



*Commentary:*

## **Revisiting the Definition of Distance Education - A Response to Sanjaya Mishra**

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Thank you very much for directing our attention to the write up by my good friend and colleague, Sanjaya Mishra, the Education Specialist on eLearning at the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) in their new #blog of 11 May, 2021 by @COL4D@SanjayaMishra <https://t.co/iaTU4VIMKQ> <https://t.co/zfZkXQnEMz> as contained in <https://www.col.org/news/col-blog/revisiting-definition-distance-education> in which he called for Revisiting the definition of distance education.

The classical definition of distance education came into being when Ana Tickner began using correspondence to teach shorthand in 1728. This was followed by Sir Isaac Pitman in the 1840s, who also taught a system of texts transcribed into shorthand on postcards, through the mail by post, and received transcriptions from his students in return for correction.

When distance education began in full force, it was referred to by different names such as correspondence education and independent learning. In fact, the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) founded in 1938 was known as the International Council for Correspondence Education. Its current name was adopted at the World Conference held in Vancouver in 1982. It was ICDE that popularised the name and the practice of distance learning and added Open to it at the World Conference due to the emergence of the practice of open education.

For the records, distance learning was first used in higher education in 1828 by the University of London when it started distance teaching, followed by the University of Chicago in 1882, Queen's University, Canada in 1889, and in 1892 by the University of Wisconsin. Columbia University started in 1906, the University of Queensland, Australia in 1906 and the University of South Africa in 1946. The era of open education began with the United Kingdom Open University in 1969 followed by Athabasca University in 1972, the Indira Gandhi National Open University in 1985 and of course the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in 2002/2003. NOUN is the only single mode Open University in West Africa established by the government, and has become the largest in Africa. By the last count, India has 14 open universities, 13 of which are State owned. The oldest and first Open University in India is Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU), Hyderabad established in 1982. In 1990 the first Open Polytechnic in the world was established in New Zealand and the first Open School was established by the Ministry of Human Resource Development of the Government of India in 1989. But it is on record that the first State Open School in India was set-up in 1991.

The mainstreaming of ODL, catalysed by modern technologies, has evolved through different forms and types; from correspondence to distance learning to online learning to technology-enhanced learning to Open and Distance Learning to Open and Flexible Learning (OFL) to Open Distance and e-Learning (ODEL) and now to the ubiquitous Virtual or Digital or Online or E-learning. The use of emerging communication technologies, network of libraries, virtual institutes, virtual laboratories, educational portals, social media in instruction, research and communication with students, colleagues and peers has become central in the provision of Open and distance learning. The use of Technology in ODL has progressed from Print to The Web/Internet and has become the strategic agent for empowerment and transformation.

Modern technologies have become a disruptive force in higher education in the production of graduates with broad-based knowledge for the emerging learning society. The pervasive use of technology has resulted in mass instruction through Open and Distance Learning

(ODL), Open Education Resources (OER) and Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) - a situation in which a web-based course of study is made available without charge to unlimited number of students. These are not the definitions of DE by any imagination and I am glad to note that Dr Mishra stated correctly in his write up that “Today, with the use of chatbots, artificial intelligence and intelligent tutoring systems along with traditional technologies such as print, these classifications may not be useful. However, they help us have clarity – that distance education means different things to different people.”

Nowadays, we mistake the forms of online learning such as MOOCs and the use of other communication applications as definitions of distance learning. They are many varieties of online or virtual or e-learning. Much of technology-delivered learning that we have these days will not stand the scrutiny of the five characteristics of the definition of distance education. I think what we should call them are the various types, forms and orientations of online learning.

It must be noted that the classical definition and characteristics of Distance Education (learning and instruction) and its elucidation in the 80s by Desmond Keegan, Otto Peters and others have not changed and have become the foundational bedrock and philosophy of distance education. They separately analysed the definition of distance learning, in detail, to include the five key characteristics as listed by Dr Mishra.

What seems to be occurring is that, because of the pervasive influence of technologies and their use in ODL, many writers and researchers make the mistake of defining ODL by the emergence and influence of technology. That explains why Professor Jim Taylor, whom I had the honour of working with for years in Australia in the 90s, defined distance learning with his ‘five generations of distance teaching and learning’ primarily from the narrow window of technology usage in Distance Learning. Back in the early 90s I forecast that the North American use of technology in defining distance learning will emerge and over shadow the philosophical foundations and theory of distance learning. That seemed to have happened and people as well as even practitioners, who should know better, use the various types and forms of technology infusion into teaching at a distance as the only criterion

to define distance learning. And yet the use of technology partly covers just two of the 5 characteristics as espoused by the third and fourth characteristics of DE by Desmond Keegan, which are:

- Predominant use of technical media for delivery of learning content.
- Provision of two-way communication between student and teacher, and student and student.

But it is absolutely essential to note that technology (medium) is not content (message)!

Michael Moore's explanation of the definition of distance learning where he accurately said that distance education is transactional, a function of 'structure' and 'dialogue' is spot on with the definition of DE. I will again predict that in the next 5 years, the dividing line between face-to-face and distance learning will blur out and we shall only concern ourselves with the tangible outcomes of learning and the appropriate skills a learner gets out of the transaction. The mode of learning will become immaterial as the dividing line gets blurred and eventually erased!

One of the reasons that made ODL more robust and tremendously successful in meeting the needs of the greater majority of the people is the fact that the planning and management of all the complex activities and operation within ODL are well structured to lead to visible outcomes which all can see and appreciate. Central to this was the emergence of instructional design and development played in the provision of higher education through this alternative medium. It was this structuring of instruction in ODL that made this mode of teaching and learning to gain acceptance world-wide and burgeoned at the higher education level.

Indeed, many people have erroneously begun to define distance education by the emergence of COVID-19 to the greatest surprise of hard core and seasoned practitioners of ODL. In the cover story of the current Newsletter of COL (March 28, 2021, 26(1), it says that "In the last 12 months, it has become increasingly clear that education and lifelong learning will be at the centre of the post-pandemic 'reset'."

This is correct and it is happening. But we must note that the pandemic did not bring ODL, it only accelerated its use and acceptance worldwide. Many countries and individuals who had frowned at ODL were running helter-skelter to understand, grab and use ODL as it became expedient that they will be left out in the cold and abandoned at the train station if they did not, willy-nilly, use ODL which has become mainstreamed. That is why video conferencing application software such as Zoom blossomed in 2020 even though it has been in existence, unnoticed or unappreciated, several years before. Now we have close to three dozen video communications software out of which two of the best in the world have been discovered by Nigerians and found most powerful and even better than Zoom.

The ecosystem of ODeL is currently undergoing a foment in different dimensions which include (i) a shift in the philosophy of learning for all, (ii) the blurring of the divide between face-to-face and Open, Distance and e-Learning, (iii) the shift from students to being considered as learners, (iv) the movement from targeted population to open education (open access, open learning and open scholarship), (v) the use of social constructivism and the theory of webagogy for course material development and, (vi) the presentation of instruction in bytes of not more than 30 minutes each. All these on-going developments in open and distance learning are what should occupy our minds as we practice ODeL in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in which all comers define everything they do as distance learning because they want to gain attention, acceptance and popularity in the modern world. Anything that has no foundation cannot stand; hence we must always recourse to the foundation definition of ODL.

To me, these are what must occupy the minds and work of practitioners and researchers in ODL. The definition of ODL has not changed; it is the practice, as determined by the emergence of technologies especially the sexy ones of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that has coloured people's thinking about ODL. The good thing is that research in ODL is still very much in its infancy and has taken the slow lane. We must fast track research into ODL including its theories, its classical definition and its understanding to the fullest.

Again, many thanks to the Vice Chancellor of NOUN for his professional and academic interest in developing our capacity in ODL. Research, effective, efficient and accurate practitioners' in-depth understanding of what we do (or are supposed to be doing) is key.