Looking beyond definitions of open and distance education: A discipline that needs rethinking

Sanjaya Mishra [ORCID]

[1] Commonwealth of Learning, Canada

Correspondence:
Sanjaya Mishra | e-mail: smishra.col@gmail.com

Abstract

The practice of distance education is nearly 300 years old. As a field, it has grown in practical relevance and contributed to the needs of society. Due to its critical dependence on the technologies of the day, the pace of development is also breakneck, and the definitions and ideas around distance education keep moving in different directions. While the core definition of distance education is still relevant with appropriate contemporary interpretations, the field needs more discussion and focus on the characteristics of distance education as a discipline. In this paper, I critically analyse and reflect on the disciplinary characteristics of distance education that merit more professional training and opportunities at the pre-service level to build and strengthen the discipline's future.

Keywords

Distance education; open education; discipline; definitions; professionalism; training.

1 Introduction

Distance education, more specifically open and distance education, has come a long way since its early beginning as correspondence education. Historically, scholars have attempted to define distance education to provide operational meaning and guidance to practitioners of distance education and institutions offering courses and programmes using distance education (Keegan, 1980, 1988; Garrison & Shale, 1987; Rumble, 1989). More recently, Bozkurt (2019) provides a historical overview of the definitions and theories of distance education. However, the field is now filled with several terms, including online learning, blended learning, virtual learning, etc., emphasizing that discourse and innovations in the field are progressing without the use of 'open' and 'distance', which is problematic (Nichols, 2024a).

In order to make sense of the field, Johnson (2020) provided a framework to categorize digital learning as used in Canadian post-secondary institutions and using the modality frame as reference, grouped learning into categories: In-person learning and distance learning. The latter includes blended learning, online learning, and offline distance learning. Further, in the context of online learning in Canada, Johnson et al. (2022) looked into how post-secondary institutions use different terminologies. Using the models of the learning spectrum to categorize learning experiences, they conclude that the defining lines are mostly blurred, though the extremes are easy to delineate.

Johnson (2023) agrees that it is unlikely that a common definition of terminologies would be achieved. Therefore, a mode-based spectrum is a 'good enough' consensus for the higher education community. For Nichols and Seelig (2022), online as a category is unsuitable, as it does not clearly distinguish across different modes. Instead, they argue that asynchronous and synchronous could provide a better definition of clarity for online learning. However, Zawacki-Richter and Naidu (2016) stated that "online education is beginning to be seen as the new face of distance education" (p. 258). Mishra (2001) also emphasized that online learning is the new age of distance education. During the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency remote teaching, which is not the same as online learning, started to be considered as "a form of triage appropriate under emergency conditions" (Nichols, 2023b, p. 646).

Reflecting on the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Open, Distance and Digital Education* (ODDE), Nichols (2024b) further highlights that attempting to define any mode of education is problematic and introduces considering ODDE as comprising "a range of educational models designed to improve the access, flexibility, and openness of education drawing on practices rooted in the open and distance education" (p. 4). He concluded that open and distance education "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" (p. 13). He suggests replacing 'distance' with 'designed', which has been questioned by Zawacki-Richter et al. (2024), as all educational programmes are essentially the result of deliberate design, and the suggested change "does not help distinguish different models of education appropriately" (p. 5).

In this reflective essay, I revisit definitions of open and distance education from contemporary perspectives and make a case for moving the discussion toward further strengthening the field by focusing on the core issues that are impeding its growth and development as a discipline. This is based on recent discussions and is an attempt to argue for more professional efforts toward developing a common understanding about open and distance education. In the rest of the paper, I cover (i) an overview of the definitions, (ii) the need for a discipline-based practice, and (iii) a

way forward and its implications for theory, research and practice. I hope this reflection will lead to more discussion on how distance education can strengthen the field as a discipline.

Positionality statement: I have over 30 years of teaching, research, and management experience in the field of distance education. I started my first job in distance education without any formal education and training in the field/discipline. I subsequently completed a master's degree in distance education through distance mode and became a member of academic faculty responsible for teaching, research, and staff development in distance education. I have conducted several capacity-building workshops in many countries around the world (especially in the low-income countries of the Commonwealth) and have firsthand experience of how inadequate these short-term in-service training are. My experiences, education, and research in distance education form the basis of the discussion in this paper. As such, these may also have contributed to my own bias towards pre-service education and training for professionalizing distance education. It could be considered one of the limitations of this paper that presents my personal views, though I have tried to justify these through citing relevant literature.

2   Defining open and distance education

In the call for the special issue of this journal, Nichols (2025) asked, "is it still helpful to talk in terms of 'open' and 'distance' learning?" (para 1) and posited that "'Open' and 'distance' no longer represent a unique call to access, innovation, and quality alternate opportunity as they used to" (para 2). So, the special issue is based on the idea of 're-branding' open and distance learning. In order to discuss the need for a focus on distance education as a discipline, I first revisit the key definitions of 'distance education' and 'open learning' and then analyze why practice needs to acknowledge the field better than it does today.

Nichols (2024a) provided five reasons for the decline in using the classical definitions of open and distance education (ODE). These are:

- 'Open' and 'distance' were used as alternatives to campus-based education. However, their use has significantly changed over the years due to the emergence of open educational resources (OER) or practices (OEP) and the synchronous use of virtual learning environments to reduce distance.
- There is less strategic thinking about making education open, and ODE is used only for operational gains, underestimating the power of openness.
- More contemporary terminologies, such as 'blended' and 'online', are preferred in popular expression.
- Emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic pushed open and distance education discourse into tangentiality.
- The field is also congested with discussions around many other topics, such as artificial intelligence, micro-credentials, and massive open online courses.

While these reasons are valid, we need to critically reflect on the resilience of the discipline and its theoretical background to understand pathways for strengthening discourses in the field. Discussing the helpfulness of terminology in the context of ODE, Nichols (2023a) attributed that the definition of ODE should:

1. Provide a clear distinction across different modes. How is this different from other forms?
2. Benefit strategy and operational decisions. What opportunities does this offer, and how is it made to work?

3. Enable a common dialogue in literature. How do we know we are talking about the same thing, for purposes of comparison?
4. Give insight into the teaching and learning experience. What does the teacher do? The learner? What infrastructure is required? (Nichols, 2023a, p. 144)

As indicated previously, the contemporary definitions of ODE are largely based on the modality approach rather than the conceptual foundations or the theoretical underpinnings. Therefore, it is appropriate to look at Keegan's (1986) definition of distance education and use the analytical-explanatory elements of the definition through contemporary lenses (Table 1).

Table 1: Interpreting the classical definition of distance education

Elements of the definition	Contemporary interpretation
Distance education is defined by	*We could interpret the definition as*
Quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process.	Teachers are essential in the teaching and learning process, but their presence is not always in person or in synchronous sessions (physical or online). Teaching presence could be embedded in learning materials and resources used asynchronously by the learner.
Influence of an educational organisation both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services.	An educational provider facilitates the teaching and learning process; therefore, the learning is not private, self-learning, or preparation for examination. While the educational organization could be interpreted as any recognized provider at any level of education, it could also include for-profit providers and course aggregators that provide support services to learners using learning resources provided by other educational organizations.
Use of technical media: print, audio, video, or computer to unite teacher and learner and to carry the content of the course.	This is essentially a common feature of contemporary distance or online education. It includes a variety of technologies (synchronous and asynchronous) and media, including the use of intelligent technologies such as messaging systems, GenAI, and AR/VR tools.
Provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue.	Contemporary technologies have facilitated two-way communication for student-teacher and student-student dialogue and discussion. The key feature of this is to provide timely feedback to the learner.
Quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialisation purposes.	In the contemporary world of distance and online education, synchronous technologies (like video conferences) have made cohort-based distance education possible. The question is how synchronous tools are used to teach (as didactic support or lectures). Essentially, the learners are not present as a group in one location. They study individually, and therefore, quality online learning also depends on asynchronous learning.

Table 1 clearly indicates that the different versions of the terminologies used (blended learning, online learning, etc.) could be covered within the existing conceptual definition without focusing on modality alone. Keegan also clarified that distance education includes 'distance teaching' and 'distance learning'. The definition complexity increases when distance education is used in conjunction with 'open education' or 'open learning' to express it as open and distance education. Certainly, not all distance education is open, and 'openness' is not an absolute quality (Wedemeyer, 1981).

Open education is characterized by (Wedemeyer, 1973):

- Opening education to more people – of all ages – irrespective of their age, previous experience, schooling, or socio-economic condition.
- Open admission without restriction to the number of places available and scores achieved in previous examinations.
- Use of multiple open channels for communications (learning) via a range of media and technology.
- Open curriculum where the learner is responsible for selecting his/her own goals.
- Open access to learning in homes, in libraries, in jobs, in communities as well as in schools.
- Open participation of part-time learners who combine working with learning.
- Open accreditation between the regular and open schools.
- Open cooperation, resource, and staff sharing between the regular and open schools, libraries, public and private schools, businesses, industry, and community resources for facilitating learning.

As such, Wedemeyer (1981) believed open learning is "a process of learning that is not enclosed or encumbered by barriers, that is accessible and available, not confined or concealed, and that implies a continuum of access and opportunity" (p.61). Thus, 'open' is a philosophy of learning to provide more equitable access to learning opportunities for all. Interestingly, the contemporary use of 'open' as in open educational resources (OER) has added to the confusion of the terminologies, if any. While open in the context of OER is about open license and making learning resources available to retain, reuse, remix, repurpose, and redistribute (for a detailed discussion on 'open' see, Mishra, 2017), the name open university used by many single-mode distance teaching institutions may have also contributed to the understanding that open is an essential characteristic of distance education. Openness in education is a goal that can be efficiently supported by distance education. Therefore, 'open' and 'distance education' are often used together, as in the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE).

While Keegan's definition of distance education is still relevant and sufficient, some issues also change the discourse in the field. For example, Guri-Rosenblit (2005) emphasized that distance education and e-learning are different things. While distance education primarily uses the industrial approach of teaching a large number of students via asynchronous modes, a limited number of teachers, and less student-teacher communication, e-learning encourages more direct interaction with a small number of students. However, with new technologies available, online learning can be scalable, like distance education, with the affordances of interaction. Distance education is also used synonymously in literature with online learning (Singh & Thurman, 2019). The review by Singh and Thurman (2019) also indicated that defining online learning using the characteristics provides a better understanding of the concept, which includes the use of technology, synchronous as well as asynchronous learning, interactivity, distance, and educational context. It is also important to emphasize that distance in distance education is not

about physical distance (Bates, 2008), but about transactional distance explained by the 'dialogue' and 'structure' of the educational programme (Gorsky & Caspi, 2005; Moore, 1993).

Considering online learning as a form of distance education, Bates (2008) presents a continuum of delivery from face-to-face (no technology use) to fully online (distance) with the use of technologies (Bates & Poole, 2003). He places blended learning in between, which covers technology as a classroom aid, flipped classroom, and hybrid learning (Bates, 2008). Bates further emphasizes that "when using terms such as online learning and distance education, we are trying to describe a very dynamic and fast-changing phenomenon, and the terminology often struggles to keep up with the reality of what is happening" (Bates, 2008). Therefore, instructors need to decide what tools and technologies to use in what conditions and how the institutions deploy these.

Now, let me return to the four criteria of a helpful definition proposed by Nichols (2023a). First, the modes need to be viewed from a continuum perspective for clarity, as technology-mediated teaching and learning are moving more toward convergence, and differentiating based on modality is not necessarily the best way. Moreover, terminological differences will continue to be there with the emergence of new technologies and approaches. Second, the foregoing discussions illustrate that operational decisions are best left to teachers and institutions within the frame of a range of modalities. Third, we must continue to discuss the field using accepted definitions, such as Keegan's (1986), and interpret these in contemporary ways and revise when needed. The question that we must discuss is about who must take action to rethink definitions when such demands emerge. This is important as terminologies keep emerging in literature, as scholars present operational definitions and discuss their work. It is also related to the narrative promoted by the organizations and researchers that play a dominant role in practice. For example, the use of emergency remote teaching during COVID-19 is a case in point (Hodges et al., 2020). In this context, I would like to draw attention to the journey of definitions in the field of educational technology (Januszewski & Persichitte, 2008), which revisited the definition of educational technology recently in a systematic way (Heggart et al., 2025). Historically, the International Council for Correspondence Education changed its name to International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) in 1982 (Sewart, 2014), but it is unclear when 'open' was added to the name without any change in the abbreviation (i.e., ICDE). Fourth, the existing definition does provide insights into the teaching and learning experiences with new interpretations. It is also important to remind ourselves of the words of Ljosa (1988):

> A definition of the term "distance education" should not be perspective as regards methods or organizational forms; rather, it should "map the boundaries" of what we want to describe (p. 86).

In the past, distance education received huge attention due to its potential for increasing access and maintaining quality at a reduced cost, often referred to as 'economies of scale' (Rumble, 2003). With more conventional teaching universities adopting technology and offering online learning, the issue of access may not be there for most developed countries. However, the digital inequity worldwide (ITU, 2024) means that access to educational opportunities will continue to need alternative ways. It may be noted that in the discussions around the definitions, the voices of the people from less developed countries with low research and publication are often missing. Nevertheless, terminology remains an issue, and I would like to discuss the challenges from the perspective of working towards distance education as discipline. I believe that the definition issues stem from the practitioner's approach adopted in ODE. In order to practice in the field of ODE, there is no essential qualification in most parts of the world. Therefore, experts in the field

come with training in different fields and learn about ODE on the job largely through short-term training and learning by doing. Different institutions follow different ODE approaches and practices, which define what we see in literature. It would be erroneous to attribute some of these as not fitting into the definitions; rather, I would prefer to view the range of ODE practices within a continuum, as I have been proposing a continuum of openness in educational institutions (Mishra, 2023). I will draw on my previous work on distance education as a discipline (Mishra, 2007a) to discuss a more professional approach in our field to move the discussions beyond definitions. The assumption here is that a disciplinary approach to the development of the field would help better understand its history, definitions, and pedagogy, leading to uniform usage of terminologies in the field and better research and practice.

3   Open and distance education: A discipline?

In order to discuss distance education as a discipline, we must first understand how disciplines are defined and formed. Disciplines lack consensus regarding descriptive and theoretical propositions in their early stages of development (White, 1989). According to Stichweh (1992), disciplines are communication systems, a connection to a profession, and a control over what gets published. Turner (2000) says:

> Disciplines are kinds of collectivities that include a large proportion of persons holding degrees with the same differentiating specialization name, which are organized in part into degree-granting units that in part give degree-granting positions and powers to persons holding these degrees: persons holding degrees of this particular specialized kind are employed in positions that give degree-granting powers to them, such that there is an actual exchange of students between different degree granting institutions offering degrees in what is understood to be the same specialization. (p.47)

The above description makes two assumptions. First, the discipline's name must be shared and used widely. Second, there is a market for trained people in the discipline. Thus, the concept of discipline is complex to define, as it is based on "who studies ('disciple') and what is studied ('doctrine')" (Hammarfelt, 2019). Disciplines are also characterized by the discourse they demonstrate (Becher, 1987). Disciplines use certain terminologies and language to discuss tacit knowledge, logical arguments, as well as scholarly communication within a community. This is important to note in the context of this paper, as I am urging for focus on the discipline to have a common understanding of the language used in scholarly communication. In the field of knowledge organization, discipline is used to depict an area of knowledge. Knowledge being a dynamic entity in any field of study; there is always the emergence of new disciplines. They use a concept called 'literary warrant' to organize knowledge in an area based on the quantity of documents published (Barité, 2018). Thus, more research and publication in an area may lead to increasing specialization and the creation of new disciplines. However, according to Stichweh (1992), new disciplines emerge when (i) universities start new departments around a scientific community, (ii) the new discipline is distinct and separate from the established ones, and (iii) there is a well-developed scholarly communication system around the field of study.

Distance education as a discipline was first argued by Sparkes (1983). Holmberg (1986) emphasized distance education as an academic discipline based on available research programmes and curricula for universities at that time. However, Rumble (1988), using a range of intrinsic and extrinsic criteria to evaluate a discipline, concluded that while distance education has developed over the years, it is yet to be considered an emerging or established new discipline. Even Tight (1988) considered distance education as a sub-discipline within education, positing

that it exists essentially as a service to collaborate with other disciplines to collaborate and communicate with a wider audience. Devlin (1989) took a similar position and considered it a derivative of adult education. While concluding the discussion around distance education as a discipline, Coldeway (1989) categorized distance education as an emerging discipline and identified three critical elements: (i) instruction associated with the field for compliance, (ii) a taught field of study, and (iii) training that shapes the future generations. How has the discipline progressed over the last 35 years? Let's discuss the status of distance education as a discipline using a framework provided by Liles et al. (1995).

3.1 Focus of study

In the early days of distance education, the focus of the study was largely increasing access to higher education and providing opportunities to those who could not access traditional face-to-face education. Thus, there was a focus on social equity, which remains a critical area in ODE. The growth and development of ODE is exponential in literature (Bozkurt & Zawacki-Richter, 2021; Wolf et al., 2020; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2009; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2017; Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016) demonstrating 'literary warrant' in the field. An early bibliometric study of distance education journal articles revealed the focus of the studies around students and their learning, preparation of distance learning materials, technologies and management issues, theory, training, and practice of distance education (Mishra, 1997). A study by Berg and Mrozowski (2001) covered ten areas covered in the literature of distance education: redefining the roles of key participants, technology selection and adoption, design issues, strategies to increase interactive and active learning, learner characteristics, learner support, operational issues, policy and management issues, equity and accessibility, and cost/benefit trade-offs. A recent study (Mishra et al., 2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that the studies focused on (i) Technologies for teaching and learning, (ii) psychosocial issues, (iii) learner issues, including communication, satisfaction, and social distancing, and (iv) eclectic matters covering a range of technologies for teaching and learning, training, sustainability, and psychological issues. Analyzing the citation classics in the field of distance and online learning, Sahoo et al. (2024) identified the focus of the discipline: (i) distance education, increasing access through mobile learning; (ii) use of a range of technologies to provide access at different levels of education and in different contexts, and (iii) address the needs of adult learners by offering self-regulated learning through blended and online learning. Thus, the field of study is unique, though it is bordering in some areas of educational technology as a field of study.

3.2 A new paradigm

According to Kuhn (1996), a paradigm is about foundational knowledge of a discipline. Any shift in that disrupts the basic assumptions and practices within the scientific discipline. Developments in distance education, especially the establishment of the Open University in the United Kingdom in 1969 for educating people through distance education, presented a new and alternative way to offer education and training using broadcast media. The use of technology in distance education has also led Taylor (2001) to categorize distance education into five generations: (i) Gen1: correspondence model, (ii) Gen2: multimedia model, (iii) Gen3: tele-learning model, (iv) Gen4: flexible learning model, and (v) Gen5: intelligent flexible learning model. This paradigm shift, supported by theoretical underpinnings and technological developments, provides distance education with a specialized knowledge structure. Economies of scale achieved by offering education at scale (Daniel et al., 2009) is also another critical aspect that made this field unique and more popular. From a broader perspective of technology-mediated teaching and learning, distance education provides a new approach to educational delivery that needs specialized education and training.

3.3 Reference discipline

Most disciplines emerge out of the existing traditional discipline. As explained before, a field's literary warrant, social demands, and utility create new space for an emerging discipline. Distance education is a specialized field of educational research and training within the discipline of education, which is also heavily influenced by the use of technology. For distance education, psychology, communication technology, education, and management are reference disciplines, and their practices largely influence research and practice (Schuemer, 1993). The influence of several reference disciplines makes the field of distance education more of an interdisciplinary discipline responsible largely for the current state of affairs, including the lack of coherent understanding within the practitioner community about the definitions used.

3.4 Principles and practices

For any discipline to function, it requires certain theories and principles that the practitioners follow. Distance education has some specialized structure of knowledge that covers issues around learner autonomy (Wedemeyer, 1975), industrialization of teaching (Peters, 1998), transactional distance (Moore, 1993), guided didactic conversation (Holmberg, 1981), use of technology (Bates, 2005; Wedemeyer, 1978), continuity of concern (Sewart, 1978), and community of inquiry (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). With the use of online technologies, such as learning management systems and computer-mediated communication, there are many methods and principles (Mishra & Juwah, 2006). The field also extensively uses various instructional design models (Dousay & Branch, 2022) to practice teaching and learning. Distance education's theories, methods, and principles are robust and merit specialized treatment as a discipline for higher education.

3.5 Research agenda

According to Moore (1985), distance education theory must guide practitioners in the simplest ways without spending much time analyzing data themselves. Research in the field should also clarify the missing gaps and indicate areas that need further investigation. Reviewing distance education research in India, Panda (1992) stated that scholars are concerned with two important areas: "(i) to undertake and report research activities in distance education and (ii) to review such activities to examine the direction in which distance education is progressing" (p.310). Research is the key link between theory building and good practice (Perraton, 2000). Zawacki-Richter (2009) conducted a Delphi study to identify three critical areas of research in distance education: (i) Macro level: Distance education systems and theories, (ii) Meso level: Management, organization, and technology, and (iii) Micro level: Teaching and learning in distance education. These categories were further explored by Zawacki-Richter and Anderson (2014) to develop a common research agenda collaboratively. In the discussion, they emphasized that "distance education is a discipline in its own right" (p.486). In addition, they articulated that the research agenda for the discipline must:

1. Quantify what research has previously been done.
2. Review and evaluate that research.
3. Describe new research needs on the basis of the quantification and evaluation.
4. Prioritize the research needs in a research agenda.
5. Perform and evaluate the new research, and by doing so . . .
6. Redefine the research agenda. (Zawacki-Richter & Anderson, 2014, pp. 486-7).

The discipline of distance education has several established journals and outlets for scholarly communication, and both qualitative and quantitative (bibliometric) studies regularly report summaries of research findings and gaps to guide researchers and practitioners in the field. These research agendas allow the community of scholars to focus on disciplinary discourse in a systematic way. However, currently, the publications in the field are scattered (Sahoo et al., 2024), though there are some core journals (Zawacki-Richter & Anderson, 2011).

3.6   Education and promotion of professionalism

Professional education and training are key aspects of any discipline (Turner, 2000). Such training should also be at higher levels of education, contributing to the research, investigation, and exploration of the boundaries of the discipline. In this context, two critical issues must be noted. First, training could be provided, as often done currently, via in-service training to support professional development. As a staff developer, I have written extensively about how to develop staff for ODE (Mishra, 2007b). Staff development also has a critical role in organizational change management and the adoption of distance learning, especially in dual-mode institutions (Latchem & Jung, 2010). Second, there are several related graduate-level academic programmes such as in instruction systems design or educational technology. But these are not the same as a full-fledged master's level programme on distance education.

Earlier, I reported a curriculum for professional training of distance educators at the master's level developed through an international Delphi study (Mishra, 2008). Postgraduate education is currently available in only a limited number of universities, such as Athabasca University (Canada), Indira Gandhi National Open University (India), and the Open University (United Kingdom). While doctoral research opportunities on distance education are available in many universities worldwide, graduate-level studies to prepare professionals are not available in many institutions. This is also related to the employability of such graduates, as most recruitments at distance teaching universities do not require specialized qualifications on distance education. Distance teaching institutions adopt in-service training, primarily through short-term training programmes and by encouraging staff participation at distance and online learning conferences and seminars. Several professional associations in ODE at international, regional, and national levels promote and share knowledge and experiences. However, the limited availability of pre-service training poses a serious threat to disciplinary discourse, as even the professional associations are managed by those without training in the discipline.

This is not to say that professional training is necessary for high performance in the field but are necessary for the growth and development of the discipline and nuanced discourse around its theory and practice. There are many educational institutions offering distance and online programmes in many other disciplines and subjects, and those involved in delivering such courses and programmes could promote a scholarship of teaching and learning in distance education, provided they are systematically trained. Practitioners and scholars need to give enough attention to this field of education and training as a discipline, which presents a huge opportunity to professionalize distance education. There is a need to have some form of pre-service education and training to promote a community of distance educators and practitioners as a professional body. It is the clarion call of the time.

4   Implications for theory, research and practice

The discussions related to distance education as a discipline indicate a strong need to focus on creating more departments for teaching open and distance education at the graduate level and preparing practitioners, who follow the norms and language of the discipline to perform. This

brings in several implications at the implementation level. First, who should spearhead the discussion around distance education as a discipline? In the early 1980s, journal editors played a significant role in discussing the topic and providing guidance. Today, with publications about distance education appearing in many sources, it is challenging to have critical discourse through journals, though this special issue is an attempt in that direction. The ICDE is in a better position, as a membership-driven organization with global representation from institutional leaders, to drive the change in offering more distance education pre-service programmes at the graduate level. First, a beginning could be made with a structured discussion around the definition as was done by the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) for defining educational technology (Heggart et al., 2025). Second, ICDE, as a professional body, may also develop relevant curricula through discussions and collaboration of its university members to encourage them to offer graduate-level programmes in open and distance education. Third, a more challenging task is to advocate for recruiting staff for professional jobs with professional qualifications in distance education.

Adopting a disciplinary approach to distance education could lead to not just a common and better understanding of the language of distance education. It will also promote more need-based, problem-centered research. Such a practice will have implications for recruiting teachers and practitioners with professional qualifications in distance education. Thirty years back, it was okay to recruit staff without any distance education knowledge and provide them with training on the job. It should no longer continue to be the same in the future. Studies in other fields, such as management, show that graduate-level professional training improves organizational performance (Gupta & Bennett, 2014). However, there is also a flip side to adopting only a disciplinary approach if regular staff development programmes are not conducted. Continuous professional development in ODE is a must as a technology-mediated teaching and learning system, the discipline is dynamic, and staff need constant updating.

5 Conclusion

Distance education is now nearly 300 years old as a practice. There are over 80 open and distance teaching universities, and many universities around the world are now using distance and online learning to further enhance their reach and achieve cost efficiency. However, the discipline of distance education is not growing. The field is inundated with operational issues and challenges extensively reported by Nichols (2023a, 2023b, 2924a, 2024b), calling for rethinking ODE's definition. The argument put forth in this paper is that Keegan's analytical definition could still be helpful when the theories and practices in the field are understood well through training. For example, distance is not physical distance, and openness is about the philosophy of increasing flexibility of learning, to name a few. While acknowledging the challenges, I have urged in this paper to discuss the discipline of ODE and the need to build a resilient profession of distance educators engaged in critical discussion, research, and practice. In this respect, I have discussed that the field has the potential of a full-fledged discipline, but the absence of many graduate programmes in the field at the university level and the lack of recruitment opportunities for people with distance education qualifications make it challenging for the field to discuss the core issues, including definitions. Organizations like the Commonwealth of Learning and ICDE have an essential role to play in developing the discipline of distance education. With their vast network of people and organizations working in distance education, it is time to put together collective ideas to professionalize the academe of distance education.

References

Bates, A. T. (2005). *Technology, e-learning and distance education*. Routledge.

Bates, A., & Poole, G. (2003). *Effective teaching with technology in higher education: Foundations for success.* Jossey-Bass

Bates, T. (July 7, 2008). What do you mean by …? https://www.tonybates.ca/2008/07/07/what-is-distance-education/

Becher, T. (1987). Disciplinary discourse. *Studies in Higher Education*, *12*(3), 261-274. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075078712331378052

Berge, Z. L., & Mrozowski, S. (2001). Review of research in distance education, 1990 to 1999. *American Journal of Distance Education*, *15*(3), 5–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/08923640109527090

Bozkurt, A. (2019). From distance education to open and distance learning: A holistic evaluation of history, definitions, and theories. In S. Sisman-Ugur, & G. Kurubacak (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Learning in the Age of Transhumanism* (pp. 252-273). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.

Bozkurt, A., & Zawacki-Richter, O. (2021). Trends and patterns in distance education (2014–2019): A synthesis of scholarly publications and a visualization of the intellectual landscape. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, *22*(2), 19–45. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v22i2.5381

Barité, M. (2018). Literary warrant. *Knowledge Organization*, *45*(6), 517-536.

Coldeway, D. O. (1989). Distance education as a discipline: In conclusion. *Journal of Distance Education*, *4*(1), 65-66.

Daniel, J., Kanwar, A., & Uvalić-Trumbić, S. (2009). Breaking higher education's iron triangle: Access, cost, and quality. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, *41*(2), 30–35.

Devlin, L. E. (1989). 2: Distance education as a discipline: A response to Holmberg. *Journal of Distance Education*, *4*(1), 56-59.

Dousay, T. A., & Branch, R. M. (2022). *Survey of instructional design models*. Brill.

Garrison, D. R., & Anderson, T. D. (2003). *E-learning in the 21st century: a framework for research and practice*. Routledge.

Garrison, D. R., & Shale, D. (1987). Mapping the boundaries of distance education: Problems in defining the field. *American Journal of Distance Education*, *1*(1), 7-13. https://doi.org/10.1080/08923648709526567

Gorsky, P., & Caspi, A. (2005). A critical analysis of transactional distance theory. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, *6*(1), 1-11.

Gupta, A., & Bennett, S. E. (2014). An empirical analysis of the effect of MBA programs on organizational success. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *28*(4), 451-460. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-10-2012-0114

Guri-Rosenblit, S. (2005). 'Distance education' and 'e-learning': Not the same thing. *Higher Education*, *49*, 467-493. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-004-0040-0

Hammarfelt, B. (2019). Discipline. In B. Hjørland & C. Gnoli (Eds.), *ISKO Encyclopedia of knowledge organization*. https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1361084/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Heggart, K., Ritzhaupt, A., Prokes, C., & Kimmons, R. (2025). Educational technology: Offering a contemporary definition. *The Journal of Applied Instructional Design*, *14*(2). https://doi.org/10.59668/2222.21453

Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, A. (2020). The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. *Educause Review*, *27*(1), 1-9. https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning

Holmberg, B. (1981). *Status and trends of distance education*. Kogan Page.

Holmberg, B. (1986). A discipline of distance education. *Journal of Distance Education, 1*(1), 25-40.

Holmberg, B. (1989). Further to the question of whether distance education is a discipline. *Journal of Distance Education, 4*(1), 62-64.

ITU (2024). *Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2024*. https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/facts-figures-2024/

Januszewski, A., & Persichitte, K. A. (2008). A history of the AECT's definitions of educational technology. In A. Januszewski & M. Molenda (Eds.), *Educational technology* (pp. 259-282). Routledge.

Johnson, N. (2020). Evolving definitions in digital learning; A national framework for categorizing commonly used terms. Canadian Digital Learning Research Association. https://www.cdlra-acrfl.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 creating multidimensional learning experiences. *WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET)*. https://wcet.wiche.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2023/09/What-to-do-When-Modality-is-Unclear-WCET-FAll-2023-1.pdf

Johnson, N., Seaman, J., & Poulin, R. (2022). Defining different modes of learning: Resolving confusion and contention through consensus. *Online Learning, 26*(3), 91-110. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v26i3.3565

Keegan, D. (1986). *The foundations of distance education*. Croom Helm.

Keegan, D. (1988). Problems in defining the field of distance education. *American Journal of Distance Education, 2*(2), 4-11. https://doi.org/10.1080/08923648809526619

Keegan, D. J. (1980). On defining distance education. *Distance education, 1*(1), 13-36. https://doi.org/10.1080/0158791800010102

Kuhn, T. S. (1996). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. University of Chicago press.

Latchem, C., & Jung, I. (2010). *Distance and blended learning in Asia*. Routledge.

Liles, D. H., Johnson, M. E., Meade, L., & Underdown, D. R. (1995). The enterprise engineering discipline. In *Society for Enterprise Engineering Conference Proceedings* (Vol. 6, No. 1195). Orlando.

Ljosa, E. (1988). The boundaries of distance education. *Journal of Distance Education, 3*(1), 85-88.

Mishra, S. (1997). A critical analysis of periodical literature in distance education. *Indian Journal of Open Learning, 6*(1), 40–55.

Mishra, S. (2001). Designing online learning. Commonwealth of Learning. http://hdl.handle.net/11599/47

Mishra, S. (2007a). Is distance education a discipline? *University News, 45*(36). 3-9.

Mishra, S. (2007b). Staff training and development in open and distance education. Indira Gandhi National Open University. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16651630

Mishra, S. (2008). Rethinking professional training of distance educators at masters level. *Indian Journal of Open Learning. 17*(3), 235-253.

Mishra, S. (2017). Open educational resources: Removing barriers from within. *Distance Education, 38*(3), 369-380. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2017.1369350

Mishra, S. (2023). The Affordances of openness for the Virtual University. In M.D. Sankey, H. Huijser, & R. Fitzgerald. (Eds.), *Technology-enhanced learning and the Virtual University* (pp. 433-447). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-4170-4_22

Mishra, S., & Juwah, C. (2006). Interactions in online discussions: a pedagogical perspective. In C. Juwah (Ed.), *Interactions in online education* (pp. 156-170). Routledge.

Mishra, S., Sahoo, S., & Pandey, S. (2021). Research trends in online distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Distance Education, 42*(4), 494-519. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2021.1986373

Moore, M. G. (1985). Some observations on current research in distance education. *Epistolodidaktika, 1*, 35-62.

Moore, M. G. (1993). Theory of transactional distance. In D. Keegan, (Ed.), *Theoretical principles of distance education* (pp.22-38). Routledge. http://www.c3l.uni-oldenburg.de/cde/support/readings/moore93.pdf

Nichols, M. (2023a). Commentary: What, exactly, is' online' education?. *Journal of Learning for Development, 10*(2), 142-148. https://doi.org/10.56059/jl4d.v10i2.1054

Nichols, M. (2023b). Transforming conventional education through ODDE. In O. Zawacki-Richter & I. Jung. (Eds). *Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education* (pp. 641-657). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-2080-6_35

Nichols, M. (2024a). We need to talk about how we talk about what we talk about: Revisiting ODL. *Asian Journal of Distance Education, 19*(1). https://www.asianjde.com/ojs/index.php/AsianJDE/article/view/786

Nichols, M. (2024b). What's in a name? Wrestling with 'ODDE'. *Journal of Open, Distance, and Digital Education, 1*(1), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.25619/fd6dch73

Nichols, M. (2025, February 13). Call for papers: Reclaiming 'open' and 'distance' education in a 'digital' world. https://ojs.uni-oldenburg.de/journals/ojs2/ojs/index.php/jodde/announcement/view/4

Nichols, M., & Seelig, C. (2022). Models of tuition for digital education. Paper presented at the Pan-Commonwealth Forum 10 (PCF10), Calgary, 2022. https://doi.org/10.56059/pcf10.9025

Panda, S. K. (1992). Distance educational research in India: Stock-taking, concerns and prospects. *Distance Education, 13*(2), 309-326. https://doi.org/10.1080/0158791920130211

Perraton, H. (2000). Rethinking the research agenda. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 1*(1), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v1i1.5

Peters, O. (1998). *Learning and teaching in distance education: Pedagogical analysis and interpretations in an international perspective*. Kogan Page.

Rumble, G. (1988). Animadversions upon the concept of distance education as a discipline. *Journal of Distance Education, 3*(1), 39-56.

Rumble, G. (1989). On defining distance education. *American Journal of Distance Education, 3*(2), 8-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/08923648909526660

Rumble, G. (2003). Modeling the costs and economics of distance education. In M.G. Moore & W. G. Anderson (Eds.), *Handbook of distance education*, (pp. 703-716). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Sahoo, S., Pandey, S., & Mishra, S. (2024). Citation classics on distance and online learning: A bibliometric analysis. *Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication*. https://doi.org/10.1108/GKMC-12-2023-0493

Schuemer, R. (1993). Some psychological aspects of distance education. ZIFF. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED357266.pdf

Sewart, D. (1978). Continuity of concern for students in a system of learning at a distance. ZIFF Papiere 22. https://ub-deposit.fernuni-hagen.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/mir_derivate_00000225/ZIFF_22_Sewart_Continuity_1978.pdf

Sewart, D. (2014). Through the mirror of ICDE: From correspondence to distance to online. ICDE. https://www.icde.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Through-the-mirror-of-ICDE-David-Sewart.docx-1.pdf

Singh, V., & Thurman, A. (2019). How many ways can we define online learning? A systematic literature review of definitions of online learning (1988-2018). *American Journal of Distance Education, 33*(4), 289-306. https://doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2019.1663082

Sparkes, J. J. (1983). The problem of creating a discipline of distance education. *Distance Education, 4*(2), 179-186. https://doi.org/10.1080/0158791830040205

Stichweh, R. (1992). The sociology of scientific disciplines: On the genesis and stability of the disciplinary structure of modern science. *Science in Context*, *5*(1), 3-15. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889700001071

Taylor, J. C. (2001). Fifth generation distance education. *Instructional Science and Technology*, *4*(1), 1–14.

Tight, M. (1988). Distance education: Discipline and service. *Journal of Distance Education*, *3*(1), 81-84.

Turner, S. (2000). What are disciplines? And how is interdisciplinarity different. In P. Weingart & N. Stehr (Eds.), *Practising Interdisciplinarity* (pp. 46-65). University of Toronto Press.

Wedemeyer, C. A. (1973). Characteristics of open learning systems. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED099593.pdf

Wedemeyer, C. A. (1975, May 10-15). Implications of open learning for independent study. [Paper presentation]. ICCE conference, Brighton, UK. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED112766.pdf

Wedemeyer, C. A. (1978). Learning through technology. ZIFF papiere 26. http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED317155.pdf

Wedemeyer, C. A. (1981). *Learning at the back door: Reflections on non-traditional learning in the lifespan*. The University of Wisconsin Press.

White, R.T. (1989). *Learning science*. Blackwell.

Wolf, S. E., Andrzejewski, C. E., Clark, D. A., & Forney, K. N. (2020). A bibliometric exploration of the qualitative research literature in distance education using a network approach. *American Journal of Distance Education*, *34*(4), 290-305. https://doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2020.1811569

Zawacki-Richter, O. (2009). Research areas in distance education: A Delphi study. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, *10*(3). https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v10i3.674

Zawacki-Richter, O., Alturki, U., & Aldraiweesh, A. (2017). Review and content analysis of the international review of research in open and distance/distributed learning (2000–2015). *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, *18*(2), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v18i2.2806

Zawacki-Richter, O., & Anderson, T. (2011). The geography of distance education-bibliographic characteristics of a journal network. *Distance Education*, *32*(3), 441-456. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2011.610287

Zawacki-Richter, O., & Anderson, T. (Eds.). (2014). *Online distance education: Towards a research agenda*. AU Press. https://www.aupress.ca/app/uploads/120233_99Z_Zawacki-Richter_Anderson_2014-Online_Distance_Education.pdf

Zawacki-Richter, O., Backer, E. M., & Vogt, S. (2009). Review of distance education research (2000 to 2008): Analysis of research areas, methods, and authorship patterns. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, *10*(6), 21–50. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v10i6.741

Zawacki-Richter, O., & Naidu, S. (2016). Mapping research trends from 35 years of publications in Distance Education. *Distance Education*, 37(3), 245–269. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2016.1185079

Zawacki-Richter, O., Xiao, J., van Tryon, P. J. S., Lim, D., Conrad, D., Kerres, M., Lee, K., & Prinsloo, P. (2024). Editorial–Inaugurating the Journal of Open, Distance, and Digital Education (JODDE). *Journal of Open, Distance, and Digital Education*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/10.25619/ozr2ce72

Author's Contributions (CRediT)

SM: conceptualization, investigation, writing - original draft, writing – review & editing, funding. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Acknowledgement of Use of Generative AI Tools

GenAI was not used in the development of this article.