Flexible Learning Resource

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Flexible Learning Resource -
Executive Summary

Flexibility is a foundational principle of an inclusive classroom. The Ryerson Mental Health and Wellbeing Committee wanted to help elucidate what flexible pedagogy can look like in practice. This was accomplished through a project to collect examples that illustrate flexibility, used by Ryerson instructors in their teaching practices. This summary contains a selection of excerpts from a literature review compiled by Michelle Schwartz, Instructional Design and Research Strategist, as well a handful of examples collected during the project. The full resource contains the full literature review, all practices collected from Ryerson University, as well as a few examples from York University.

A movement towards flexible learning supports a more equitable experience of education for all learners. Flexibility can be planned and implemented to numerous degrees and in many ways. Viewing flexible learning through the lens of the following six pedological ideas - learner empowerment, future-facing education, decolonizing education, transformative capabilities, crossing boundaries, and social learning - can help instructors in the transition towards a more flexible learning experience, one that is co-created with students.

Instructors currently face increasing demands on their time in a context of shrinking educational resources and precarious work arrangements. The reality of this can make the pedagogical shifts recommended in this resource feel daunting. These examples are meant to provide ideas, provoke thought and encourage any action towards creating a more flexible and inclusive classroom. Small steps can and do make an impact.

Learners, instructors, and institutions all have a role to play in flexible learning:

→ **Learners** must take responsibility for their own learning, taking advantage of opportunities that are presented to them and being able to self-advocate for the delivery method that best serves their learning needs.

→ **Instructors** must be able to identify opportunities for flexible learning, "with a growing emphasis on managing the learning process rather than being the primary provider of learning material."

→ **Institutions** must build flexible systems that provide students with choices in their learning, as well as maintaining the frameworks that ensure a quality learning experience (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013).

Prepared by M. Schwartz, N. Roach, S. Anwar, J. Tanner & R. Thistle on behalf of the Ryerson Mental Health & Wellbeing Committee, http://www.ryerson.ca/lt

Characteristics of Flexible Learning

The lack of an agreed upon definition of flexible education or the use of a definition that is too broad has led to a confusing "conflation of educational typologies," such as identifying any aspect of a course that is delivered in a non-traditional way as being flexible, or equating distance education with flexibility (Palmer, 2011). Ian Hart has defined eight principles that he says are "central to the implementation of a *flexible learning policy*" (2000).

Several of these principles are expanded in the following section.

1.
Flexible access

2.
Recognition of prior learning

3.
Flexible content

4.
Flexible participation

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Allow students to contribute to and benefit from classes in circumstances when they are unable to attend in person. Flexible participation can range from accessing recorded lectures online, earning participation grades through written reflections instead of attendance, or live streamed lectures with participatory components.

5.
Flexible teaching and learning methods

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Have the ultimate goal of meeting learning objectives and requirements, and allows for these goals to be met in a variety of ways.

6.
Flexible resources

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Allows students access to all required course resources both on and off campus. Modular self-instruction materials (remedial, revision, and extension) are available if students require them.

7.
Flexible assessment

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Focuses on competence and achievement of targets, rather than time limited methods of evaluation.

8.
Ongoing evaluation

Implementation of flexible learning techniques can happen at any or every stage of course design.

→ Ideally, learning is individualized, collaboration is encouraged, and metacognitive goals are pursued.

→ There is an incremental approach to independent learning, with the ultimate goal of developing a deep approach and learner responsibility.as well as maintaining the frameworks that ensure a quality learning experience (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013).

Some practices used at Ryerson:

Setting up a live stream for lecture for those students that cannot make it to class.

Evaluating participation for in-person classes, assigning online memos posing a question that have to be completed every week. This allows each student to have equal opportunity to achieve participation marks, regardless of their level of confidence in speaking in front of a class

Using a 'floating deadline', meaning a deadline given between two specific dates (e.g., Oct 18 - Oct 25).

A Ryerson Instructor Perspective on Flexible Learning:

"A common fear among professors is that people will take advantage of alternatives because it will be 'easier'. This is a misconception because only a very, very, small number of people will choose an alternative when not needed. It's ultimately better to be 'taken advantage of' by a small number of people than to not provide the necessary support for the majority of students. Also, taking an alternative does not necessarily mean it will be easier, the same objectives and outcomes are met, just through a different medium".
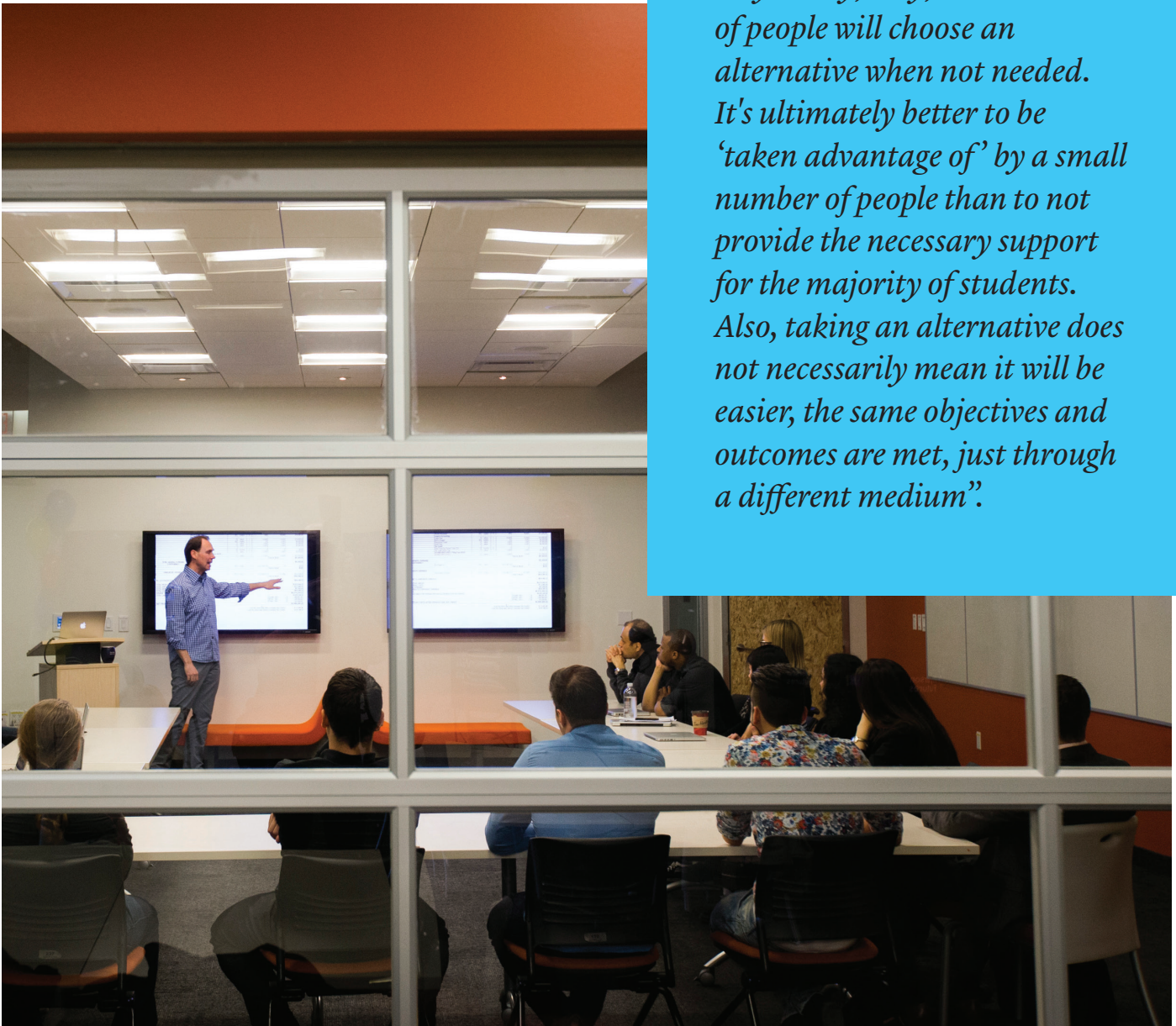
Introduction

This report weaves together a review of current literature on flexible learning authored by Michelle Schwartz, Instructional Design and Research Strategist, for the Learning & Teaching Office, with the findings of an inquisitive project at Ryerson University done in the 2016/2017 academic year titled the 'Flexibility Catalog Project'. Supported by the Ryerson Mental Health and Wellbeing Committee, this project sought to collect practical examples of how Ryerson instructors were using flexibility in their pedagogical practices. Instructors from York University were also included in this project. The examples gathered in this project from both Ryerson and York University are denoted throughout this report, and are also included in Appendix A under the following three themes: content delivery, evaluation methods and teaching philosophy.

Instructors currently face increasing demands on their time in a context of shrinking educational resources and precarious work arrangements. The reality of this can make the pedagogical shifts recommended in this resource feel daunting. The examples listed, currently in use at Ryerson, and accompanying literature are meant to provide ideas, provoke thought and encourage any action towards creating a more flexible and inclusive classroom. Small steps can and do make an impact.

In looking at pathways to wellbeing in learning environments, for instance, Stanton, Zandlivet, Dhaliwal and Black (2016) found that one of the major themes in creating wellbeing in the classroom was experiences of flexibility and participation. These experiences ranged from asking students' input on the course halfway through the semester and responding as able to feedback to giving students choice in determining exam questions. All of these steps, ranging from large to small, had the impact of reducing stress, and increasing students' sense of support, happiness and satisfaction in the learning environment (Stanton et al, 2016).

High stress leads to an interruption in the cognitive processes that are key to learning, such as an ability to focus attention selectively, execute judgement to determine what is most important and retrieve information (Stixrud, 2012). Mental health problems, such as stress, can impair the quality and quantity of learning; it can be stated then that students' mental health challenges can translate into learning problems (Douce & Keeling, 2014). Thus, taking whatever steps are feasible as an instructor to engage in teaching practices that will reduce students' experience of stress, such as flexible pedagogy, will enhance their ability to learn and be successful academically.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (2003) outlined a shared responsibility, including educators, in ensuring that students with disabilities can count on a welcoming and inclusive learning environment. The practices outlined in this report outline ways in which instructors can create this environment for *all* students. Flexibility is an important way in which educators can be future facing and responsive. We hope you find this resource useful.

Flexible Learning

Shifts in demographics have led to a change in the student bodies of universities, with greater numbers of mature students, students with full time jobs or families, and international students. There has been a change in both student expectations for their education, with a greater emphasis on job preparedness and customizable or self-directed experiences, and employer expectations for their workforce, with a push for greater "flexibility and transferable skills" that will equip students for "more fluid working lives" (UBC).

Flexible learning is one way to address these shifts. Flexible learning gives students choices about when, where, and how they learn. This is often referred to as the pace, place, and mode of learning.

→ **Pace** "encompasses accelerated and decelerated programmes, part-time learning, recognition of prior learning and associated credit frameworks."

→ **Place** refers to the physical location of learning, whether it takes place in a classroom, or is completed at home, while commuting, or as part of a work-based experience.

→ **Mode** refers to the ways that technologies can be used to deliver learning in fully online, blended, or technology enhanced experiences (Gordon, 2014).

Learners, instructors, and institutions all have a role to play in flexible learning.

→ **Learners** must assume responsibility for their own learning, taking advantage of opportunities that are presented to them and being able to self-advocate for the delivery method that serves their learning best.

→ **Instructors** must be able to identify opportunities for flexible learning, "with a growing emphasis on managing the learning process rather than being the primary provider of learning material."

→ **Institutions** must build flexible systems that provide students with choices in their learning, as well as maintaining the frameworks that ensure a quality learning experience (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013).

Flexible learning can "help meet the needs of a diverse range of students," "allow students to combine work, study, and family," and "enable students to develop skills and attributes to successfully adapt to change" (HEAC). By providing choices in learning delivery (online, face-to-face, blended), scheduling options (part-time, full-time, day, night), personalization of programs (degrees, certificate, just-in-time programs, career-based learning), options for experiential and community-based learning, and the inclusion of open content that is freely available, flexible learning has been shown to improve student learning outcomes and increase access to education (UBC).

Characteristics of Flexible Learning

In his article on flexible learning, Ian Hart traces the origins of the flexible learning movement. He quotes Nunan (1996), who said:

> *"...there are progressive interpretations of flexible learning which are structured around competing social and humanist values, which have educational expression through concepts such as constructivism, open education, student-centered learning, lifelong learning, deep learning, and accessible learning structures"*
> *(as cited in Hart, 2000).*

This wide-ranging set of influences can make it hard to define flexible learning. Palmer points out that the range of elements in teaching that lend themselves to flexibility can "lead to the conclusion that nearly any teaching and learning configuration could claim to be flexible in some regard," however he points out that we should be more cautious in our use of the term flexibility (2011). The lack of an agreed upon definition of flexible education or the use of a definition that is too broad has led to a confusing "conflation of educational typologies," such as identifying any aspect of a course that is delivered in a non-traditional way as being flexible, or equating distance education with flexibility (Palmer, 2011). Hart also points out that it's important to separate out *"flexible delivery"* (technology or economically driven strategies) from true *"flexible learning"* (an educational goal). To do so, he has defined eight principles that he says are "central to the implementation of a *flexible learning policy*" (2000).

1. Flexible access

→ Admitting students without a traditional educational background or qualifications

→ Allowing students to determine when they enter or exit from a course

→ Allowing students to work independently, attend classes, or a combination of the two

Flexibility in Practice @ Ryerson: Livestream/video record lectures and upload to D2L or YouTube

2. Recognition of prior learning

→ Giving credit for formal or non-formal learning, including work experience and training and using this individual experience to develop a suitable course of study

3.
Flexible content

→ Breaking courses into modules that students can take as they need

→ "Problem-based—as opposed to managed—curricula that enables students to operate at different levels"

→ Allowing students to create a course of study that includes "units from other universities, extensions of offered units, supervised practical work or learning contracts"

4.
Flexible participation

→ Instructors and support staff available at all times that are convenient to students

→ Communication can be "face-to-face or asynchronous, one-on-one or open, timetabled or on-demand"

5.
Flexible teaching and learning methods

→ The delivery mode is set using a combination of the "requirements of the subject and the needs of the individual learner"

→ "Learning is individualized, collaboration is encouraged, and metacognitive goals are pursued"

→ There is an incremental approach to independent learning "with the ultimate goal of developing a deep approach and learner responsibility"

Practices Used at Ryerson

→ Mini lectures coupled with significant discussion points that relate back to the objectives of the chapter. The discussion points are then analyzed and evaluated in small groups of 3-4 within the class with a 10-15-minute time frame. The class comes back to lecture form and presents their findings

→ Lectures are not participatory but try to make them as much as you can. Move around to different parts of the classroom so that the angle the professor's voice is reaching to students keeps changing. It is effective in keeping students engaged and promotes flexible learning for students who have a tough time sitting in lectures. In addition, some professors play music or lead exercises during breaks

Flexibility in Practice @ Ryerson: Change/ alternate activities in class every 20 minutes to keep content interesting and students engaged

6.
Flexible resources

→ Access to all university resources are available both on and off campus

→ Modular self-instruction materials (remedial, revision, and extension) are available if students require them

Practices Used at Ryerson

→ PowerPoint/slides provided ahead of lectures to encourage timely review of content that will be discussed

→ Online submissions rather than in-person (ex. 11:30 pm submission deadline)

→ Workshops conducted in partnership with Library services around research skills, writing, editing and creating

7.
Flexible assessment

→ Assessment is based on competency rather than time; "on achieving targets rather than normal distribution, on providing feedback as well as judgment"

→ Assessment is an integral part of the course that evaluates students' performance in "declarative, procedural, and contextual aspects"

Practices Used at Ryerson

→ Provide an outline of different components (such as midterm, assignment, final, article summaries, presentation) and allow students to choose their method of course assessment based on learning style (see Appendix B).

→ **Learning style examples:**

1. Traditional: midterm, assignment, presentation
2. Reinforced Learning: midterm, assignment, article summaries
3. "Bookish": assignment, article summaries, final
4. Innovative: presentation, article summaries, final
5. Procrastinator: assignment, presentation, final

→ Scaffolding assignments: creating doable, manageable chunks of one large assignment with specific deadlines for each part. The parts build upon each other and therefore highlight the importance of time management

→ In classes with multiple examinations (2 midterms, 1 final), students have the opportunity to miss one test without any explanation or reason. The makeup test is then scheduled at the end of the term. This helps to ease any difficulties for students who have medical problems, last-minute emergencies or are simply not ready

→ To evaluate participation, assigning online memos posing a question or invoking a thought (often the practice for online courses) which have to be completed every week. This allows each student to have an equal opportunity to achieve participation marks regardless of whether they're confident speaking in front of a class or not

→ Incentivizing students with individual feedback. If a student misses the deadline, but nevertheless submits the assignment and demonstrates the learning goal anywhere between one day late and the last day of term, mark it and include it in the final mark at face value. Late assignments lose no marks; however, will not get the more in-depth, individual feedback as assignments handed in on time.

Flexibility in Practice @ Ryerson: Use a 'floating deadline'. Students hand in the assignment at any time between two dates.

8.
Ongoing evaluation

→ Ongoing formative and summative evaluations of flexible learning curricula and materials ensure that the necessary development or revisions of modular courses and course elements occur as needed (Hart, 2000)

Keep in mind that learning may not be flexible just because it integrates some of the characteristics above. The key elements of truly flexible education are the "adaptability of learning to learners' needs and circumstances" and the instructor's role as someone who "monitors, directs, and regulates actions towards goals of information acquisition, expanding expertise, and self-improvement" (Paris & Paris, as cited in Bergamin et al., 2012).

Bergamin et al. connect flexible education to Zimmerman's theories of self-regulated learning. Self-regulated learning "corresponds with independently generated thinking, feeling, and connecting to the adaption of personal objectives." In the beginning phase of self-regulated learning, learners are responsible for task analysis, defined as setting goals and strategic planning, and self-motivation, defined as "self-efficacy, outcome expectations, intrinsic interest, and goal orientation." In Bergamin et al.'s view, this corresponds with the ability of students participating in flexible learning to determine what, when, and how to learn (Zimmerman, as cited in Bergamin et al., 2012). Flexible learning encourages self-regulated learning by allowing students to "set their own objectives and plan, regulate, and evaluate the process themselves" (Narciss, Proske, & Koerndle, as cited in Bergamin et al., 2012).

Flexible Pedagogy

Following up on Bergamin et al.'s focus on flexible learning as being connected to self-regulated learning, Ryan & Tilbury define the scope of flexible learning through the lens of six "pedagogical ideas." In this model, the six "pedagogical ideas" are interrelated and overlapping, with one idea, "learner empowerment," at its core (Fig. 1). In flexible learning, the "balance between instruction and facilitation is being revisited in fundamental ways, with implications for pedagogical dynamics and the learner-educator relationship." This model of learning challenges "the authority of the expert educator and makes space for an enhanced contribution from the learner, by changing the dynamics of learning interactions as well as confronting the power frames that underpin the academic project as a whole" (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013).
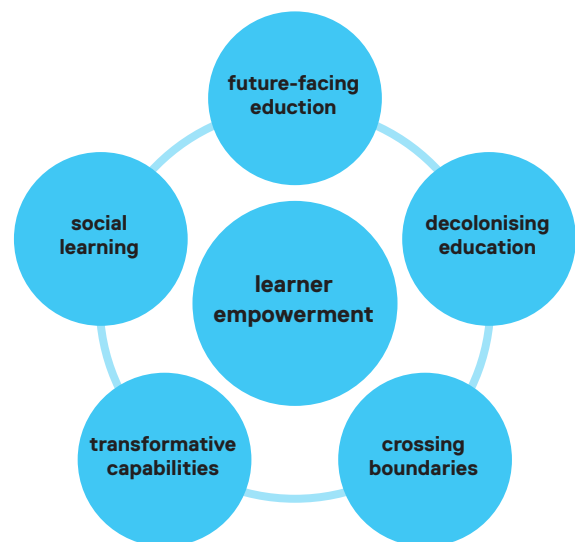

Figure 1: Flexible Pedagogies, Higher Education Academy

The six pedagogical ideas that form a framework for flexible learning are as follows:

1. **Learner empowerment:** works to involve students more "actively in the process of learning and thereby in the process of reshaping teaching and learning processes." Here flexibility is about reframing the relationship between students and instructors as collaborative, and as co-creators of knowledge. Learner empowerment can be achieved through the use of "participatory, transformative and 'active' pedagogies" that position students "as peers with valuable contributions to make to curriculum design and teaching approaches."

2. **Future-facing education:** enables students to think "creatively and flexibly about future prospects, to generate alternative visions of future possibilities and to initiate action in pursuit of those visions". To achieve this, students need to be provided with the skills and confidence to address complex, uncertain, and changeable problems, to understand different perspectives, envision alternatives, uncover tacit beliefs and assumptions, and plan ways to work toward positive change.

3. **Decolonizing education:** involves diversifying curriculum, creating inter-cultural understanding and experiences, and giving students the "ability to think and work using globally-sensitive frames and methods" and different cultural perspectives. The goal is to provide a learning experience that enables students to "understand global-local connections and links between their lives and the experiences of other people worldwide, including the political, cultural, economic and environmental factors at stake and the wider implications for justice and equity".

4. **Transformative capabilities:** reframes learning through a holistic lens, thinking beyond cognitive ability to take into account affective and spiritual dimensions, as well as the lifelong learning that takes place in adult and community education. By using transformative learning and critical reflection to engage not just the "intellect but affect, identity, worldview, beliefs and values," students are provided with the ability to challenge assumptions, to respond to complexity, uncertainty and change, and to "not only to see the world differently but to engage and act differently in it."

Ryerson Faculty Feedback: Proactive flexibility has reduced the need for reactive accommodations and requests further in the semester resulting in higher engagement/ commitment by students, better relationships, and higher work quality.

5. **Crossing boundaries:** places the focus on interdisciplinary and inter-professional learning, taking an "integrative and systemic approaches to knowledge and learning" that transcend the "disciplinary points of focus and specialist expertise that are embedded in the academic endeavor." Whether through institutional initiatives or informal learning activities that engage students from multiple departments, these inter-disciplinary and inter-professional learning experiences help respond more effectively to "societal, economic, and industry concerns."

6. **Social learning:** creates flexibility by acknowledging the "varied context in which learning takes places" beyond the formal curriculum. This area looks at spaces both physical and virtual to rethink how learning is shaped. Social learning can take place through co-curricular learning spaces, informal learning and social interaction, as well as by engaging with forms of technology that focus on interaction and collaboration (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013).

Ryerson Faculty Feedback: Although some professors at Ryerson expressed their initial worry of undermining academic excellence and integrity, they have found that designing flexibility into their courses has resulted in higher efficiency and effectiveness for them as an instructor.

Integrating Flexible Learning

This document focuses on the parts of the educational process that instructors can control – meaning a focus on instructional approach and delivery. According to Palmer, instructors can create opportunities for flexible education in any of the following areas:

→ **Time:** The pace of a course and the timing of assessments

→ **Content:** The topics covered, the sequence of topics, the types of learning materials, the range of assessment methods

→ **Instructional Approach/Design:** the "social organization of learning," whether that means group learning, individual or independent learning, and the format of learning resources, and the "origin of learning resources" (instructors, students, library, Internet)

→ **Delivery:** place of study (on campus, off campus, blended, flipped, work-based), opportunities for contact with instructors and/or students, methods of support, and content delivery and communication channels (Palmer, 2011).

To determine if the changes that you've made in any of the above areas are truly flexible, Bergamin et al. have set out some characteristics that are shared by flexible learning experiences. Ask yourself:

→ Do your learners have greater control over their own learning? Are they "active and constructive learners, as opposed to passive recipients"?

→ Are your teaching methods learner-centered rather than teacher-centered, and are your learning resources designed to meet the varied needs of the learners? (2012)

In their *Guide to Providing Flexible Learning in Further and Higher Education,* Casey and Wilson provide some important planning and design decisions that need to be made before trying to make a course more flexible (2005).

→ In flexible education, the primary focus is on "designing and managing the activities of the students rather than the course content." To be effective, flexible education needs "more attention in the design phase, and involves us in thinking more about what our students are going to do and the possibilities open to them which we might provide – and their implications" as well as "what constitutes teaching and learning of our subjects."

→ More than ever, it is absolutely crucial to have clearly stated learning objectives and assessment criteria. The types of assessment methods tell students everything they need to know about what educational values and attitudes are at the heart of their course.

→ Create profile of your students – what is their current level of understanding, how much support do they need, and how much independent or self-directed learning could they manage?

→ Chunk your course – break your content up into topical chunks that can be rearranged or recombined as needed.

→ Don't do everything at once – "build expertise, learn as you go, and scale up the operation with increasing experience and confidence." Document everything in detail, and regularly evaluate to see what works and what doesn't (Casey and Wilson, 2005).

→ Help students develop the ability to be self-directed. Because flexible learning requires students to make choices and take responsibility for their learning, it is key that they have the necessary skills to succeed in a course in which they may have some measure of control over the time, pace, or content (Bergamin et al., 2012).

Remember that true flexibility goes beyond just replacing one learning format with another; it means providing students with an actual choice, whether it is in the way the course content is presented, or how they are assessed.

Flexibility in Assessment

Ryerson Faculty Feedback: An important part of using flexibility in teaching practices is establishing a good relationship with students based on honesty and trust.

Clayton and Booth (2000) have argued that flexibility in assessment is "one of the principles that underpins good assessment practice" (as cited in Irwin and Hepplestone, 2012). Giving students some control of their assessment can also empower them to "exploit assessment to improve their learning," rather than see assessment as just about the pursuit of grades (Irwin and Hepplestone, 2012).

Flexible assessment can take many forms, including "allowing individual students to decide the weightings applied to each assessment task, and the use of scored rubrics alongside peer- and self-assessment to offer engagement in the criteria and the result" (Irwin and Hepplestone, 2012). Final grades can be calculated based on the best scores from "a range of compulsory and optional tasks," giving students the ability to avoid losing marks or gain higher marks (Asafu-Adjaye, as cited in Irwin and Hepplestone, 2012).

Mayes suggests developing computerized formative assessment systems that can provide students with a large number of interactive assessment tasks— "the number selected is under students' control, and the tasks can be repeated as many times as students wish... combined with appropriate feedback, these systems become effective interactive teaching tools" (2006).

Irwin and Hepplestone also suggest that flexibility in assessment can means setting clear learning outcomes and then allowing students to use a variety of formats to demonstrate how they've met those outcomes. By allowing students to select the format by which they demonstrate their learning, instructors can create a more authentic and engaging learning environment in which students can gain practice in a transferable skill that is relevant to them, or tailor their work toward their potential future careers (2012).

Providing students with some choice over the method of their assessment can also increase the validity of the assessment, as factors that would normally leave certain students at a disadvantage in trying to demonstrate their learning in specific formats, are removed (Irwin and Hepplestone, 2012). This particularly benefits students with disabilities, reducing the need to make accommodations.

Flexibility in Practice @ Ryerson: Provide the goals of an assignment but allow students to choose the way in which they want to complete it, whether it is a report, presentation or examination.

When giving students choice over the form of assessment, it is important to use criterion-referenced marking schemes so that no matter what format the student is choosing to submit, they will be graded against a consistent set of criteria. To avoid any accidental bias toward giving higher grades to specific formats, students could also be required to submit a reflection on how they feel their work has met the specific criteria, which "has the added benefit of getting student to engage more deeply with the criteria as part of the assessment" and starts "a dialogue around the assessment processes and any resulting feedback," another principle for encouraging self-regulation in learners (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006, as cited in Irwin and Hepplestone, 2012).

Keeping in mind the outcomes of your course, there may be certain key skills, like writing or research, that must be assessed in a specific format. Flexible assessment methods should therefore not be used as a default, but only for some assignments where appropriate. Students will also need guidance in selecting the methods that will be the most beneficial to them, and provided with "realistic and up-to-date knowledge about long-term skill needs." Students may also need guidance in taking a more active role in the assessment process, and support in learning how to "make, justify, and evaluate their choices" (Irwin and Hepplestone, 2012).

When implementing flexible assessment formats, Irwin and Hepplestone recommend that instructors:

→ "Determine the degree of flexibility in format choice to build into assessments across the course"

→ "Refine assessment criteria to ensure they are directed at demonstrating the desired learning outcomes instead of incidental learning outcomes that are specifically linked to the assessment format used previously"

→ "Have an open and honest enquiry into any preconceptions of the worth of different assessment formats"

→ Agree on marking strategies ahead of time

→ "Discuss with students why you are introducing assessment format choice and what the implications are for them" (2012)

Teaching Practices That Compliment Flexibility

→ Invite guest speakers to connect course content to real-world examples to further the understanding of students and promote independent learning

→ Dedicate a class to discussing the exam format with instructions about how the exam will be designed, what specific chapters or topics will be covered. This helps to alleviate the guesswork and stress of preparing for a final exam that usually accounts for a significant part of the final mark

→ Publish guides to assist in the completion of assignments, papers and essays such as "Tips for success" and/or "How to create citations"

→ Vlogging: video blog or video log which can be recorded easily on a smartphone, tablet or webcam and uploaded onto YouTube to share with others

→ In-person discussion/interview with professor regarding assignment topic

→ Use a publisher product that can be easily accessed online anytime to help students keep up with course content weekly. Grades can be assigned for the completion of these modules

→ For factors that cannot be controlled by students, professors can take the lead to incorporate flexibility (E.G., 8:00 am classes can be difficult to get to on time, some instructors choose to make an adjustment to class start time to 8:15 am)

Ryerson Faculty Feedback: Implement an approach that teaches 'with', not 'for' or 'to' students.
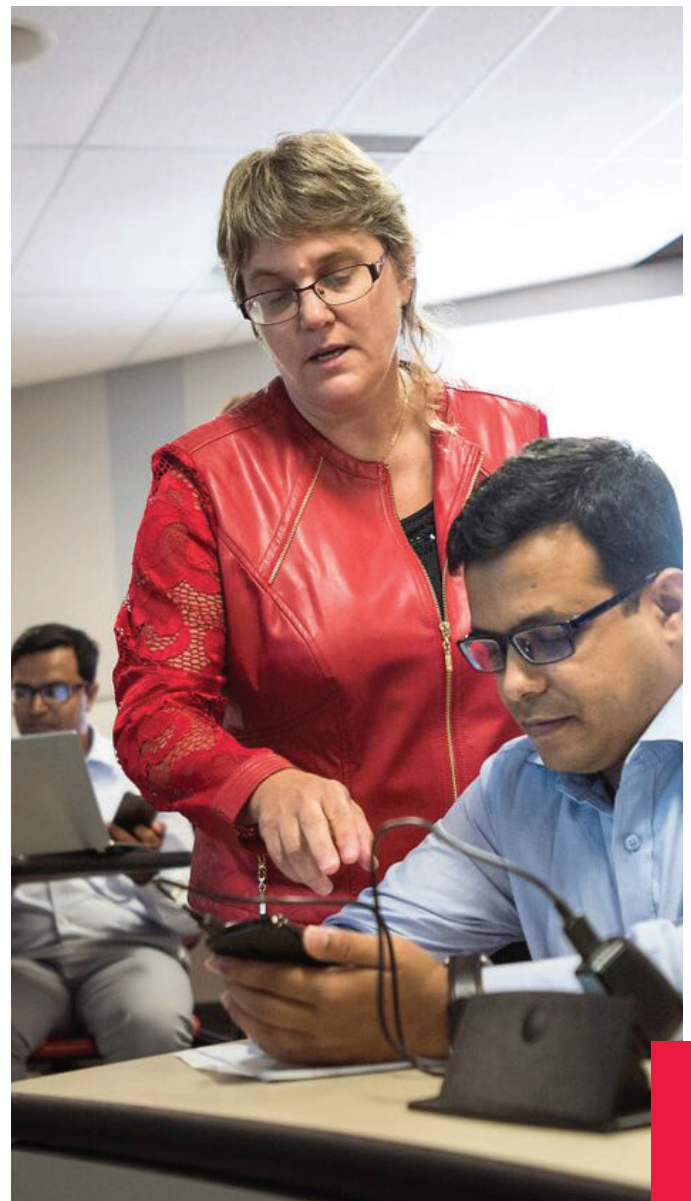
Continuum of Flexibility

Casey and Wilson have created a "flexibility grid" that can be used to determine where your course currently stands on the continuum of fixed ← → flexible and how to start thinking about ways in which you can make your course more flexible (2005). The aspects of this grid that focus on the pedagogical aspects of flexible education are excerpted below in a slightly modified form:

Time	Not flexible	Medium	Very flexible
Submitting assignments and interacting within the course	• Assignment deadlines fixed and set times for interaction	• Assignment deadlines and times for interaction are within stated brackets of time	• Assignment deadlines and times for interaction are negotiable
Tempo/pace of studying	• Materials and tasks fixed – revealed on a weekly basis to students	• All tasks and material are available to students at start; studying happens within broadly stated phases, allowing some leeway	• All tasks and material are available to students at start; pace of studying entirely up to students
Moments of assessment	• Fixed	• Adjustable within limits	• Negotiable with students
Content			
Topics of the course	• Fixed	• Some choice/options	• Broadly negotiable
Sequence of different parts of the course	• Fixed	• Some variability allowed	• Can be completed in any sequence
Orientation of the course (for example, theoretical versus practical)	• Fixed	• Mixed, to suit the subject matter and institutional constraints	• Students can choose the orientation that suits them
Key learning materials of the course	• Fixed	• Core materials with options, and students allowed/expected to use other materials	• Students able to choose from a wide variety of sources and materials
Assessment standards and completion requirements	• Fixed	• Choice of assessment methods allowed, with reference to stated learning outcomes. Completion possible by a number of routes	• Assessment criteria and methods negotiable, completion possible by a number of routes.
Delivery and logistics			
Time and place where contact with instructor and other students occur	• Fixed time and place according to a timetable	• Some flexibility, within limits – often related to mode of access	• Course can be completed without ever having to visit the institution
Methods, technology for obtaining support and making contact	• Fixed and restricted range – academic office hours, tutorials	• Wider range, including online peer forums, different student learning supports	• Wide range and adjustable to student needs, access to frequently asked questions (FAQs) and previous cohorts' work
Location, technology for participating in various aspects of the course	• Fixed place – face to face	• Blended – some face to face and some online work; different locations possible	• Location and technology for participating can be negotiated

Ryerson Faculty Feedback: *"A common fear among professors is that people will take advantage of alternatives because it will be 'easier'. This is a misconception because only a very, very, small number of people will choose an alternative when not needed. It's ultimately better to be 'taken advantage of' by a small number of people than to not provide the necessary support for the majority of students. Also, taking an alternative does not necessarily mean it will be easier, the same objectives and outcomes are met, just through a different medium".*

Flexibility Dimensions

Nikolova and Collis have created a table of flexibility dimensions (1998), which is reproduced in a slightly adapted format below. Many of the dimensions are similar to the continuum above, with the notable addition of flexibility in the level of difficulty of the course and flexibility in the standards or criteria set for assignments.

Categories	Flexibility dimensions	Some possible options
Time of course participation	• Times for participation within the course • Learner's tempo through the course • Time when assessment occurs	• Fixed hours, periods during the workday, weekends, blocks of released time • Fixed, flexible in pre-set boundaries, the learner decides • Fixed, the learner negotiates with the instructor, the learner decides
Content in the course	• Topics covered within the course • Sequence in which topics are covered in a course • Amount of learning activities expected to be completed within the course • Level of difficulty of course content • Assessment standards relative to course content	• Fixed, the learner participates in content selection, the learner decides • Fixed content path, the learner makes choices among alternatives • Complete all, possibility to not participate in some activities, the learner decides • Basic, intermediate, advanced • Fixed by the instructor, negotiated between the learner and the instructor
Instructional approaches and learning materials	• Social organization of learning • Learning materials • Pedagogy of the course	• Follow the course individually, follow the course as part of a group • Paper, multimedia, online resources, etc. • Fixed, choice of the instructor as a consultant, collaborator, or facilitator
Course delivery and logistics	• Times and places for support • Method of obtaining support • Types of support available • Place for study and course participation • Delivery channels for the course	• Fixed, within pre-defined boundaries, learner's choice— "just-in-time" • Face-to-face, at a distance • Individually, within a group • Individually, within a group, home-based, internet based • Face-to-face, online

Flexibility Questionnaire

Bergamin et al. developed a questionnaire to measure flexibility in the classroom from the perspective of students. Participants marked their perception of flexibility for each item on a 5-point Likert scale where 1=not true at all and 5=completely true. The questionnaire was broken into three areas, flexibility of time management, flexibility of teacher contact, and flexibility of content. The table below reproduces below in a slightly modified format (2012), with the addition of a section on assessment based on the criteria listed by Clarke and James (1998):

Scale of flexibility	Item
Flexibility of time management	• I can decide when I want to learn • I can define my own learning pace • I can repeat the subject matter at will • I can arrange the learning time
Flexibility of teacher contact	• I can contact the teacher at any time • There are different ways of contacting the teacher
Flexibility of content	• I have a say regarding the focus of the topics of the class • I can prioritize topics in my learning • I can choose between different learning forms, including on-campus study, online study, and self-study • I can study topics of special interest
Flexibility of assessment	• I can set the pace of my assessment • I can select my method of assessment • I can decide the value assigned to each assessment • I can set the criteria for my assessment

To recap, there are a number of flexible teaching practices already being used successfully on campus at Ryerson as well as York University. We realize that each School is different, but we do have a responsibility to enhance learning across the board. This resources speaks to some practical ways to accomplish this.

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Appendix A -
Examples Collected from Ryerson and York University for the 'Flexibility Catalog' Project

The following is a condensed version of the examples listed throughout this resource, divided into the themes of content delivery, evaluation methods and philosophy.

Content Delivery

1. Content Accessibility:
→ PowerPoint/slides provided ahead of lectures to encourage timely review of content that will be discussed

2. Extensive use of D2L:
→ Online submissions rather than in-person
→ Online evaluations

3. Publish guides to complete assignments, papers and essays such as "tips for success" and/or "How to create citations"

4. Dedicate a class to discussing the exam format with instructions about how the exam will be designed, what specific chapters or topics will be covered. This helps to alleviate the guesswork and stress of preparing for a final exam that usually accounts for a significant part of the final mark.

5. Change and alternate activities in class every 20 minutes to keep the class interesting and students engaged

6. Conduct workshops in partnership with Library services around research skills, writing, editing and creating.

7. Mini lectures coupled with significant discussion points that relate back to the objectives of the chapter. The discussion points are then analyzed and evaluated in small group of 3-4 within the class with a 10-15-minute time frame. The class comes back to lecture form and presents their findings.

Evaluation Methods

1. A student who had extreme difficulty with concentration needed to create content on a computer screen for an assignment. These alternatives were provided:
→ Voice record the paper
→ Meet in person to talk about the struggles, and how the instructor can be of assistance
→ Write the paper out (pen & paper)
→ Ask the student "can you commit to doing x amount of work by x date?"

2. Vlogging: video blog or video log which can be recorded easily on a smartphone, tablet or webcam and uploaded onto YouTube to share with others

3. Oral 1:1 in-person discussion/interview with Professor regarding the topic of the assignment

4. Scaffolding assignments: creating doable, manageable chunks of one large assignment with specific deadlines for each part. The parts build upon each other and therefore highlight the importance of time management.

5. The use of a "floating deadline" which refer to a deadline given between two specific dates (e.g. Oct 18-Oct 25). Students may choose to hand in the assignment at any time between those dates.

6. In classes with multiple examinations (2 midterms, 1 final), students have the opportunity to miss one test without any explanation or reason. The makeup test is then scheduled at the end of the term. This helps to ease any difficulties for students who have medical problems, last-minute emergencies or are simply not ready.

Philosophy

1. An important part of using flexibility in teaching practices is establishing a good relationship with students based on honesty and trust.

2. Common fear among professors is that people will take advantage of alternatives because it will be "easier". This is a misconception because only a very, very, small number of people will choose an alternative when not needed, but rather be taken advantage of from a small number of people than not provide the necessary support for the majority of students. Also, taking an alternative does not necessarily mean it will be easier, the same objectives and outcomes are required, just through a different medium.

3. Teach "with" not "for" or "to" students.

4. Although some professors have expressed their worry of undermining academic excellence and integrity, they have found that designing flexibility into their courses has resulted in higher efficiency and effectiveness for them as an instructor.

Content Delivery

8. Lectures are not participatory but try to make them as much as you can. Move around to different parts of the classroom so that the angle the Professor's voice is reaching to students keeps changing. It is effective in keeping students engaged and promotes flexible learning for students who have a tough time sitting in lectures. In addition to that, some Professors play music or lead exercises during breaks.

9. Provide exam review classes in which exam format, practice questions and student inquiries are addressed. Alleviates the guesswork for students and ensures students understand the main concepts that are integral to the understanding of the course rather than have them focus on the smaller details that are not as important.

10. Video Record lectures and upload them to D2L or YouTube under a privacy setting only accessible to those with a link. This is a popular practice at York University and they have IT support set up especially for these purposes.

11. Set up a live stream from the lecture for those students that cannot make it to class.

12. Invite guest speakers to connect course content to real-world examples to further the understanding of students and promote independent learning.

Evaluation Methods

7. To evaluate participation, assign online memos posing a question or invoking a thought (often the practice for online courses) which have to be completed every week. This allows each student to have an equal opportunity to achieve participation marks regardless of whether they're confident speaking in front of a class or not.

8. Use a publisher product that can be easily accessed online anytime to help students keep up with course content weekly. Grades can be assigned for the completion of these modules.

9. Allow students to do presentations in the Professor's office.

10. Express openness for alternative evaluation methods. Provide the goals of an assignment but allow students to choose the way in which they want to complete it whether it is a report, presentation or examination. Ex. If a student chooses to do a presentation and they are not comfortable with standing in front of their peers, they may hand in a script of what they would say in the presentation.

11. Provide an outline of different components (such as midterm, assignment, final, article summaries, presentation) and allow students to choose assessment tool based on learning style (see Appendix B).

12. Incentivize students with individual feedback. If a student misses the deadline, but nevertheless submits the assignment and demonstrates the learning goal anywhere between one day late and the last day of term, mark it and include it in the final mark at face value. Late assignments lose no marks; however, students will not get more in-depth, individual feedback on the assignment.

Philosophy

5. For factors that cannot be controlled by students, professors can take the lead to incorporate flexibility (e.g. 8 AM classes can be difficult to get to on time, therefore making an adjustment to class timing, 8:15 AM).

6. Proactive flexibility has reduced more reactive accommodations and requests further in the semester resulting in higher engagement/commitment by students, better relationships, and higher work quality.

Appendix B -
Sample Course Outline, Flexible Assessment

PSY 215 Psychology of Addictions *Winter 2016*

Dept of Psychology, Ryerson University

Learning Plan

Due February 1, 2016

This course requires you to SELECT three (3) components for your evaluation. It's like a 'Choose your own Evaluation Components" course (not the greatest ring to it, happy for suggestions).

You can choose from the following, and you must choose 3 of the following. Each is worth 33% of your final grade.

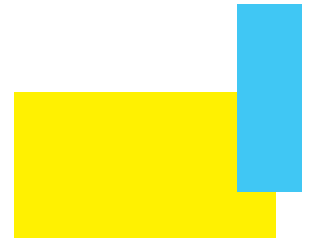| Component	Due Date	Details
A. Midterm Exam	Mon Feb 29, 2016	Readings Weeks 1 – 5 and Lectures
B. Assignment	Mon April 4, 2016	See Assignment Handout
C. Presentation	Mon April 4, 2016	See Presentation Handout
D. Article Summaries	Throughout	See Article Summaries Handout
E. Final Exam	Between April 18-30 2016	Readings Weeks 7 – 12 and Lectures

If choice is too challenging for you, consider the following menu selections (or bundles).

Traditional	Reinforced Learning	Bookish, not Present	Innovative	Procrastinator
A, B, C	A, B, D	B, D, E	C, D, E	B, C, E

You are to sign a learning contract. In doing so, you cannot deviate from your learning contract.

Please note that we will be happy to schedule a meeting with you at least 3 days before your assignment, presentations, or summaries are due to provide verbal feedback on drafts.

My Learning Contract

PSY 215: Psychology of Addictions

Name:	
Student ID:	
Date:	

I, _____ (full name), have decided to complete the following three components in this course:

	Name of Component	Due Date
Component 1		
Component 2		
Component 3		

I, _____ (full name), understand that I cannot change my mind after this point. If I fail to submit an assignment or take an exam listed in the above components, I cannot "sign up" for another component. I will get 0 for this component of my grade in the course.

Signature:	
Date:	
Witness Name:	
Witness Signature:	
Professor's Signature:	

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Faculties Interviewed at Ryerson University:

Spanning the Gaps Program

Faculty of Arts
→ **Department of Psychology**
→ **Department of Sociology**
→ **Department of English**

Faculty of Community Services
→ **Department of Social Work**
→ **School of Nutrition**
→ **School of Nursing**

Faculty of Engineering and Architectural Science
→ **Mechanical and Industrial Engineering**

Ted Rogers School of Management
→ **School of Accounting & Finance**

Department of Kinesiology at York University, within the Faculty of Science.

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