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The Origins of the Term *Distance Education* and the Roots of Digital Teaching and Learning

Les origines du terme enseignement à distance et les racines de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage numériques

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Introduction

By no means is the digitalization of learning and teaching a new phenomenon (cf. Inglis, et al., 1999). Since the 1960s and 70s, open and distance teaching universities have spearheaded new and emerging technologies to bridge the distance between students and teachers. Since the turn of the millennium, online learning has spread worldwide, particularly in countries with a long tradition of distance education (e.g., Canada, Australia, India, or South Africa, see Qayyum & Zawacki-Richter, 2018; Zawacki-Richter & Qayyum, 2018). Online study programs have also been increasingly established at campus-based universities. In 1999, Alan Tait observed that the boundaries between distance teaching and conventional campus-based universities were blurring: "The secret garden of open and distance learning has become public, and many institutions are moving from single conventional mode activity to dual mode activity" (Tait, 1999, p. 141).

Since Spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has boosted the use of digital media and tools for online learning in the mainstream education. However, the transition to online learning has often been *ad hoc* to maintain study operations. Emergency remote teaching was coined for this practice, which differs significantly in quality from carefully designed online learning and teaching (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). Concepts from face-to-face teaching were often transferred directly, which led to the excessive use of synchronous video conferencing systems, for example. Nichols (2023) criticizes that everything is now *online*: "It is unfortunate, though, that this shift became popularly known as a move to 'online' and even 'distance' education" (p. 142).

Due to these terminological confusions, this research note will first discuss the definition(s) of *distance education*, and then the term's emergence will be reconstructed from a historical perspective, representing the roots of current forms of education in the context of the digital transformation.

Excursus

Definition of Distance Education and the Transition to New Forms of Digital Education

After the foundation of the first open and distance teaching universities in the 1960s and 70s, the field of distance education developed and matured as a scholarly discipline of its own (Delling, 1971), which led to the establishment of dedicated academic journals, such as *Distance Education* (1980, Australia), the *American Journal of Distance Education* (1986, USA), the *Journal of Distance Education* (1986, Canada), and *Open Learning* (1986, UK). In the inaugural issue of *Distance Education*, Desmond Keegan proposed a definition of distance education that he revised for his book “Foundations of Distance Education” (Keegan, 1980, 1986).

In the second half of the 1980s, there was a lively discussion about the definition of distance education until Rumble (1989) presented a five-part definition based on the debate:

1. "In any distance education process there must be: a teacher; one or more students; a course or curriculum that the teacher is capable of teaching and the student is trying to learn; and a contract, implicit or explicit, between the student and the teacher or the institution employing the teacher, which acknowledges their respective teaching-learning roles.
2. Distance education is a method of education in which the learner is physically separate from the teacher. It may be used on its own, or in conjunction with other forms of education, including face-to-face.
3. In distance education learners are physically separated from the institution that sponsors the instruction.
4. The teaching/learning contract requires that the student be taught, assessed, given guidance and, where appropriate, prepared for examinations that may or may not be conducted by the institution. This must be accomplished by two-way communication. Learning may be undertaken either individually or in groups; in either case it is accomplished in the physical absence of the teacher.
5. Where distance teaching materials are provided to learners, they are often structured in ways that facilitate learning at a distance." (p. 18)

This definition can be seen as the preliminary conclusion of the efforts to define distance education as a professional field of practice in higher education during its founding phase.

Open and distance learning are often used synonymously, however, the concept of open learning is different from distance education since it embraces the idea of students being able to take courses or programs without prerequisites and being able to choose to study any subject they wish. Indeed, most of the 'Open Universities' were founded upon this basic premise. While some distance education programs may involve open learning, most do not. (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 2)

With the emergence of new educational technologies and media, the proliferation of personal computers, and, most importantly, the Internet, new modes of delivery were developed that were also adopted by conventional educational institutions (see Tait, 1999). Since the turn of the millennium, new terms such as e-learning, online learning, blended learning, hybrid learning, technology-enhanced learning, and flexible learning have come to the fore. With the ever-evolving new media and technologies for teaching and learning, the field of practice and research is a moving target.

For a recent handbook, Zawacki-Richter and Jung (2023) chose the title “Open, Distance, and Digital Education” (ODDE), combining open and distance education to mark the historical origin of recent online education and digital education to capture newer manifestations of teaching and learning with digital media in the process of digital transformation of educational institutions:

We conceptualize ODDE as an overarching term to refer to all kinds of learning and teaching processes in which knowledge and skill base of educational technology, digital media, and tools are used to present and deliver content, as well as facilitate and support communication, interaction, collaboration, assessment, and evaluation. Thus, ODDE is not monolithic in form. It includes various types, from technology-enhanced education to flipped learning and blended learning, and to fully online education. (p. 6)

It has been criticized that we have not succeeded in maintaining a coherent definition of ODDE throughout the handbook (Olivier, 2023). On the one hand, this was hardly possible with over 100 authors of the handbook, but on the other hand, it also illustrates very well the fuzziness of this multifaceted term.

Origin of the Term Distance Education

The origins of ODDE go back to correspondence education in the middle of the 19th century, in which teachers and students communicated via written text, and the course content was delivered via printed study letters (see Moore, 2023). The International Council of Correspondence Education (ICCE) was founded in 1938. The name of the ICCE was changed at the World Conference, which took place in Vancouver in 1982, to the International Council of Distance Education (ICDE). In the reminiscences on the origin of the term distance education, Shattuck (2023) provides an email correspondence between Otto Peters and Michael G. Moore. In the early 1970s, Otto Peters was already a professor of education focusing on distance learning research and became the founding rector of the FernUniversität in Hagen (Germany) in 1975. Michael G. Moore, around that time, joined Charles A. Wedemeyer as his research assistant at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (USA). Moore explains that Wedemeyer initially advocated the term *independent learning*, but then, as president of the ICCE, favored changing the name to ICDE (Shattuck, 2023).

In a recent interview (Zawacki-Richter, 2024), Otto Peters explains how and why he invented the term *distance education*. In 1969, Peters moved to the DIFF¹ in Tübingen, where he led the “Distance

¹ Deutsches Institut für Fernstudienforschung, German Institute of Distance Education Research

Education Abroad” department and finished his Ph.D. with Günther Dohmen. In this capacity, it was one of his duties to draft papers for European Union meetings preparing the establishment of open and distance teaching universities in the member states:

While carrying out this work, it crossed my mind that English-speaking countries did not distinguish distance teaching (in the secondary area) and distance studies (in the tertiary area). The usual designation here for distance studies at universities was, therefore, the same for both school and commercial courses, namely “correspondence study.” However, I did not want to use the term correspondence study in my conference papers because in several countries, above all in the USA, it was a reminder of severe commercial misuse and, for this reason, no longer had a positive image. It would be unfortunate if the new academic distance studies that we had in mind and wanted to promote were to suffer due to its negative connotation. However, there was no English word corresponding to the German *Fernstudium*, which was why I set about “inventing” an appropriate English term without further ado. I assumed this would be very simple because I needed to translate the German word *Fernstudium* freely for my use in English. My suggestion was to translate it as “distance education.” (Zawacki-Richter, 2024, p. 84)

In the following decade, the term *distance education* became increasingly widespread at international conferences and in education policy papers of the European Union, which ultimately also led to the establishment of the term in North America and the name change of the ICCE to ICDE in 1982.

Conclusion

We can benefit from decades of research, theory, and practice in the field of distance education to inform new developments in digital teaching and learning. Xiao (2018) reminds us that “campus-based universities with the intention of jumping on the bandwagon of distance education should not ignore the history of distance education. Instead, they should learn from its successes and avoid the mistakes it has made” (p. 12).

Therefore, it would be desirable to see more research and reflections on the history and development of distance education. In this commentary, I have underscored the terminological origins. With the dynamic development of digital forms of learning and teaching, a further conceptual sharpening of the field, which I would describe as ODDE, is warranted and necessary.

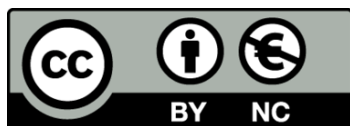
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