# Chapter III
# Understanding Flexible Learning Theory and How it is Used in Online Learning

**Deb Gearhart**
*Troy University, USA*

## ABSTRACT

*Flexible learning is a term becoming increasingly prevalent in distance education. The concept of having a flexible learning environment is appealing to distance learners. Many learners choose a flexible environment over the traditional classroom so that learning can fit into their busy lifestyle. This chapter will define and discuss flexible learning theory, describing how it is used in the distance education setting and how it is a changing tide in education.*

## CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The reader will be able to:

- Define flexible learning theory and distinguish its difference from providing a flexible learning environment
- Explain the advantages and issues related to using a flexible learning environment
- Design an online course based on flexible learning theory

## INTRODUCTION

The term anytime, any place is common when discussing online learning. The phrase should be changed to anytime, anyplace, for everyone to include the concept of flexible learning. The term flexible learning is a term with a dual meaning. It is both a term used by many programs instead of distance education, especially internationally, and it is also a learning theory. Forms of delivery that were appropriate for education in the indus-

trial age of mass production are now viewed as inappropriate in the emerging information age (George & Luke, 1995). Flexibility and access are important to the success of education in the information age. In order to provide flexible learning, an instructor must consider the issues facing online education such as pedagogy, learner needs and characteristics, interaction and communication between and among instructor, learner and content, outcomes, and assessment.

Flexible learning, seen as a shift in basic educational paradigm, brings together three dimensions: learner learning styles, forms of delivery, and content (George & Luke, 1995). Flexible learning encompasses the belief that learners should be viewed as active participants in the learning process. Thusly, flexible learning is learner-centered and the instructor makes a pedagogical shift to a facilitating role in learning, with technology being the enabler. Although this seems to be common in theory related to online learning, flexible learning theory is much more aggressive in modeling learner-centered instruction.

Defining the term flexible learning and explaining how it is not, just another term for distance education or distance learning is the prerequisite to understanding the theory of flexible learning. Indeed, flexible learning is the term used interchangeably with distance learning by many international programs, however not all distance learning is flexible. For the purposes of this paper, flexible learning will be defined as providing educational opportunities that are focused on meeting the needs and circumstances of individual learners (Bryant, Campbell & Kerr, 2003; George & Luke, 1995,). Flexible learning is an approach to providing educational opportunities that are focused on the varying learning needs and circumstances of individual learners.

# BACKGROUND

## Definitions

Defining flexible learning theory includes placing learner educational needs and choices as the center of educational decision-making. It signifies a shift from locating formal, whole classes, didactic teaching at the center of the learning process towards individuals or group management of learning, through the provision of structured resource materials (Drennan, Kennedy, & Pisarski, 2005). Flexibility is generally understood to mean offering choices in the learning environment so that a course of study better meets the individual needs of learners (Bryant et al., 2003). In the broadest sense, flexible learning is about a learner-centered, rather than an instructor-centered, approach to learning. In this view technology is an enabler; flexible learning and flexible delivery are used interchangeably (Radcliffe, 2002). Flexible delivery is a term which signifies the desirable social goals of increasing access to education and democratizing and learning processes by giving greater control over learning to learners—also means an educational environment in which unfettered individuals and choice are the values which ultimately determine the shape of education through the competitive marketing of educational products and processes (Nunan, 1996).

## Whom Can Flexible Learning Serve?

All types of learners can be served by flexible learning. Research has found that at-risk learners, not normally considered to be suitable online learners, are doing well in flexible learning environments (Bryant et al., 2003). Learners of all abilities are becoming comfortable with using hypermedia, leveling the playing field. Using flexible learning and focusing on gains in performance, instructors can individualize

## Related Content

Investigating Computer Forensics
Steve Brown (2008). *Encyclopedia of Information Technology Curriculum Integration (pp. 487-492).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/investigating-computer-forensics/16751/

The Role of Targeted E-Mail Messaging at the Worksite
Betsy B. Aumiller (2012). *Encyclopedia of E-Leadership, Counseling and Training (pp. 504-513).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/role-targeted-mail-messaging-worksite/58459/

Immersive Virtual Environments to Facilitate Authentic Education in Logistics and Supply Chain Management
Torsten Reiners and Lincoln C. Wood (2013). *Learning Management Systems and Instructional Design: Best Practices in Online Education  (pp. 323-343).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/immersive-virtual-environments-facilitate-authentic/76197/

Students' Joint Reasoning about Gas Solubility in Water in Modified Versions of a Virtual Laboratory
Göran Karlsson (2015). *International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design (pp. 67-77).*
www.irma-international.org/article/students-joint-reasoning-about-gas-solubility-in-water-in-modified-versions-of-a-virtual-laboratory/129967/

The Interpretive Imagination Forum: A Hermeneutic Tagging Technique and Instructional Tool for Conducting Collaborative Video Research across the Social Sciences and Humanities
Karyn Cooper, Rebecca Hughes and Aliyah Shamji (2016). *International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design (pp. 65-76).*
www.irma-international.org/article/the-interpretive-imagination-forum/147746/