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The cow holder principle: A call to simplify scholarly definitions

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Abstract

When having scholarly debates over the different nuances and uses of terminology within our field, it is important to consider how those outside our field use and understand those same terms (or what they might find if they search up a term, looking to find out what it means). Directed towards Open Digital Distance Education (ODDE) scholars, this article takes the conversation of definitions outside of our scholarly community and explores how the terms open learning, distance learning, and digital learning might be understood by others. An exploratory scan was conducted to identify the vernacular meanings that a layperson might encounter when searching these terms using common online search tools. The purpose of identifying differences between our scholarly use of a term compared to the vernacular is to develop an awareness of what might be perceived as confusing or complex jargon by outsiders. The discussion highlights some inconsistencies in how open learning is defined and understood within the scholarly community, and how the vernacular understanding provides somewhat of a middle ground. Each term is further simplified using the Cow Holder Principle, a self-invented principle put forth by the author, that serves as a reminder to use easy-to-understand language.

Keywords

open learning; distance learning; digital learning; definitions; higher education



1 Introduction

Roughly 12 years ago, a very minor and mundane event completely changed my approach to explaining complex concepts to others. I had accompanied one of my children on a preschool field trip to a dairy farm. During her explanation to a group of highly distractible four-year-olds on how to milk a cow, the farmer showed the group an apparatus used in the process. “This is a stanchion,” she said, “that means it’s a cow holder.” The children did not need to remember the technical name of the apparatus; all they needed to know was that it holds cows in place — a cow holder.

That a-ha moment was profound enough for me that I went home and wrote “The Cow Holder Principle” on a sticky note and stuck it on the wall above my desk. It served as a reminder to me, a student working on a master's degree at the time, to always consider my audience and communicate concepts in a way they would understand. I still have that sticky note to this day to keep myself in check (I will let my friends and colleagues be the judge of whether I have succeeded).

The purpose of this article is to explore how the terms open learning, distance learning, and digital learning are explained outside of our Open, Distance, and Digital Education (ODDE) academic discipline through an exploratory scan. We have a tendency in academia to use terminology that, to us in the field, represents everyday language and concepts; however, as open, distance, and digital learning specialists, we sometimes fail to recognize when our everyday language is perceived as jargon by an outsider. For instance, when we use a term like “open learning,” do we expect the broader public to know what we are talking about (and use the term according to the intended meaning within our field of study)? The farmer understood that the word stanchion was jargon and that she needed a simpler phrase to help her audience of four-year-olds understand what it was and why it was important. Likewise, we need to reflect upon our own awareness of which words in our field are perceived as jargon by outsiders, so we can help others understand what we mean and why the practices underlying the terms are important.

The objective of this study was to attempt to encounter the terms open learning, distance learning, and digital learning in the same way that a student or faculty member outside of the ODDE community might come across them online. Additionally, I identified how these publicly available online sources (that might be encountered by an outsider) defined and described the terms. Lastly, I compared the definitions found on the online sources with the traditional meanings associated with these terms within the ODDE field of study. To achieve the purpose and objective, I performed an Internet search, a search on popular social media platforms, and inputted requests for information on several generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) platforms. The search results and GenAI outputs were the data used in the analysis.

My self-invented Cow Holder Principle guided my analysis, which means that I identified how these terms are commonly described and explained in simple language for a layperson. I then compared the common descriptions found in the data with the academic understandings of these terms as put forth in the literature.

The following questions guided the investigation:

- What are the meanings commonly attached to the terms open learning, distance learning, and digital learning when used in the vernacular?
- How do these meanings compare to the meanings we use for these terms within the ODDE community?

2 Literature review

I am choosing to bend academic conventions and write this article in the first person, mostly because I have established a reputation for myself as a “definitions nerd” (Johnson & Poulin, 2025), based on considerable work I have done over the years researching the meanings attached to various terms related to online and digital learning. I am humbled by how widely others have used my work in this area to inform the definitions used at institutions and in educational policy around the world. By sharing why I started this work, the reasons that drive my ongoing work on definitions, and by linking these reasons to the literature, I hope to illustrate the need for us, as scholars, to continue to delve into the discourse, the semantic nuances, and the overall geekery accompanying any sort of work on definitions.

2.1 The importance of academic work on definitions

In 2019, I began working with the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association (CDLRA), and shortly after, took over as project lead for an annual longitudinal research study that tracks digital learning trends across Canada through survey research. When writing my first report for the CDLRA, I noticed that the organization had, in past reports, adopted the convention of using the phrase ‘blended/hybrid’ to describe learning experiences delivered partially online and partially on campus. Driven partially by imposter syndrome (wondering if perhaps I did not fully understand what the terms blended or hybrid meant or uniquely described, which would be very embarrassing) and partially by the irritation of having to write out ‘blended/hybrid’ repeatedly throughout the report, I asked myself: Why can I not just write ‘blended’ or ‘hybrid’? Why exactly am I awkwardly writing both?

In opening that metaphorical can of worms, I quickly came to discover that a) I did not have an embarrassing lack of knowledge about the finer nuances of these terms, and b) there did not seem to be consistent usage of these terms both within and outside of the Canadian context. I also discovered that multiple meanings were attached to other terms like *online learning*, *remote learning*, and *distance learning*. When conducting research to track growth and trends related to online learning, one quickly learns that the margin of error increases substantially when a common word is defined in multiple different ways.

I began exploring how individuals and institutions were self-defining these terms to improve the validity and reliability of the research findings. Two research studies arose as part of this exploration (Johnson, 2021; Johnson et al., 2022). In 2021, the CDLRA’s annual survey asked respondents to share, as an open-ended response, how they defined the following terms: online learning, remote learning, distance learning, and hybrid learning (Johnson, 2021). After analysing the various responses, I consolidated them into a set of simple, easy-to-understand definitions based on how Canadian institutions were using these terms in day-to-day practices. The following year, my colleagues and I discovered that when we presented these definitions to survey respondents (quantitatively, this time), asking the extent to which they agreed with each definition, we found surprising consensus (Johnson et al., 2022).

In a follow-up report on how to define learning experiences that do not fall neatly into a categorical box (Johnson, 2023), I provided two key recommendations: “the importance of a ‘good enough’ consensus” and “the importance of a student-centred approach” (p. 14). A ‘good enough’ consensus acknowledges that we, as a scholarly community, are not likely to ever achieve 100% agreement on the use of terms. The consensus then allows us to move forward from (sometimes contentious) debate to more collaborative dialogue that focuses more on the overall concepts and objectives of what we’re trying to achieve. A student-centred approach shifts the focus from “the technological characteristics of the learning experience and the philosophical underpinnings of

the semantics used” (p. 14) towards using language that helps students understand what the learning experience will be like, what they will be expected to do and what technologies will they need to use (e.g., will they need to be in a certain place at a certain time, on campus or online). Recently, a colleague and I reiterated the importance of a student-centric approach to defining terms, which means using simple and easy-to-understand language to describe different types of learning experiences (Johnson & Poulin, 2025).

2.2 Open, distance, and digital learning: do scholars agree on what these terms mean?

Nichols (2024), in an article where he questioned, “what exactly is Open Digital Distance Education?” called on scholars to reflect on the meanings we attach to the terms open learning, distance learning, and digital learning. He provided a historical overview of these terms (through a broad, international lens), highlighting how the once-clearly demarcated line between ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ institutions is becoming increasingly blurred. For example, he explains how early online courses and programs emerged within the non-traditional field of correspondence learning to meet the needs of students who could not easily access higher education otherwise. Non-traditional institutions, with a specific mandate to make education accessible for students who could not attend traditional institutions, specialized in delivering learning opportunities that did not require students to come to campus.

2.2.1 Open learning

There has been contention surrounding the meaning of the word “open” as it relates to educational contexts for decades. According to Nichols (2024), open learning historically referred to a “paradigm-changing presence” and an “audacious call for inclusiveness” (p. 5), and he referred to the Open University in the UK as an exemplar of open learning. The Open University’s website (Open University, n.d.) currently describes the institution as “a global leader in higher education able to reach every adult in the United Kingdom - and many others across the world.” The website also states the institution’s objective as “giving anyone, anywhere the power to learn” (para. 1). Tait (2008), a scholar from the Open University, in his comparison of different open universities detailed the different aspects of the concept of openness, which can be summarized as making education accessible to those excluded by the current systems through innovation and by challenging existing models.

A historical example of debate around the term “open” can be found in an article written by Rumble (1989) and a response to the article from Lewis (1990). Rumble acknowledged that “open” was an imprecise term for which there were many interpretations and definitions. To provide further clarity to the term, he put forth a list of characteristics that would be expected in an open learning experience: 1) the learner is able to access the learning experience regardless of age, location, qualifications, or any other personal circumstance, 2) the learner decides when and where they engage in learning, 3) the learner can choose from a range of media or other instructional delivery means, 4) the learner has agency over the extent to which they complete or skip parts of the learning content in relation to their personal goals, and 5) the learner is not left to fend for themselves and has access to support services. Of concern to Rumble was the application of the word “open” to learning experiences that were not made available to the general public (e.g., open admission to the experience).

Lewis, while in agreement with many of Rumble’s points about the characteristics of open learning, questioned whether openness should only be assumed when the learning experience is made publicly available. He counterargued that a learning experience can be open, even within a private-access or corporate setting, depending on the characteristics of the learning experience for the intended learner within the closed context. Essentially, Lewis viewed open learning as

existing on a multi-factorial continuum with different factors being more open (or offering more choice) or closed (limited learner choice) depending on context, rather than casting learning experiences into a strict binary classification of open or closed based on who was granted admission and access.

Now, more than 35 years after Rumble's article and Lewis' response, we still do not have clear consensus as to what "open" means. Rather, technological advances and new approaches to learning have, going back to Nichols (2024)'s statement, blurred the lines even further. Current definitions for open learning range from broad and innovative (aligned with Nichols and Tait), to having a narrower focus on the production of free and shareable resources (Year of Open, n.d.; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020). For example, Open Education Global (n.d.) characterizes open education as the development of non-proprietary, freely shareable resources within a learning community. Such resources enable customization and facilitate collaboration to improve a resource over time. The focus of the narrower definitions is on improving access to education materials and opportunities, whereas the broader definitions centre more on innovation and the creation of learning opportunities (e.g., programs, institutions, pathways) that will enable more people to engage in education.

2.2.2 Distance and digital learning

Terms like distance learning and digital learning, although they are broad and have evolved over time, appear to be less contentious. Nichols (2024) noted the transition from the use of the term 'correspondence learning' to 'distance learning' in the early 1980s. He detailed how, despite some disagreement over the preceding decade, there was eventually consensus within the scholarly community that 'distance' was the better term to use, partly because it was more "in vogue," meaning that it had become a more popular term than 'correspondence' in the vernacular.

When conducting my past research on definitions, I found that the terms distance learning and digital learning tended to be used as 'umbrella terms,' capturing a broad range of learning experiences. The term distance learning captures "all learning that takes place at a distance" (Johnson, 2021, p. 8) and includes both online learning and traditional correspondence learning. Digital learning is "an overarching term that captures all kinds of technology-supported learning" (Johnson, 2021, p. 2). Neither term has appeared to spark much debate in recent years within the scholarly community, although it is worth noting that the United States Department of Education defines distance education in several ways, depending on context, which has presented challenges for my colleagues in that country (Kerensky et al., 2023).

2.3 The value of debate

Clearly, there are differences of opinion within our field as to what is meant by open learning, more so than distance and digital learning. Rather than giving my opinion as to how the term should be defined based on its historical or current use within the scholarly community, my practice when doing definition work has always been to explore how terms are understood by others in their day-to-day practices (their vernacular meanings). In withholding my personal perspective, my intention is not to diminish the value of debate. The ongoing scholarly discussions about the meaning of open, distance, and digital learning are critical, especially as online course and program offerings become more commonplace at traditional institutions. For instance, Tait (2017) expressed concern about traditional institutions moving quickly to take advantage of new technologies to develop or expand online offerings, at the risk of damaging the reputation of online learning if these offerings are poorly done. These concerns should spur us in the ODDE community to consider our role in helping new open, distance, and digital learning providers understand the rich history of innovation that they, too, can draw upon.

But, to effectively communicate our ideas about open, distance, and digital learning to others, we must first understand what they are likely to think we mean when we use these terms.

3 Method

3.1 Research method and design

To identify the vernacular meanings of the terms open learning, distance learning, and digital learning, I conducted an exploratory scan by simulating the experience that a layperson (e.g., students, non-ODDE faculty, administrators, etc.) may have when searching to find the meanings of these terms. No participants were involved in this study, and all data consisted of publicly available information, including the resources informing the outputs generated by GenAI tools and platforms.

3.2 Data collection (and tools)

Data for this study consisted of outputs generated through question inputs into specific search tools and GenAI platforms. The search tools and GenAI platforms used were free and identified as those commonly used by Generation Z (GenZ), as well as by the Millennial and Generation X (GenX) demographics, when seeking information (Koetsier, 2024). The search tools and platforms used to gather data were: an Internet search (using Google as the search engine), a social media search (using Instagram and Reddit), and through GenAI inquiries (using ChatGPT, Google Gemini, and Microsoft Copilot). I input the following three questions into each tool or platform:

1. What is open learning?
2. What is distance learning?
3. What is digital learning?

3.3 Research procedures

I used a content analysis approach (Krippendorff, 2013) to identify the popular meanings attached to each of the three terms (open learning, distance learning, and digital learning) within the most prominently displayed results. The primary objective was to identify words and phrases commonly used to describe open learning, distance learning, and digital learning, respectively. The content analysis yielded a compilation of common descriptors for each term. Next, the descriptors were consolidated to build a definition for each term, as it is used in the vernacular. In the discussion section of this paper, the vernacular definitions are compared and contrasted with the academic definitions (from the review of the relevant literature) to identify areas of consensus and discord.

3.4 Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, some of the search tools have geolocation built into their search functionalities. Thus, the findings may carry a North American, specifically Canadian, bias. It is feasible that someone from a different location searching the same terms may have different results. Secondly, publicly available large language models (LLMs) like the ones used for the AI search in this study are known to be trained on the content available on the Internet, including academic publications and discussion forums. Many of the existing ambiguities and points of contention were likely reflected in AI search findings. The AI outputs should not be viewed as definitive (or right or wrong) definitions, but rather what a learner is likely to encounter when searching those terms.

Additionally, the findings may be biased toward my personal interests due to algorithms based on my past searches (particularly as a digital learning researcher). Also, I am a specialist with expertise in the field. I am looking at the results through a biased lens as someone who already has a strong understanding of these terms and their common usage. A future research study might have a student or scholar outside the ODDE field of study replicate the methods used in this study and compare their findings with those reported here.

4 Results and discussion

For each term (open learning, distance learning, and digital learning), I used the same search prompt across six platforms (Google search, Instagram, Reddit, ChatGPT, Google Gemini, and Microsoft Copilot). The first result for the Google, Instagram, and Reddit searches was an AI overview, similar to the findings from the AI searches (ChatGPT, Google Gemini, and Microsoft Copilot). These overviews contained links to the websites, posts, or other resources (e.g., YouTube videos) that informed the overview. All the searches, except for Instagram, also generated a detailed list of key characteristics following the overview. I used the overviews and lists of key characteristics as the data sets for the content analysis.

4.1 What is open learning?

Table 1 shows descriptors of open learning that appeared in all, or nearly all, of the six searches (in either the overview, the key characteristics, or both) and a consolidation of the meanings that were attached to each descriptor within the search results.

Table 1

Descriptors for open learning

Key Word	Meaning	Count
Accessible	The learning experience is designed to reach and accommodate the needs of students who may not be able to participate in traditional, on-campus learning experiences due to financial, geographical, or time constraints.	6
Flexible	The learning experience empowers learners by providing them with options and the agency to decide where and when they study, so that they can tailor their studies to their individual needs, preferences, goals, and interests. Learning may occur within or outside of formal learning contexts, and Internet technology is often used to enable more options.	6
Cost-effective	The learning experience is often offered at no cost or low cost for students. Open-access learning resources and materials, such as Open Educational Resources (OER), are frequently used in the learning experience to reduce costs while maintaining quality standards.	6
Collaborative	The learning experience is interactive and involves knowledge-sharing, particularly in online communities and spaces.	5

I consolidated the descriptors from Table 1 to form the following everyday-language definition for open learning:

Open learning is a term that describes a specific type of learning experience that is characterized by accessibility, flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and collaboration. Open learning experiences are intentionally designed to reach and accommodate the needs of students who may not be able to participate in traditional, on-campus learning experiences due to financial, geographical, or time constraints. An open learning experience empowers learners by providing them with options and the agency to decide where and when they study, so they can tailor their studies to their individual needs, preferences, goals, and interests. Learning may occur within or outside of formal learning contexts, and Internet technology is often used to enable more options. The learning experience is often offered at no cost or low cost for students. Open-access learning resources and materials, such as open educational resources (OER), are frequently used in the learning experience to reduce costs while maintaining quality standards. Open learning experiences tend to be interactive and involve knowledge-sharing, particularly in online communities and spaces.

4.2 What is distance learning?

Table 2 shows the consolidated meaning of the most common descriptors that appeared in the overview and key characteristics sections of the search results for distance learning.

Table 2

Descriptors for distance learning

Key Word	Meaning	Count
Physical separation	During the learning experience, the learner and instructor are in different physical locations.	6
Technology	Internet technology and digital platforms are used to deliver the learning experience.	6
Various formats and purposes	The learning experience includes various formats and modalities (e.g., fully online, hybrid, synchronous, asynchronous, correspondence, self-paced, degree-granting, professional credential-granting, MOOC, varying degrees of interactivity, etc.).	5

I also consolidated the descriptors from Table 2 to form the following everyday-language definition for distance learning:

Distance learning is characterized by physical separation and often uses technology to deliver the learning experience. The term distance learning encompasses a broad array of diverse learning experiences with different purposes: 1) experiences may have set timelines or they may be self-paced, 2) experiences may be synchronous or asynchronous, 3) experiences may result in the attainment of a credential or they may not, 4) experiences may be highly interactive or solitary in nature, and 5) experiences may be delivered in a fully online or a hybrid format.

4.3 What is digital learning?

Table 3 shows the common descriptors that appeared in almost all the overviews and lists of key characteristics found in the search results for digital learning.

Table 3
Descriptors for digital learning

Key Word	Meaning	Count
Encompassing	The term digital learning is broad and describes any learning experience that uses digital technology.	6
Technology	Internet technology, digital platforms and/or resources, and digital devices are used in the learning experience.	6
Multi-modal	The learning experience is characterized by the use of technology within any learning modality.	5
Learner-centric	The learning experience supports individualization, flexibility, and diverse learner needs.	6
Interactive	The use of technology as part of the learning experience facilitates interaction with other learners, the instructor, and/or the learning materials.	6
Enhances learning	The use of technology as part of the learning experience creates an enhanced learning experience for students.	6

As was done for the open learning and distance learning results, I consolidated the descriptors from Table 3 to form the following everyday-language definition for digital learning:

Digital learning is an encompassing, broad term that describes any learning experience, regardless of modality, that uses Internet technology, digital platforms and/or resources, and digital devices (e.g., laptop, tablet, or smartphone) to enhance the learning experience. A digital learning experience is designed to support individualization, flexibility, and diverse learner needs. Technology is used to facilitate interaction with other learners, the instructor, and/or the learning material.

Once I established vernacular definitions for each term based on the search results, I revisited the literature to compare them with those found there. Essentially, I wanted to understand how well we are applying the Cow Holder Principle when talking about open, distance, and digital learning. Do we, as scholars, need to use simpler and clearer language when using these terms, particularly with students and others outside our field?

4.4 Comparing scholarly meanings with vernacular use

For the term open learning, there are both narrow and broad meanings within the scholarly community. There is also a longstanding debate as to whether a learning experience can be open in closed contexts (e.g., not made available to the general public). Some scholars, when referring to “openness”, are mostly referring to OER and specific practices that are related to free access to resources, which are often collaborative in nature and designed to be customized and reshared (Open Education Global, n.d.). Other scholars view open learning as paradigm-shifting innovativeness in the delivery of education more broadly, to create more learning opportunities

for those who cannot access traditional institutions (Nichols, 2024; Tait, 2008). The vernacular meaning for the term open learning appears to fall somewhere in the middle of the various scholarly meanings and perspectives. The elements of accessibility, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness (including the use of OER) are captured in the vernacular definition; however, so is learner empowerment and the acknowledgement that learning can occur outside of formal settings.

The meanings of distance and digital learning are relatively undisputed, likely due to the generally accepted broadness of these terms. The vernacular meanings were consistent with the scholarly meanings. Essentially the defining characteristic of distance learning is the separation of the student from the on-campus environment. Similarly, the defining characteristic of digital learning is the use of digital technology to support learning. Within the Canadian context, and likely in many other regions around the globe, most distance learning experiences are delivered using Internet technology, making them digital learning experiences as well (Johnson, 2021).

4.5 Applying the Cow-Holder Principle

Having compared the academic meanings with the vernacular meanings and having emphasized the importance of communicating concepts in easy-to-understand language, I am compelled to put forward simplified, single-sentence definitions for each term that are hopefully 'good enough' at synthesizing the meanings attached to these terms.

Open learning: Innovative, low-cost learning educational opportunities that are intentionally designed to reach people who may not be able to participate in a traditional, on-campus learning experience.

Distance learning: A learning experience where a student is learning in a physically separate location from their instructor and/or campus.

Digital learning: Any educational experience that uses Internet technology, digital resources, and/or digital devices to support and enhance student learning.

Are these simplified, vernacular definitions perfect? No.

Are they too simplistic? For the scholarly community, yes. For everyone else, probably not.

Are they 'good enough'? Maybe. I will turn it over to you, as fellow scholars, to decide that.

4.6 Further Research

If, after reading this article, your position is that the simplified definitions are not 'good enough' or you disagree with the wording that I have landed upon as a result of process I have followed, I encourage you to replicate (perhaps modify?) my methods and propose alternative definitions. Or take a completely different approach to come up with alternatives. I say this with a genuine alacrity that is rooted in sheer geekiness and my love for this work. My only ask is that you apply the Cow Holder Principle and keep the end result as simple and layperson-friendly as possible. Simple language enables us to better communicate and collaborate on the possibilities that exist for creating innovative learning opportunities. With continued collaboration and iterative work on making our scholarly jargon easier to understand, my hope is that we can eventually find ourselves in a place of 'good enough' consensus.

5 Conclusion

If you want to take the challenge of simplifying scholarly terms and concepts one step further, I invite you to engage in one of my favourite practices. Ever since my children were in early elementary school, I have taken advantage of any opportunity to come into their classrooms to describe what I do for work. To effectively explain what a digital learning researcher does to first graders, or even middle schoolers, one must throw away all their favourite scholarly jargon (and big words in general) and simply explain the basics of what they do (and quickly, because children are not known for being quiet and polite listeners when a speaker is long-winded or boring).

So, with that said, I challenge you to imagine yourself in a situation similar to that of the farmer in the introduction to this paper. You are in a school classroom speaking to a group of children, tasked with describing ODDE. Using the Cow Holder Principle, what would you say?

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Author's Contributions (CRediT)

NJ: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, resources, software, writing and editing the original draft. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability

All data was gathered through searches using publicly available tools and websites.

Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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Based on Academic Integrity and Transparency in AI-assisted Research and Specification Framework (Bozkurt, 2024) In the creation of this scholarly product, the author used GAI for the purposes of data generation, as described in the methods. This paper was edited and refined with the assistance of Grammarly (Version as of November 2025), complementing the human editorial process. The human author critically assessed and validated the content to maintain academic rigor. The author also assessed and addressed potential biases inherent in the AI-generated content. The final version of the paper is the sole responsibility of the human authors.