

# 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 pedagogical 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**



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



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



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



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”.*

