

Oral histories and engaged perspectives: In conversation with Otto Peters*

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Abstract

Professor Otto Peters (* 06 May 1926 in Berlin, Germany) is one of the leading pioneers and scholars of distance education and founding Rector of the FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany. Professor Olaf Zawacki-Richter, Otto Peters' last doctoral student, conducted the interview. Otto Peters talks about how he himself first came into contact with distance learning as a student during World War II. While working at the German Institute of Distance Education, as head of the department for distance education abroad, he invented the term "distance education". He talks about the development of distance education in Europe, the establishment of the FernUniversität in Hagen, and how he was appointed as the first rector of the new distance teaching university in Germany. Finally, Otto Peters reflects on the impact and reception of his theory of distance education as the most industrialized form of education, which has made him a globally recognized theorist in the field of distance education research.

Keywords

Otto Peters; FernUniversität in Hagen; distance education; industrialization theory of distance education; history of ODDE

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1 Introduction: A Personal Remark

Professor Peters celebrated his 100th birthday on 6 May this year. To mark this remarkable milestone, we are republishing this interview, which originally appeared in the *American Journal of Distance Education* (Zawacki-Richter, 2024) under a CC BY license.

I had the privilege to be the last doctoral student of Professor Otto Peters. Coming from a working-class background, he considers himself a lucky non-traditional student with a magnificent professional career as a school teacher, researcher, and professor up to the Rector of a university. I was born in 1972, around the time Otto Peters received his Ph.D. for his dissertation about the pedagogical structure of distance education as an industrialized form of teaching and learning (Peters, 1973).

I first met Professor Peters in person at a curriculum development workshop in Frankfurt am Main in 2000. In 1999, Dr. Ulrich Bernath from the University of Oldenburg (Germany) and Dr. Eugen Rubin from the University of Maryland University College (USA) raised funding for the development of a fully-online Master of Distance Education (MDE) program (see Bernath & Rubin, 2002) that built upon a virtual seminar for professional development in distance education funded by the AT&T Foundation (Bernath & Rubin, 1999). From 1999 to 2003 I was working in my first job as an instructional designer and research assistant at the Center for Distance Education in Oldenburg, and my role was to support faculty members in developing their courses for the new online learning environment, among them Otto Peters who was a visiting expert in the Foundations of Distance Education course (OMDE601).

This meeting in Frankfurt was the beginning of my Ph.D. journey with Professor Peters. In the following years, I regularly went to Hagen to discuss my work. Around that time, he was fascinated by the new opportunities that the Internet and online learning afford for distance education. I remember, on my first visit, when he drove me back to the station in his black Opel Omega (it was a beautiful, sunny day), he said to me as a farewell: "Thank you for your visit! You can learn from me and I can learn from you". He was, and still is, very interested in learning new things from the younger generations. Despite his infinite wealth of experience as a scholar and leader in distance education, he always treated me as an equal partner in conversation. I very much hope that I can pass on some of the kind academic support and guidance I received from Otto Peters to my own Ph.D. students today.

This interview was recorded on Saturday, June 10, 2023. It was conducted in German at the home of Professor Peters in Hagen. The interview was transcribed by Mrs. Elisabeth Janssen and translated into English by me. I would like to thank heartfully Professor Junhong Xiao, Professor David Lim, Dr. Kathryn Johnson, and Dr. Berrin Cefa for their valuable feedback and comments that helped tremendously to improve the manuscript.

2 Interview with Professor Peters

Olaf Zawacki-Richter (OZR): Dear Otto, thank you very much for agreeing to do an interview with me. It will appear in the *American Journal of Distance Education*. The journal published the first interview in this series with Professor Charles Wedemeyer 37 years ago, whom I know you hold in high esteem. In Germany, you certainly laid the foundations for the introduction of distance education and the establishment of the FernUniversität in Hagen, of which you were the first rector from 1975 to 1984. But first of all, would you please tell our readers how you acquired distance learning experience at a very young age?

Otto Peters (OP): It happened around 1940 during the war¹. I was 14 years old and lived in a teacher training college² in Neustadt³ (West Prussia) which was organized like a boarding school for about 120 pupils of the same age, who were to be trained as teachers within four years. The discipline was very strict. We were not allowed to leave the premises and could not even go for a walk in that little town. Our curriculum was unusually restricted as English was the only foreign language. We should only be prepared for the teaching profession and not continue to go on to university.

One day there was a big excitement. 50 Marks had been stolen. The director immediately ruled that all cupboards and beds must be turned upside down to find the money and the thief. When they searched my bed they did not find the typical pulp fictions or crime thrillers, but instead found a big blue box containing twenty distance study letters published by Gustav Langenscheidt⁴ in Berlin. Its title was "Introduction to Latin". This was my first encounter with distance education and a clear violation of the house rules. However, I badly wanted to learn a second foreign language at a distance for admission to a university in the future. With that big blue box in my hands, I could not at all assume that twenty years later distance education would become my specialty for a lifetime. – And the money was never found.

OZR: What a nice story... In 1947, after the war, you worked as a teacher in Berlin and started to study at Humboldt University and later at the Freie Universität of Berlin.

OP: Yes, someone who had the first teacher's examination was allowed to study at Humboldt University at that time. I could walk from school to the university in 30 minutes, which was at Unter den Linden. Half of the schools were bombed out at that time, so the schools always had to alternate: one week of classes in the morning, one week in the afternoon. Why do I say that? To show how difficult it was for me, because I could only go to university in the morning or afternoon. There were always different lectures, which I only half attended. Then it turned out there was a teacher shortage in East Berlin. The students were then supposed to teach for 10 hours. That's when they found out I was from West Berlin and I was prohibited from attending just before the first exam. At the Freie Universität in West Berlin, I had to have the Abitur⁵. So I attended evening classes for 2.5 years to catch up on my Abitur. When I finally had the Abitur, I went to the Freie Universität. On the side, I had continued to work as a teacher. I taught all classes, from primary school to middle school to high school.

¹ World War II (1939-1945)

² After a phase of academisation of teacher education in the Weimar Republic since 1919, a process of de-qualification in teacher education took place under National Socialism in Germany since 1939. Elementary and middle school teachers were trained non-academically in teacher training colleges. This was also a consequence of the dramatic shortage of teachers during the war (see Vogt & Scholz, 2020).

³ Wejherowo in Poland today

⁴ A German language teacher, publisher, and owner of a correspondence school in Berlin (1832-1895). Together with Charles Toussaint (1813-1877) in Paris, Gustav Langenscheidt published self-study letters for French courses. They developed the "Toussaint-Langenscheidt Method", that was used to teach French pronunciation via study letters. The introduction of phonetic transcription was also the basis for the successful foundation of the publishing house of Langenscheidt in 1856 (Delling, 1992).

⁵ University entrance qualification in Germany

OZR: So as an experienced teacher, you became the director of the didactics department of the Pedagogical Centre in Berlin from 1963 to 1969. During this time, you were already involved in distance learning?

OP: First of all, I would like to correct a mistake in the literature. At the Pedagogical Center in Berlin, I was not commissioned to study international distance education systems. My task in this institution was to deal with the didactic problems of teachers at schools in Berlin.

No, I became interested in distance education entirely by myself. It grew out of me. Since 1956 I attended all meetings of the International Council of Correspondence Education. Each time I presented a paper. At these conferences, I met many international experts. In this way, I developed some expertise and became internationally known in the field of distance learning.



Figure 1: In conversation with Professor Otto Peters, Hagen (Germany), June 10, 2023

Then the German Congress of Municipal Authorities started to deal with this topic. The Minister of Education in West-Berlin, Carl-Hein Evers⁶, asked me to prepare a paper about distance education for him. Being a traditional teacher who loved face-to-face instruction, I had thought little about distance education. Therefore, I started my paper by revealing its obvious pedagogic deficits and by deploring its commercial misuse. However, the more information I required from many countries all over the world, the more I learned about its specific techniques and methods, its merits in educational emergency situations, its significance in the field of continuing and adult education... the more I was attracted by this new mode of educational delivery. You should know that at that time, German universities were totally lacking this particular kind of teaching and learning. I became aware of the rare chance of breaking new ground. And I felt challenged by having entered a new field of educational research. In other words: I had started writing the paper as a *Saulus* and finished it as a *Paulus*.

⁶ Carl-Hein Evers (1922-2010), Minister of Education (Schulsenator) in West-Berlin (1963-1970)

OZR: In the late 1960s, the Volkswagen (VW) Foundation became involved in establishing distance education in Germany. What can you tell us about that?

OP: My general impression was that the VW Foundation played an outstanding role in establishing distance education in Germany. The foundation was really interested in funding projects that could expand the educational system to reach more students. Establishing distance education was such a project. The VW Foundation took notice of my work⁷, and they invited me to join their group of advisors. My most important advice for this group was that their planned new distance education project should not be established at just any university but rather at the prestigious University of Tübingen. And indeed, in 1967, the VW Foundation provided enough money for establishing and running the German Institute of Distance Education at the University of Tübingen (DIFF). Even necessary buildings were financed as well.

The VW Foundation also supported my endeavor to learn more about distance education in other countries. At that time, I was invited to the United States to stay for three months. It was a great chance for me to visit distance education experts at their universities. The VW Foundation funded this visit with 5,000 German Marks. However, the VW money was not spent at all after these three months in the USA, as the U.S. State Department had covered all my travel expenses. So, I asked the Foundation whether I could use the money to visit distance teaching universities in the Soviet Union. It was a bold suggestion as, at that time, Russia was kept in isolation during the Cold War. The Iron Curtain prevented me from traveling officially to Moscow and Leningrad (St. Petersburg) as our government had no diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. I could visit this country only as a tourist. Imagine this scene: I am standing in front of a Leningrad university addressing individual students leaving the university building for quite a while. I found one able to understand English. "Can you show me the way to your distance teaching professor?" She did so – and I met Professor Slatkin. He was so delighted, that he stopped his seminar immediately, and our discussion began. He told me that distance education was implemented at all Russian universities. I learned that Russian distance education was legally more developed than in Western countries. It was provided by law as a regular study mode besides face-to-face teaching and evening study. I left with additional information material and statistics about the Russian distance education system. By the way, my report was published as a book and had won a prize.⁸

OZR: You then moved to the DIFF in 1969. Can you share your experience there?

OP: Yes, it was a very good time for me and also for my family. We moved from Berlin to Tübingen and got an official flat there, which was built by the VW Foundation. They were wonderful years in Tübingen. Professor Dohmen⁹ was interested in what I was doing and I also did my doctorate there. But even nicer is the story about the European Union...

OZR: Yes...

OP: The European Union had nine member states cooperating in various fields, such as business and education. DIFF had agreed to organize conferences and meetings of distance education experts from all nine countries. And I was, after all, the head of the "Distance Education Abroad" department, so I prepared the papers for the meetings of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

⁷ see: Peters (1965)

⁸ see: Peters (1967), and also Zawacki-Richter & Kourotchikina (2012)

⁹ Günther Dohmen, Professor of Education at the University of Tübingen (1926-2022), Director of the DIFF

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

However, things were not that simple. At the time, Professor Norman MacKenzie¹⁰ from the British Open University was visiting our institute in Tübingen. During a break, I asked him eagerly what he thought about my new creation. He reacted with controlled indignation: "That is absolutely impossible, because this word does not exist in English at all. I can assure you that nobody will accept this peculiar term in England." Despite his objection, which he meant to be friendly but came across as brusque, I did not get discouraged. Two months later, the American seminal scholar, Professor Charles Wedemeyer, came to Tübingen. I asked him the same question, and he listened with great interest without commenting on this new term.

From then on, I used my new English term in all papers distributed to representatives of the then ten countries at subsequent meetings of the Council of Europe. Since then, only distance education was referred to in my talk and in the subsequent discussions. Surprisingly, the new term was taken up by many of those attending the conference and was also used in many cases at later conferences without contradiction. The delegates took their conference papers back to the capitals of their countries and spread the new term from there in their own working areas as well. Gradually, distance education became commonplace at the Council of Europe. Theoretically, this can be explained by the fact that in Europe, an international academic Standard English lingua franca had been established. Acceptance of this new term was probably due to these developments.

I discovered the extent to which distance education had been absorbed and applied over time some years later at the next world conference of the International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE), which took place in 1982 in Vancouver. I noticed with satisfaction that more and more delegates from EU countries, but also Americans and the British as well, were already using the term familiarly.

Things went so far that some delegates even filed a motion for the name of our conference to be changed accordingly, and "Correspondence" changed to "Distance". Professor Charles Wedemeyer, a well-known academic of high prestige from the University of Wisconsin, delivered a passionate speech, in which he convincingly described the advantages of a change of name of this nature and which met with great applause. Only the owners of private commercial correspondence schools wanted to keep to "correspondence", for business reasons. However, when the vote was taken on this motion they remained in the minority. Since then, this global association has been known as the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE). This

¹⁰ British journalist (1921-2013), member of the planning committee and council that created the OUUK

meant that the new English term that I invented for distance studies had been officially accepted and legitimated internationally. I was pleased that I had prevailed everywhere with my "invention". Since then, distance teaching in the tertiary sector has been referred to all over the English-speaking world as "distance education", both in practice and research.

ORZ: In the meantime, plans to establish a dedicated distance education higher education institution in Germany had taken shape. And you were a member of the founding committee of the FernUniversität in Hagen.

OP: Yes, I was quite busy on the founding committee. In fact, Johannes Rau¹¹ originally had other plans for the FernUniversität. He was responsible for all universities. And it was the time when so many people were taking their Abitur exams that the universities could not accept them all. He had imagined that the main task of the new distance teaching university would be to take care of these students.

We sat there in the founding committee and listened to it and then the educators, not the others, but the educators on the committee said, it doesn't work that way. A distance teaching university cannot take over the function of a traditional university. It must open itself up to completely different students, namely adults. And working people. There were major disputes, but we prevailed. That's why the goal of the FernUniversität had to be redefined. And that was what happened.¹²

OZR: How did it then happen that you became the founding Rector of the FernUniversität in Hagen?

OP: In 1974, I was offered and accepted a professorship in education at the Pädagogische Hochschule (PH) in Berlin¹³. But Johannes Rau negotiated with the Rector of the PH that I would be released after one year. So, I came to Hagen as a professor, and it happened that Dr. Friedrich Besch, Rau's personal secretary¹⁴ approached me on the street and asked me if I wouldn't like to become the founding Rector. He said, "I don't have anyone in the whole of Germany who is knowledgeable about distance education and who is a full professor." I replied, "No, I won't do that. I can't do administration." He then said they had an excellent man as head of administration, Ralf Bartz, who became the first Chancellor of the FernUniversität. This finally convinced me, and so a vote was taken unanimously at the Founding Committee, and one day later I was appointed Rector by Johannes Rau. With Ralf Bartz, I set up the whole operating system of the FernUniversität. Furthermore, this position enabled me to travel even more than before, I could travel anywhere. That was very nice.

OZR: Your international travels finally lead us once again to your theory based on your observations and comparisons of distance teaching institutions around the world; distance education as the most industrialized form of teaching and learning. This work, published in 1973, was also your dissertation. Internationally, the theory became known worldwide through the

¹¹ Johannes Rau (1931-2006), Minister of Science and Research (1970-1978) in the State of North-Rhine Westphalia, Prime Minister of North-Rhine Westphalia (1978-1998), and President of Germany (1999-2004)

¹² see: Rau (1974)

¹³ University of Education in Berlin

¹⁴ Friedrich Besch (* 12-21-1934 in Danzig), a German lawyer, administrative official, and politician (SPD, Social Democrat Party)

English edition by Desmond Keegan in the 1990s¹⁵. There was an intense discussion about it in the academic literature. Some colleagues had accused you of having a technocratic view of distance education. As you replied in your own writings, this was a misunderstanding¹⁶. What do you think about the reception of your theory today?

OP: This judgment was superficial, incorrect, and wrong. It affected me deeply as the pedagogical consequences induced me to analyze and interpret distance education in a new way. It was really displeasing for me to see that criticisms like this one suggest that I have been a proponent of the industrialization of education, even worse, an ed tech enthusiast. Jeavons¹⁷ even called me even "a great technological optimist." All of this, however, was not the case. Not at all, not at any time. I developed the Industrial Model for a better understanding of the "education" in distance education. It was always about educational changes. The statements of some authors were contrary to what I had strived for and written about for years. As a professional pedagogue specialized in theories of teaching and learning, my main purpose was to inform readers about the profound, radical pedagogical changes caused by industrialization. My focus was on revealing the extraordinary teaching and learning changes in completely industrialized systems. I had not advocated the industrialization of teaching and learning but tried to describe new and entirely unusual pedagogical possibilities and challenges of instructional design. I was motivated by pedagogical considerations, which envisioned the extension and improvement of the educational system through distance education.

OZR: Also, after your retirement in 1996, you have intensively followed the ongoing development of distance education. You have passed on your vast knowledge and immense experience to younger generations, your students, and doctoral candidates. What do you wish for the future when you look back on more than half a century of your professional activity in research and practice of distance education? How would you reflect on your professional career?

OP: I would like to see a different focus. I have the impression that most people involved in teaching and learning are concerned with how the media can improve the learning process. I think that it would be much better if the time is used to establish contact with the learners, the students. Be it in person, be it through the media... in order to learn more about their interests, ideas, desires, hopes, and expectations. The students are by far much more important than the media. We owe them more attention and affection. Distance education can and should be improved by making the development of the student's autonomy possible. The autonomous person is the real and superior goal of education. As a counterpart to the education of big and even very big groups taught at once together, the pedagogical goal of individualization becomes more and more important. Well...

Looking back at my curriculum vitae, I am myself stunned. A not serious and easy answer could be that my very long life has entirely been a long chain of strokes of luck. How was this extraordinary development possible from the son of a single-parent cleaning woman to a professor and even a university Rector? My first answer is that you need stamina, persistence, patience, and, of course, a special sense of purpose. However, my sense of purpose was only a

¹⁵ see: Keegan (1994), and also Zawacki-Richter (2019)

¹⁶ see: Peters (1989)

¹⁷ see: Jeavons (1986)

general one and never specifically directed to certain academic positions. I had never made efforts to reach a better academic position because I had always been asked to change.

The real relevant and consequential precondition for my unusual course of life was my non-traditional way to higher education and even more so the following eleven years of academic studies. However, I could afford this only by working full-time alongside my studies. At that time, I worked and studied under the same great strain as many of the students at our university in Hagen today. Unconsciously and unintentionally, I have therefore been an early example of a working student myself.

OZR: Dear Otto, thank you very much for sharing your vast experience with us.

OP: You are welcome.

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