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REFLECTION

Flexible learning: a Luddite view

Jon Baggaley*

Centre for Distance Education, Athabasca University, Alberta, Canada

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This article reflects on the flexible learning concept through the eyes of the 19th-century industrial activists known as the Luddites. During a period of economic uncertainty, the Luddite perspective provides a sensitive justification for a change-free educational environment, and for a backlash in favour of 'inflexible learning' (IL). The article outlines institutional strategies for encouraging IL in the face of flexibility, including a five-step intervention programme helping teachers to resist flexible tendencies in their work, and to return to the naturally inflexible state of many of their colleagues.

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The flexible learning concept

Following an article in this journal about the 19th-century Luddite Revolt (Baggaley, 2010), a spiritualist medium was engaged to channel the messages of deceased social reformers. A séance-based focus group (SBFG) was conducted. Little of note was gleaned until 19th-century radical, Ned Ludd, came through. Previously thought to be fictitious, Ludd spoke powerfully in response to the SBFG's probing. In 1811, a group of UK textile workers gathered in his name, dedicated to opposing automation in the workplace. The Luddites smashed their looms, fought the army, and in many cases were executed (Binfield, 2004). Times have changed since then, and Ned Ludd's tactics have become more widely appreciated, as in the celebrated YouTube video *Irate man smashing computer* (Samuelleofisher, 2007). Today, Ludd would be called a slow adopter and invited on the lecture circuit. He would observe, with thinly concealed disgust, the constant introduction of new teaching and learning technologies; and he would find the concept of flexible learning (FL) particularly puzzling. 'In my day, the workers fought bravely to remain inflexible,' Ludd commented in our interview, 'but today ye aspire to flexibility.' The writer tried to reassure him that FL would not be an issue at all today if so many teachers and students were not secretly against it, owing to their confusion at the welter of teaching tools available to them. Ludd's rising emotions seemed assuaged.

*Email: jonbaggaley@gmail.com

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'So, if an unending choice of educational approaches were universally tolerated,' he asked, 'the idea of FL would not be needed, but would be a redundant motherhood-and-apple-pie concept?'

'Indeed so,' I told him. 'Institutions are afraid of the anti-technology sentiment you inspired two centuries ago. To oppose it, they create formal FL centres and directorships.'

'As in a Centre for Motherhood and Apple Pie?' asked Ludd incredulously.

'You would be surprised at the depths of academic politics,' I responded.

'Are there also directors of inflexible learning, for the sake of institutional balance?' he asked.

'There is rarely the need for one, because today's universities and colleges have dwindling funds for FL infrastructure, and inflexible learning is therefore the de facto position.'

With my assistance, Ludd learned that his 19th-century method of dealing with workplace innovations (i.e., smashing them) was lacking in subtlety. Together, we examined how a modern Luddite can effectively combat the rise of FL practices, armed only with a knowledge of office politics. I explained that if I were a director of inflexible learning (DIL) I would offer consultation hours from 9 to 10 each morning. Teachers would bring their new ideas for flexibility to me, and I would pretend to be flexible in response. Students would ask if they could be flexible in their choice of attending lectures or studying online. 'Just do it your own way,' I'd tell them. Some days, if asked for $50,000 to pay for six multimedia servers, or for a three-month extension to the study period to develop a new, flexible approach, it would be harder to keep my doubts about FL hidden. 'Call yourself flexible,' my colleagues would say to me. 'You're the least flexible learning director we've ever met.' 'Being flexible costs, you know,' I'd explain. 'Money doesn't grow on trees.'

Other colleagues would try to be more constructive. 'You should be the director of blended learning,' they would tell me. 'You believe in combining teaching methods and media, like e-learning and the personal touch, but you're not always too flexible in how you do it.' I would agree that the responsibilities of a director of blended learning (DBL) would be easier to fulfil, because most of us already use mixed media in our work, and all of us use the personal touch, however unpleasantly. So the idea of encouraging blended learning in the institution would be less of a challenge. Ultimately, I would probably fail as both a DFL and a DBL. I wouldn't have much patience as a Director of Pervasive Learning either. 'I can't be everywhere at once,' I'd snap.

In all of these positions, my one gesture towards change would be to bring back the most sophisticated blended system of all, the shorthand typist. Educational institutions have not given us colleagues with that combination of note-taking and speed-typing skill in 30 years. In the 1970s, one could dictate a letter while reading the morning paper. It was the most productive period of my career. I mentioned the invention of the shorthand typist to my séance companion Ned Ludd. 'A hybrid medium without equal!' he declared. 'Skills of dictation, typing, and making coffee, all in one colleague.' I cautioned Ludd that requests for personal services such as coffee-making have to be made with great sensitivity these days, being apt to annoy.

Once the PC arrived on every desk, sadly, the days of the typing pool were numbered. University and college administrators reasoned that the teaching staff could do their typing for themselves. One day in 1983, I was told that my regular

secretary had been laid off and that my letter could be typed if I was now willing to wait three days. I could have taken a hammer, Ludd-like, to the new PC in my office at that moment. Gradually, teachers and students learned to adapt to WordStar™, then WordPerfect™, and Microsoft Word™. It no longer took three days for a letter to be typed and another three to get it corrected, because we had learned to correct our words as we typed them. Nowadays one's brain spins on all rotors, composing, arrow-keying, cutting and pasting all at once. The daily typing chores leave less time for other activities, unfortunately, like preparing lectures and being available to students.

This is certainly the case in today's distance education (DE). When first becoming involved in DE, teachers and students realise that their work will be more technologically dependent than ever before. They may not realise, however, just how much the technologies will monopolise their working day. Preoccupied at the keyboard for ten hours at a stretch, many find flexible teaching and learning goals more difficult to attain than they had imagined. Whereas colleagues once had to be persuaded to use the typewriter, they now have to be urged to find time for face-to-face discussion. For some of them, it will ultimately be impossible to become as flexible as the institution might prefer; and there probably comes a point in everyone's career when even the most ardent advocate of workplace technology becomes a neo-Luddite, begging not to be forced to switch from Word 2003 to Word 2007 because the earlier version works just fine. For the colleague who is unwilling to change his or her working habits indefinitely, there is one answer: inflexible learning (IL).

The goals of inflexible learning

In the recent economic recession, it has become increasingly appropriate for educators to focus their attention on whether technological policies and practices are actually having the workplace benefits claimed for them; and it has become politically correct to point out that continuing flexibility is expensive and can hasten an institution's economic decline. The time seems ripe, therefore, for IL specialists to *come out*, and to campaign for the establishment of official centres of IL excellence, for the sake, as Ned Ludd has put it to me, 'of institutional balance.' An appropriate vision statement for a centre for inflexible learning (CIL) is as follows:

> CIL's vision is (a) to monitor the goals of effective teaching and learning in the institution and the extent to which they are being achieved; and (b) to examine the remote likelihood that changes in institutional or personal policy and practice shall manifestly affect the efficiency with which these goals are attained. In the rare situation that a proposed change in policy/practice is identified as being conducive to flexible goals, the proposal shall be referred to the Centre for Flexible Learning (CFL) for filing. When the proposed change fails to fulfil its promise, the CIL shall identify ways of dissuading the institution and its members from reconsidering it.

In the mandate of the new IL centres, the need for software evaluation will be fundamental – but not with the usual purpose of justifying change. IL specialists will focus on preserving the status quo in their institutions. Whereas the goal of FL has been to encourage new approaches and policies, the CIL will ask the institution's members to justify their wish to move to new levels of flexibility. Assisted by mandatory programme evaluation courses, the members will be required to

submit well-documented evidence for their flexibility proposals. As the multidimensional processes of flexibility and change are notoriously difficult to evaluate, and should not in all conscience be implemented unless they can be justified beyond a reasonable doubt, we can rest assured that the stringent IL methodology *will prevent any appreciable institutional or personal change from ever taking place again*. Gone will be the day when FL was regarded as the best and only option since sliced bread.

To this end, the writer is currently developing numerous initiatives to support IL in educational institutions. Plans are being discussed with a publisher for the launch of a *Journal of Inflexible Learning* (JIL), though are currently being obstructed by the publisher's wish to allow a flexible format for articles. A Society for Inflexible Learning (SIL) will be formed, with a Luddite Youth (SILLY) award, and a Diploma in Inflexible Learning Development Overseas [*Ed: acronym deleted*]. A bicentennial celebration of the life and ideas of Ned Ludd is being planned for 2011–2012; and a useful set of training schemes and support materials is under development. These include a two-week, five-step residential intervention programme for teachers, adapted from the stages of change model of Prochaska and DiClemente (1983). The inflexibility intervention will emphasise the corresponding stages of non-change.

- Stage 1: *Precontemplation*. The teacher is asked to discuss the reasons for insisting on flexibility in his or her working approach.
- Stage 2: *Contemplation*. The teacher is brought to the point of facing up to his or her previous flexibility, and is helped to consider the option of inflexibility.
- Stage 3: *Preparation*. Ways are suggested for the teacher to dig in his or her heels and to say, 'I've had enough change in my career. This is where I stand.' Role-playing sessions with surrogate students are held, so that the teacher can explore strategies for non-innovation.
- Stage 4: *Inaction*. Over an extended period, the teacher's development towards non-change is monitored. Programme evaluation methods are taught, permitting the teacher to measure and record the benefits of inflexibility as opposed to the spurious advantages of more flexible ways.
- Stage 5: *Maintenance*: The decision is made as to whether the teacher has achieved an appropriate inflexibility quotient, or whether the intervention needs to be repeated. Successful graduates from the programme are introduced to techniques for obduracy maintenance (OM).

Critics of the five-step IL intervention may argue that the very process of moving from flexibility to inflexibility involves change, and is only viable if the individual is intrinsically flexible. Such arguments are intended to debunk the notion that inflexibility can be induced and maintained over time. They suggest that IL and OM methods do not teach inflexibility at all, but the ability to feign inflexibility on a temporary basis. In response to these criticisms, it should be noted that IL development is less a process of promoting inflexibility through change, but rather one of flexibility cessation: that is, casting off flexible tendencies acquired over time in order to return to the naturally inflexible mentality to which we were born. When did the critics last see a newborn baby behaving flexibly anyway?

Conclusions and recommendations

Until recently, educational institutions have encouraged FL principles on the grounds that teachers and students commonly fail to take advantage of the technological options available to them. For many, however, flexibility in the use of technology is unattainable. While grappling with the constant need to update his own educational technology skills, this writer has observed with sadness those colleagues who have failed to do so and have fallen out of favour in the institution. He has also sympathised with the abject cries of students about their inability to receive the colourful new FL materials that he produces for them, owing to their lack of expensive new technologies. For the benefit of such colleagues and students, it is important for educators to admit to the value of the IL philosophy. Fortunately, with the recent downturn in the world's economy, it has suddenly become appropriate to do so.

In this light, the birth of the IL movement is seen as a natural outcome of the cyclic process of institutional change. What goes up, comes down; and when a period of flexibility has evolved to the limit, it is important to be able to recognise the fact. The educational world has seen many such changes since this writer joined its employ 39 years ago. In my role as an educational administrator, my instinct has been to move forward by moving backwards, and I still yearn for the day when word-processing needs will once again be served by shorthand typists as in the productive early years of my career. When I recounted this dream to my new friend Ned Ludd, he told me that in his experience paradigm reversals of this type do not happen. But, I insisted, a return to older technologies is a strategic first step in encouraging inflexibility development and OM. 'Wise up,' Ludd replied.

My regressive attitudes would probably not permit me to survive in an administrative position for long in contemporary academia; but I confidently look forward to the day when inflexibility, and its by-products IL and OM, will be lauded as redeeming educational solutions. In anticipating that future, it is recommended that educators should celebrate the inherent inflexibility of their colleagues rather than lamenting it, and should stimulate inflexibility in teaching and learning by the development of IL centres, intervention programmes, journals, professional associations, and events. It is predictable that FL advocates will accuse the new IL movement of being neo-Luddite, dedicated to opposing the technological changes and diversity that educational institutions officially espouse. As the new Society for Inflexible Learning's motto proudly declares: *Non inflexibilitas sed constantia* (not inflexibility but regularity). It is poignant to realise that this noble goal was the inspiration for the original Luddites, unfairly maligned by change enthusiasts for 200 years. The educational system needs to be reminded of Luddite principles occasionally, in order to decide whether flexibility or inflexibility is the path to take.

Notes on contributor

Jon Baggaley is Professor Emeritus at Athabasca University, Canada. He is in full agreement with the principles of flexible learning, really he is. His 2011 book *Harmonizing Global Education*, published in Routledge's Open & Flexible Learning series, examines how ideas such as flexible, blended, and learner-constructed learning emerge and re-emerge at regular intervals when the educational system most needs them.

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