

What is the Postdigital? Why Might it Matter for Outdoor Experiential Education?

By Jack Reed

Into the Postdigital

In outdoor experiential education (OEE), the place and use of technology remains a contentious and divisive topic for discussion. In recent times the postdigital has emerged as a lens through which educators the world over have begun to ask deeper questions which extend beyond thinking about gadgets and devices, and begins to 'get at' the underlying algorithms, data, and sociotechnical systems which increasingly permeate educational endeavours. As I discuss, we do not have to look too far to see that OEE is already affected by what we might call the postdigital condition.

In March 2018, Petar Jandrić and colleagues (2018) published a paper titled "Postdigital science and education" in the journal *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. Eight months later the inaugural volume of the new journal '*Postdigital science and education*' was published and, to the date of writing, now has over 200 published articles covering an array of topics in education including the Covid-19 pandemic (Coeckelbergh, 2020), postdigital ecopedagogies (Jandrić & Ford, 2020), and feminism (Deepwell, 2020). Within this flood of articles, very little (if any) applies such a concept to OEE and, in the context of my PhD study which is investigating the influence(s) of social media on residential outdoor learning experiences, it seemed reasonable to ask: why might the postdigital condition matter for OEE?

I do not intend for this short piece to provide an overarching metanarrative on postdigital and its applicability or inapplicability for learning outside the classroom, but I hope it does offer a space for thought and reflection on how young people's experiences of OEE may be influenced when thinking through this lens. I begin by turning to the literature to define the postdigital, including addressing why 'digital' in and of itself may be an aging concept, and then I apply the

concept to OEE to ask why it might matter for the field.

Defining the Postdigital

As Jandrić et al. (2018, p. 895) state, "the postdigital is hard to define" but can be considered "a rupture in our existing theories and their continuation". Further, Cramer (2015, p. 13) goes so far to say that ultimately the postdigital is a "term that sucks but is useful". As we shall see, that is not to say I cannot define postdigital here and that it is not important within the context of OEE. To do this I turn to Knox (2019), who shows how the postdigital is concerned with assessing how technology is entangled and rooted within contemporary social life. It is attempting to understand the interactions which exist between us as humans and technology and what the impact may or may not be. Of course, the 'post' in postdigital makes likely links to a general trend which incorporates 'post' to mean something 'posterior to' (e.g., Grenz 1996; Negra, 2009; Nayar, 2014), but bear with me! Whilst discussing topics such as postmodernism, postfeminism, or posthumanism is beyond the scope of this paper, bundling the postdigital into the 'post' theorising camp does not quite capture the essence of the term. As Cramer and Jandrić (2021) discuss, we no longer call a 'digital camera' a 'digital camera', it is just a camera. We no longer call a 'digital computer' a 'digital computer', it is just a computer. The postdigital may be considered an ironic opposite to what the term actually says. Instead, the postdigital encourages us to think of the term 'digital' as forming a binary where if we have the digital then we must also have the non-digital. As I will show, this is increasingly problematic in contemporary society and, potentially, for OEE.

So, where to form an oxymoronic term such as the postdigital? Well, Knox (2019, p. 368) suggests we may no longer need to get so

caught up in “a tendency to understand technology in terms of tangible devices and gadgets” in education. The postdigital instead encourages us to look beyond to the *sociotechnical systems* which more and more frequently pervade, influence, and sustain the contemporary educational endeavour. This frames a significant point of conversation for educational spaces where the physical and digital become increasingly blurred, hybridized, and entangled (and more so during the Covid-19 pandemic). Bayne et al.’s. (2020) book, *The Manifesto for Teaching Online*, gets at some of this complexity and consolidates the perspective that 21st century spaces for teaching and learning form a small part of what van Es and Schäfer (2014) call the datafied society. For example, how do algorithms and big data intertwine with education? How does social media permeate the once impermeable walls of the educational institution? To what extent do sociotechnical architectures frame what it means to be a young person experiencing education? In summary, the postdigital has gained notable traction within the educational literature and recognises that the place of ‘digital’ in education during the third decade of the 21st century may no longer be considered binary ‘other’ but instead may be considered indistinguishable from the physical realities of educators and students. As Jandrić et al. (2018, p. 893) comment, “(w)e are increasingly no longer in a world where digital technology and media is separate, virtual, ‘other’ to a ‘natural’ human and social life”.

Postdigital in Outdoor and Experiential Education

So, what might the postdigital offer OEE? This is a complex and shifting field of thought and, whilst I do not have the answer, perhaps I have something with which to get started. It is worth mentioning that I do not wish to sketch out the literature on the place(s) of technology in OEE. Many papers discuss this including the works of Beames (2017), Thomas and Munge (2017), and Hills and Thomas (2020). However, Leather and Gibson’s (2019) paper on the consumption and hyperreality of nature is particularly

helpful when they acknowledge how physical and virtual realities are increasingly blurred in the framing of how young people engage with nature. What I would like to do is build upon these conversations a little through the postdigital lens.

One theme coming out of literature concerned with tech in outdoor learning is the ‘for and against’ argument, the binary or, as Cuthbertson et al. (2004) describe, the ‘double-edged sword’. To simplify, the use of technology in OEE can be divisive and absolutely remains a much-needed topic for discussion. In relation to the digital in OEE and returning to the postdigital, how helpful this binary remains is yet to be seen and, I think, asks the sector two key questions:

1. In a fluid and ‘hyper-networked’ society where technology increasingly (and more so in the case of the pandemic) sustains and entangles the everyday lives of young people, how might OEE respond in order to remain relevant and credible?
2. Given the permeating nature of algorithms and data, how might we begin to understand how these factors enter and influence the contemporary experiences of young people in OEE?

In relation to question one, the postdigital adds a layer of complexity to the binary of tech/digital in OEE. Irrespective of whether we use technology in OEE practice or not, young people will arrive and leave as part of a networked backchannel that the outdoor experiential educator cannot even see. In essence, this turns me to social media and how platforms such as Snapchat, WhatsApp, or TikTok create underpinning networked spaces and places which collapse the notion of the bounded OEE experience. I am unconvinced that the sector has a choice here, we may ban phones or turn off the Wi-Fi, but the fact remains that after an OEE experience, or even during off-task time, young people will return to their networked bubbles. For question two, whilst we may

not be able to see networked backchannels, the sociotechnical systems which flood in and out of an OEE experience need to be explored. Think of a spider web—its intricacies, links, fragility—OEE is one small part in a web where innumerable other sociotechnical factors influence young people's lives before, during, and after an OEE experience.

All of this is, of course, an abstract representation of how the postdigital collides with OEE. An example is therefore necessary to contextualise the postdigital in practice. Dunn and Reed (2020) produced a short film called "Dear Oak"¹ which unpacks what we may begin to think of as a postdigital OEE experience. We first visited the oak in 2018 as part of the Outdoor and Environmental Education master's degree programmes at the University of Edinburgh. The initial experience I had at the oak tree was profound and personal. However, if I look deeper, phones took photos, social media offered a space to share and reminisce (even nearly three years later), and FaceTime allowed a chat with friends back home to tell them all about an oak in Kingussie, Scotland. The ways in which technology and networks permeated this space was not so obvious at the time. However, when lifting the postdigital lid on this experience we see that algorithms and data are not as far away as we first thought.

But let's return to the film! It was shot and edited nearly a year after the initial visit to the oak and was developed in conjunction with both students and staff on the University of Edinburgh's Outdoor and Environmental Education programmes. What the film captures is the realisation that even here, in a forest in the Highlands of Scotland, sociotechnical systems permeate and sustain the OEE experience. From the initial line of 'Dear Oak' at the tree, to a video on YouTube that is immediately sharable and viewable globally, to the pixels and speakers in your hardware; algorithms and data have continued this experience without us blinking twice. Of course, this is not all that surprising in the context of a fluid and hyper-networked society. What

remains interesting however, is the ways in which learning and educating in outdoor spaces and places are influenced by what we might begin to think of as the place of the postdigital in contemporary OEE.

Summary

What I am seeking to demonstrate here is that the postdigital may offer a lens to think critically about how networked spaces, sociotechnical systems, and associated algorithms and data permeate OEE. We may not have invited the big tech companies into OEE, but they are here, likely influencing how young people experience, relate, and sustain the journey of an OEE experience. What the postdigital offers OEE researchers and practitioners is a lens through which to think beyond the binary of '*technology, to be, or not to be?*'. As we respond to and recover from the pandemic, young people are likely to have relied on their social networks and sociotechnical architectures more so than ever. As I have discussed, we may choose to not incorporate technology in our practice, but irrespective of this we can be confident that algorithms, data, and networks are never far away. This raises significant questions for OEE and, I believe, the postdigital is well-placed to begin answering them.

Notes

1. You can find the film on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHTuY8UBCCE>

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