

Grounding, framing, and problematising research in online, distance and digital education

Ground, frame,
problematised
ODDE
research

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David C.L. Lim

*Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Open University Malaysia,
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

Olaf Zawacki-Richter

*School of Educational and Social Sciences, University of Oldenburg,
Oldenburg, Germany, and*

Insung Jung

Education Research Institute, Seoul National University, Seoul, South Korea

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper engages Olaf Zawacki-Richter and Insung Jung in a frank and penetrating conversation that seeks to ground, frame, and problematise research in the field conceptualised as “open, distance and digital education” (ODDE). Taking as starting point the recent publication of the landmark *Handbook of Open, Distance, and Digital Education* (2022), it segues into a broad critique of the shortcomings of ODDE research, the importance of knowledge production on the meso- and macro-levels, the autonomy of ODDE as a field coming into its own, the place of postfoundationalism in ODDE discourse, and related topics that are pivotal in ODDE today.

Design/methodology/approach – The semi-structured interview was employed as the primary qualitative research method.

Findings – The research imperative of the relatively young but complex field of ODDE today is not the incessant reiteration of the same but rather a strategic reorientation that, first, circumvents the well-documented yet too-often-overlooked shortcomings of ODDE research and, second, promotes transboundary collaborations with the potential for system-wide impact.

Originality/value – This novel interview-based critique of ODDE research demonstrates that extending the scholarly discourse beyond the conventional report format is a productive method for enriching conversations on ODDE and vitalising the field itself.

Keywords Open, distance and digital education (ODDE), Research, 3M-framework, Theory

Paper type Viewpoint

Part I: setting up the terms of the conversation

The field of “open and distance education” in which many of us work as practitioners and researchers is neither fixed or settled nor endowed with an internal telos that awaits our discovery and compliance. Instead, it is a discursive construction held together by a web of ideas that intermesh, layer, and cohere into epistemic sense over time, but only contingently so. This is because, by its nature as a discourse, it is open to contestation and is ultimately malleable. For this reason, what we routinely refer to as “open and distance education”

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(Gaskell, 2017) can be reconstructed as “open, distance, and digital education” (ODDE), a new term coined by Zawacki-Richter and Jung (2022a) in their recently published *Handbook of Open, Distance, and Digital Education* that this paper takes off from. As discussed in Part II of this paper, ODDE is both a nod to the open and distance origins of the field and a recognition of the increasing adoption of digitally-mediated forms of teaching and learning practices by educational institutions globally (Weller, 2022). These practices mark a significant and deepening convergence between open and conventional institutions (Tait and Mills, 1999; Naidu, 2003). ODDE is not simply another term in the crowded sea of related terminologies, each of which has sought to capture the essence of our practices in its own way. To harness the term’s potential, the myriad facets of ODDE are concertedly explored across eighty chapters in the aforementioned *Handbook* by a global representation of scholars covering virtually every pertinent topic related to ODDE. This monumental investment of intellectual labour in itself makes ODDE a key term and a discourse that contemporary practitioners and researchers in the evolving field cannot afford to ignore. At the very least, they ought to reconsider their own positionality in the discursive field that remains no less contestable with the emergence of ODDE on the horizon.

Seeded by the first co-author’s prior engagement with the *Handbook* in which ODDE takes centre stage as a term and a discourse, Part II of this paper takes the form of a conversation between the three co-authors. This conversation is informed by decades of active research and praxis. On the meta-level, it seeks to ground and frame research in ODDE that shapes the field and, just as importantly, to problematise the field in the critical sense of probing some of the underlying assumptions, biases, or limitations that practitioners and researchers may have brought to it. Eschewing the orthodoxy that takes the report structure of empirical papers as the natural, if not the sole legitimate format in which scholarly discourse on ODDE should take shape, this paper seeks to show, as part of its commitment to cross-mode critical inquiry, that ODDE stands to be vitalised rather than compromised from a diversification of the formats in which scholarly ODDE discourse is cast. While report-style empirical papers certainly have their place in ODDE scholarship, it is also crucial that departures from it are effected when the occasion calls for it, particularly in light of the startling findings that a significant proportion of empirical papers churned out and published in even some of the more established ODDE-related journals are, despite their best intentions, problematic and potentially undermining of the credibility of ODDE as a field, a mode, a practice, and a community (Peng and Xiao, 2022; Xiao, 2022, 2023).

At least two alternatives are available to the normative format: the discursive or argument-based essay format (see, for, e.g. Teräs *et al.*, 2020) and the Q&A interview or conversational format (e.g. Siegel and Biesta, 2022). Both are staples in academic scholarship across disciplines, including Education Studies, although they may not be as widely recognised and employed as the report-structured empirical papers favoured in certain ODDE circles. The latter of the two alternatives is adopted in Part II of this paper as the presentation style and primary research method. Procedurally, the interview questions derived from the scoped topics of conversation, as well as the reflective thoughts that precede the questions, were formulated in writing by Lim, the first co-author, based on his take on the field and on the ODDE-related areas of interest and expertise of the latter two co-authors, Zawacki-Richter and Jung, as gathered from their selected publications, including their chapters in the *Handbook* in question. The prefacing texts and questions were then emailed to the latter two who then conferred briefly before responding individually and returning their responses by email. Based on the responses, the first co-author expanded on the conversation by inserting several follow-up questions as necessitated by the flow then in formation before the process was repeated. The completed conversation was then edited and proofed by all three before it was finalised. The entire process from first contact to proofing was completed within the first three weeks of November 2022.

The semi-structured interview employed in this paper is conceptualised as hermeneutic in nature, both as method and format. From a hermeneutical standpoint, the interlocutors are engaged in a shared Socratic dialogue that evolves through questions and responses, where interpretation is “an essential part of the interview process itself, rather than an isolated phase that occurs after the completion of the interview” (Roulston and Choi, 2018, p. 235; see, also, Dinkins, 2005; Brinkmann, 2007, 2013). This theoretical framing of the interview is well-suited for the purposes of this paper for several reasons. It allows the interlocutors and readers to view the exchanges as speech acts or acts of knowledge, rather than as opinions to be deciphered and analysed as pointing to some other signified. It cuts through formality and allows for the posing of pointed statements and questions that incentivise the interlocutors to respond with the kind of forthrightness and clarity that may not be possible in academe. Additionally, it provides the interlocutors with the opportunity to formulate and articulate views relating to their scholarly and subjective positionality on aspects of ODDE that they may not have considered or addressed previously.

Overall, our conversation covers a number of critical issues in ODDE that we hope will serve as points for self-reflection and interrogation. We believe that our relatively young yet complex field requires practitioners and researchers to periodically step back from focusing on the minutiae of their work and to adopt an expansive kind of “lantern consciousness” (Gopnik, 2009) that is diffused, plastic, and open to new possibilities in order to reappraise the shifting field and their place in it, and to reorientate themselves as necessary. We recognise the heterogeneity of ODDE practitioners and researchers, and we believe their respective idiosyncrasies will guide them to formulate their own implications from the dialogue. However, we wish to offer our own takeaways for readers’ consideration. First, empirically speaking, research that focuses on micro-perspectives of ODDE is already over-represented, while knowledge gaps in macro- and meso-perspectives exist and present themselves as research opportunities to be seized, ideally as transboundary collaborations with the potential for system-wide impact. Second, ODDE is still in the process of becoming and we encourage our readers to take full cognisance of the grounds that have been built by generations of scholars and the extensive range of theories that are constantly being generated from across disciplines, all waiting to be discovered, adapted and deployed to frame further knowledge production on ODDE. Finally, we wish to reiterate our stand on the importance of being open to the diversification of the forms of ODDE discourse beyond the orthodox, and we hope that readers, too, will be persuaded by its merits and continue in our steps in striving to vitalise our shared field.

Part II: the conversation

Shaping the field of open, distance and digital education (ODDE)

David C.L. Lim [DL]: Congratulations on the publication of *Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education* [ODDE] (2022), the open-access volume you collaborated on as co-editors-in-chief. The *Handbook* is certainly ambitious in scale, sprawling over eighty chapters, and covering all key topics from accreditation to virtual internationalisation, and everything else in between, all organised according to the 3M [macro, meso, micro] Framework developed by Zawacki-Richter (2009). For context, the macro-level deals with “ODDE systems, theories, and methods,” the meso-level covers “ODDE educational management and institutions,” and the micro level focuses on “teaching and learning” (Zawacki-Richter and Jung, 2022b, p. 1–2). To top it off, the landmark volume was completed in record time – in under two years from the planning stage in the early months of 2020, as mentioned in the introductory chapter you both co-wrote (Zawacki-Richter and Jung, 2022b, p. 2). Can you share the inner workings of how you mapped out the topics to be covered in the *Handbook* and how the chapter contributors were identified and roped in? Were there topics or areas you wanted to include but could/did

not for one reason or another? With hindsight, what was the experience like for you as the co-editors-in-chief? What were the key challenges you faced, and the lessons learnt?

Olaf Zawacki-Richter [OZR]: In fact, the *Handbook* was my biggest publication project during the last two and a half years. Without the long-standing collaboration with Insung and our team of six Section Editors, the book would not have been possible. Strong international networks of senior scholars were important to cover the global landscape and the whole body of knowledge of ODDE and to find leading authors on a given topic all over the world. We aimed at a truly international handbook covering perspectives from both the Global North and the Global South. Most importantly, we wanted the *Handbook* to be accessible for all in an open-access format. It was crucial to recruit a strong team of Section Editors to edit the six volumes covering the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of research and practice in ODDE. Together with them, we developed a list of potential authors, and with the help of their scholarly and professional networks, we were able to get around 120 authors on board. Getting such a huge team together was probably the greatest challenge in editing such a comprehensive handbook, but on the other hand, it was also the greatest privilege and pleasure to collaborate with this international community, thereby shaping the field and structure of ODDE as a scholarly discipline. I consider this work as the current culmination of my scientific activity.

Insung Jung [IJ]: Editing the *Handbook* together with Olaf, one of the leading scholars in ODDE, was a great honour for me just before my retirement. It was one of the few monumental projects in my career. As Olaf mentioned, we strategically invited six highly capable scholars as Section Editors first. All of them have strong networks with other scholars across all regions. We – the two Editors-in-Chief and six Section Editors – reviewed the original handbook proposal, modified, added, deleted the chapter titles in each of the six sections, and suggested possible chapter contributors. In identifying chapter contributors, we tried to locate both well-established and emerging scholars who have shown an exceptional record of publications with empirical data and at the same time considered regional, generational and gender balances in creating the contributor list. As for the chapter topics, I think our *Handbook* covers all important themes and issues in ODDE following the 3M-Framework. The *Handbook* also encompasses the past, present and future of ODDE in discussing the themes and issues important to both the Global North and Global South.

One big challenge for me was to manage and assure the quality of the *Handbook* chapters. While a book publication by a global publisher typically involves a peer review process with two or three external reviewers, a large-scale reference book project such as ours did not invite external reviews for the final approval. Instead, all reviews and quality assurance had to be done by the editorial team members. Each section editor played a key role in implementing the project, discussing chapter themes with the authors, providing comments, editing, assuring the quality of each chapter, and so on, in close collaboration with Olaf and me. Then, each of us independently reviewed the chapters that were initially approved by the Section Editors, approved only the high-quality chapters for publication and sent the others back to the authors for improvement until the chapters met our quality standards. As a result of our efforts, I can now proudly say that we have produced a high-quality handbook which is comprehensive and open, theoretical and practical, truly international and diverse, and most recent.

ODDE against a sea of terminologies

DL: Readers will appreciate it being said in the *Handbook* that the many terminologies used to describe what it is that we facilitate may indeed be confusing. Among those listed are “Remote learning, distance learning, open learning, e-learning, flexible learning, hybrid learning, blended learning, web-based learning, online learning, mobile learning, and technology-enhanced learning” (Zawacki-Richter and Jung, 2022b, p. 3).

Against a sea of terminologies, you decided to go with “open, distance, and digital education” [ODDE] (Zawacki-Richter and Jung, 2022b, p. 3). As explained in the aforementioned introductory chapter, the term ODDE is “to clearly mark the historical origin of recent online education, and *digital education* to capture newer manifestations of teaching and learning with digital media in the process of digital transformation of educational institutions” [original emphasis] (2022b, p. 3–4). ODDE, as defined in the chapter, operates “as an overarching term to refer to all kinds of learning and teaching processes in which knowledge and skill base of educational technology, digital media, and tools are used to present and deliver content, as well as facilitate and support communication, interaction, collaboration, assessment, and evaluation.”

Do you expect the term “ODDE” to stop the sliding of the multiple terms currently being used and to ease at least some of the confusion that may arise from the proliferation of terms? And do you see ODDE as, by definition, converging with the epistemic practices of the “conventional” universities, many of which have become increasingly digital post-Covid-19? How do you see the term ODDE evolving in the future, given that our practices and our understanding of them are constantly evolving?

OZR: Due to the fact that we have chosen to title the *Handbook* this way, we are setting a certain anchor. We hope that the *Handbook* will be a major reference point for research, practice, and theory of ODDE. I think there will always be other terms in different contexts, but with ODDE we want to set a standard that, as you say, marks the historical roots of open and distance education while embracing modern forms of digital learning on all educational levels.

IJ: When we began writing the book proposal, one of our initial challenges was to come up with a title that would encompass the diversity of perspectives and practices that have been explored in a wide range of historical and cultural contexts. After exploring a range of definitions and terms, from early distance education to new, emergent, rapidly growing concepts of online learning and digital education, we decided to use ODDE as an umbrella term for the diverse perspectives and practices in the field. We did not attempt to offer one clear definition of ODDE. Instead, we tried to expand our thinking about what we mean by “ODDE” and let our chapter authors adopt their own approach to understanding ODDE in an educational context of their interest. As seen in some of our chapters, the field of ODDE, as well as the term itself, is evolving with emerging pedagogies and technologies.

Problems in ODDE research

DL: One of the first chapters in the *Handbook* that I read was Junhong Xiao’s “Introduction to History, Theory, and Research in ODDE” (2022). For me, the sedate title of the chapter belies its incisive critique of the state of research in ODDE. Forthrightly, Xiao writes that “it is not uncommon” for ODDE research to fall short of rigorous scholarly standards, and that it is often a-theoretical, lacking methodological rigour, focused on isolated matters to the point of overlooking the bigger issues and lacking in trustworthiness and generalisability. Xiao then articulates what most in the field would loathe to admit: “These findings are shocking because what used to be the problems in ODDE research remain unsolved today or have deteriorated” (2022, p. 6).

Of course, none of what Xiao argues is meant to detract from the progress that ODDE research has made over the decades. Still, it raises the question of how widespread the problem is. Given your long-standing experience in the world of ODDE, what is your view on this?

OZR: Although high-profile scholarly journals in ODDE have been available for 40 or 50 years (e.g. *Computers and Education*, the *British Journal of Educational Technology*, and *Distance Education*), ODDE is still a relatively young discipline that continues to develop and

mature. Research initially emerged out of practice, was often focused on single cases, and was carried out by reflective practitioners in, for example, the newly founded distance teaching institutions in the 1960s and 1970s. But I think that remarkable progress has been made, although we also see today quick and less rigorous research on so-called “Emergency Remote Teaching” practices by colleagues who do not share or might not even be aware of the decades of research literature that should inform evidence-based practice in the development and design of online learning.

IJ: As several chapters of the *Handbook* have shown, research in ODDE has expanded in scope and improved in quality. Of course, it still needs further enhancement, particularly in identifying important research questions and employing appropriate methods to seek answers to those questions. That is, there is an urgent need for researchers in ODDE (perhaps in other disciplines too) to assure methodological rigour, link their research questions and findings to existing knowledge and theoretical bases, and pay more attention to research themes beyond micro- or instructional-level issues. I believe our *Handbook* will help ODDE researchers understand the various theoretical and empirical bases of the field and identify research gaps at meso- and macro-levels.

Overrepresentation of micro-level ODDE research

DL: One of the chapters in the *Handbook* is titled “Research Trends in Open, Distance, and Digital Education” (Zawacki-Richter and Bozkurt, 2022). It is highlighted therein that, as compared to the macro- and meso-categories, “the micro-perspective (teaching and learning in distance education) is highly overrepresented” (2022, p. 9). How would you account for the overrepresentation? How is its overrepresentation problematic?

OZR: We found this in various bibliographic studies in which we quantified research publications on the different levels of the 3M-Framework. It is not surprising that educators are more concerned with issues related to the micro-level of teaching and learning, instructional design, learner characteristics and their needs, or interaction and communication patterns in online learning environments. But for implementation and integration of ODDE in educational institutions on a large scale, strategic and organisational issues come in – issues related to educational leadership and change, professional development, student support systems, technological infrastructure, costs and finance, quality assurance, etc. on the institutional meso-level or even macro-level when we consider the digital transformation of entire educational systems. We hope that all these issues are well covered in our *Handbook*, and we highly appreciate the contributions by Prof Tian Belawati and Prof Ross Paul as Section Editors of the two volumes on the meso-level. With their background and vast experience in their roles as educational leaders and former Rectors or Presidents of open and distance teaching universities, they were able to configure and orchestrate a set of chapters that cover all essential issues for the sustainable integration of ODDE in educational organisations.

IJ: I would like to add one point on overrepresentation of micro-level research, particularly media comparison studies in our field. Due to the constantly changing features of technology and conceptually and methodologically easy research design, many media comparison studies (most of them are micro-level research) have been carried out in ODDE, often ignoring the “no significant difference phenomenon”. They tend to focus on media comparison (e.g. online vs face-to-face; SNS [social network sites] vs no SNS; synchronous vs asynchronous tools) without paying much attention to the different attributes of media and other confounding variables such as instructional design and method. ODDE researchers should move away from simple media comparison studies and rather look deeper and broader into the important issues of technology attributes, instructional design, policy, support and other environmental and cultural aspects.

Knowledge production on the meso- and macro-levels

DL: The points you both make are well taken. ODDE educators, especially those working on the ground with students, would naturally be keen to research what they know best: micro-level matters immediately related to their practice. A paucity of research exposure, skills, judgement, and resources may be among the reasons accounting for a proportion of their output falling short of the scholarly standards discussed by [Xiao \(2022\)](#) in the *Handbook*, hence the unnecessary repetition of the kind of research in media comparison studies which Insung highlights. While more ODDE research on the meso- and macro-levels would be desirable, delivering quality output on those levels would also be much more demanding in every way. Equity, ethics, global ODDE markets, institutional partnerships, transdisciplinary theories, institutional leadership, financial investments and returns, technical infrastructures, and staff development – these are all matters of a different order of magnitude altogether, compared to teaching and learning. In a chapter in the *Handbook*, [Moore \(2022, p. 13\)](#) even goes so far as to say that the future of ODDE depends on the answers to the questions surrounding such big topics. Given the foregoing, what do you think can be done by local, national, regional, and global ODDE stakeholders to assist atomised ODDE practitioners – especially those located in developing countries or lacking the required types of capital (social, political, cultural, networking, financial, etc.) – so that they may be sufficiently equipped and empowered to participate in knowledge production on matters that matter most to the future of ODDE?

OZR: Even though the scientific journals have a clear focus on teaching and learning in ODDE, it was very important to us to balance the micro-, meso- and macro-level topics in the *Handbook*. We have two volumes or sections on each level. The macro-level covers (1) history, theory, and research, and (2) global perspectives and internationalisation. The meso-level looks at (3) organisation, leadership and change, and (4) infrastructure, quality assurance, and support systems. And on the micro-level, we have (5) learners, teachers, media, and technology, and (6) design, delivery, and assessment. I think this structure is unique.

Numerous authors from around the world who have written about these issues at the institutional and system levels show how diverse the issues are. We hope that the many macro- and meso-level chapters in particular will stimulate further research in this direction.

IJ: I would like to suggest more active international collaboration in ODDE research to go beyond small-scale micro-level research, especially for researchers from resource-poor, smaller countries. Over the past decades, owing to globalisation, we have observed a noticeable surge in international collaboration in academic research. International collaborative research tends to promote cross-cultural, cross-country research on meso- and macro-level research topics, rather than on individual micro-level issues. It also has a great potential to promote collaboration among researchers from resource-poor countries and resource-rich countries. [Guo et al. \(2015\)](#) analysed over 12,000 works published in international journals (including *Computers and Education*, *British Journal of Educational Technology*, and *Educational Technology Research and Development*), books and proceedings and uncovered that international collaboration in educational technology has been increasing, but the overall rate of international research collaboration in our field is only 2.05% while that in natural sciences is between 16 and 19%, and collaboration is centralised around a few selected countries such as the USA, Germany, Australia, Canada, and other mostly resource-rich countries. In Asia, China, Hong Kong and South Korea are more active than other countries. I think these trends in educational technology can be similarly found in ODDE research.

With the growth of globalisation and the advancement of networked technologies, I don't think geographical distance and language differences pose serious barriers to international collaboration in ODDE research. Young ODDE researchers could initiate a small-scale research project involving two to three members from different institutional and cultural backgrounds and consider conducting an institutional- or national-level study, for example.

Using text-mining tools to analyse research trends in ODDE

DL: One of the chapters in the *Handbook* is titled “Research Trends in Open, Distance, and Digital Education” (Zawacki-Richter and Bozkurt, 2022). For both new and experienced researchers, this chapter is particularly helpful in the way it maps out the terrain of ODDE research using various bibliographic analyses. For the benefit of those unfamiliar with the tools for such analyses, could you shed light on what tools are available and how complex they might be for those who are unfamiliar but wish to experiment with them?

OZR: Yes, we used a text-mining tool for the content analysis of research publications in various journals to identify and contrast research trends in ODDE. The tool identifies major “concepts” (terms), how they occur together in the text (co-word analysis) and form a thematic region. The method is described in detail in a paper with Colin Latchem (Zawacki-Richter and Latchem, 2018), in which we analysed more than 3,600 articles published in *Computers and Education* over 40 years between 1976 and 2016. Open-source text-mining packages are also available in R, the free software environment (see Silge and Robinson, 2017; <https://www.tidytextmining.com>).

IJ: I am not an expert in this particular area. But I understand that text analytics helps researchers gain insights from huge volumes of structured and unstructured data, and various tools for text analytics are available for text mining, text data visualisation and more, as Olaf mentioned.

Philosophy/theory in ODDE

DL: In a conversation with Prof Tian Belawati featured in Issue 17 of Open University Malaysia’s *inspired* e-magazine, she observed that a lot of ODDE research is now looking at application and R&D, and not so much on [educational] philosophy/theory. By philosophy/theory, I have in mind works by contemporary thinkers like Biesta (2010), Gourlay (2021), and Knox (2016). Where would philosophy/theory fit in the 3M classification of research areas? And why, in your view, has there been minimal focus on it in ODDE?

OZR: The theories in the context of ODDE are considered on the macro-level of the 3M-Framework. Thus, chapters dealing with the theories of ODDE are available in the first section “History, Theory, and Research in ODDE” edited by Junhong Xiao. Early research into distance education was criticised as being atheoretic. But as I mentioned, the field has matured over some decades. In the beginning, theories from related disciplines were imported or “borrowed” from, for instance, adult education, and then early scholars and pioneers of distance education, such as Otto Peters, Börje Holmberg or Michael Moore, developed proprietary theories of distance education. By the way, we are very proud to have Moore (2022) as an author in the *Handbook*. He contributed a very informative chapter on the history of ODDE, from correspondence to online distance education. But to return to the topic of theories in ODDE, Insung has edited a whole book about the theories.

IJ: Yes, my edited book, *Open and Distance Theory Revisited: Implications for the Digital Era* (Jung, 2019a) provides an up-to-date overview of ODDE theories and models for the digital age, covering both foundational and emerging theories and models. It also includes evidence to support these theories and models for various ODDE formats, sectors and contexts, and provides practical advice and guidelines for the future development of ODDE research and practice. ODDE researchers are strongly advised to read this book and familiarise themselves with the various theories and models in the field.

ODDE theories and philosophical backgrounds are discussed in our *Handbook* as a macro-level theme. Even though a weak knowledge base in the theoretical foundations of ODDE has been indicated as a problem, our field has several well-established foundational theories (e.g. theory of autonomy and independence, theory of adult learning, guided conversation, theory of industrialised teaching and learning, and transactional distance theory). Moreover, a few

theories have been developed in response to the new and different contexts as network technology-based online and distance education becomes more common. Such emerging theories include connectivism, the community of inquiry model, the model of extended e-teaching and e-learning spaces, and heutagogic theory. Of course, there are theories that are borrowed from other fields, including those three thinkers you mentioned.

To me, the lack of a theoretical framework in ODDE research is a more serious issue than the lack of theories in the ODDE field. A theoretical framework guided by a relevant theory connects the researcher to the existing body of knowledge in the field and offers a basis for research hypotheses. Good ODDE research should ask research questions that are situated within a theoretical framework, which is still lacking in the field. ODDE researchers should understand that theory is an invaluable tool to identify and solve good research questions.

Autonomy of ODDE as a field

DL: It is certainly important to emphasise that the popularity of application and R&D over philosophy/theory as ODDE research foci in no way implies that the ODDE field lacks theory for research grounding and framing. In this context, *Open and Distance Theory Revisited: Implications for the Digital Era* (Jung, 2019a) is an enormously useful reference point for seasoned and novice ODDE practitioners alike, and for anyone interested in gaining an up-to-date understanding of the nexus between ODDE and theory. The volume serves as a reminder, and as historical and intellectual memory of the advances that have been made in theorising what began as correspondence education as an early form of ODDE and subsequently evolved through several stages into contemporary ODDE (Jung, 2019b). It also serves as a bulwark against uninformed or spurious assertions made against ODDE – for instance, that ODDE today still lacks theory. Or, worse, that ODDE also allegedly lacks “good research on the best forms of online learning,” this being a maddening position challenged by Baggaley (2016). But as you argued, Insung, the putative lack of grounding theories in the ODDE field is less of a concern than the lack of a theoretical framework in ODDE research.

This, then, brings me to the question of the origins of the theories used to frame ODDE research. In the long run, to entrench ODDE as a field in its own right, how important is it for ODDE research frameworks to eventually be constructed mainly from ideas produced endogenously from within the ODDE field, instead of borrowed from adjacent disciplines? Or is the question of origin of little importance so long as the adopted frameworks enable ODDE researchers to formulate legitimate research questions? Accompanying this question is the larger question of how you conceive of the becoming of the ODDE field. Do you anticipate ODDE to evolve into a relatively autonomous field in the continental *Pädagogik* sense that it substantially generates its own “proprietary” theories and organises itself around a distinctive ODDE agenda even as it remains open to knowledge domains outside itself? Or should ODDE be seen as a subset of the academic discipline of education in the Anglo-American sense of being reliant mainly on intellectual input from the major academic disciplines such as psychology and sociology to answer educational questions? Or are there other ways of conceiving ODDE as a field coming into its own?

IJ: To me, ODDE is a multidisciplinary field of study as well as a professional practice. As a form of educational practice, ODDE can be seen as a subset of education. But as a field of study or a discipline, ODDE cannot be seen as a subset of education or a subset of any other related disciplines. It is a unique field of study. ODDE and other related fields of study are all connected and complement each other to produce new knowledge in education. That is why ODDE research has been borrowing various theories and models from other related fields such as educational technology, information science, media studies, psychology, sociology, and so on, and using them to formulate unique questions and add new perspectives to the ODDE field. On the other hand, ODDE theories and models have also been adopted in other

disciplines and have helped researchers with different academic backgrounds see their issues from perspectives other than their own. I do not see great academic benefit of conducting ODDE research only within the ODDE field or only applying ODDE theories.

OZR: I agree with Insung. ODDE is very complex in nature and the various issues related to ODDE research, development and practice on the macro-, meso- and micro-levels have to be explored in a multidisciplinary approach. But I clearly see the field of education as the overall umbrella of ODDE and distance education as its roots. I remember an article by Manfred Dellinger (1971) in *Epistologidaktika* about the foundations of the science of distance education ("Grundzüge einer Wissenschaft vom Fernstudium"). In principle, however, I do not think that such delimitation efforts are purposeful. Various disciplines have to work together to address the complex issues for sustainable integration of ODDE into institutional practices related to instructional design, professional development, management and organisation, technology and infrastructure, legal issues, etc. When it comes to the investigation of educational and learning processes, I think – in general – educational researchers should be the principal investigators. For example, in a systematic review of artificial intelligence applications in higher education (Zawacki-Richter *et al.*, 2019) we found that less than 10% of the first authors were from education departments. In many cases, this is not very helpful when it comes to developing pedagogically meaningful applications.

Critical research

DL: Earlier I cited Biesta (2010), Gourlay (2021), and Knox (2016) as examples of contemporary thinkers who produce theoretico-philosophical work of a type that is not normally encountered in ODDE discourse. The broadest umbrella term I can think of to describe the type of work they produce is "critical research." For the benefit of readers who may not be familiar with the term, "critical research" generically describes an array of methods driving scholarly discourse across the humanities and social sciences. It is found in such areas as cultural studies, gender studies, literary studies, queer studies, philosophy, critical education studies, and critical pedagogy. In relation to ODDE, and conceptually speaking, critical research may be viewed as the application of postfoundationalist perspectives to study, critique and problematise aspects of ODDE that may not appear on the discursive horizon of mainstream ODDE research. Or it may be used to examine familiar aspects of ODDE in ways that are unorthodox as far as mainstream ODDE research is concerned.

In the broad field of education, critical research is evident on diverse platforms. One example is the journal, *Critical Studies in Education*, which takes a different route than the "positivist approaches that presume reality is 'out there' to be objectively documented or 'revealed' by researchers", to pluck a line from its statement of Aims and Scope. Another example is *Postdigital Science and Education*, a journal that situates itself intellectually at the "intersections of technology, sociology, history, politics, philosophy, arts, media studies, critical pedagogy, and science-fiction," and "welcomes contributions from wide range of disciplines and inter-, trans- and anti-disciplinary research methodologies." Yet another example is the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*. This journal features articles that apply critical theory to curriculum thinking and classroom practice in ways that "challenge disciplinary, genre, and textual boundaries."

Given the foregoing description, would you say that "critical research" – or postfoundationalism, for that matter – has yet to make its presence felt in ODDE discourse? Do you think that mainstream ODDE researchers and practitioners whose disciplinary training or intellectual orientation is dissimilar, if not antithetical to critical research, are likely to be open to critical research? Lastly, would you say that ODDE discourse, which is already heterogeneous, would benefit from being further heterogenized by ODDE practitioners with postfoundationalist training so as to bring in new ways of thinking and writing about ODDE to complement existing ways?

IJ: Critical research paradigm has been well accepted in such ODDE research methodologies as action research and participatory research in which taking a value position is recognised, challenging prevailing practices and perspectives is encouraged, and suggesting transformative actions for improvement in practice or society is promoted. I am certain that this critical research paradigm will continue to be a part of ODDE research trends, and that it will be further understood and applied by ODDE researchers and practitioners with proper training and support.

OZR: Research and science must always be critical and should not be a matter of methodological disputes or ideologies. With new and emerging media, technologies, and methods, such as datafication, machine learning, and artificial intelligence applications in education, many unsolved ethical issues, questions of power, justice, and biases come in that need to be discussed and regulated. However, I am convinced that strong empirical evidence should inform our arguments and actions in this process.

Future research

DL: Circling back to what we started with, now that the mammoth task that is the *Handbook* has been completed, what new projects are you embarking on?

OZ: Referring back to the synthesis of empirical research evidence, I recently did some work on systematic reviews in educational research ([Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020](#)). With my co-authors, I also published a systematic review of artificial intelligence (AI) applications in higher education that has received a lot of attention ([Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019](#)). In this short period of time, it has been cited over 500 times. Now I receive many invitations from journals to review articles that use the method of a systematic review. However, quite often, the review studies do not meet the criteria of a *systematic* review. So, the next paper that I plan to do will be an umbrella review or review of reviews to assess the quality of systematic reviews in ODDE and educational technology.

IJ: One of my recent projects is related to the application and refinement of the Open Thinking Scale or OTS which measures 'open thinking' as a learning outcome of open educational practice (OEP). The development and validation of OTS was recently published in *Distance Education* as an open access paper ([Jung and Lee, 2022](#)). A few researchers are now using OTS in their research to investigate their students' open thinking development as a result of OER use in STEM education or as a result of OEP in a distance university context. My next study assumes that open thinking is an attribute affected by each student's OEP experience along with individual-, course-, and cultural-level factors. In three different cultural contexts, it investigates factors affecting open thinking development measured by OTS adopting an ecological systems theory.

Closing with a book recommendation

DL: Last but not least, if you had to pick one relatively new book that is broadly related to education, however tenuously, to recommend to our readers, which book will it be?

OZR: I was deeply impressed by reports about floating schools by colleagues from Bangladesh at the 10th Pan-Commonwealth of Learning Conference in Calgary. Climate change is here! We also need to consider the environmental impact of different delivery modes in education in terms of their carbon emissions to design greener ODDE programmes. To learn more about this, my next read will be *Climate Change and the Role of Education* ([Filho and Hemstock, 2019](#)).

IJ: I would like to recommend a book titled *Research Methods in Learning Design and Technology* ([Romero-Hall, 2020](#)) to ODDE researchers. This book introduces both well-known and emerging research methods in our field.

DL: Thank you, Insung and Olaf, for the interview. It has been a pleasure.

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Corresponding author

David C.L. Lim can be contacted at: david@oum.edu.my

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