

Editorial – From the origins of distance education to ethical AI in ODDE

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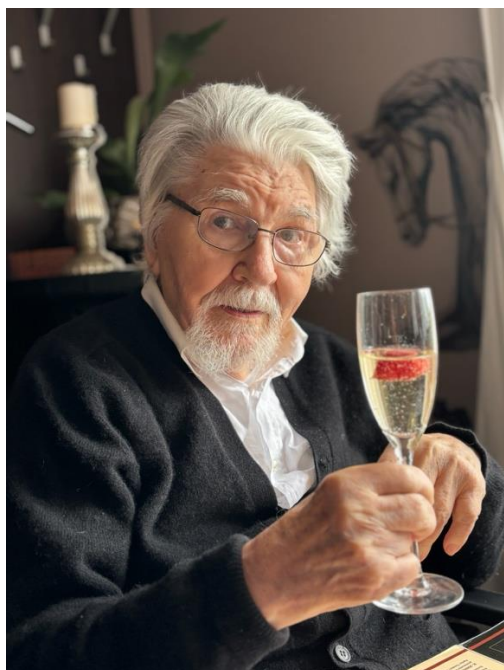
1 Congratulations to Professor Otto Peters

This year marks an extraordinary milestone for the field of ODDE. On 6 May 2026, Professor Otto Peters celebrated his 100th birthday. Few scholars have shaped the development of distance education as profoundly as Peters, whose work has influenced generations of researchers, practitioners, and institutional leaders across the world.

As the founding Rector of the FernUniversität in Hagen, Peters played a pivotal role in establishing distance education as a legitimate and respected mode of higher education. His contributions, however, extend far beyond institutional leadership. Through decades of comparative research, international collaboration, and theoretical innovation, he helped define the intellectual foundations of the field itself.

One of Peters' most remarkable contributions was the introduction of the term *distance education* (Zawacki-Richter, 2023). As he recounts in the interview republished in this issue, the expression emerged during his work for the Council of Europe in the 1960s, when he sought an alternative to the increasingly inadequate term *correspondence study*. What began as a practical solution for international communication gradually became the internationally accepted designation for an entire field of research and practice.

Peters is perhaps best known for his theory of distance education as the most industrialized form of teaching and learning (Peters, 1967, 1973, 1983). Often misunderstood as a celebration of industrialization, the theory was in fact conceived as a pedagogical and organizational framework for understanding how large-scale educational systems could widen access to higher education while maintaining quality (Peters, 1989). As discussed elsewhere, Peters's work anticipated many of the organizational principles that continue to underpin contemporary digital learning environments, including specialization, division of labour, instructional design teams, quality assurance, and systems thinking (Zawacki-Richter, 2019, 2023).



Photograph taken by Olaf Zawacki-Richter on 10.10.2025, reproduced with the permission of Otto Peters

To honour Professor Peters' remarkable legacy, we are pleased to republish *Oral Histories and Engaged Perspectives: In Conversation with Otto Peters*, an interview originally published in the *American Journal of Distance Education* under a Creative Commons (CC BY) licence (Zawacki-Richter, 2024). In this wide-ranging interview, Peters reflects on his own educational journey: From a non-traditional student during and after World War II to one of the world's leading scholars of distance education. He shares the story of how he first encountered correspondence study, how he came to "invent" the term *distance education*, the founding of the FernUniversität in Hagen, and the development and international reception of his industrialization theory. Most importantly, readers encounter Peters in his own words: thoughtful, reflective, intellectually curious, and deeply committed to expanding educational opportunities through openness.

As a journal dedicated to the advancement of ODDE, we are honoured to celebrate Professor Otto Peters' centenary by making this important historical document available to a new generation of readers. At a time when artificial intelligence (AI), platform technologies, and digital transformation are reshaping educational systems, revisiting the ideas of one of the field's founding theorists reminds us that innovation is best understood in dialogue with the intellectual and conceptual foundations on which it builds.

2 Debating ethical AI

The second major theme of this issue turns our attention from the history of distance education to one of its most pressing contemporary challenges: the ethical use of AI.

AI has rapidly become embedded in open, distance, and digital education. From generative AI and learning analytics to intelligent tutoring systems and automated assessment, AI technologies are transforming how educational opportunities are authored, designed, delivered, and experienced. At the same time, they raise profound questions about autonomy, responsibility, fairness, transparency, privacy, and the purposes of education itself. While there is broad agreement that ethical reflection is essential, there is far less agreement on what constitutes ethical AI practice or how ethical principles should be interpreted and applied.

It is precisely this lack of consensus that motivates the scholarly exchange presented in this issue. Stephen Downes opens the discussion with a provocative critical reflection questioning the widespread assumption that AI ethics can be reduced to a universally accepted set of principles. Rather than rejecting ethics, Downes argues that many commonly cited "ethical AI principles" are inseparable from political and philosophical commitments and therefore cannot be regarded as neutral or universally shared foundations for governing AI in education.

As editors, we considered it important that such a position should not stand alone. We therefore invited two distinguished scholars – Jon Dron and Dagmar Monett – who served as reviewers of Downes's paper to respond. Jon Dron, co-authoring with Stella George, engages critically with Downes's arguments, examining both areas of agreement and points of disagreement while exploring the role that ethical principles can still play in educational practice. Dagmar Monett offers a complementary perspective by questioning several of Downes's underlying assumptions and reflecting on the relationship between machine intelligence, human values, and ethical reasoning. Together, these three contributions illustrate that meaningful scholarly progress often emerges not from consensus, but from constructive disagreement.

At JODDE, we see this exchange as more than a discussion about AI. It exemplifies the kind of scholarly dialogue that this journal seeks to foster: critical, respectful, theoretically informed, and open to diverse perspectives. Complex challenges such as the role of AI in education cannot be resolved through simple prescriptions. The complex challenges that AI in education poses require sustained interdisciplinary conversation, conceptual clarity, and a willingness to examine underlying assumptions.

We hope that readers will engage with these contributions not as the conclusion of a debate, but as its beginning. As AI continues to reshape educational systems around the world, journals have an important role to play as spaces where competing ideas can be examined, challenged, and refined through scholarly discourse.

3 Further Contributions

The issue is complemented by three additional contributions that address important macro- and meso-level developments in ODDE from different perspectives.

Wolfgang Müskens presents the validation and norming of the Instrument for the Quality Assurance of OER (IQOER) Rating Scales, providing a rigorously tested instrument for assessing the quality of open educational resources. Building on the comprehensive IQOER quality framework, the study demonstrates strong psychometric properties and offers empirically derived quality thresholds that support educators and developers in the systematic evaluation and continuous improvement of OER.

Maria Cristina Lima Paniago contributes an international qualitative study on digital teacher education, in which researchers from Brazil, Canada, England, and South Africa explore how pre-service and in-service teacher educators construct meanings of digital cultures across diverse contexts. Using online dialogical cycles grounded in Freirean dialogue, complexity theory, and action research, the study demonstrates that digital cultures require more than instrumental uses of technology. Instead, it highlights the importance of critical reflection, collaboration, inclusion, and relational approaches to teacher education, offering a valuable contribution to ongoing discussions about the human dimensions of digital transformation in education.

Finally, Abbigail Harris, Richard E. West, and Tyler Westerberg present a comprehensive scoping review examining the meso- and macro-level impacts of open badges and microcredentials. Their synthesis highlights the growing influence of open recognition technologies on institutions, educational policies, and lifelong learning ecosystems, while also identifying important gaps in the current evidence base, particularly regarding broader societal impacts.

Together, these contributions reflect the breadth of contemporary ODDE research, from quality assurance of open educational resources and institutional digital transformation to the evolving landscape of open recognition.

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