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What's in a name? Wrestling with 'ODDE'

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Abstract

JODDE, the Journal of Open, Distance, and Digital Education, is a new and welcome addition to scholarship linked to open and distance learning (ODL). However, the title of the journal should give pause to just what open, distance, and digital education is and stands for. This invited piece critiques ODDE as a concept, in the context of the multiple terms now used to describe models of education. A gradual, haphazard evolution of terminology brought about by innovation fueled by technology is taking shared meaning to a breaking point. Conversations around educational practices are becoming muddled, to the extent that discourse is becoming ambiguous. ODDE becomes an additional term among this already confusing landscape, and while it might serve as an extension to ODL its founding premise of representing forms of teaching and learning considered 'non-traditional' mediated by technologies may already be unnecessary. This article explores the importance of shared terminology, the challenges to ODDE as a term, and the difficulties already facing ODL in the contemporary landscape of practice. Though ODDE is arguably as apt as any alternative for extending the traditional scholarship of open and distance education, a reframing of 'open' and 'distance' might be preferable. 'Open', it is suggested, might be better unpacked to provide a more definite sense of what it promotes; the terms available, inclusive, scalable and sustainable are offered. 'Distance' might be replaced as a term with 'designed,' which is inclusive of multiple methodologies of education practice now in place. The term 'designed' invites the question, *how?* Linked with 'open,' 'designed' provides a means of analysis and objective. In a field where diverse models of education are defined using the same term, and similar models are defined using very different terms, adding a further term (ODDE) into the mix seems disingenuous.

Keywords

definitions, designed education, distance education, ODDE, ODL, open education

1 Scratching the surface of ODDE

A new outlet is available to scholars. The Journal of Open Digital Distance Education (JODDE) is now live, with a critical mission:

Rooted in an ethos of openness, and recognizing the diverse socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural landscapes in different parts of the world, the journal aims to promote a global dialogue and avoid the underrepresentation of diverse critical voices (JODDE, 2024, p. 2).

This new journal, made up of an intentionally international team, certainly meets a need across the landscape of scholarship:

The focus and scope of JODDE are placed on the macro- and meso-levels of educational systems and institutions, including articles reporting on qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies; critical reflections; systematic reviews; theoretical or conceptual articles; and position papers. Articles on micro-level practice, for example, evaluating the impact of single teaching and learning interventions without an institutional or system dimension, are not within the scope of JODDE (JODDE, 2024, p. 3).

The focus on macro- and meso-level concerns, those of the overall context of theories and systems, and institutions and management respectively (Zawacki-Richter & Jung, 2023a), certainly fills a void. But what exactly is Open Digital Distance Education (ODDE)? How helpful is it to put a fresh stake, labelled ODDE, in the ground as a further marker in our scholarly field? Is ODDE a suitable term to 'promote a global dialogue'? Where does ODDE sit across the plethora of alternative terms? Perhaps more provocatively, is ODDE something we ought to be associated with and promote? Is the term intended as a replacement for ODL (open and distance learning), that acronym already used by long-in-the-tooth scholars and practitioners subscribing to its theories?

The answers to these questions are very complex, and consideration of them is very timely. This article introduces the landscape ODDE finds itself in and proposes how the term might be situated across scholarly discourse. ODDE is represented as

a main or alternative mode of delivery to widen access to education, provide flexibility and openness in school education, satisfy continuing educational needs of adults, expand the trained workforce, train teachers to improve the quality of schooling, and/or increase cross-border traffic in education. It has also been considered as an innovation to bring about pedagogical changes in various levels and sectors of education (Zawacki-Richter & Jung, 2023a, p. 4).

So, ODDE represents that contrast to on-campus, fixed education models designed for (usually) young school-leavers, able to attend a campus and commit to full-time study loads. It is an 'alternative.' As such, ODDE seeks to represent the latest step in that gradual and ongoing evolution of delivery models finding their roots in ODL, intended as a superset for those educational techniques and approaches that improve education's reach through digital means.

However, we are also assured that "ODDE is complex in nature and scope as it involves a wide range of nontraditional ways of teaching and learning that are mediated by various media and technologies" (Zawacki-Richter & Jung, 2023a, p. 5). It is at this point that we need to acknowledge the messiness of terms currently being used to describe the sheer breadth of educational practice around the world – and in doing so we quickly encounter the limitations of the language being used across the 'non-traditional' space. We enter a confusing, grey twilight of

sense, where we all claim to know what we mean with the words we use without precision, using terms interchangeably and largely subjectively.

This article traverses a semantic landscape where things become complex very, very quickly. This is not unusual when language is deliberately investigated; even defining something as tangible as a table is problematic, as Bertrand Russell once illustrated. It is apparent that “In daily life, we assume as certain many things which, on a closer scrutiny, are found to be so full of apparent contradictions that only a great amount of thought enables us to know what it is that we really may believe” (Russell, 2015, p. 1). Once we put the assumptions of terminology under scrutiny, ‘apparent contradictions’ are quickly revealed, and our need for better definition becomes clear.

An immediate observation about ODDE is its presentation as ‘a main or alternative mode’ that ‘is complex in nature and scope as it involves a wide range of nontraditional ways of teaching and learning that are mediated by various media and technologies.’ Two questions arise: what is a ‘mode’, particularly as a single entity consisting of multiple diverse practices? And what might be considered ‘traditional’ as a contrast to ‘nontraditional’? It is helpful to begin with the latter consideration.

1.1 Traditional and non-traditional

Traditional boundaries are not what they used to be.

Some fifty years ago, following the successful beginning of the Open University UK that arguably popularised ODL, it was relatively straightforward to distinguish between a ‘traditional’ university and a ‘non-traditional’ ODL one. This is no longer the case, which a simple illustration demonstrates.

Consider a university with a vast campus, timetabled lectures, cafeteria, and expectation of attendance; certainly traditional. However, thanks to a straightforward technological innovation, timetabled lectures are now livestreamed and recorded for remote students alongside those sitting in the lecture theatre. This enhances the flexibility of education, and improves its openness, through a technological means. ‘Traditional,’ or ‘non-traditional’? Both? Do we now have an ODDE university? Or is this university part ODDE, and part not?

What was once a clear separation is now, thanks to technology, more of a muddle. The categories of ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ can no longer be applied to the realities of practice. This simple illustration reveals that ODDE simply cannot categorise those forms of practice no longer representative across the ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ binary. More, we can see that even the classic ODL way of viewing things has eroded. Extending ODL into ODDE merely takes this difficulty forward. Inserting ‘Digital’ into the ODL acronym will not prove much help (assuming the ‘Education’ and ‘Learning’ elements to be interchangeable).

This muddling of practice applies to the micro (teaching and learning), meso and macro levels of education. We would be hard-pressed to identify any form of education that is now truly ‘traditional,’ and so also hard-pressed to suggest that ODDE as a term best represents ‘a main or alternative mode.’ While a case could be made by proponents of ODDE that most digitally enhanced innovation in higher education is ODDE (in that it is ‘non-traditional’) and so should be referred to as such, we are unlikely to see many innovators in higher education from within ‘traditional’ universities describing their progress in terms of those classic ODL theories that ODDE seeks to carry forward.

The ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ distinction no longer applies, and to pretend that it does risk chipping ODL-based scholarship off into its own branch of research that runs counter to how educational models are progressing. Educational practice is no longer easily divisible across

'traditional' and 'non-traditional,' and across the significant adoption of 'non-traditional' practice ODL (and by extension ODDE) cannot claim to have won converts. Instead, scholarship seems to be attracted to the alternative terminology outlined in the next section, many of which terms have their roots in those forms of education considered 'traditional' some fifty years ago.

ODDE seems a logical candidate for extending classic ODL into the digital age, as hinted at in Moore (2023). However, as such, ODDE looks to continue a line of scholarship that already finds itself increasingly displaced by those innovative digital practices with roots in 'traditional' forms of education rather than ODL. The term 'blended' already claims to occupy the growing 'non-traditional' space that ODDE seeks to expand into (Beetham et al., 2024; Hrastinski, 2019; Vaughan et al., 2023). The 'traditional,' 'non-traditional' divide is already irrelevant, and terms for this new world are already in use.

1.2 Modes and models

Claiming ODDE as a 'mode' of education is problematic. We have already considered the bi-modal view of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional,' a binary that is no longer representative. Helpfully, though, the term 'mode' is also applied in the context of ODDE to describe a particular *orientation* to education that seeks to 'widen access to education, provide flexibility and openness...[through] innovation'. Perhaps our solution can be as simple as replacing 'mode' with 'orientation.' Either way, 'mode' does not seem a helpful term to introduce as it implies a classification system or framework (Johnson, 2021; Nichols, 2023b), and it is not clear where ODDE might find itself across these frameworks.

It could be, under Johnson's (2021) framework, ODDE contends for the 'Online Learning,' 'Hybrid Learning' and 'In-Person Technology-Supported Learning' modes. The difficulties in settling this are significant, not least because Johnson's own framework is problematic for suggesting 'online' as a mode (Nichols, 2023a). Our attention might be best directed to *models of education* rather than categorisation by mode.

The phrase 'mode of *delivery*' (emphasis added) suggests that ODDE does indeed seek to represent a *model of education*. Here, we encounter the problem that ODDE is also described as representing 'a wide range' of practice, that is, a *spread of models of education* as broad as those practices that 'widen access to education, provide flexibility and openness...' There are multiple terms used to describe models of education, including 'blended,' 'distance,' and 'hybrid.' We now enter the territory that Russell warned us about: are we to believe blended learning is a form of ODDE, or vice-versa? If something is described as 'online' and seeks to improve accessibility to education, is it more accurate to call it ODDE? Or is ODDE instead a subset of 'online'? Rather than clarifying the situation presented by a plethora of terms, ODDE merely adds to the many voices in the terminological marketplace. We will consider this cacophony of voices in more depth shortly.

If ODDE is to find its place, it is likely as a term used to summarise different models of education aligned with its general orientation. So, we might describe ODDE as 'encompassing a range of educational models all designed to improve the access, flexibility and openness of education drawing on practices rooted in the open and distance education tradition, with the particular feature of digital technologies.' As such ODDE can once again be characterised as digital ODL, and so needs to find its place alongside those other contenders already being applied to describe emerging educational practice.

Key to this suggested definition of ODDE is the phrase, 'drawing on practices rooted in the open and distance education tradition.' It is that addition which provides a distinguishing element from 'blended,' which would not make such an explicit claim of heritage. However, despite its

decades of solid theory, innovative practice, and incredible contribution to the opening of education, ODL can no longer claim a monopoly on educational innovation nor, indeed, on opening education to more learners or overcoming the barriers of distance. The future of ODDE depends on the contemporary status of ODL, a status already under question (Nichols, 2024).

It is unlikely that ODDE can be considered the meta-term for all educational models that are non-traditional in their pursuit of more openness and flexibility in higher education through digital means. ODL, and so ODDE, is already facing an existential crisis from those 'traditional' universities orientating themselves toward more accessible, flexible, and open education without any reference to ODL in its classic guise. While their practice may overlap with and be similar to ODL, such universities do not purposefully link to ODL literature nor necessarily perceive it as relevant. While ODL might claim a 'win' here toward relevance, it cannot claim to have extended its reach (noting that other terms are usually associated with such innovation).

To bring some main points together toward a logical cascade:

1. Around fifty years ago, it was simpler to distinguish between 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' modes of education. ODL was a clear alternative, representing an asynchronous and accessible design in contrast to the requirements of the traditional model built around full-time, lecture-based, on-campus tuition. For the most part, 'campus-based' and 'distance' (ODL) practice were in opposing corners.
2. ODDE has its roots in ODL and seeks to take that same legacy of the 'non-traditional' mode of education into the digital age. However, the category of 'non-traditional' is now highly fragmented and includes newly designed models of tuition with roots traceable to both the traditional and non-traditional modes of fifty years ago. While a bi-modal differentiation across 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' once made sense, the breadth of practice now in place means it can no longer be sustained.
3. ODDE is representative of different 'models' of education, so might be defined as 'encompassing a range of educational models all designed to improve the access, flexibility and openness of education drawing on practices rooted in the open and distance education tradition, with the particular feature of digital technologies.' However, improving the access, flexibility and openness of education does not require any reference to classic ODL theory and can take place alongside it. The former hegemony of ODL over 'non-traditional' can no longer be assumed.

The context of education practice has changed, with multiple designs now possible that combine teaching practice, learner contexts and technology across a remarkable galaxy of expression – each of which tends to improve access, flexibility, and openness of education as a matter of course.

2 Contemporary terminology

The range of educational approaches now designed through technology and pedagogical innovation is nothing short of incredible. Each model might be thought of as branching innovatively from two main starting points: classic asynchronous ODL, and the traditional synchronous approach still discernible across most universities. However, as the branches from both points began to merge, new terminology flourished to the extent that it can be difficult to discern which starting point they came from. This section, not intended as a thorough glottochronology, considers how the evolution of the terms 'open' and 'distance' in the form of ODL might be summarised.

2.1 The evolution of modes to models

Section 1.2 considered the difference between ‘modes’ and ‘models,’ concluding that the latter was a more appropriate fit for ODDE. The shift from ‘mode’ to ‘model’ as a more suitable platform might be traced as a natural consequence of the rapid evolution of educational practice. The evolution of binary mode to multiplicity of models over time can be crudely illustrated as follows.

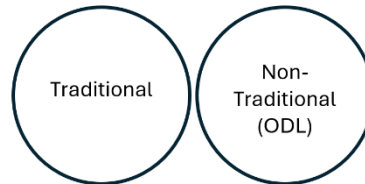


Figure 1: Representation of classic binary educational modes of circa fifty years ago

Figure 1 represents the simpler, binary phase of ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ forms of education that might be said to exist before and across the 1970s, where open and distance learning could securely claim a ‘non-traditional’ identity. Alternative pedagogies were largely limited to the infrastructure of the time; these are days pre-computer-networking for the purposes of tuition. ‘Traditional’ might be considered synchronous and on-campus (in-classroom) and ‘non-traditional’ asynchronous and correspondence. Bi modality at this stage is easy to defend; ODL is indeed a ‘non-traditional’ mode, clearly distinguishable from ‘traditional’ forms of education with little variety of practice.

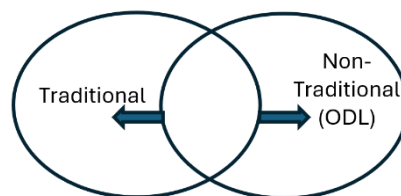


Figure 2: Representation of crossover as technology and pedagogies extend

Figure 2 is evidenced by the increasing presence of articles related to ‘blended’ and ‘online’ learning practice as alternative to ODL over time across such journals such as *Distance Education* (Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016) and the *British Journal of Educational Technology* (Bond et al., 2019). This phase might be considered to have begun in the late 1980s, with considerable acceleration across the 1990s. It is also broadly characteristic of the early 2000s as technologies continued to improve in capability, usability, and reach. ‘Traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ forms of education can still be discerned, but more and more variability of practice now stretches the differences across the two as options extend. The arrows in Figure 2 represent the steady invasion of these new forms of practice into the classic territories of ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional,’ challenging their validity as bi modal representatives. ODL might still claim to be a ‘mode’ however its boundaries with respect to ‘traditional’ practices are becoming increasingly uncertain.

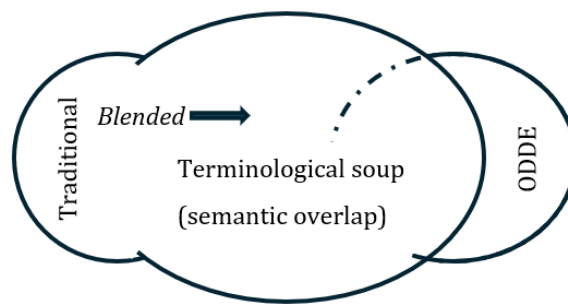


Figure 3: Representation of contemporary models

Figure 3 represents where we now find ourselves. ‘Traditional,’ though it might still be practiced in the form of its original binary, can now more properly be considered to have extended into a variety of different models. A recent JISC report (Beetham et al., 2024) provides an excellent example of how the ‘traditional’ is extending into the ‘non-traditional’ without reference to the models or theoretical foundations of ODL or, by extension, ODDE. Tellingly, the report assumes blended learning is based on “in place learning (where learners and educators are physically present in the same space)” (Beetham et al., 2024, sec. The need for new approaches). Similarly, blended learning is elsewhere described as “the integration of face-to-face and online learning activities” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 8). So, the term ‘blended’ might be said to represent those approaches beginning at the ‘traditional’ extreme.

In fact, innovation is now at the point where practices from across the traditional spectrum might be considered of interest to all (Xiao, 2018). A distinction for ‘ODL’ or ‘ODDE’ attempts to anchor such developments at the extreme of Figure 3, whereas innovations now tend to swirl in that area of overlap. It is all too possible for educational models including ‘in place’ (Beetham et al.) or ‘face-to-face’ (Garrison & Vaughan) tuition to have their origins in what might be considered the ODDE extreme of Figure 3. In degree programmes at the author’s institution, the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, ‘face-to-face’ tuition is sometimes included as an extension of traditional ODL practice when required by accrediting bodies. These programmes might be said to integrate ‘online’ learning activities and face-to-face, a reversal of the order of Vaughan et al. So, it seems, ‘blended learning’ is a contender for the same real estate ODDE seeks to occupy – but it is not alone. Indeed, ‘blended’ learning might be said to have long camped alongside ODL, with advocates of the latter keen to retain a separation.

We now find ourselves confronted with ‘bichronous,’ ‘blended,’ ‘distance,’ ‘extra-mural,’ ‘flexible,’ ‘flipped,’ ‘hybrid,’ ‘hyflex,’ ‘online,’ ‘remote,’ ‘streamed,’ ‘technology enhanced,’ and ‘work-based’ options (and more!), each of which invite a casual addition of the suffix ‘education’ or ‘learning.’ It is not helpful to assume that all these ‘non-traditional’ approaches are ODDE if they happen to extend the reach of education and make use of digital technology as part of their workings. In fact, many of these terms have their origin, and majority of practice, in those organisations with roots in the ‘traditional’ camp of Figure 1. As suggested in Nichols (2024), the only scholars thinking in terms of ODL as a superset for ‘non-traditional’ are those already identifying as ODL scholars. Other educators, representing the extension of new models from the previous ‘traditional’ binary, are using different terms – and it is unlikely that they will adopt ODDE in place of their current descriptors.

The complexity of Figure 3 is intentional. ODDE, as suggested earlier, is seeking to extend classic ODL into its contemporary phase of extended digital practice, while maintaining a separate identity as ‘non-traditional.’ However, the territory it is seeking to inhabit is already

overpopulated, to the extent that (as the Figure implies) 'ODDE' might be considered an outlier. In Figure 3 any sense of 'mode' is broken; models of practice become the focus, though these are fragmented across a confusing semantic overlap that makes scholarly conversation extremely difficult. As a metaphor, the models are intermixed in a homogenous soup of terminology.

So, ODDE is useful as a means of describing the ongoing evolution of ODL, however it is not inclusive enough or representative enough to span the emerging models that now have significant buy-in from scholars. The evolutionary concept of survival of the fittest does not favour ODL across the species of terms now in use, and so ODDE seeks to extend a breed already facing extinction.

The opaqueness of the soup is easily illustrated by a definition of 'hyflex', described as "an instructional approach that combines face-to-face (F2F) and online learning... an instructor, along with some students, could 'attend' class remotely, while other students join physically from a room on campus" (Milman et al., 2020, sec. What is it?). This, apparently, is therefore a form of 'blended' learning as defined earlier. The gymnastics required for terminology to find its place can be seen in how the term 'bichronous online learning' lands among others "as the **blending** of both asynchronous and synchronous online learning, where students can participate in anytime, anywhere learning during the asynchronous parts of the course but then participate in real-time activities for the synchronous sessions" (Martin et al., 2020, sec. Bichronous (Asynchronous + Synchronous)). The definition given here is very similar to that of 'hyflex,' and makes a claim to 'blended' as part of its own identity.

The last thirty years or so since the phenomenal growth of the internet and digital education have certainly changed educational practice. The plethora of terms now in use are a clear testimony to the pedagogical innovation that *continues* to take place, naturally aligning with the general trajectory of improving the 'access, flexibility and openness of education' claimed as part of the suggested definition of ODDE. The problems of terminology that have emerged over the last few decades demonstrate a lack of differentiation and description. These same problems also apply to ODDE as a model.

2.2 'Open' and 'distance'

We might follow the terms 'open' and 'distance' applying the same lens of evolution. It is argued elsewhere (Nichols, 2024) that the terms 'open' and 'distance' need reconsideration, on the grounds that their own evolution has diverged (in the case of 'open') and faded into an obscurity facing extinction (in the case of 'distance' in the physical sense; the psychological and cognitive senses as defined by Michael Moore remain entirely relevant). The close of this article will restate the conclusions of that earlier piece; suffice for now to reiterate that the terms 'open' and 'distance' find themselves appropriated, underestimated, relegated, tangential, and congested. Neither is suitable as a hitching point for what ODDE seeks to take into the future.

The term 'open' is particularly problematic. Its innovative roots, perhaps best exemplified as applied to the Open University UK's mission of being "open to people, places, methods and ideas" (Open University, n.d.), are now overshadowed by its use as a prefix to such things as 'open educational resources' and 'open source' software. The term is now associated more with 'free' and 'sharable' than it is with a more audacious call for inclusiveness, a point largely accepted by the scholarly community because openness is now considered "a living idea" (Koçdar et al., 2023, p. 13), more characteristic of an 'epistemic community' than a 'social movement' (Koçdar et al., 2023). 'Open' has become pedestrian, a far cry from its initial, paradigm-changing presence as the lead component of ODL.

The term ‘distance’ is also experiencing challenges in the ongoing, terminological evolutionary survival of the fittest. The term is becoming less helpful as a means of differentiating practice and risks exclusivity. It is already by-passed as a term by those institutions successful in offering ODL-style education that prefer to refer to themselves as ‘online’ (Nichols, 2024).

In the latter part of 2015, before leaving New Zealand for a role with the Open University, UK, the author had the privilege of supporting DEANZ (the Distance Education Association of New Zealand) through a period of redefinition which saw it emerge as FLANZ (the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand). There was concern that the term ‘distance’ was not a broad or inclusive enough superset to embrace the new forms of ‘non-traditional’ education in Aotearoa New Zealand seeking a community; the name change adopted the dominant term felt to be of relevance to members.

Similarly, albeit earlier and on a much larger scale, the International Council of Correspondence Education, ICCE, changed its name in 1982 to the International Council for Distance Education, ICDE. While with hindsight the change of reference point from ‘correspondence’ to ‘distance’ makes good sense, the change was controversial at the time. Some were convinced that the term ‘correspondence’ was no longer representative; others struggled with the discontinuity a change to ‘distance’ might bring.

The change in name had its roots in the 1970s, but it took a decade for ‘correspondence’ to give way to ‘distance’ (Young, 1982). The first to formally propose the change was none other than Professor Charles Wedemeyer, who in May 1972 “asked members to discuss a change to ‘a broader and more appropriate title’” (Young, 1982, p. 8). The arguments at the time for both ‘correspondence’ and ‘distance’ are informative:

Table 1: Points made in favour of the terms ‘correspondence’ and ‘distance’ respectively (Young, 1982, p. 9, emphasis original)

Correspondence	
<i>For</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It expresses that there will be a <i>response</i> – two-way communication is a vital part of education. 2. It has been the <i>key</i> word in ICCE’s name for 44 years. 3. Students <i>prefer</i> it. 4. There is a <i>warmth</i> about it which creates interest. 5. It emphasises the <i>bringing together</i> of student and tutor.
Distance	
<i>For</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Several eminent <i>researchers</i> in our field of education like it and use it. 2. It is the <i>in-word</i> among officials at Unesco [sic] and some government and semi-government organisations. 3. It appears to be the only <i>alternative</i> to correspondence. 4. It is held by some to be a <i>broader</i> term, incorporating other media besides the post and the printed word.

It is clear from this summary that reasons in favour for both terms were in part emotional, appealed to familiarity, and were concerned with the desire for the field maintain some consistency. There was a need for continuity, in the context of change, and no clear science underpinned the move.

At the time, there was a clear alternative term to 'correspondence': 'distance', which was gaining in popularity and was widely in use by UNESCO and other agencies, despite "the natural meaning of the word, which is 'remoteness', 'stand-offishness' and 'aloofness of manner'" (Young, 1982, p. 10). The change from 'correspondence' had both push and pull forces at work upon it; the term had become outdated and a new term, more in vogue, was standing by to take its place. The change from ICCE's 'correspondence' to 'distance' education, proposed by Otto Peters (Zawacki-Richter, 2024) and agreed at the 1982 ICCE conference at Vancouver, "was carried by a large majority" (Daniel, 1983, p. 14). Tellingly,

Like all debates on names this one raised issues far more complex than simple comparisons of dictionary definitions... The arrival of representatives of the wave of state-supported open colleges and universities that were created around the world from the 1960's onward caused some misgivings among the founding constituencies of ICCE. Inevitably, if wrongly, the move to change the name of the Council was sometimes interpreted as a newcomers' takeover bid. (Daniel, 1983, p. 14).

The name change was officially agreed to at the 1982 Vancouver ICCE conference, adopting 'distance' "on the grounds that it would better reflect the growing diversity of methods for learning outside the classroom and emphasise the Council's role as the worldwide association in distance education" (Sewart, 2014, p. 13).

To bring this section to a close, some further points will be added to the cascade of argument here:

4. The vast selection of terminology now in use for describing non-traditional forms of education follows a natural evolution reflecting changes to the design of educational practice. These terms are not easy to mutually distinguish and frequently overlap, and ODDE finds itself among them.
5. The terms 'open' and 'distance' themselves, though familiar, are not necessarily a stable platform for revisiting terminology as it relates to different models of education. These terms have their own evolution and may not represent the fittest possibilities for changes to the design of educational practice. Adding 'digital' to ODL is a descriptive fix, however it is unlikely to provide scholars with the fittest option for discourse in the longer term.
6. Terminology is difficult to change. Even where a clear replacement is standing by the incumbent has the advantage of familiarity. ODDE faces a tremendous barrier toward becoming the new alternative to ODL, even though the landmark *Springer Handbook of Open, Digital and Distance Education* (Zawacki-Richter & Jung, 2023b) provides a common point of reference.

The lack of common terminology is becoming an acute problem for educational practice, and so it is timely to consider different ways in which the fragmentation of terminology ODDE seeks to bring together might be approached.

3 Confronting terminology

By this stage the urgency of the terminological problem is clear. We are in desperate need of a common terminology, one that gives academics, administrators, decision-makers, educators, readers, researchers, scholars, and students confidence in what is being written about, compared,

and promoted. While some excellent recent work has been done in this regard (Johnson, 2021, 2023; Johnson et al., 2022), we are yet to reach a definitive conclusion (Nichols, 2023a, 2024).

The key issue we face across our terminological options is that of ambiguity, in this case the result of

woolly and muddled thinking... [In logical discourse], the most general practical part is that which treats of the ambiguity of terms – of the uncertainty and the variety of meaning possessed by words... whenever two or more meanings are confused, we inevitably commit a logical fallacy, darken counsel, render hazardous the way of communication (Partridge & Whitcut, 2008, p. 18).

The current variety of terms across educational practice is very muddled, and very woolly. 'Open', as stated before, is 'a living idea.' 'Distance,' too, is amorphous:

The field of "open and distance education" in which many of us work as practitioners and researchers is neither fixed or settled nor endowed with an internal telos that awaits our discovery and compliance. Instead, it is a discursive construction held together by a web of ideas that intermesh, layer, and cohere into epistemic sense over time, but only contingently so. This is because, by its nature as a discourse, it is open to contestation and is ultimately malleable (Lim et al., 2023, p. 187).

The term 'distance' is itself relative, as illustrated by the theory of transactional distance: "Teaching-learning programs are not dichotomously either 'distance' or 'not distance,' but they have 'more distance' or 'less distance'" (Moore, 2007, p. 91). It is, then, perhaps more correct for us to talk of 'distances education' with reference to models.

We seldom take opportunity to contest the terms we take for granted, because we seldom acknowledge this fluffiness as a problem. However, rather than taking a sense of pride in the malleability of how we describe our field, we should instead be entirely concerned. We need clarity and consistency in terminology. Our core terms 'open' and 'distance' are relative, not specific, which in the context of multiple models of education means that we are seeking to extend our discourse through the banner of ODDE upon shifting clouds, not solid ground. Nouns are important, and ours increasingly lack substance. How, for example, can we compare studies claiming to promote evidence-based practice for 'distance education,' when actual models might differ?

We might talk of 'open, digital, and distance education' however Institution A's practice of ODDE might be meaningfully different to that of Institution B – and others might use an entirely different term, appropriately, to describe what Institution A does. This fragments our discourse in woolly and muddled ways. The danger of this is again highlighted elsewhere (Nichols, 2024), making the case that wooliness can mean that the core theories and principles of ODL (even if repositioned as ODDE) can be completely overlooked by those who have adopted other terms ('blended' in the case highlighted in that work).

A further point, then, in the gradual cascade of this article's thesis:

7. The current terminology within ODL (for 'open,' 'distance') is extremely flexible, affecting the positioning of ODDE. This flexibility is problematic, as it increasingly indicates an unsettledness problematic for discourse, and risks the terms ODL (and, by extension, ODDE) being overlooked by those preferring a more concrete descriptor of how their practice is designed.

3.1 Options for resolving the plethora of terminology

So, what should be our response as a community of scholars? At least four options look to be available to us as we consider how to better represent ODL:

1. Let a thousand terms bloom.
2. Categorise by exception to 'traditional' and maintain ODL (extending to ODDE).
3. Categorise based on criteria.
4. Adopt a structure for conversation.

A case will be made for option four based on a variant of three, following some reflections on the first two.

Letting a thousand terms bloom is where we now find ourselves. Literature and discussion are already sufficiently confusing for this option to be dismissed. Attempts to reign in and standardise terminological options (Johnson, 2021, 2023; Johnson et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2020; Nichols, 2023b; Nichols & Seelig, 2022) are already demonstrating the importance of consistency to reduce the woolliness and muddled confusion of contemporary educational practice. However, it is unlikely that any of these will become the new default of practice discourse. More such options will only further befuddle.

Categorising by exception to 'tradition' seeking to extend the legacy of ODL (in this case by rephrasing it as ODDE) is problematic for the reasons given earlier. This is an attempt to continue modal thinking, which is no longer sustainable now that 'traditional' is no longer easily categorised. New forms of practice extending from the 'traditional' mode are difficult to differentiate from what once might have been termed 'non-traditional' models.

We are best to instead adopt a deliberate structure for discourse drawing from a set of criteria that can be used to describe different models of education. Trying to establish a standard set of categories is too nebulous to provide a solution (Nichols, 2023a). Instead, we might consider ways in which we can promote more care and disclosure over the models we are seeking to include and more deliberate ways of representing the differences in educational models.

3.2 Suggested criteria for describing models

The assertion has been made that it is no longer helpful to discuss education in terms of 'mode,' but to rather emphasise the actual design of the models of education under discussion.

A starting point of models brings more deliberate attention to "the more traditional learning design issues like activity, task, technology and materials" (Beetham et al., 2024, sec. Going beyond blended learning). The four elements of blended learning are suggested as:

1. **Time, pace and timing:** synchronous (live, shared time) and asynchronous (independent, own time)
2. **Space:** place and platform
3. **Learning materials:** tools, facilities, learning media and other resources (digital, print-based, other materials)
4. **Groups, roles and relationships:** teacher-led and peer learning, varieties of group learning (Beetham et al., 2024, sec. Four aspects of learning).

This thinking looks to take us down the right track, and leads us to two further points extending this article's thesis:

8. Models of learning are best primarily differentiated based on whether the underlying operating model is asynchronous or synchronous by design (Nichols, 2022; Nichols &

Seelig, 2022), noting that ‘bichronous’ is at heart synchronous from an operating model perspective.

9. Models of education are best described in terms of their design as they relate to the overall mechanisms they adopt toward learner activity, teaching activity, resources, timetable, and assessment activities. ODDE can be said to represent multiple combinations of these, however other terms will overlap considerably.

So, it is possible to provide a reliable structure for more solid, less woolly, and much clearer discourse related to models of education What, though, for ODL, the term ODDE seeks to extend?

4 Suggested framework for the future of ODL

Historically an entire field of scholarship and practice has been described under the shorthand ‘Open and Distance Learning,’ the validity of ‘open’ underscored by its use as the describing element of ‘open universities’ across the globe. The validity of ‘distance’ is easily illustrated through the multiple global professional organisations including ABED, DETC, EDEN, FIED, ICDE, and ODLAA (as well as journals including *Distance Education*, *The American Journal of Distance Education*, *The Asian Journal of Distance Education*, and many others). Many universities also have a ‘distance education’ strategy, and the term is also widely used by governments and such agencies as UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning as a shorthand for education that is not necessarily confined to the grounds of a campus. ODL is part of the contemporary landscape, but its future is in doubt; its core terms of ‘open’ and ‘distance’ are now woolly, ambiguous, and increasingly sidelined.

To begin with a solution for ‘open,’ it is argued elsewhere that ‘open’ needs to be reclaimed as “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” (Nichols, 2024, p. 228)

More controversially, a very different proposal is made for the term ‘distance.’ Clearly, ‘distance education’ means something, perhaps best put by Holmberg who described it as

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 organization (Holmberg, 1977, p. 9).

Returning to an earlier point and with reference again to Figure 1, this distinction made sense when educational models were limited in practice. Based on Moore’s own observation that ‘distance’ is not dichotomous and the clear evidence that multiple models of education now address the classic issues of distance without reference to ‘distance,’ the term is no longer helpful at all except for those already invested in the ODL paradigm.

So, how might we replace 'distance' in model discourse? A preferred candidate is already injected throughout this article. The term 'design' represents a fresh option, and it draws us back to how models of education function.

'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 (Nichols, 2024, p. 229).

So, to bring a final point to the thesis of this article:

10. The terms 'open' and 'distance' themselves need to be reset. 'Open' can be considered a vision for education design that seeks to make education opportunities ever more available, inclusive, scalable, and sustainable. 'Distance' might be best replaced by the term 'designed,' which emphasises the importance of educational models as they seek to become more open.

5 Conclusion

Across the ten statements across this article, it is suggested that the term 'ODDE' is a logical one for extending the ODL paradigm assuming the historic bi-modal picture of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' still holds true. As such, ODDE might be defined as 'encompassing a range of educational models all designed to improve the access, flexibility and openness of education drawing on practices rooted in the open and distance education tradition, with the particular feature of digital technologies.'

However, it is also suggested that the reality of discourse now centres around multiple educational models described by a muddled set of terminology that makes discourse woolly and ambiguous. Rather than extending ODL by adding 'Digital' and swapping 'Learning' for 'Education,' we are best to reframe ODL completely or else risk being sidelined by those now preferring alternate terms. ODDE may seek to continue a paradigm of thought no longer appropriate to discourse.

We have here a new journal, and so a new opportunity to debate what ODDE, and for that matter ODL, stands for. If JODDE is indeed wanting to 'promote a global dialogue and avoid the underrepresentation of diverse critical voices,' it may be best to open itself more deliberately to those models of educational design that self-identify under different terminology. This would be true to this journal's focus on macro- and meso-matters, as the actual design of education models is very much determined by decisions made at these levels.

Author's note:

I would like to express my gratitude and admiration to the editorial team of JODDE for encouraging this piece for publication. It reveals a generosity of scholarship and academic endeavor to include a piece as critical as this in an inaugural issue of a journal and bodes well for a community of practice seeking to continuously develop.

Further debate surrounding the theme of this article is welcome and needed. The messiness, muddle, woolliness, and ambiguity around our terminology is now acute, not helped by casual use of terms such as 'mode' and 'model.' There is important work to be done as we reorient ourselves to the very different environment ODL, and by extension ODDE, now populates.

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