



# Asian Journal of Distance Education

---

## We need to talk about how we talk about what we talk about: Revisiting ODL

Mark Nichols

**Abstract:** The terms 'open' and 'distance' are no longer helpful for advancing approaches to education traditionally served by open institutions. A proposal to reframe the terms 'open' and 'distance' is made: 'open', it is suggested, needs to be linked more explicitly to education that is increasingly available, inclusive, scalable, and sustainable. 'Distance', on the other hand, needs to be replaced with the term 'designed,' which places attention on to the range of educational approaches now used to facilitate learning in ways that remove geographical barriers. The paper is based on part on the experience of a dedicated ODL institution in New Zealand, which found itself marginalized while a nation-wide renewal of the vocational education sector was taking place. Rather than being seen as a central part of the solution, ODL was instead assumed to be possible across regional provision. The 'distance' component was even represented as 'online,' which is becoming common across new entrants into what was traditionally understood as ODL. Five reasons for the decline of traditional understandings of ODL are offered.

**Keywords:** available, definitions, distance education, education design, inclusive, ODL, online education, open education, reframing, scalable, sustainable.

### Highlights

What is already known about this topic:

- Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a recognized field of educational provision, with its own literature and professional representation.
- Practice in ODL is varied, and multiple terms now exist for describing alternative models to classroom-based education, including 'online.'
- The terms 'open' and 'distance' have always been controversial.

What this paper contributes:

- A critique of the terms 'open' and 'distance' as now popularly understood.
- Proposals for reframing the terms 'open' and 'distance' in ways that reposition the significance of ODL.

Implications for theory, practice and/or policy:

- Researchers need to be more deliberate in their use of ODL as a term.
- Describing educational approaches in terms of their 'design' helps make practices more explicit.



## Introduction

'Open' is now too open as a term to be meaningful.

'Distance' is now too distant a term for reflecting a point of difference.

The complexity of the title for this piece is deliberate, as is the conversational tone throughout. The former is intentional, as the title reflects some of the befuddlement facing the terminology swirling around open and distance education. The conversational tone is an attempt to extend engagement with this perspective as broadly as possible. The intention of this piece is to provoke debate and stimulate thought rather than initiate a referendum (though a proposal for change is included).

In open and distance learning (ODL) there is a need for urgent dialogue about how the field is represented. Put provocatively, 'we talk about how we talk about what we talk about.' It's not that the commitment to the principles of ODL should be in any way relaxed; if anything, ODL as a system of thought is as contemporary and relevant as it always has been. It's just that, from this author's perspective, the terms 'open' and 'distance' no longer carry the same significance they once did. They are no longer a call to action, reliable point of contrast, or rallying point for improvement. It is possible to think of 'open' and 'distance' as having in-house meanings that are very dissimilar to how these terms are understood in general (the term 'in-house' here indicates that part of the ODL community using these terms with reference to theories enshrined in the 1970s up to the early millennium).

The historic impetus of the terms 'open' and 'distance' is now displaced. Popular discourse and innovation are progressing without these terms. In literature and strategic thought this is now problematic to the extent that corrective action is needed.

## Illustrating the Problem

The motivations for proposing this conversation are in part anecdotal and personal, however the author's experiences that follow will likely resonate. They are certainly illustrative of concerns documented elsewhere (Tait, 2018).

Recently, New Zealand sought to bring together its national network of competing Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs) and combine them with national Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) into one institution. That bringing together is, as of early 2024, being undone by a new government, however the story behind how that consolidation took place will be of interest to ODL advocates.

New Zealand's ITP sector consisted of 16 organisations: 15 regional polytechnics, each with a regional identity, and one national polytechnic, Open Polytechnic, with a firm ODL identity. Open Polytechnic has a structure and practices familiar to any open institution around the world, very different to campus-based institutions. In the ITP setting Open Polytechnic was traditionally seen as a competitor across the regional ITPs, many of whom also had niche distance programmes of their own.

One of the objectives for bringing all 16 organisations into one national network was to provide "a unified, sustainable public network of regionally accessible vocational education" (Tertiary Education Commission, 2023, p. 1), through a single, national provider mandated by legislation to "offer in each region a mix of education and training, including on-the-job, face-to-face, and distance delivery that is accessible to the learners of that region and meets the needs of its learners, industries, and communities" (Education and Training Act 2020 [New Zealand], s.13 3[a]).

There seemed an opportunity here for the new, consolidated institution to build upon the highly successful ODL practice of Open Polytechnic as the basis for a national network of delivery. After all,

the Open Polytechnic model could be considered a future enabler, not just the workings of an historic competitor. At last, it seemed, there was an opportunity for ODL to be leveraged in support of education everywhere.

It was not to be. Instead of being considered a centrepiece for national delivery, Open Polytechnic was practically sidelined. In turn, ODL was often referred to as 'Online and Distance Learning' by the new institution; the term 'distance' was even changed to 'online' in some public-facing communications (see, for example, <https://www.tec.govt.nz/vocational-education/vocational-education/delivering-vocational-education/te-pukenga/>). Soon it became clear that 'blended learning' was centrally decided upon as the basis for the future education model. Far from being central to planning a new national network of delivery, ODL was overtaken by an agenda that assumed there was no need for a specific ODL approach based on traditional principles.

It is timely to consider just what the 'traditional principles' of ODL might be. Internal to the ODL community, the following can be considered representative of the shared assumptions of what constitutes ODL thinking (in, for example, Evans & Jakupec, 2022):

- An understanding of 'distance' in transactional terms, requiring a systems approach.
- An understanding of 'open' as providing improved access to education.
- An understanding of ODL practice as characterised by an 'industrial' approach, based on a 'guided didactic conversation.'
- A presumption that online technologies are a mechanism for ODL, rather than 'online' being a distinctive modality.
- Use of the 'iron triangle' as a point of reference.

Advocacy for ODL on these terms was not lacking. Open Polytechnic attempted multiple times to advocate for ODL, drawing on international experts (one of whom described the oversight of ODL as part of "a project of national self-harm"). Open Polytechnic also had a healthy national and international reputation. The Chief Executive at the time was later made an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for her contribution to vocational education and distance education; the Open Polytechnic had made a consistent series of financial surpluses and achieved near parity course completions (unusual for the sector and distance education); the institution received the 2022 Commonwealth of Learning Award for institutional excellence; and the author was on the ICDE Board across the time of these developments (and is currently President of ICDE). Advocacy for ODL was authoritative and thorough.

Open Polytechnic was not the only practitioner of ODL, only the sole organisation to base its entire operating model and identity around it. Bringing together 15 regional and the single national provider highlighted different approaches to ODL across the sector. Anecdotally, I recall participating in one meeting where I was politely but firmly informed that a specific region was doing a certain distance programme quite adequately on its own without Open Polytechnic, though the conversation also revealed that their idea of 'distance' was largely regional (not national), required extensive block course attendance, and required a cohort-based approach to enrolments. This was nowhere near as 'open' or scalable as it would have been under the Open Polytechnic model, but it could not be argued that the approach did not constitute some form of 'distance' practice.

It occurred to me that I knew what I was talking about using the terms open and distance, but so did others who meant something quite different at a detailed level. I became self-conscious of my accent as someone whose professional history is steeped in ODL literature. My interlocutor and I spoke the same language, but we were making very different assumptions around what ODL might look like. *Legitimately*. From a very real perspective we were both right about ODL, even though we were essentially talking past one another. The systematic and strategic possibilities of ODL had been

overtaken by an appropriation of these terms that reflected a more operational, pragmatic view of how education might take place.

More concerning was the lack of insight apparent from some senior decision-makers who, as disclosed above conflated 'distance' with 'online', and who also ignorantly – using the term without any pejorative intent – assumed the 'O' in ODL stood for 'Online' (and presented it as such in documents mentioning ODL). The classic distinction between ODL and campus-based providers had been worn away through a gradual erosion of perception. Attempts to point out the discrepancy were no doubt considered unnecessarily pedantic; ultimately, an issue was being pressed that others did not perceive as relevant in any way.

Further investigation into how distance courses were being offered across the ITP network revealed impressive differences. How courses are designed, and their relative substance (particularly in narrative voice); who prepares online courses, specifically whether the input of subject matter experts based in industry should be valued alongside that of academic staff; the role of the educator or tutor, leading to very different fixed and variable cost dynamics; and the assumptions around how courses should be timetabled are just a few areas of contrast. Such differences in practice along these lines also differ across 'Open' institutions around the world, as the result of different operating model assumptions and institutional design (Nichols, 2020).

The case study and anecdote provided here may seem remote, but it is worthwhile reflecting on how this scenario might have unfolded across any country: What sort of voice are open, distance providers likely to have alongside their more numerous on-campus peers, each of whom are now streaming classes to extend their reach? The account above is highly repeatable across any reader's context, likely in any part of the world. Elements of this journey and the parallel concern about definitions and perceptions of ODL are reflected in my recent work (Nichols, 2020, 2022, 2023; Nichols & Seelig, 2022).

The motivation for this article was intensified based on conversations at and since the 29th ICDE World Conference in Costa Rica, where delegates to the Presidents Forum were challenged to explain ODL without reference to 'in-house' terms. Since that time, I've been considering how to advance critique about the 'O' and 'D' of ODL with a view toward revisiting them in ways that will resonate with those concerned with ODL. My proposal, revealed in more detail later, is thus:

- We describe 'Open' explicitly in terms of availability, inclusivity, scalability, and sustainability.
- We make the 'D' stand for 'Design,' as 'D' for 'Distance' is no longer distinctive or helpful.

This position is expanded on at the end of this piece. For now, attention will turn to what appears to have brought this need for further definition to a crisis point.

### **Five Reasons for Decline**

Discernible from the anecdote above are five possible reasons for the changes that seem to have taken place around those who started their journey from within classic ODL practice. Briefly, these reasons are:

1. *Appropriation.* The terms 'open' and 'distance' are now popularly detached from their historical moorings.
2. *Underestimation.* ODL is considered as having an operational, more than strategic, expression in education.
3. *Relegation.* Terms such as 'blended' and 'online' (and more recently 'hyflex' and 'b synchronous') are considered more contemporary or mainstream than is ODL.

4. *Tangentialism*. The perceived need for 'openness' and overcoming of 'distance' is no longer what it once was, as these become more characteristic of the general education system.
5. *Congestion*. Serious engagement with ODL is hindered by the constant traffic of potential innovations fuelled by (more recently) AI, streaming classes, microcredentials and, more historically, MOOCs.

Elements of these five factors overlap.

### **Appropriation**

The Open University, UK was launched with an openness to people, places, ideas and methods. In 1969 this was radical; now, in 2024, it might be said that openness in these terms is a level playing field across most higher education providers (except, perhaps, for those universities who, on the grounds of misplaced prestige, are strategically determined to remain 'closed.')

Innovation is no longer the sole domain of open institutions. Neither is the provision of courses or modules that do not require classroom attendance. This is stated explicitly by Alan Tait some six years ago:

The narrative of paramount leadership by Open Universities for innovation, inclusion and social justice has begun to be challenged by a number of commentators, who in one way or another identify the spread of innovation elsewhere in the higher education sector as threatening for the place of Open Universities in that landscape. (Tait, 2018, p. 150).

And, more recently:

The increasing accessibility to online learning and digital education tools, alongside the capacity to introduce temporal and spatial separation even within traditionally campus-based educational institutions, has inadvertently exposed many educational institutions to the concept of "distance." However, this exposure often occurs without a full comprehension of its relevance to distance education (Cefa, 2023, p. 257).

'Open' and 'distance' used to stand for an alternative to campus-based, real-time, synchronous education. The binary that once was is now extremely muddled, arguably beginning with so-called 'blended' approaches that came to the fore alongside the LMS/VLE. The term 'open' is now frequently associated with 'educational resources' (OER) or 'practices' (OEP), perhaps moreso than it is with a more generous view of welcoming all learners. 'Open' increasingly means free and reusable, and lacks a coherent conceptual framework (Kalz, 2022). 'Distance' is now commonly thought of as an easily facilitated form of education via an LMS/VLE and some learning materials placed online, or else streaming live classes to a remote audience. The distance education that was once asynchronous and distinctive by necessity can now be synchronous by design. This is a complete about-face from 50 years ago.

### **Underestimation**

'Open' is a relative term; the previous anecdote differentiating between 'regional' distance and 'national' distance implies that 'distance' can be, too. As such, any movement toward more openness or greater distance in reach might be seen in operational terms. The point here is that any activity that improves openness or reduces the tyranny of distance can be, and frequently is, seen as evidence of 'open' and 'distance' education in action.

However, this incremental approach to improving openness and overcoming distance falls well short of the sort of strategic thinking required to make education more 'open,' and less inhibited by 'distance.'

The agenda for 'open' and 'distance' must traverse well beyond operational improvement. 'Open' and 'distance' are terms that ought to be reserved for strategic imperatives as they were used around 50 years ago, those changes that broaden the framework of operations in their entirety. An example will likely help.

Assume for a moment that one dimension of 'open' is availability (as proposed later in this article). Increasing availability of a module (or 'paper', 'course', or 'unit;' that is, the enrollable element a learner receives credit for) could be done operationally or strategically. Operationally, a semesterised module usually offered once might be offered twice a year or, in a trimesterised system, three times; availability is improved, so more 'open' is achieved. However, strategically, availability could be extended into a year-round, anytime access format. Both are improvements to 'open,' but only the latter represents a significant shift.

The terms 'open' and 'distance' are too easily underestimated as operational, rather than strategic, pursuits. Subsequently, ambitions for improving openness and overcoming distance tend to be piecemeal. It follows that conversations using the terms 'open' or 'distance' across different organisations risk being overtaken by those who see 'open' and 'distance' as operational, incremental matters. It might even be assumed that 'open' and 'distance' are no longer worth mentioning in strategic terms.

### Relegation

A glance at literature suggests that the terms 'open' and 'distance' are increasingly being marginalised in favour of terms more widely adopted by universities: 'blended,' 'hybrid,' and 'hyflex' are among the most popular at present, though 'bichronous' is also becoming prominent (Martin et al., 2020).

More recently, the impressive Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education (Zawacki-Richter & Jung, 2022a) has attempted to introduce the term 'ODDE,' 'Open Digital Distance Education,' to the ODL lexicon. However, one reviewer of the book expresses an important oversight of the opening chapter (Zawacki-Richter & Jung, 2022b), which sought to clarify terminology:

Firstly, although it attempts to address the problematic issue of terminology in reaffirming how ODDE is viewed in the literature, the definition offered, unfortunately, does not align with the initial definition in the Preface, nor does it add value to that definition. Secondly, despite attempts at clarifying ODDE-related terms, this introduction adds to the confusion by using "online learning/education" and "digital learning/education" as being synonymous without clarifying how either of them are to be understood in this work. Importantly, ODDE is considered an "overarching term", which then with this disclaimer, covers all educational and related activities discussed in the rest of the publication. (Olivier, 2023, p. 466; see also Cefa, 2023).

Also, worth noting here is the primary investigative work of Johnson (Johnson, 2021, 2023; Johnson et al., 2022), which attempts to map the complex landscape of contemporary terminology, firstly in Canada then across the United States. Significantly 'open' does not appear at all in the Modes of Learning Spectrum (correctly, perhaps, signaling that 'open' is not a mode) however 'distance' is characterised as potentially 'offline,' 'online,' or 'hybrid' (or 'blended'), based on the dichotomy across distance learning, "defined as all learning that takes place at a distance" (Johnson, 2021, p. 8) and in-person learning, "defined as learning that takes place entirely within a physical classroom with one's peers and instructor physically present" (ibid.). This breadth of meaning for 'distance' makes it an extremely opaque category.

In a further paper, Johnson et. al. report that:

In the United States, the term 'distance education' is defined differently by the Veterans Administration, armed forces, accrediting agencies, and states. The U.S. Department of Education has at least three versions of definitions. This causes confusion and does not even consider the different variations of digital learning that have emerged (2022, p. 92).

The paper then proceeds to explore the use of 'online,' 'hybrid,' 'hyflex,' 'in-person,' 'synchronous' and 'asynchronous' options. 'Distance' is relegated to a superset; this is likely a logical outcome of the term breaking free from its initial fusion over 50 years ago with asynchronous approaches to education. The significant point here is this: 'distance' no longer stands for a single set of assumptions around asynchronous, intermediated learning that could at one stage simply be assumed. Further, the most apparent thing 'distance' did once stand for, that is a means of providing 'open' education in ways that made physical location less relevant, is now described using very different terms.

'Open' is now as nebulous as is 'distance;' indeed, the lexical association of 'open' as it relates to ODL has morphed over the decades since initially popularised in the 1970s such that its meaning is also highly 'open.' Openness is now described as "a living idea" (Koçdar et al., 2023). Terms that were a call to action in the 1970s are now increasingly sidelined, because they are overtaken.

### **Tangentialism**

The relegation described above is likely the root of 'open' and 'distance' becoming tangential to discourse about education innovation. The initial objectives of 'open' and 'distance' education to provide increased levels of access to students became increasingly mainstream as the classroom model extended through technology, and as those with more traditional forms of education offering sought to become more competitive.

COVID-19 likely hastened this tangentialism, unfortunately, because many equated unplanned Emergency Remote Teaching with 'distance' education. As a specific orientation to education, 'open' and 'distance' are no longer viewed with the vitality they once were. Take the case of new 'mega-universities,' defined as any non-in-person university with more than 100,000 students (Daniel, 1999). It is interesting that three recent and highly successful mega-universities established in the United States, Southern New Hampshire University, Western Governors University, and University of the People, each of which would seem to align perfectly with traditional notions of 'open' and 'distance' education, choose to self-identify on their public-facing websites as 'online.' Taglines such as "You're Ready for Your Degree," "Get a Degree on Your Time, in Less Time" and "Our 100% online, tuition-free degree programs are designed to fit your life" must surely bring to mind the enduring aspirations of open and distance education.

A lot can be said against the term 'online' (Nichols, 2023), however it must be conceded that the term has currency. It would be difficult to disagree that many facets of the new 'online' universities mentioned here provide a much more 'open' and pedagogically improved version of 'distance' education than might many institutions calling themselves 'open.' Clearly, then, the terms 'open' and 'distance' are no longer necessary to describe the traditional contrast to in-classroom, synchronous tuition. 'Open' and 'distance', then, become tangential.

### **Congestion**

There is so much for university Rectors, Vice-Chancellors, Chief Executive Officers and their executive leadership teams to keep on top of. To not labour the point, the urgent tends to displace any serious opportunity to discuss the important. FOMO, Fear Of Missing Out, tends to drive the innovation agenda, with elements such as AI, COVID responses, microcredentials and MOOCs driving pedagogical change

moreso than serious debate and the operating model implications of more serious and strategic 'open' and 'distance' approaches.

The ephemeral nature of 'open' and 'distance' as terms in themselves, as hinted at earlier, make it extremely difficult to use them for traction in any ELT conversation. 'Open,' as mentioned, is a living idea; 'distance' is no longer considered a strategic barrier. In a classic post-modern scenario, these terms now exist free of any common meta-narrative. Not only is the ELT agenda congested, it requires a basic, common understanding of terms and issues to have a traction-based conversation. It is dubious whether the terms 'open' or 'distance' can now provide the basis for a productive conversation among non-specialists in ways that they need to.

### Reclaiming Terminology

Having provided this critique, it's incumbent to propose a response. The position of this article is this: the terms 'open' and 'distance' now lack the vigour and distinctive flavour they once had. The erosion of practice, technology, and new terminology have changed the landscape. However, the causes these terms initially laid claim to are every bit as relevant as they were over 50 years ago. The need for 'open' and 'distance' education remains, however the case is made that the term 'open' needs much better definition and the term 'distance' needs to be politely retired, and subtly replaced.

Beginning with 'open', it is helpful to consider what 'closed' once meant around 50 years ago. 'Closed' once meant inaccessible to anyone without a university entrance qualification who could not attend lectures on campus. What was once 'closed' in this sense is now well and truly at the least *ajar* across university provision. Much has been achieved across the last 50 years in terms of providing increased access to those previously unable, for whatever reason, to embark on a university education.

Today, it seems that 'open' might be considered a more meaningful and helpful term were it based on four key issues where strategic work still needs to be done. These four dimensions suggest that *'open' education is an ongoing vision for education that is increasingly:*

- *Available*, summarising the ease at which learners can enrol in anything that interests them when and where it suits them. Availability is considered in terms of when an enrolment period starts and ends, and the flexibility around those dates (and those in between).
- *Inclusive*, a measure of whether anyone can participate, usually expressed in terms of disability, geographic remoteness, life commitment, minority, or special study need.
- *Scalable*, describing how an approach can easily cater for a broad range of demand and reach, whereby an increase in demand or extended reach can be catered for in a time- and cost-efficient way.
- *Sustainable*, characterised by, one, a low carbon footprint and, two, long-term financial viability while providing a quality, reliable service.

These are designed to be comprehensive, however there may well be gaps; this list needs to be further critiqued, debated, and once settled, promoted. 'Open,' then, becomes *a vision for education based on education provision having the characteristics of ever-increasing availability, inclusivity, scalability, and sustainability.*

The suggestion here for 'distance' is much more nuanced. Johnson's work cited previously confirms that the term is poorly defined and understood in the United States, a view that has subsequent traction (Kerensky & Poulin, 2023). It is increasingly unclear as to whether 'distance' means a) a *model* of education that should sit alongside terms such as 'blended,' 'hybrid,' 'hyflex' etc.; b) a *superset* of educational possibilities (or one end of a dichotomy) in contrast to in-person or in-classroom education; or c) a term *illustrative of a barrier* to education now rendered less significant because of technology. The term 'distance' can be understood in all these ways, which is problematic.



The term 'distance' is also a poor contemporary term for describing educational methods that differ from traditional face-to-face teaching. Here, it is helpful to draw on Keegan (1980) who is, arguably, the historical authority for the definition of 'distance.' The definitions preferred by Keegan in his analysis are those that describe 'distance' as an umbrella term for forms of teaching that are not lecture-based (recall Johnson's proposal above). Consider the definition of Holmberg, which Keegan prefers:

The term 'distance education' covers the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organisation (Holmberg 1977, p. 9, in Keegan, 1980, p. 13).

We would be very hard-pressed to insist that the term 'distance education' applies to such forms of tuition today, especially where "the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms" can now take place virtually, *at a distance*.

A strong case can be made to remove 'distance' as a component of ODL, to replace it instead with another 'd' word: 'designed.' 'Designed' recognises that all forms of education are, in some way, deliberately configured and are both enabled and limited by a particular operating model that supports that design. Using the term 'designed' immediately brings a clarification question: *designed how?* It is that 'how' question that frames important dialogue about educational methods and comparison.

Adopting the term 'designed' also hints at a means of investigating the quality and efficacy of a particular education approach on its own merits. Designs will tend to be different, and recognising this explicitly legitimises deeper exploration and makes new connections with those whose innovative forms of pedagogy are different to traditional on-campus education, but who do not perceive themselves as having adopted 'distance' education in its classic sense. Attempting to convince them otherwise, that what they do really does constitute 'distance' education, seems an unnecessary iconoclastic position to take (recall the reference to being 'pernickety' above).

Ironically, the term 'designed' is perhaps more faithful to the working definition of 'distance education' suggested by Moore & Kearsley:

Distance education is *planned* learning that *normally* occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result *requires special techniques* of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements (1996, p. 2) (emphasis added).

The added emphases here imply that the term 'distance' already implies deliberately designed approaches to learning, potentially making 'designed' a contemporary synonym. In other words, meaning is not necessarily lost in changing 'distance' to 'designed;' ODL advocates might both regain the agenda and be positioned to lead the conversation without betraying their roots.

To summarise this proposal for reclaiming terminology, it is suggested that the field of ODL might be best summed as *the continuous pursuit of opening education in terms of availability, inclusivity, scalability, and sustainability through specially designed modes of education*. The value of this proposal is that it places openness at the forefront and forces subsequent attention as to how education is being designed in pursuit of openness. For professional associations, this proposed change in terminology implies three principles:

1. **Promoting openness.** We can emphasise openness in clear, measurable ways that draw attention to strategic improvement. Openness comes first, in that it is toward improving openness that we design our educational solutions.
2. **Designing education for openness.** A shift from 'distance' to 'designed' recognises that there are multiple educational models possible in pursuit of openness, and it is this reach toward openness – their design – that drives our pedagogical advocacy.
3. **Advocating systems that reward design.** Our focus becomes promoting those policies, systems, and practices that encourage design toward openness.

This piece aims to prompt critique, debate, and further development across how we describe open and distance learning. So much is at stake.

### References

- Cefa, B. (2023). Book Review: Handbook of Open, Distance, and Digital Education. *Open Praxis*, 15(3), 255–260. <https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.15.3.592>
- Daniel, J. S. (1999). *Mega-Universities and Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education*. Kogan Page.
- Education and Training Act 2020 (New Zealand). Accessed 18 March 2024 from <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2020/0038/latest/whole.html>.
- Evans, T., & Jakupec, V. (2022). Classic Theories of Distance Education. In *Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education* (pp. 1–19). Springer Nature Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-0351-9\\_7-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-0351-9_7-1)
- Johnson, N. (2021). *Evolving Definitions in Digital Learning: A National Framework for Categorizing Commonly Used Terms*. 1–11. <http://www.cdla-acrf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/2021-CDLRA-definitions-report-5.pdf>
- Johnson, N. (2023). *What to do When the Modality of a Learning Experience is Unclear: Guidelines for Categorizing Multidimensional Learning Experiences*. <https://wcet.wiche.edu/practice/digital-learning-definitions>.
- Johnson, N., Seaman, J., & Poulin, R. (2022). Defining Different Modes of Learning: Resolving Confusion and Contention Through Consensus. *Online Learning Journal*, 26(3), 91–110.
- Kalz, M. (2022). Open Education as Social Movement? Between Evidence-Based Research and Activism. In *Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education* (pp. 1–14). Springer Nature Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-0351-9\\_3-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-0351-9_3-1)
- Keegan, D. J. (1980). On Defining Distance Education. *Distance Education*, 1(1), 13–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158791800010102>
- Kerensky, K., & Poulin, R. (2023). *Defining "Distance Education" in Policy: Differences Among Federal, State, and Accreditation Agencies*. Author: Contributing Authors. <https://wcet.wiche.edu/practice/digital-learning-definitions/>
- Koçdar, S., Bozkurt, A., Uçar, H., Karadeniz, A., Erdoğan, E., & Naidu, S. (2023). Openness in Education as a Living Idea: A Longitudinal Investigation of its Growth and Development. *Distance Education*, 44(4). <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2023.2268321>
- Martin, F., Polly, D., & Ritzhaupt, A. (2020). Bichronous Online Learning: Blending Asynchronous and Synchronous Online Learning. *EDUCAUSE Review*.
- Moore, M. G., & Kearsley, G. (1996). *Distance Education: A Systems View*. Wadsworth Pub. Co.
- Nichols, M. (2020). *Transforming Universities With Digital Distance Education: The Future of Formal Learning*. Routledge.
- Nichols, M. (2022). Transforming Conventional Education through ODDE. *Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education*, 1–17. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-0351-9\\_35-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-0351-9_35-1)
- Nichols, M. (2023). *Commentary: What, Exactly, is "Online" Education?* 10(2), 142–148. <https://www.xn-tepkenga-szb.ac.nz/>

- Nichols, M., & Seelig, C. (2022). Models of Tuition for Digital Education. *Pan Commonwealth Forum (PCF10)*. <https://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/4401>
- Olivier, J. (2023). Book Review: Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education: Parts I and II. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 10(3), 466–471. <https://doi.org/10.56059/jl4d.v10i3.1252>
- Tait, A. (2018). Open Universities: the Next Phase. *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal*, 13(1), 13–23. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AAOUJ-12-2017-0040>
- Tertiary Education Commission (2023). *Te Pūkenga*. Accessed 18 March 2024 from <https://www.tec.govt.nz/vocational-education/vocational-education/delivering-vocational-education/te-pukenga/>
- Zawacki-Richter, O., & Jung, I. (Eds.). (2022a). *Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education*. Springer.
- Zawacki-Richter, O., & Jung, I. (2022b). Shaping the Field of Open, Distance, and Digital Education. In *Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education* (pp. 1–10). Springer Nature Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-0351-9\\_94-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-0351-9_94-2)

### About the Author

Mark Nichols; mark.nichols@openpolytechnic.ac.nz, Open Polytechnic, a business division of Te Pūkenga, New Zealand; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8131-6562>

### Author's Contributions (CRediT)

Mark Nichols: Conceptualization, supervision, investigation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank those international colleagues from the ODL community for their feedback on the early thinking and draft of this piece.

### Funding

Not applicable.

### Ethics Statement

Not applicable.

### Conflict of Interest

The author does not declare any conflict of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

### Article History

Submitted: March 18, 2024 – Accepted: April 2, 2024.

### Suggested citation:

Nichols, M. (2024). We need to talk about how we talk about what we talk about: Revisiting ODL. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 19(1), 2021-231. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10911113>



Authors retain copyright. Articles published under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (CC-BY) International License. This licence allows this work to be copied, distributed, remixed, transformed, and built upon for any purpose provided that appropriate attribution is given, a link is provided to the license, and changes made were indicated.