

Modes of flexible learning

Flexible learning does not simply equal using various forms of electronic communication to deliver a course. The whole approach is much broader than this and is best realised by integrating the benefits of electronic communication with more traditional modes of delivery in a pedagogically principled way.

Modes of flexible learning include:

- face-to-face contact
- websites with interactive content and/or chat rooms, discussion boards
- CD-ROMs
- VHS or broadcast video
- teleconferencing or videoconferencing
- print resources
- audio tapes
- field trips.

When designing a course, you can choose to use any combination of these various modes, depending on a number of factors, including availability of particular resources, cost, the kind of interaction you wish to encourage in your students, and the capacity of the technology to realise the learning objectives. In fact, this final consideration (match between learning objectives and use of the technology) is crucial.

Benefits of electronic communication

Electronic communications include asynchronous platforms such as email and discussion boards, and synchronous forums such as chat rooms. Various benefits are associated with these forms of communications.

- The relative lack of formality can be appealing to students.
- Depending on how the course's activities are structured, students may have greater choice about when they will complete learning activities.
- Students are able to take their time and plan their messages thoughtfully before submitting them - an advantage which is not possible in face-to-face interactions where answers are expected to be spontaneous.
- The ability to store and retrieve communications (from emails, discussion boards, chat groups) can facilitate subsequent reflection, improvement and extension.
- Students have the opportunity to communicate in a more equal way without the domination of one or two highly confident individuals.
- Carefully structured and appropriately moderated interactions can provide opportunities for students to develop collaborative skills.

[adapted from Dufresne, Leonard and Gerace (1995:8-10)]

Learning resources are an important component in designing a course for flexible learning. Well-considered selection and use of resources will contribute importantly to achieving your educational purposes.

Defining and identifying a variety of learning resources

Learning resources are the many things that contain course content and that help learners to acquire skills or knowledge. They include textbooks, journals, CD-ROMs, videos, audio tapes, guest speakers, excursions, work experience, learning guides, broadcast television and radio, your own lecture notes, overhead transparencies and slides. Indeed, the possibilities are vast.

Remember that resources may simply contain course content, if so you will still need to assist students to construct meaning from them by means of well designed, interactive learning activities.

Principles of valid resource selection

Given the vast range and quantity of learning resources available, the challenge is to select those which are most likely to enhance learning. Essentially, what needs to be borne in mind is why you are doing something, your purpose - in other words, the learning objectives of a particular course. The resources which are selected should contribute towards achieving the objectives of the course. It is often tempting to include a vast amount of resources but in learning resource selection the aim should be to provide only key resources. Too many is overwhelming for students.

Horses for courses - choosing appropriate learning resources

Your choice of delivery medium will depend on how much access your students have to the campus, a computer and the Internet. In distance education courses students' access to videoconferencing facilities is also a consideration. While access is important, you also have to build students' skill and confidence in using these technologies. Finally, your budget will also determine what delivery mediums you choose.

Developing your own learning resources

Despite the rich array of available resources, it may occasionally be the case that you need something very specific for your teaching needs and you may elect to create your own resources or adapt existing ones. If you decide to follow either of these paths, you'll need to bear certain things in mind. The following considerations are relevant.

- Best practice - whether you decide to create original materials or to adapt existing ones, both the content and the pedagogical design need to reflect best practice and knowledge of relevant theory. One very useful theoretical approach is that of constructivism.
- Inclusion of interactive learning activities which will engage learners in deep learning is important.
- Both the content and the activities need to reflect values which are non-racist, non-sexist, inclusive and culturally sensitive.
- Copyright and moral rights considerations.

- Clearly, developing learning resources can be a creative and rewarding experience. However, you need to weigh the benefits of the time spent against other priorities.
- It is highly recommended that you enlist the collaboration of an educational designer.

Learning activities

Learning activities are the tasks and exercises which assist students in making meaning from the content of a course. They are the vehicle through which learning occurs.

Commonly used activities include:

- note making (from lectures, videos or print materials)
- group discussions
- debates
- surveys
- accessing and completing exercises on the Web or CD-ROM
- gathering information from community sources
- participating in applied practical sessions
- carrying out lab work.

In view of the variety of learning activities available, on what basis should you choose to use some activities rather than others?

The answer lies in your response to this central question:

What do students need to **do** in order to demonstrate that they have met the learning objective?

Put another way, there needs to be a clear congruence between the learning objectives which you have designed and the learning activities which you select to realise those objectives. If, for instance, in an education course, an important objective is for students to develop coherent lesson plans, then it would not be adequate to simply ask them to compare different kinds of plans, though this might well be a sound foundation activity. To have confidence that students could meet this objective, it would be necessary for them to actually produce a satisfactory lesson plan.

The activities listed above are, in a sense, quite broad. Once you have selected an activity, you need to think about the details of how you will use this activity.

Example 1

If you want students to take part in a discussion, what exactly are they meant to do?

- Explore a topic in a general way?
- Pool information gathered from various sources?
- Reach a conclusion or consensus?
- Problem solve?

If they carry out any or all of the above, which particular objectives are being served?

Level of challenge of activities

Tertiary students need to be engaged in ways which challenge them intellectually. Among the kinds of activities which will promote beneficial thinking skills are:

- making forward and backward references
- exploring extended contexts
- comparing and contrasting
- categorising and classifying
- predicting
- explaining (summarising, describing, discussing, defining)
- generating multiple solutions
- planning, justifying and strategising
- reflecting (evaluating, integrating, extending, generalising)
- meta-communication about the learning process.