



A Critically Informed Conversation with Terry Anderson: Visions on the Next Generation of Online and Distance Education

**CRITICAL
SCHOLARLY
CONVERSATION**

TERRY ANDERSON 

ARAS BOZKURT 

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*



ABSTRACT

This scholarly dialogue captures the critical perspective of Dr. Terry Anderson, a foundational theorist in online and distance education, at a time when the field faces a paradigm shift driven by artificial intelligence. The conversation revisits Anderson's seminal contributions, including the Interaction Equivalency Theorem and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, examining their relevance and limitations in an era where AI can mediate all forms of educational interaction. A central theme emerges from Anderson's analysis: a sharp distinction between AI's immense potential in the cognitive domain—offering personalized content and scalable learning support—and its profound inability to replicate the affective and intuitive roles of human teachers and peers. He argues that while AI will dominate cognitive presence, the inspiration, care, and deep social connection vital for motivation remain uniquely human endeavors. Looking forward, Anderson presents a vision where AI's greatest promise lies in enabling personalized learning and forcing a long-overdue revolution in assessment, potentially scaling ancient methods like the *viva voce*. However, he issues a stark warning against the risks of information monopolies and highlights the field's abiding responsibility to ensure equitable access, championing social justice as a core principle for the next generation of online education.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Aras Bozkurt

Anadolu University, Türkiye;
Western Caspian University,
Azerbaijan

arasbozkurt@gmail.com

KEYWORDS:

Online Education; Distance Education; Artificial Intelligence (AI); Interaction Equivalency Theorem; Community of Inquiry (CoI); Pedagogy; Educational Interaction; Social Presence; Digital Transformation; Higher Education

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Anderson, T., & Bozkurt, A. (2025). A Critically Informed Conversation with Terry Anderson: Visions on the Next Generation of Online and Distance Education. *Open Praxis*, 17(4), pp. 830–835. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.17.4.976>

INTRODUCTION: FOLLOWING THE LIGHT OF INTELLECTUAL BEACONS

The history of distance education is a story of continuous reinvention, marked by distinct generations (Anderson & Dron, 2011) shaped by the prevailing technology of their time. From the postal service and broadcast media to the interactive web, each technological wave has redefined the possibilities for teaching and learning at a distance (Bozkurt, 2019). Today, we stand at the threshold of a new epoch, one catalyzed not merely by a new tool, but by a force that promises to fundamentally redraw the boundaries of interaction, content, and cognition. The rapid emergence of generative AI represents more than an incremental update; it signals a paradigm shift, compelling us to re-examine the very nature of our pedagogical models and the future of educational community (Bozkurt et al., 2024).

In moments of such profound and disorienting change, when the landscape shifts beneath our feet, the wisdom of those who have navigated previous transformations becomes our most critical asset. While the allure of the new is powerful, it is the perspective of pioneers of the field that provides the compass needed to distinguish between fleeting trends and foundational principles. Their witness helps us anchor our vision in the enduring goals of learning, community, and access which ensure that our pursuit of technological innovation serves humanistic values rather than being swept away by the currents of hype. This intellectual ballast is essential for charting a course that is both bold and sustainable.

Few individuals embody this role more completely than Emeritus Professor Terry Anderson. As a pioneering researcher, dedicated faculty member, and influential theorist, his work on educational interaction and community has provided foundational models for the field for decades. In this era of unprecedented change, his voice serves as an intellectual beacon, illuminating the path forward by grounding the future of online and distance education in the hard-won lessons of its past.

A SCHOLARLY CONVERSATION ON THE FUTURE OF ONLINE EDUCATION

Aras Bozkurt:

Professor Anderson, it's a privilege to engage with you in this dialogue. For decades, your pioneering work has provided the intellectual architecture for quality online and distance education. Specifically, your Interaction Equivalency Theorem and seminal studies on interaction (Anderson, 2003a, Anderson, 2003b; Anderson, 2008) has offered instructional designers a flexible yet powerful model for creating meaningful learning pathways, while your significant contributions to the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 1999; Garrison et al., 2001) have given the field a vocabulary to build and assess the essential blend of social, cognitive, and teaching presences. These theories have not just guided practice; they have fundamentally shaped how we conceptualize effective online interaction. As we enter a new era defined by AI, this conversation will explore how these foundational ideas are challenged and extended, what the future holds for educational community, and what core principles must guide the next generation of distance learning

THE NEXT GENERATION OF INTERACTION IN THE AGE OF AI

Aras Bozkurt:

Your Interaction Equivalency Theorem has been a powerful guide for instructional design, positing that meaningful learning requires a high level of at least one of three key interactions (learner-content, learner-teacher, or learner-learner). With the rise of sophisticated AI that can act as a tutor, a Socratic partner, or a collaborator, how does this challenge or extend your theorem? Can a high level of 'learner-AI' interaction legitimately compensate for lower levels of human interaction, and what do you believe are the critical pedagogical trade-offs or opportunities in such a model?

Yes, I continue to be surprised and a bit delighted that my Equivalency Theorem still has intuitive appeal – even though empirical evidence is harder to find. As you note, AI can be used to take any of the three major interactive roles – content, peer or teacher. This suggests that older frameworks, like mine may be less useful now that these roles are blurred. Content has always been mediated (books, video, letters etc.) but now all three types can be mediated. When I started thinking about Interaction Equivalency I thought of content getting way better and thus the need to have the other two diminishes. For AI to fully fill peer and teacher roles, it needs to greatly expand its intuitive and affective roles- which just MAY be realms that depend on a human experience to fully be expressed. It is hard to image a machine inspiring, starting, supporting or lighting a fire of interest and commitment as **some** teachers and peers have done for students throughout history. But the machines will continue to get closer to meeting that ideal.

AI will bring potential improvements to all three learning resources and the learner will be provided vastly increased ways, paths and means to learn something. If the learning is the domain of “how to do something” or how to explain or predict something, or even how to think critically about some topic, then the learner will have lots of new AI driven resources of explore and find that information. Some of this will be structured content, designed both by humans and AI following proven learning designs from behavioural pedagogy traditional instructional systems design (ISD) others by constructivist, connectivist or boutique pedagogies, such as feminine, queer studies, indigenous, or other approaches designed or customized for learners’ cultures. However, if the learning outcomes are to get along more effectively with others, lead new initiatives or find a life partner, AI will only be a minor assistance.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

Aras Bozkurt:

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, which you have significantly contributed to, emphasizes the importance of social, cognitive, and teaching presence for a successful educational experience. As digital transformation introduces tools like immersive virtual worlds, AI-driven discussion moderators, and advanced social learning platforms, how do you see these technologies impacting our ability to create and sustain these presences? Can technology genuinely foster a deeper, more authentic sense of community and cognitive presence online, or does it risk creating more fragmented and superficial interactions?

Terry Anderson:

I largely gave up work on the COI model as I found it couldn’t really scale beyond the small group, constructivist pedagogical paradigm with in which it was built. AI will certainly dominate providing cognitive presence (mostly interactive content within the COI). But teacher presence with the role modelling, care, affection and deep content knowledge will likely still be needed and will survive – the orchestra needs an conductor who can understand and direct both the intellectual and affective needs of learners – something AI is not very good at. As for social presence, though people do fall in love with bots, I think there is an evolutionary drive to meet, mate, friend and protect other humans that is very hard to replicate by a machine. Good teachers inspire and motivate, good social interaction with peers leads to motivation to do good work so as not to disappoint others or be embarrassed in social company. These may perhaps never be roles that AI replaces.

THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON PEDAGOGY

Aras Bozkurt:

Over your career, you have witnessed the evolution of distance education from print and teleconferencing to the interactive web and now to AI. Looking beyond simply delivering content more efficiently, what do you see as the most profound **pedagogical shifts** that current and emerging technologies enable? Are there new models of teaching and learning—perhaps centered on inquiry-based discovery, collaborative creation at scale, or highly personalized mentorship—that are now truly feasible for the first time, and which of these excite you the most?

Terry Anderson:

As you suggest the new power of AI opens doors to new learning models and more effectively drive and evaluate existing models. The holy grail of being able to provide customized content and activities based on individual learning needs, style, language etc. is finally in sight – if not yet in reach. Collectivist ideas that allow for massive “classes” set over very wide geographic and linguistic borders will become much more common. I also hope that AI tools, through analysis of student interactions (of all types) will be able to prescribe learning or remedial paths effectively both for groups as well as individual learners.

Distance education has always been about access. Therefore, distance teachers and administrators will have to turn our social justice efforts towards insuring equitable and affordable access to the networks and machines of AI enhanced education. AS we do when more of us live closer together geographically, we will move beyond from focusing only on those in remote locations. We will broader access goals by providing quality learning to those with health, mobility, care giving responsibilities and economic or other challenges. Together with AI we will create and support quality learning experiences– anytime/anyplace.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Aras Bozkurt:

“Looking toward the next decade, what is your overarching **vision for the future of distance education**? Considering the rapid pace of technological change and the growing global need for equitable access to lifelong learning, what do you see as the biggest opportunity we must seize as a field, and conversely, what is the most significant risk we must mitigate? What are the core human values and educational principles that must be protected and championed as we build this future?”

Terry Anderson:

My vision for the future is that learners will have affordable options that allow and support them in effectively achieving their social, intellectual and vocational goals. Our largest challenge is ensuring that the current monopolies on information and networking are broken to allow for geographic and intellectual diversity. Doing so will help to insure that costs and profits are shared fairly between entrepreneurs, learners and governments.

Finally, I have argued for years that much more of our efforts should go to developing assessment models and activities so that these better align with learner, employer and societal needs and expectations. In particular, the reliance in upper-level undergrad and graduate courses on term papers, thesis, and other reports is very problematic when AI tools can write an acceptable essay in seconds. This type of student activity that does very little to assess, remediate or help credential learners. Perhaps AI will force us to find ways to assess distance learners using the ancient British viva voce (“with the living voice”) and maybe even be able to do this at scale!

CONCLUSION

The conversation with Terry Anderson offers a masterful blend of pragmatic foresight and deep humanism, providing a crucial anchor in the turbulent waters of the digital transformation and AI revolution. His analysis consistently pivots on a critical distinction: while AI is poised to dominate the cognitive aspects of learning by delivering personalized content and support, it cannot replicate the affective bonds, inspiration, and social motivation that are the hallmarks of human-led education. This perspective leads to a powerful vision for the future, one that accepts AI not as a replacement, but as a catalyst that forces a long-overdue revolution in authentic assessment and redoubles distance education’s core mission of ensuring equitable access for all. Ultimately, Anderson’s message is a clear directive: our goal is not merely to integrate new technology, but to leverage it to make learning more accessible, assessment more meaningful, and the essential human connection at the heart of education more vital than ever.

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

This study was conducted collaboratively by both researchers, who are also listed as the sole authors of the work. As the research did not involve external participants and was based entirely on voluntary collaboration between the authors, no formal ethical approval was required. Participation in the study was based on mutual consent and voluntary involvement of the researchers.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This paper is funded by Anadolu University with grant number YTS-2024-2559 and YTS-2025-2776.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS (CRediT)

Terry Anderson: Conceptualization, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing. Aras Bozkurt: Conceptualization, supervision, project administration, funding acquisition, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

AUTHOR NOTES

Based on *Academic Integrity and Transparency in AI-assisted Research and Specification Framework* (Bozkurt, 2024), the authors of this paper acknowledge that the paper was proofread and edited with the assistance of Google's Gemini (Versions as of July 2025), complementing the human editorial process. The human authors critically assessed and validated the content to maintain academic rigor. The authors also assessed and addressed potential biases inherent in the AI-generated content. The final version of the paper is the sole responsibility of the human authors.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Terry Anderson  orcid.org/0009-0007-0689-1763

Athabasca University, Canada

Aras Bozkurt  orcid.org/0000-0002-4520-642X

Anadolu University, Türkiye; Western Caspian University, Azerbaijan

REFERENCES

- Anderson, T.** (2003a). Getting the Mix Right Again: An Updated and Theoretical Rationale for Interaction. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v4i2.149>
- Anderson, T.** (2003b). Modes of interaction in distance education: Recent developments and research questions. In M. Moore (Ed.), *Handbook of Distance Education*. (pp. 129–144). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Anderson, T.** (2008). Towards a theory of online learning. In T. Anderson (Ed.), *Theory and Practice of Online Learning* (pp. 109–119). AU Press. <https://doi.org/10.15215/aupress/9781897425084.004>
- Anderson, T., & Dron, J.** (2011). Three generations of distance education pedagogy. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 12(3), 80–97. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v12i3.890>

- Bozkurt, A.** (2019). From Distance Education to Open and Distance Learning: A Holistic Evaluation of History, Definitions, and Theories. In S. Sisman-Ugur & G. Kurubacak (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Learning in the Age of Transhumanism* (pp. 252–273). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-8431-5.ch016>
- Bozkurt, A.** (2024). GenAI et al.: Cocreation, Authorship, Ownership, Academic Ethics and Integrity in a Time of Generative AI. *Open Praxis*, 16(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.16.1.654>
- Bozkurt, A., Xiao, J., Farrow, R., Bai, J. Y. H., Nerantzi, C., Moore, S., Dron, J., Stracke, C. M., Singh, L., Crompton, H., Koutropoulos, A., Terentev, E., Pazurek, A., Nichols, M., Sidorkin, A. M., Costello, E., Watson, S., Mulligan, D., Honeychurch, S., ... & Asino, T. I.** (2024). The manifesto for teaching and learning in a time of generative AI: A critical collective stance to better navigate the future. *Open Praxis*, 16(4), 487–513. <https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.16.4.777>
- Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W.** (1999). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The internet and Higher Education*, 2(2–3), 87–105. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516\(00\)00016-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(00)00016-6)
- Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W.** (2001). Critical thinking, cognitive presence, and computer conferencing in distance education. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 15(1), 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08923640109527071>

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Anderson, T., & Bozkurt, A. (2025). A Critically Informed Conversation with Terry Anderson: Visions on the Next Generation of Online and Distance Education. *Open Praxis*, 17(4), pp. 830–835. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.17.4.976>

Submitted: 06 August 2025

Accepted: 01 September 2025

Published: 25 November 2025

COPYRIGHT:

© 2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Praxis is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by International Council for Open and Distance Education.