Commentary: What, exactly, is 'online' education?

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Abstract: As responsible educators, it is time we admitted that we do not know what 'online' education is. We also need to confront the discomforting realisation that no one else does, either.

The term 'online' has reached the stage where it is now so inclusive as to be meaningless. In embracing too much, it describes nothing. What was once a useful term to describe using the internet as part of asynchronous distance education is now used universally, to describe almost anything. Lectured, synchronous classes are now 'online' (Johnson et al., 2022). Emergency remote teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic was 'online'. Including additional resources on an LMS for students to refer to after class is considered 'online'. Across much of the educational spectrum, to be 'online' now is far from unusual.

In this commentary I make the case that the term 'online' needs a forced retirement, or, at the least, additional context when it is applied.

Personal Illustrations

This matter came to a head for me across two major events, one international, the other local.

The Covid-19 pandemic required an immediate educational response. Many teachers, eager to continue teaching their students (or else required to by desperate administrators), made the courageous, otherwise unnecessary, and formerly unprecedented move to full ZOOM- and LMS-based education. It is not disputed that this shift to what is widely known as Emergency Remote Teaching/Learning was unavoidably pragmatic and rushed (Talib et al., 2021). It is unfortunate, though, that this shift became popularly known as a move to 'online' and even 'distance' education. The move to this form of 'online' education was experienced internationally and, in the minds of some, has tainted 'online' education in general as a second-rate option reserved for those unable or unwilling to access a classroom or lecture theatre.

The second event was a local one: the bringing together of multiple Aotearoa New Zealand institutes of technology and polytechnics, and industry training organisations, into one. Te Pūkenga, the largest higher education provider in the country I am proud to call home, combines some nine on-the-job, fifteen on-campus, and one distance provider of tertiary vocational education and training (https://www.xn--tepkenga-szb.ac.nz/). Early in the activity it became clear that the term 'online' was used in various ways across these providers, in ways that obscured some serious operational differences. The polytechnic I am part of at the time of submitting this piece, the Open Polytechnic business division of Te Pūkenga, is based on the classic open, distance and flexible learning (ODFL) principles of
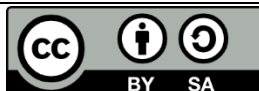
access, independent learning, and asynchronous education to the extent of moving toward *anytime enrolment*. This approach is facilitated 'online'. However, a much larger group of providers in the Te Pūkenga network are also offering 'online' education — albeit in many ways that mostly do not facilitate anytime enrolment into substantial programmes, nor mirror the same asynchronous and cohort-free/independent study pathways offered through the Open Polytechnic approach.

Clearly, 'online' is an inadequate term to describe educational approaches. It runs the risk of a part representing the whole, simultaneously masking significant operational and strategic differences, and opportunities.

Further Illustrations

The term 'online' is an extremely general one, properly only indicating the facilitation of a computer network to transfer data. Given that most activity in higher education now involves networked computers, it might be a fair stretch to describe *all* that we do — as administrators, academics — as 'online'. I use email: Does that make me an 'online' manager in ways that differentiate my role from that of other 'online' managers? When I research, I use online databases, and increasingly a browser-based word processor. Am I, then, an 'online' researcher? Or on the days I work from home, is it sufficient and accurate to define who I am solely as an 'online' employee, with no additional context?

It is worth considering the inadequacies of 'online' across a broader lens.

Consider watching a movie. You might watch it by going to the cinema, or you may stream it from the comfort of home; you might watch it on a long-haul flight, or on your phone on the train. Facilitating each of these options is a computer network transferring data, including cinemas which increasingly receive the movies they project through digital distribution. All, then, might be legitimately described as 'online' to some extent.

A further illustration, demonstrating the category error that 'online' leads to: the term 'vehicle' is used to describe a range of transport modes that, a quick online search reveals, embraces at least military, domestic, and commercial means of travel. A 'vehicle' is at once both descriptive and useless as a means of communicating what I might be driving, as I may be a tank driver, bus driver, hovercraft pilot, coachman, remote control operator… I trust the point is made. From a passenger and driver perspective the *type* of vehicle is foundationally important. To extend this illustration, the 'vehicle' I am concerned with may need a specific type of fuel; only operate on roads (or perhaps may not need one at all); and require a specific licence. Driving a horse and cart is a far cry from driving a tank, and simply maintaining even these two 'vehicles' requires completely different facilities, equipment, fuel, and training.

Coincidentally, considering the 'vehicle' example brings to mind the debate as to whether educational technologies ought to be considered 'mere vehicles' for the purposes of instruction (Clark, 1983, 1994; Koehler, 2016; Kozma, 1991, 1994). Is 'online' relevant in *any* way as a means of defining education? If 'online' literally means use of a network to transfer data, so by extension how a user accesses services, would it be a stretch to refer to on-campus learning as 'commuter' learning?

Applying the term 'online' to education is at best a category mistake, easily corrected. At worst, it is a naïve misunderstanding that may mislead educational decision-making and inappropriately signal a *particular* educational approach. In applying the term 'online' we

confuse the medium for the means. This is not only highly inaccurate; it is operationally and strategically dangerous.

For all involved in ODFL, whether academics or administrators, how educational efforts are aligned is significant to our learners, colleagues, and broader stakeholders (including funders and accrediting bodies). We need ways of describing practice that enable us to plan, refine, improve, and coordinate activities that are mutually understood. 'Online' is simply not up to that task.

Refining the Issue

So, how might we proceed? How can we begin to tame the problem? A useful start would be to refine just what terminology should achieve for educational practitioners and decision-makers.

In a paper published from PCF10 in Calgary last year (Nichols & Seelig, 2022), Dr Caroline Seelig and I suggested that helpful terminology describing forms of education should:

1. Provide a clear distinction across different modes. *How is this different from other forms?*

2. Benefit strategy and operational decisions. *What opportunities does this offer, and how is it made to work?*

3. Enable a common dialogue in literature. *How do we know we are talking about the same thing, for purposes of comparison?*

4. Give insight into the teaching and learning experience. *What does the teacher do? The learner? What infrastructure is required?*

When we run the term 'online' across these four categories, it is clear that the term obscures more than it reveals.

Distinctiveness. Higher education might be differentiated across the high-level categories of in-classroom; on-the-job; and open, distance, and flexible learning (ODFL). These frequently overlap in practice however they are also reasonably descriptive of different teaching and learning from a student perspective. As recently as twenty years ago it was possible to talk about 'dual-mode' universities, that offered both in-classroom and distance education. Blended, hybrid and other terms have since elbowed their way into dialogue. 'Online' is a term that might be used to describe elements of practice across *all* these categories. Of the categorical terms used to describe how education takes place, 'online' is the *least* distinctive.

Strategy and operations. There are many facets to this. One of the great barriers to higher education access is the ability for learners to begin study at any time. Many open universities, for example, *still* have only a few semesters or presentations each year. My own institution offers courses monthly (soon likely twice per month), with the objective of *anytime* enrolment. The term 'online' is not a helpful one for this level of strategy, and neither does it give any insight as to the operating model requirements it has. Neither does the term adequately indicate the sorts of roles, responsibilities, analytics, technologies, systems, or configurations necessary to support the sort of education that it attempts to describe. Critically, neither does 'online' give any sense of the operational cost, up-front investment, scalability, or actual flexibility of the education on offer.

Common dialogue. In academic literature as in real-life, describing a course as 'online' gives no clue as to the actual dynamics of education in play. It is possible for two educators or decision makers to talk completely past one another if they rely on the term 'online'. For the moment, literature seems divided as to whether this represents a problem (Johnson et. al., 2022; Singh & Thurman, 2019); after all, for most conversations taking place across immediate colleagues *within* a department or school 'online' likely has a shared meaning. At a larger scale, however, 'online' is extremely problematic given the range of meaning projected on to it by anyone using it.

Teaching and learning experience. 'Online' can be — and is — used to describe both asynchronous and synchronous courses. The roles of learning designer, teacher, peer-engagement, and course materials differ significantly across asynchronous and synchronous models. So, 'online' gives no insight into what a teacher does; the scope of course materials involved; the function of a tutor, if any; or the suggested pattern of study. When and how a student enrols might be completely different, as would weekly study patterns for a course based on ZOOM lectures, and one based on specially prepared courseware designed to facilitate asynchronous, independent learning. Some forms of 'online' might be perfectly suitable for part-time or anytime study, while others might have strict timetables.

So, I propose that we take a collective stand *against* the term 'online' as it relates to education. What then, might replace it? Given the term 'online' is now in popular dialogue, how would we seek to fill the considerable vacuum left if we refused to use it?

Toward Resolution

Sadly, there is no easy answer — primarily because of the chaotic mash that is terminology across ODFL ('online' is but the latest open-ended term; 'open', 'distance' and 'flexible' also have chequered histories as journal debates across the 1980s and 1990s demonstrate). However, to suggest some hope and guidance, the earlier principles for describing forms of education may prove helpful.

In a chapter for the *Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education* (Nichols, 2022) I suggested it would be helpful to distinguish between teaching models primarily on the basis of synchronicity, that is, whether by design a model begins from an asynchronous or synchronous assumption of the education experience. Further definition may be possible based on:

- the responsibility of tuition, whether it rests for example in a single teacher or is spread across an educational team that might include learning designers and tutors;

- what provides the instructor voice, for example, it might be a didactic teacher or based in courseware constructed with a subject narrative;

- the location of instruction, whether it is a classroom, lecture theatre, workplace, or fully independent; and

- the level of peer involvement assumed in the model, whether conversational, casual, or optional.

Any new set of definitions will only be as useful as they are widely adopted, and it is not my intention to propose a new series of definitions in this piece; I am not deluded enough to assume that any proposal I make will be suddenly universal. My objective here is to

constructively provoke, rather than resolve. Eventually it may be possible to harness the multiplicity of other terms already in the ring — 'hybrid', 'blended', 'hyflex' immediately spring to mind — and apply them in more deliberate ways. For now, at the least, when we describe the forms of education we are involved with as ODFL practitioners, it might be optimal to provide some additional context. By way of a few examples:

> "We offer our courses online. By this, I mean that we create courseware suitable for independent study and anytime start. Our learners are able to study anywhere on their own, with an academic on call offering assistance and connection."

> "We have online courses, where our lecturers stream their live classes. This means learners are able to study flexibly while still enjoying the benefits of peer engagement through discussion forums and on-campus workshops."

> "Our online courses are designed to have learners interact in group work. It's mostly self-directed, based on a series of reference materials and discussion prompts. Our team of tutors helps guide the groups and make sure they keep to the semester schedule."

> "Online learning for us supports the workplace experience. Learners need to pick up what they need for their study as assessment opportunities present themselves, and alongside their workplace mentors and colleagues. It's mostly 'how-to' guides, demonstrations, and places to upload evidence."

Across these four examples it is clear that "We offer our courses online…", "We have online courses…", "Our online courses are…" and "Online learning for us…" provide little clue as to the very real differences across the practices given dimension and life with just a few thoughtful additions. At the least, it's incumbent for us all as those involved in and advocating ODFL to be much more careful and considered as to how we explain what we do, and to ward off misunderstanding for those whose 'online' practice might be thought to resemble ODFL when it patently does not.

An important dialogue is needed if we are to maintain the value and distinctiveness of ODFL so that it is not confused with the popular — not always effective — perception of whatever 'online' education is thought to be. May our innovation and forward-thinking plans for education instead be in the direction of open, distance, and flexible learning possibilities — noting that even across these terms we all hold so dear, definitions are contentious! That ODFL is still misunderstood should also give us pause —

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