

Rowan University

Rowan Digital Works

Libraries Scholarship

University Libraries

2023

Flexible Pedagogies for Inclusive Learning: Balancing Pliancy and Structure and Cultivating Cultures of Care

Andrea Baer

Rowan University, baera@rowan.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://rdw.rowan.edu/lib_scholarship



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Information Literacy Commons](#), and the [Online and Distance Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baer, A. (2023). Flexible pedagogies for inclusive learning: Balancing pliancy and structure and cultivating cultures of care. In R. Brown, E. Foster, M. Mallon, J. Nichols, A. Santiago, and M. Seale (Eds.). *Exploring inclusive & equitable pedagogies: Creating space for all learners* (291-301). ACRL Publications: Chicago.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at Rowan Digital Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Libraries Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Rowan Digital Works.

Flexible Pedagogies for Inclusive Learning

Balancing Pliancy and Structure and Cultivating Cultures of Care

*Andrea Baer**

When we think about or enact equitable and inclusive pedagogies, we are in many ways engaging in a practice of flexibility. We consider students' varying needs, interests, and passions, as well as the differing ways that they learn individually and collectively. This can then inform how we design and facilitate learning experiences, as we structure learning experiences that provide a helpful degree of focus and guidance and that at the same time are flexible enough to allow room for student choice and agency.

This is essentially what *flexible pedagogies* are: “giv[ing] students choices about when, where, and how they learn” in order to foster student agency and engaged learning.¹ Research on self-regulated learning and intrinsic motivation suggests that being able to exercise such choice fosters a sense of agency and purpose.² In this essay, I reflect on flexibility as a concept and as a practice that has informed my teaching, in particular since adapting to online library instruction in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how flexible pedagogy principles and

* Andrea Baer is a white, US-born, cis, able-bodied woman. At the time of this writing, she is a mid-career academic librarian in a tenure-track position. Her career has focused primarily on teaching and learning in higher education.

practices can be catalysts for reflective and inclusive teaching and a culture of care in all teaching contexts.

Flexible pedagogy, like the very concept of flexibility, is not rigidly defined. As David Harris points out, the term *flexible learning* (closely tied to *flexible pedagogy*) has been “itself used pretty flexibly.” It “does not seem to refer precisely to any particular kind of educational system but acquires its meaning only from its location in particular discourses” that often describe existing educational systems as lacking flexibility.³ While Harris understandably expresses skepticism about much of the discourse surrounding *flexible learning* (which at times seems more oriented to business models of education that prioritize discrete workplace skills over the broader skills of critical thinking), the basic principle of flexibility in teaching and learning remains powerful. In this essay, I focus less on the wide-ranging uses of the term *flexible learning* and instead concentrate on how the concept of flexibility can enrich teaching and learning, when used with the goal of fostering inclusive learning environments in which students exercise choice and grow a deeper sense of agency in their learning process.

My discussion of flexible pedagogies (and relatedly flexible learning) in this essay might also be considered flexible. I use the term *flexible pedagogy* not to describe a fixed set of teaching practices, but rather to consider more broadly ways that we might design learning experiences and cultivate learning environments with the intention for all students to experience greater choice and agency in their learning process. Flexible teaching and learning can be processes through which both educators and students gently bend and stretch beyond familiar habits that often unnecessarily limit student choice and agency. This process can cultivate holistic learning, a recognition of students’ full lives and communities, and a culture of care.

The flexibility that I describe is not about librarians and educators breaking ourselves or giving up all agency in teaching. To the contrary, it is about cultivating connective and inclusive learning environments and experiences that are vital to both agentic learning *and* agentic teaching, as we balance the degrees of structure and choice that are part of those environments and experiences.

Flexible Pedagogies as Inclusive Practices

Often we apply principles of flexible pedagogy and flexible learning intuitively. This happens any time we present students with choices about how they will learn or how they will engage in a task or project. But intentional reflection on how we integrate opportunities for student choice, and how we design learning experiences and environments accordingly, can help us further expand how we encourage

agency and motivation among students who have a wide variety of interests, backgrounds, experiences, personalities, preferences, and passions. Creating room for student choice affirms a valuing of difference in people's learning processes and experiences and may help students grow a sense of agency and purpose. Flexible pedagogy can be enacted in a number of ways, including through pacing and timing, instructional content, instructional approach or design, and delivery methods or spaces.⁴

In considering flexible learning in connection to inclusive pedagogies, I find Ryan and Tilbury's discussion of flexible pedagogies to be particularly useful.⁵ In their report on flexible pedagogies for the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in the UK, Ryan and Tilbury describe flexible pedagogies in relation to "new pedagogical ideas" that help both learners and educators strengthen their capacity "to develop flexibility as an attribute or capacity" as they "think, act, live and work differently in complex, uncertain and changeable scenarios."⁶ Ryan and Tilbury present these concepts as a response to questions about higher education at a time of rapid and increasing technological change, globalization, and changing employer expectations.⁷

Recognizing that efforts to grow the flexibility of higher education can have both beneficial and deleterious effects, Ryan and Tilbury challenge an uncritical celebration or acceptance of technology and of "work-readiness" training that often overlooks social inequities and systems of power and privilege and instead are interested in the potential through flexible pedagogies for "democratic and emancipatory approaches to teaching and learning."⁸

Though Ryan and Tilbury do not foreground the phrase "inclusive pedagogy" in this report (they do refer twice to "inclusive learning"), their discussion relates directly to inclusive pedagogies. This is evident in the following pedagogical ideas that they outline:

- learner empowerment: "actively involving students in learning development and processes of 'co-creation' that challenge learning relationships and the power frames that underpin them"
- future-facing education: "refocusing learning towards engagement and change processes that help people to consider prospects and hopes for the future across the globe"
- decolonising education: "deconstructing dominant pedagogical frames that promote only Western worldviews"
- transformative capabilities: "creating an educational focus beyond an emphasis solely on knowledge and understanding, towards agency and competence"
- crossing boundaries: "taking an integrative and systemic approach to pedagogy in HE"

- social learning: “developing cultures and environments for learning that harness the emancipatory power of spaces and interactions outside the formal curriculum”⁹

These principles reflect a flexibility in thinking that involves looking both inward and outward—considering individual experiences, relational and collective experiences, and systems and structures. This flexibility occurs largely through continually examining experiences and situations from different angles (e.g., challenging traditional power relations and Western-centric pedagogies, valuing not only knowledge but also agency) and through enabling a range of individual and relational experiences (e.g., co-creation, social learning and engagement beyond formal curricula). Similar language might be used to describe equitable and inclusive pedagogies, even though Ryan and Tilbury don’t explicitly refer to inclusive pedagogies.

Considerations for Putting Flexible Pedagogies into Action

These ideals of flexible pedagogies may sound lofty to some readers, particularly as librarians look at the realities and confines of our everyday work (e.g., the prevalence of one-shot sessions that are usually structured around completing an assignment that a librarian did not design, the difficulty of building a rapport with students within the confines of a stand-alone workshop). At the same time that the limitations of our day-to-day teaching contexts are real, the creative approaches that librarians repeatedly bring to their work within and beyond classroom settings demonstrate the potential power of intentional flexibility as a pedagogical practice.

Because of the many shapes and forms that flexible learning can take, it can be hard to know where to start in integrating it more intentionally into one’s teaching.¹⁰ I think it’s helpful to remember that there are multitudes of ways to encourage student choice and that each approach will depend on one’s teaching context at a particular moment in time. For those interested in expanding their engagement with flexible pedagogy principles, Per Bernard Bergamin and colleagues recommend beginning by asking several key questions: In what ways are students engaged as active and constructive learners who exercise some control over their learning? and How are learning materials designed to respond to learners’ varying needs?¹¹ I would add to these questions a consideration of how activities can be constructed as welcoming invitations for participation and as expressions of valuing students’ unique and varying perspectives and contributions.

While flexible pedagogies may at first glance seem too involved for short periods of instruction like library one-shot sessions, often a small tweak to a class session or an activity can open considerably more room for student choice and agency. For example, in a one-shot instruction session, perhaps students have the choice to work individually or in small groups when looking for relevant sources. Or students might be given the option either to explore a topic of their own choosing or to select from one or two sample topics. During an in-class discussion, students might have the option to reflect and express their individual and collective ideas in various ways (for example, through individual reflective writing, creating a visual, contributing to a collaborative Google Doc, or speaking in small groups or in the larger class). In a hands-on research workshop, students could choose to focus on different aspects or stages of the research process depending on their particular process and needs. (Practices like these align with Ryan and Tilbury's emphasis on flexible pedagogy principles like co-creation and the valuing of all participants' voices and contributions.) Credit courses open a still wider range of possibilities for flexible pedagogies, including choosing among assignment options that target the same learning outcomes or having the option to engage in additional learning activities through which students can engage more deeply with a course-related issue or project or an assignment.

Of course, too much choice or flexibility can also be overwhelming and can contribute to an experience of cognitive overload, in which a person is presented with more information than they can process in a given moment. According to John Sweller's theory of cognitive load theory, individuals can process only a certain amount of information in a given moment, and instructional design can be used to make cognitive load more manageable.¹² Experiences of cognitive overload tend to feel paralyzing, rather than being empowering and motivating. Cognitive load differs among individuals. Relatedly, some learners may prefer a higher degree of structure, which limits the number of choices they need to consider, while others benefit from more flexibility. For example, when students are asked to reflect or to articulate their thoughts, some students may immediately have much to say without being given any specific prompt, while others might be unsure how to respond without being given any more specific prompts or examples.

As this suggests, flexible pedagogy involves balancing pliancy and structure: just as things that are too rigid are likely to break, those that are too bendable may not be able to hold a form. In a class with too many rules, people may feel boxed into formulas that lack meaning or purpose. On the other hand, in a classroom that has no structure, people are likely to feel adrift, and a classroom in which the teacher bends so much that they strain their bodies ultimately becomes counterproductive. Flexible pedagogies can present a healthy and bendable amount of structure—for example, giving students the option to respond to specific questions about the issue at hand or to generate and answer their own questions.

Bringing Flexible Pedagogy Principles to Online Teaching during the Pandemic

I am writing this essay in spring 2021, after a little over a year of social distancing, remote work, and a good amount of isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Flexible thinking and flexible structure have been key to the synchronous online class sessions and workshops that I've facilitated during this time, probably more so than when I taught almost exclusively in person. I've been pleasantly surprised that the move to online teaching has helped me create more opportunities for all students to engage in idea sharing and conversation than had previously been the case in my in-person classes.

Reflecting on my recent experiences with online library instruction and my intention to cultivate flexible and inclusive learning environments, I see Ryan and Tilbury's description of flexible pedagogy principles mirrored back in several ways in terms of both content and approach. Though I focus in this essay primarily on pedagogical approach (and less on learning content), it's worth noting that flexible pedagogy principles are relevant to both. In terms of content, the many social, cultural, structural, and ethical dimensions of information literacy are certainly relevant to Ryan and Tilbury's description of a "future-facing education," through which people "consider prospects and hopes for the future across the globe and ...anticipate, rethink and work towards alternative and preferred future scenarios."¹³ Issues and skills about which I and other librarians teach—evaluating online information, valuing and acknowledging different types of expertise and knowledge, algorithmic bias, digital privacy and digital wellness—have real and everyday significance to students and to societies more broadly. Engaging with such issues is about more than merely acquiring new knowledge; it also points to, in Ryan and Tilbury's words, "transformative capabilities" that involve students' expanding their experiences of agency and competence.¹⁴ The pandemic has drawn this into sharp relief, as trustworthy information sources and supportive online communities and platforms have had real impacts on virtually all aspects of human and global health and well-being.

Whether diving into the complexities of online information environments and systems or focusing on the practicalities of a source-based research project, I have found with a shift to online instruction that flexible pedagogy principles can be integrated into my teaching about almost any learning content. Like many fellow librarians and educators, I have done this partly through collaborative digital tools, which can encourage a more inclusive and participatory learning environment that involves co-creation and social learning, as well as time for individual and shared reflection.

One practice that I've adopted that has been particularly valuable for cultivating more flexible and inclusive learning environments has been the use of collaborative writing tools like Google Docs, Padlet, and Google Jamboard. Since the move many of us made to online instruction in spring 2020, many readers have likely become familiar with incorporating these tools into their teaching. Collaborative writing tools are an example of how simple teaching practices can help to open up choices and avenues for class engagement, participation, and even community building.

Here is what that has often looked like for me in practice. The majority of online library classes and workshops that I've taught over this past year have been synchronous meetings that primarily involve an online meeting platform like Zoom and use of a collaborative Google Doc. I give all attendees Google Doc editing privileges and retain a master template to which only I have access so that I can easily recover portions of the original document if needed (for example, on the rare occasion that someone inadvertently removes content from the collaborative document). Students and workshop participants frequently comment that they enjoy the engagement and interaction that the Google Doc enables and find it highly effective.

The Google Doc includes essential information, links to multimedia like short videos, and collaborative activities and discussion prompts. It also includes "grounding principles" that describe how we will strive to engage with one another, with an appreciation of what we each bring to the class and with an appreciation of difference. Presenting these grounding principles at the start of a class conveys the collaborative and communal spirit of the session and encourages a sense of community and mutual support in which individuals value what both they and others bring to the learning process. In a credit course in which there is more time, I would take the time for the class to build on and revise these guidelines in order to feel more ownership of them.

As we move through the class session, important concepts and information about which I speak are represented in the text and resources included in the Google Doc. The document also includes links to multimedia content like videos. Such content is accompanied by collaborative activities and discussions. For example, in a workshop on algorithmic bias, I begin with a quick poll within the Google Doc on the degree to which Google is neutral (with 1 being completely unneutral and 5 being completely neutral), followed by the open-ended prompt "After rating Google's neutrality in the online poll, please share the reasoning behind your ranking of Google's neutrality." We take a few minutes for everyone to add thoughts to the Google Doc so that each person has time to reflect while also seeing what others are saying. Sometimes people respond to one another's thoughts within the Google Doc (for example, using "+1" to indicate agreement or referencing and making a connection to someone else's idea). This provides another means for engagement. It may be particularly appreciated by students who are otherwise reluctant to share their thoughts aloud and by those who benefit from more reflection time before articulating their ideas. In short, there is

more time and space for everyone to contribute to the conversation and for everyone to see, reflect, and perhaps build on what others are saying.

When the writing has slowed down or the allotted time has passed, I invite participants to speak about things that they have shared or noticed in the Google Doc. Sometimes this generates richer conversation; at other times the group may be fairly quiet. In either case, I skim the document for points that may be worth further emphasizing or expanding on. I use a similar approach when introducing new content like a short video: before showing the video, I often present questions to consider about the video content, usually including at least one very open-ended question that invites students to share any thoughts, questions, or impressions related to the video that aren't explicitly addressed in the other question prompts. Participants can then respond to those questions while and after watching the video. This again creates an opportunity for reflection and sharing, as well as an opening for further discussion. Such questions provide a flexible structure that leaves room for choice (e.g., answering those questions that interest them most, having the opportunity to see what others have written, introducing new ideas or questions that aren't already represented in the question prompts).

The interactive components of the document also present opportunities during and after the session for formative assessment (through which the teacher/facilitator checks student understandings and can revise their pedagogical approach in order to respond to participants' interests and needs). During the session, I can immediately see evidence of many participants' thinking and areas of interest; after the session, I can return to the document to analyze and to reflect more deeply on participants' thoughts and processes. An additional benefit of this approach is that the resources and ideas shared during the session continue to be available to the class after the class. The Google Doc serves as a record for both participants and teachers; it offers a way to continue engaging with learning content at a later time.

The affordances of online learning that are reflected in this approach, of course, don't erase the fact that many inequities persist (e.g., the availability and speed of internet connections, the digital devices and physical spaces through which students obtain online access, the time and resources available to students to engage in learning on- and offline). Online learning no doubt can exacerbate educational inequities, as the pandemic has brought into sharp relief. But many aspects of online learning can also work to foster a more inclusive and flexible learning environment in which students have meaningful choices about ways to engage and participate. Collaborative digital writing tools like Google Docs, Padlet, and Jamboard are just a few examples of technologies that help to flexibly structure learning environments and experiences that foster inclusion and social learning, alongside student choice and agency.

When these technologies are available to all students, they may help to increase inclusion in the physical classroom as well. When I return to the physical classroom

in the coming months, I will continue to offer students a wider range of choices and possibilities for both individual and collaborative work. In both in-person workshops and one-shot sessions, I'll continue to use collaborative tools like Google Docs as a means for students to reflect on and share about their process. Similar to my approach in online sessions, I'll create time and space in which we can view what others have shared and speak aloud or in large and small groups about our observations and experiences and how they relate to those of others. While presenting different participant options, I'll also remain cognizant that using too many tools or having too many choices can be distracting or overwhelming. With this in mind, I'll aim to choose tools based on goals, intentions, and an appreciation of where I am asking students to focus their attention.

In short, as I integrate in-person and digital means of communication and interaction, I will continue to learn and to practice ways to balance structure and flexibility. For me this largely involves providing a helpful degree of guidance alongside manageable and meaningful options for individual and collective student expression and engagement, as well as an appreciation of the ways that students contribute to and shape both their own learning and the class's collective process.

A Final Reflection

The importance of balancing structure and flexibility in both teaching and in everyday life has become especially apparent to me in this past year. A healthy amount of flexible structure has helped me to get up in the morning and often to regain some sense of purpose on days when I felt that I and many others around me were losing that.

Amid so much loss across the globe and in our everyday lives, it can feel trivial to write practical teaching recommendations. At the same time, I find hope in the thought that sometimes even one small action or interaction has positive ripple effects, even if those ripples aren't immediately visible or felt. Those ripples can come from fostering more inclusive learning environments, which are often also more flexible environments: in them we interact with and respond to others in the moment, hopefully seeing, hearing, and appreciating one another as human beings with unique experiences, thoughts, and voices, and at the same time with a shared humanity.

Notes

1. Ryerson Mental Health and Wellbeing Committee, "Flexible Learning Resource," Ryerson University, accessed May 21, 2021, 2, <https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/learning-teaching/teaching-resources/teach-a-course/flexible-learning.pdf>.

2. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 68–78, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>; Jack Martin, "Self-Regulated Learning, Social Cognitive Theory, and Agency," *Educational Psychologist* 39, no. 2 (2004): 135–45, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep3902_4.
3. David Harris, "The Paradoxes of Flexible Learning," in *Flexible Pedagogy, Flexible Practice: Notes from the Trenches of Distance Education*, ed. Elizabeth Burge, Chère Campbell Gibson, and Terry Gibson, Issues in Distance Education Series (Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press, 2012), 275.
4. Stuart R. Palmer, "The Lived Experience of Flexible Education: Theory, Policy and Practice," *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* 8, no. 3 (2011): article 2, <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.8.3.2>.
5. Alex Ryan and Daniella Tilbury, *Flexible Pedagogies* (York, UK: Higher Education Academy, November 2013), https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/npi_report.pdf.
6. Ryan and Tilbury, *Flexible Pedagogies*, 4.
7. Ryan and Tilbury, *Flexible Pedagogies*, 4.
8. Ryan and Tilbury, *Flexible Pedagogies*, 4.
9. Ryan and Tilbury, *Flexible Pedagogies*, 5.
10. Andrea Baer, "Gently Stretching to Reach All Students: Inclusive Learning through Scaffolding and Flexible Pedagogy," *College and Research Library News* 82, no. 4 (April 2021), <https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/24890/32733>.
11. Per Bernard Bergamin et al., "The Relationship between Flexible and Self-Regulated Learning in Open and Distance Universities," *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* 13, no. 2 (2012): 101–23, <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v13i2.1124>.
12. John Sweller, "Cognitive Load during Problem Solving: Effects on Learning," *Cognitive Science* 12, no. 2 (1988): 257–85.
13. Ryan and Tilbury, *Flexible Pedagogies*, 5.
14. Ryan and Tilbury, *Flexible Pedagogies*, 5.

Bibliography

- Baer, Andrea. "Gently Stretching to Reach All Students: Inclusive Learning through Scaffolding and Flexible Pedagogy." *College and Research Library News* 82, no. 4 (April 2021). <https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/24890/32733>.
- Bergamin, Per Bernard, Simone Ziska, Egon Werlen, and Eva Siegenthaler. "The Relationship between Flexible and Self-Regulated Learning in Open and Distance Universities." *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* 13, no. 2 (2012): 101–23. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v13i2.1124>.
- Harris, David. "The Paradoxes of Flexible Learning." In *Flexible Pedagogy, Flexible Practice: Notes from the Trenches of Distance Education*, edited by Elizabeth Burge, Chère Campbell Gibson, and Terry Gibson, 275–84. Issues in Distance Education. Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press, 2012.
- Martin, Jack. "Self-Regulated Learning, Social Cognitive Theory, and Agency." *Educational Psychologist* 39, no. 2 (2004): 135–45. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep3902_4.
- Palmer, Stuart R. "The Lived Experience of Flexible Education: Theory, Policy and Practice." *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* 8, no. 3 (2011): article 2. <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.8.3.2>.

- Ryan, Alex, and Daniella Tilbury. *Flexible Pedagogies: New Pedagogical Ideas*. York, UK: Higher Education Academy, November 2013. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/mpi_report.pdf.
- Ryan, Richard M., and Edward L. Deci. "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being." *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>.
- Ryerson Mental Health and Wellbeing Committee. "Flexible Learning Resource." Ryerson University. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/learning-teaching/teaching-resources/teach-a-course/flexible-learning.pdf>.
- Sweller, John. "Cognitive Load during Problem Solving: Effects on Learning." *Cognitive Science* 12, no. 2 (1988): 257–85.

