

Editorial – Designer labels...

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What's in a name?

Such is the opening question in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Open, Distance, and Digital Education* (Nichols, 2024). The phrase was, perhaps, a subconscious reference to Juliet's musings about the eavesdropping Romeo in that famous balcony scene penned by Shakespeare:

*'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for that name which is no part of thee
Take all myself.¹*

A few reflections are relevant at this point.

First, though we know it popularly as the *balcony* scene, the script (see link in footnote) describes Juliet appearing at a *window*. That's a pedantic point I will come back to.

Second, though Juliet is right in one sense – Romeo would still retain his 'dear perfection' if he had some other name – she is very incorrect in another. The sweetness of Romeo's rose is atop the thorny stem of his surname. The fact is, Romeo *is* a Montague, and Juliet *is* a Capulet. Without that distinction, there is no story, no drama, no contrast.

Names, terminology, can be contentious. Their subtleties can be jarring; consider the Gulf of Mexico and the Gulf of America, the Department of Defense versus the Department of War. Or a 'Police Action' instead of a declared war. 'Sponsored content' instead of advertising. A further example I sourced from Copilot: 'end-to-end encrypted' proposes complete privacy, whereas providers can maintain metadata about who you talk to, when, how often, and where. In many important ways, names, terms, the meanings we place on them, matter.

This Special Issue, invited by the JODDE Editorial Team, further explores the importance or otherwise of how we refer to our practice as open, digital and distance education theorists, thinkers, and practitioners. Tony Bates captures the awkwardness of this focus well in his review of the first issue of JODDE:

Frankly, such discussion easily descends into the category of how many angels can dance on the point of a pin. In terms of a new journal, there is surely space for a new one that deals with the current technology-influenced changes to education, and that also recognises the importance of inclusive, scalable, and sustainable learning. In other words, I am happy that the journal is called the *Journal of Open, Distance and Digital Education*. Nevertheless, at the same time, Nichols is right to be concerned that we don't get locked into narrowly defined historical perspectives, and the term 'ODDE' might result in the journal being ignored by those newly moving into this area. (Bates, 2024, 'Critical reflections', ¶ 2).

¹ Romeo and Juliet: Entire Play | https://shakespeare.mit.edu/romeo_juliet/full.html, Scene II.

On the one hand, debating terminology can be incredibly pedantic and ultimately meaningless (I'm reserving that window and balcony issue for the end of this editorial). However, on the other hand, the terminology we use always brings a context in its train. Romeo isn't just an adolescent; he's a Montague. That means something. In some countries, 'distance' isn't a respected mode of education; it's second-rate or irrelevant. In others, 'online' isn't innovative; it's a compromise. Around the world, we see 'Smart,' 'HyFlex,' 'Bichronous' all trying to gain traction as a point of difference across practice that is typically more broadly termed 'blended,' or 'hybrid.' Tragically, these terms can often be used to describe the exact same thing, even as various models using the same term are very different. 'Open,' 'Flexible,' and 'Distance,' the lead cast of OFDL, increasingly find themselves strangers in international dialogue, particularly as emerging models of education simply take what is implied by these three terms for granted.

At one level, Romeo is Romeo no matter his name. On another, his relationships and community are shaped by the fact that he is a Montague. I'm certain there's no risk of spoiler here; the entire play revolves around this tension, and its end is worth considering.

We owe a great deal of gratitude to the authors appearing in this Special Issue.

To begin with, we have Som Naidu's piece 'Reconceptualizing educational provision: An integrated approach'. Naidu draws us back to basics, reminding us that the 'learning and teaching transaction' lies at the heart of what we are all concerned with. The main issue, Naidu suggests, is the fitness-for-purpose of how these transactions are carried out. Naidu brings an incredible scholarly heritage and authority to bear, and he correctly draws attention to the imperative for educational designers and technologists to transition from a focus on the design of instructional materials for flexible learning to the crafting of learning experiences and whole education ecosystems, regardless of what they are called or their mode of learning and teaching (Naidu, 2025).

Naidu points out the equivalence of educational models, despite their relative practices, and proposes that we see the varying terminology we now see worldwide as complementary. I recommend Naidu's closing questions as worthy of a Special Issue in their own right.

Folake Ruth Aluko and Tony Mays, in their article 'Revisiting the open and distance learning agenda within a neoliberal digital world', draw attention to the social justice behind open and distance learning (ODL). Neoliberalism, the authors contend, works against social justice; new models and approaches are reflecting market forces, particularly given patchy access to technology to the very learners ODL was first designed to serve. Drawing on Sen's Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1993), a strong case is made for educational practice that focuses on the needs of those excluded from education, over more scalable and sustainable (typically technology-enhanced) practice that appeals to the privatisation of education skewed toward those able to pay. As a Western reader, I found the treatment in the article a refreshing challenge. The words of Monbiot and Hutchison (2024) ring true here: "So pervasive has neoliberalism become that we no longer even recognize it as an ideology" (p. 2). We must be concerned less about terminology, more about ensuring the social justice values of ODL are carried forward.

Sanjaya Mishra draws our attention to distance education as a discipline in 'Looking beyond definitions of open and distance education: A discipline that needs rethinking.' Mishra traces the evolution of the discipline, outlining the issue of definition drawing on both my work (Nichols, 2024) and Johnson's (Johnson, 2023), who has also contributed to this Special Issue. The article is recommended because it aims at the very core of the arguments made in the article that spurred this Special Issue, and I am, as usual, grateful for Mishra's rich thinking and engagement. While Mishra makes a strong and correct case that the term 'distance' is sufficient to embrace all contemporary models of education contrasted with on-campus provision, whether 'distance'

remains a viable term to use in broader discourse is left (with some irony) 'open' in my view. Knowledge of Keegan's (Keegan 1986) concept of 'distance' and Wedemeyer's (1973) concept of 'open' are a privilege confined to those already in the OFDL tent, though Mishra does us all a tremendous service in resurfacing them in his piece. It is worth considering whether 'open and distance' remains the referential terminology for conversation related to future education models, despite their remaining signpost on a fertile field to date. Mishra's closing observation about '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' (Mishra, 2025, p. 11) is sobering.

A more theoretical article is Olaf Zawacki-Richter's 'A systems *Weltanschauung* of Open, Distance, and Digital Education (ODDE)'. Zawacki-Richter is Executive Chief Editor of this journal, and his reputation as a scholar in the field needs no introduction. His treatment establishes ODDE as a constantly evolving entity, itself the latest incarnation of ODL, through the lens of Luhmann's systems theory. The connection of systems theory (also drawing on Zawacki-Richter's previous studies in ecology) to ODDE provides a fascinating insight, and the Figures 1, 2, and 3 on pp. 5, 14, and 17 invite careful study. A systems view, argues Zawacki-Richter, is a *Weltanschauung* or 'worldview' that presents the reality of ODDE consisting of multiple sub-systems in a dynamic relationship with changes in their context. The article deserves careful reading. I take from Zawacki-Richter's position that terminology is less important than the dynamics of systems adapting coherently to their environment, noting that for many open universities, this has led to self-referential change that calls into question their ongoing competitiveness. While Zawacki-Richter does not attempt to change terminology, his case for presenting 'a conceptual foundation for analysing ODDE as both a technological and social phenomenon, functional in purpose, critical in reflection, and ecological in its systemic interrelations' (Zawacki-Richter, 2025, p. 16) is surely successful. This major contribution provides a macro-level view of the field, one that I trust others will reference and extend.

Nicole Johnson, reflecting through her self-described identity as a 'definitions nerd' (Johnson, 2025, p. 3), shifts the conversation toward the importance of simplification and audience-awareness, highlighting the accessibility and utility of ODDE terminology beyond the field itself. Johnson draws us back to the vernacular, focusing more on what something does or achieves than what it is called. Functions and features, in other words, are more useful than titles; 'open,' 'distance,' and 'digital' learning come under scrutiny, resulting in some suggested vernacular definitions on p. 7. Johnson asks us to consider these, with the added challenge of how we would describe what they mean to a group of children. Johnson illustrates our very real problem as a scholarly community; how do we explain what we stand for, without drawing technical distinctions that are meaningless to others?

Finally, we have Dawn Gilmore and Chin Nguyen's 'Reframing Open, Distance, and Digital Education: Purposeful design for distributed learners.' Here, the paper focuses particularly on the concept of designing education models in ways that apply openness and distance as a means of 'principled design orientation—one that foregrounds learner agency, inclusivity, and social purpose' (Gilmore & Nguyen, 2025, p. 4). This looks to have considerable merit, as demonstrated in their case study, and the four design questions refocus us on what ultimately matters: purposeful solutions 'grounded in access, flexibility, and learner-centred pedagogy' (p. 9). While Gilmore and Nguyen do not solve the matter of what to call models of practice, they do at least outline how the lack of agreed terminology need not hold things up; 'open' and 'distance' retain their roles as reference points of design.

Coming back to the window versus the balcony. One key term across this Special Issue is one I tried to draw attention to in the "What's in a name?" article behind it: *design*. It is curious to see

Naidu, and in particular Gilmore and Nguyen, drawing direct attention to this word; Aluko and Mays suggest Sen's framework as a method of ensuring education practice is designed for inclusivity; Mishra draws our attention to those issues that determine practice in '3.1 Focus of study' (p. 8 of his article); design faces systemic challenges in Zawacki-Richter's analysis, which urge a self-referential reaction to a changing environment (the history of which 'has led to a blurring of boundaries between distance and campus-based universities', (Zawacki-Richter, 2025, p. 14); Johnson includes the term 'design' in her working definitions of open and digital learning. *Design matters*, and for a set design, whether Juliet appears at a window or a balcony really shapes the dynamics of the entire scene. The balcony is a *design* decision, one, perhaps illustratively, off script.

Perhaps, as Gilmore and Nguyen suggest, our attention should be less on the terms we use in favour of a purposefully designed educational transaction best suited to matching those wanting education with those accredited to provide it. How we *design* education will determine the roles of the various actors (teachers, learners, associated success services); options for assessment; timetabling and enrolment options; and the role of educational resources.² Design decisions will also influence the available, inclusive, scalable, and sustainable nature of provision. I invite the reader to enter into this stream of scholarship, mindful that what attracted Romeo and Juliet to one another was more on who they perceived one another to be, not the labels they brought with them.

AI statement: AI was not used at all in preparing this editorial, with the exceptions of a query for additional examples of terminology (noted on p. 2). Submitted articles were referred to in full.

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² As an aside, I am currently completing a book as part of my closing role as Commonwealth of Learning Chair considering blended learning, drawing on the six characteristics of learner and teacher activities, resources, timetable, assessment, and institutional success services across a series of case studies.

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