffith University opened a new campus built explicitly for FL in Logan, 40 km south of Brisbane, Australia. Logan Campus is characterised by many small rooms for study groups and only a few larger rooms for traditional teaching, many small study spaces, large student work and reading areas and high student access to computerised work stations. The idea behind the construction of Logan Campus was that the physical classroom should not constitute the centre point of learning. At Logan Campus, the student's primary source of learning should be through interactive, web-based classes and online class activities instead. Communication with peers and lecturers is primarily through electronic forums, notice boards and e-mail. At Logan Campus, lecturing (in the conventional sense) is not the primary source of information for students. This role is largely given over to prepared resources, including printed materials, audio and video materials, CD-ROM and the web. At Logan Campus all subjects and course materials are available on-line to students at the start of the semester. For all this to be effective, Logan Campus is characterised by leading edge technology, which makes the delivery of truly interactive multimedia resources to support learning and teaching possible. In a study by Gilbert (1999), Logan Campus is described as an environment where students and teachers constitute the heart, where staff are encouraged to utiise innovative and effective learning strategies and to integrate formal face-to-face activities (teacher-student, student-student) with a range of more independent peer-based and individual learning activities. The pedagogical approach at Logan Campus is based on a large body of research on student learning and in particular parallels Biggs' (1996) theory of selecting appropriate teaching and learning activities to address the desired performance of student understanding.

Teaching in FL — some hypotheses

When transforming a traditional educational environment to a FL environment, it is assumed that the role of the teacher will change in many ways. Laurillard and Margetson (1997) illustrate this change theoretically by describing a move from a "personal culture" to a "role culture". In traditional forms of teaching the question "how to run a course" lay typically in the lecturer taking a class. In this "personal culture", questions of preparations, when and how to lecture, how to assess the students, how to evaluate and perhaps modify the course are questions dealt with mainly by the lecturer in his or her own way. In this environment the teacher has a central role and a role as the primary source of knowledge. In a FL

environment, on the other hand, the teacher's role is different. In this "role culture" the teacher will be part of an educational team, which together and well in advance must prepare the course to be held. Printed materials must be written, published and delivered to students, videos and/or CD-ROM's must be produced and sites on the web must be created and updated. In this new environment the teacher's role is less central, and course development, modifications, evaluation, assessment etc., will be done by course-teams rather than by individual lectures. Teachers will follow traditional teaching timetables, but also team based production schedules. In this environment the teacher is not seen as the primary source of knowledge, but more as a mentor or guide whose aim is to help the student in his or her own learning. Laurillard and Margetson (1997) conclude their discussion by writing: "Perhaps the most challenging changes for many academics are (I) the need to make greater use of existing materials in their teaching, (ii) the requirement to become a member of a team, to teach in a collaborative mode and subject their own teaching input to the critical examination of their colleagues, (iii) the need to carry out formative evaluation on innovations, and (iv) the need to keep production schedules"

Also Moran (1998) describes the new role of the teacher as a profound change, from "the sage on the stage" to "the guide on the side". Moran underlines that skills required in a FL environment, especially in relation to course design and choice plus the use of technologies, are new and growing, and, just like Laurillard and Margetson (1997), that flexible course development must be a collaborative process in which the academic content expert draws on specialist skills for educational design and production assistance. Moran concludes her discussion by stating that "even the most experienced and excellent teachers need professional development and specialist support in making their courses more flexible and student-centred", Nikolova and Collis (1998) also discuss the new teacher role in flexible learning and write: "The teacher must step out of the traditional instructor's role: instead, a role of consultant, collaborator, facilitator, becomes dominant" and continues "offering more flexibility to the learners puts higher demands on the teacher and often requires more teacher's time and effort" (Nikolova and Collis, 1998). Similar discussions of the new teacher role in FL is also discussed elsewhere, e.g. by Taylor and Roughen 1997, Brown 1997, Bates 1997, Charmers 1998 and Anderson 1999.

FL is a relatively new pedagogical approach, and its consequences on university teaching and learning has not been studied much. In a review by Andersson (1999), this problem is highlighted and it is also underlined that most of the existing literature is based solely on beliefs and anecdotal evidence, whilst only a minimal number of authors base their discussions on empirical studies. To the author's knowledge, no previous empirical studies, with the explicit aim of finding out how teachers experience their new role as teachers in FL environments, exist.

Aim

The aim of the current study is to investigate how four university teachers experience their new role as teachers in a FL environment when compared to their role in traditional university teaching. The aim is not to obtain statistically viable data but rather to focus on individual teachers and their personal experience. It was hoped that analysed data could generate further hypotheses or theories.

Method

The study has a qualitative design. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with four teachers with experience from teaching in traditional university environment and who at the time of the interview were working as teachers in a FL environment. Four teachers at Logan Campus, Griffith University were asked to participate, and they all agreed. All four teachers taught in the field of social sciences.

For the interviews a list of relevant issues was prepared. The issues were:

■   Teachers' general role in FL

■   Use of educational technology

- Experienced workload

- Working in an educational team

- Course planning

- General satisfaction

Besides these issues, it was hoped that the teachers, by letting them lead the conversation, would present their own ideas and experiences.

The interviewed teachers were all women aged between 35 and 45 years. They had between 4 and 10 years' experience from traditional teaching and between two and three years experience from teaching in a FL environment. The interviews were held at the teacher's own offices and lasted between 1 to 2 hours. No formal ethics clearance was applied for.

Data analysis

The interviews were taped with permission from each interviewee. Each conversation was primarily transcribed and inductively analysed according to the issues listed above. Conversations regarding other issues, ideas or experiences were categorised into different themes. In the result section, they are presented under 'other issues'.

Results

Teachers' general role in FL

All four teachers felt that the introduction of FL had led to a change. For Teachers A and B, the change was moderate. They had also previously viewed higher education as a learner centered process and had also experimented with different methods in teaching and learning. For Teachers C and D, however, adapting to FL meant a great change. "I really had to change my own way of thinking" (Teacher C), "Oh, yes, absolutely ....it was a massive change" (Teacher D). For all four teachers, the most significant change was the need for detailed planning and thinking ahead. "You need to develop a real ability to have the whole subject planned, because you can no longer work on a week to week basis" (Teacher B). Teacher A, C and D also felt a dramatic increase in the use of educational technology. "I still meet with my students face to face, both individually and in smaller groups, but mostly we communicate by e-mail, web forum or by telephone" (Teacher A). All four teachers experienced more interaction with other departments within the university, e.g. the FL unit, information technologists and the library.

Use of educational technology

The increased use of educational technology in general, and especially via the Web, was at first viewed as something scary and difficult by Teachers A and C. After a while, however, they both viewed it as very useful and facilitating. Teacher D had not experienced any difficulty with the increased use of electronic forums. Teacher B was the only teacher who did not use educational technology much in her present teaching." In my subjects I need students talking to each other and practising their listening skills, so if anything, I will be steering them away from the Web for that subject, and that is what I believe FL is about".

Experienced workload

Teacher A could not say if the total workload had increased or decreased with FL. Obvious for her however, is that the workload now is more uneven. "Sometimes, before and at the beginning of a course, there is extremely much to do, with different deadlines all the time, while during other periods there is not very much that actually has to be done". Teachers A, C and D thought that the workload involved in the actual course design would decrease with time; "I can see, as I gain more confidence with the material that I am creating, that it probably will decrease" (Teacher C). Teacher B had already experienced this. "If I

plan a subject really well it takes a lot of planning time the first time I run the course, but the second time it does not". She gave an example of a course that had been running for three years now. "Today it basically runs itself, and the planning and preparation that has to be put into that course each year is minimal". Teacher B believed that the ability to plan and prepare was directly associated with the teachers' workload in FL; "In flexible learning, the more you plan, the less you will do".

Teacher D gave another picture; "I also see how FL has the potential to significantly reduce the workload, even to a point that I imagine is quite unethical. I can see that it is a system that has potentials for exploitation by academic staff, who can put part of a Web page up and deal with students through electronic means and hereby get all their teaching for the semester over and done with in a six week block".

Working in an educational team

All four teachers felt that teaching in FL is much more a matter of teamwork than traditional teaching is. They also saw this as something positive, especially Teachers A and B. "I love working in a team! Beside having the opportunity to discuss subject related questions with my colleagues, we get pedagogical and technological help from other members of the team — that's great!" (Teacher A). Teachers C and D were also positive regarding the educational teams. Sometimes, however, the teamwork could be problematic; "You can't just expect that the team is just going to happened and work together well" (Teacher D). All four teachers were very pleased with the assistance from the FL unit.

Course planning

All four teachers felt that planning in detail and well in advance constitutes the greatest change from teaching traditionally. "Everything — the study guide, the Web text, videos, group assignments, assessment etc. — has to be done and completed at least three months before the start of the course" (Teacher A). For Teacher B, this was not a problem; "You need to be prepared and you need to be organised, and that suits me personally, but for someone else, who does not like to work like this, they probably hate it". Teachers A and D found this difficult in the beginning, but ok now. Teacher C still saw this as a great problem; "Well, as I said to you, I am probably a more creative person.... planning you know, I hate it (laugh)."

General satisfaction

All four teachers experienced the introduction of FL positively. Teacher B was most positive. "FL allows you to teach your subject in a way that you think will improve the student's learning best, and I think the students learn more. I also think that it creates independence in the students". Also Teachers A and D appreciated the learner centered philosophy in FL. "The students that we manage to nurture and keep going through the system here, would just drop out at a traditional university, and I think this is because here the students can choose their method of learning, to some extend, and because they feel more in control of the whole process" (Teacher D).

Teacher A mentioned a nice experience from the end of last year. "At the end of a course I said to the students — ok. tell me one thing that you have learned from this course, and one of them said —'in this course I learned how to think'. That really made me feel good". Teacher C thought teaching in a FL environment was "The good thing is that you can use your creativity much more in FL, you can make learning fun. The negative side of FL had to do with the lack of social contact with students."

Other issues

Teachers A, C and D expressed that FL meant less social contacts than in traditional teaching. Even though they felt that they had more contact with colleagues today than in traditional teaching, the great loss of student contact isolated the teacher more than before; "Days, sometimes weeks, can pass without meeting even one student" (Teacher A).

Teacher C had experienced that FL environment required new student skills. An example she gave was students who are verbal and like to discuss; "In traditional teaching students who are verbal and like to take part in discussions often have an advantage. But how do you do that in FL? In FL you need to express your thoughts much more in text and by e-mail or in electronic forums. This is quite a change".

Teacher D explained that her transition into FL was unnecessarily exaggerated due to the focus on the Web and the construction of Web pages. She believed that the transition would not have been so difficult if someone had explained to her what FL actually was, and the philosophy behind it.

Teacher A also expressed that even though the Logan Campus officially apply FL, there is still a long way to go before FL is fully implemented among staff, students and in the organisation. "For me, FL means that the learner has more control over his or her learning, and I am not sure that we have reached that stage yet. A lot of teachers need to change their attitude, but so do the learners".

Discussion

Are there then any interesting findings? Yes, I think there are. Regarding the first issue, whether FL has changed the teachers general role or not, the interviewed teachers had similar opinions. All four agreed on the fact that there had been a change in their role, and that this new role in many ways meant being more "a guide on the side than a sage on the stage". This supports the hypothesis by Moran (1998) and Nikolova and Collis (1998). Neither Teacher A or B, however, thought that the change had been too great or dramatic. Previously, when working in a traditional environment they had also viewed higher education as a learner centered process and had experimented with different methods in teaching and learning. None of them had ever seen themselves as the sage on the stage! Perhaps teaching in FL is not as dramatically different from teaching traditionally as is often discussed in the literature. Teaching in today's 'traditional' universities is perhaps not as old fashion and rigid as it is often said to be? Or could the results be explained by the character of the interviewed teachers, i.e. four women aged between 35 and 45? Perhaps they do not quite represent the 'traditional university lecturer'?

Regarding use of educational technology, Teachers A, C and D had similar experiences. For them the introduction of FL meant a dramatic increase of technology, and in the beginning, especially for Teacher A and C, this was experienced as difficult and scary. At that stage they were all heavily depending on help from the FL unit. Today, however, after 2-3 years, they were in much less need of external help. This indicates the importance of both introducing the teaching staff to the technology, and also the importance of having a well functioning 'help unit' for the teaching staff, when FL is introduced.

Regarding workload, the results are interesting. After a hard first year, Teacher B now experienced a clear reduction in work. The other teachers had not experienced a decrease in workload yet, but they all believed they would do in the future. Teacher D had an interesting point; "I also see how it (FL) has the potential to significantly reduce the workload, even to a point that I imagine is quite unethical. I can see that it is a system that has potentials of being exploited by academic staff". This is interesting in different perspectives. If FL actually requires less teaching staff, the expressed fear among many teachers of 'making themselves unnecessary', which in its turn means teachers losing jobs, is relevant. Even though teachers will claim (and often rightly so) that the decreased actual workload means improved quality in teaching, politically it can become even easier to argue for cut backs in teaching time and teaching staff And if Teacher D is right, that FL is 'a system that has potentials of being exploited by academic staff', how will that turn out in the future?

Academics being part of an educational team is often discussed as being a great potential problem. These interviews indicate the opposite, that educational teams can be viewed as something positive and fun. All four teachers were really pleased with being part of a team.

When it comes to 'course planning', all four teachers agreed that this was the greatest change from before. FL requires detailed planning and preparation, well in advance. Teacher A, and even more so Teachers C and D experienced this change of planning and thinking as being very difficult. Teacher B was an exception; "Planning suits me personally, but for someone else, who does not like to work like this, they probably hate it" Perhaps Teacher B is right? Perhaps FL is a pedagogical approach that suits (and perhaps

requires) very organised and planned staff? Not all academics are organised personalities. How will they work in a FL environment? Teachers A, C and D felt that the need for detailed preparation and planning was problematic in another sense. They felt that there could be hesitation in changing something that already is 'up and running". "It is not difficult to change it, but you don't really want to upset the process" (Teacher C). "Earlier I was always looking for interesting papers, chapters and other written materials to bring into class and discuss, but in FL it does not work that way" (Teacher A). This aspect is interesting. In this sense a FL environment leads to less flexibility.

Regarding general satisfaction, all four teachers preferred working in a FL environment compared to a traditional university environment. Teacher B was most positive followed by Teacher A and D. Teacher C was less certain. This correlates well with the degree of the teacher's own experience of 'ability to plan and be organised'. See figure 1.

Figure 1: The association between teachers experienced ability to be organised and their general satisfaction with flexible learning
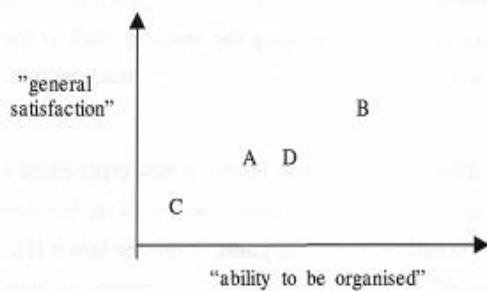
Teacher B liked planning; "Preparation and planning suits me", while Teacher C did not".. .planning you know, I hate it", Teachers A and D were somewhere in between. This correlation, although small, supports the hypothesis that FL suits organised and planned personalities more than teachers who like to improvise and to do things at the last minute.

A problem that was brought up by three of the four teachers under 'other issues', was that FL meant less social contacts with students. For these teachers FL meant more time in front of the computer and less time with students. This issue is interesting. Does FL lead to isolated teachers sitting on their own in front of their computers? What impact will this have on the working environment? What impact will it have on university teaching and learning?

Conclusion

The aim of the current study was to investigate how four university teachers experience their new role as teachers in a FL environment, compared with their role in traditional university teaching. All four teachers agreed on the fact that there had been a change. For two of them, the change had been dramatic. The major difference was that FL meant a greater need for detailed course planning in advance. Other differences were that they made much more use of educational technology, worked more in educational teams, had less social contact with students and an experienced decrease in workload. The overall opinion was that working in a FL environment was more satisfying than working in a traditional university setting.

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