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Between the Post and the Com-Post: Examining the Postdigital 'Work' of a Prefix

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Abstract

In examining the work of the prefix 'post', we aim to contribute to the current postdigital dialogue. Our paper does not provide a rationale for the use of 'postdigital' in the title of this journal: that has been thoroughly explored elsewhere. We want instead to consider the work the prefix might do. We look at 'post', as it appears to 'act' in the terms of 'postmodernism' and 'posthumanism', suggesting that modernism and humanism are in need of questioning and reworking. We also examine what gets 'post-ed', or sometimes 'com-posted'. (Com- is another interesting prefix, meaning 'with'.) We then consider how these inquiries inform our understanding of a 'postdigital reality' that humans now inhabit. We understand this as a space of learning, struggle, and hope, where 'old' and 'new' media are now 'cohabiting artefacts' that enmesh with the economy, politics and culture. In entering this postdigital age, there really is no turning back from a convergence of the traditional and the digital. However, this is not simply a debate about technological and non-technological media. The postdigital throws up new challenges and possibilities across all aspects of social life. We believe this opens up new avenues too, for considering ways that discourse (language-in-use) shapes how we experience the postdigital.

Keywords Discourse · Reworking · Haraway · Materiality · Fertility · Postdigital

Introduction: the Post(-) Prefix

We begin by explaining our interest in 'post' and the 'work' we believe this prefix does. We could have instead examined a suffix, such as the 'ism' in postmodernism and

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posthumanism. However, we wanted to comment on the value (as well as the dangers) of distinguishing the postdigital from the digital. Therefore examining the ‘labour’ that a prefix such as ‘post’ might undertake (Hayes 2018a, 2018b) is of particular interest. We cannot help but notice too that some concepts, when examined through the lens of ‘post’, seem to have fallen out of favour. For example, Cohen and Kennedy (2013): 28) describe postmodernism as ‘a concept that is now going out of fashion but that held sway for 30 years’. This has prompted us to reflect on when the assignment of ‘post’ to a theory may later cause it to become earmarked for the ‘com-post’. This humorous metaphor runs a little deeper than it may at first seem, because even what is discarded as compost may (after being left for a while) be recycled to yield new growth. Perhaps theories are similar. Some appear to regain ground, having been for some time discarded to decay. With these ideas in mind, we proceed firstly, to discuss our interest in unpacking the ‘post’ in postmodernism and in posthumanism—two terms that seem rich with complexity. We then apply these arguments to the postdigital to ask what might be positive about the prefix ‘post’ alongside any reservations about its use and we explore the serious implications of the compost metaphor as envisioned by Haraway (Franklin and Haraway 2017; Haraway 2016). We play with this metaphor too—seeing the prefix com- as offering us the meaning ‘with’, so that com-post can also mean ‘with post’. Finally, we invite others to join this debate, thus enabling our shared understandings of the postdigital to grow.

We Began with a Little ‘Digging’

We begin by explaining our choice to examine the work of ‘post’, following a little digging into both ‘post’ as a prefix and ‘ism’ as a suffix. For example, an ‘ism’ added to the end of a word tends to indicate that a practice or philosophy is being represented. Often an ‘ism’ is associated with an artistic, revolutionary, political or economic movement, such as ‘Marxism’ or ‘Capitalism’, indicating that those following this movement share certain beliefs or common practices. An example is the work of Cypriot media-artist Theo-Mass Lexileictous, whose understanding of ‘postdigitalism’ is emerging through his artistic exhibitions where he has been ‘infiltrating the art world, utilising what he has identified as our urban culture’s largest powers: money, fashion and the media’ (Spirou and Lexileictus 2013). In #POSTDIGITALISM part 1, he raised the question: ‘What happens when we extract the digital world from the screen to reality?’. His interest in the digital coming into the physical was explored through the impact of images and text distributed on social media sites like Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. The words in his #POSTDIGITALISM manifesto were accompanied by the hashtag symbol (#) enabling people to enter themed image archives. When these same words are printed in paper format, they no longer function in the same way and so a hybrid language emerges through postdigitalism (Spirou and Lexileictus 2013). In this example, the -ism suggests a new movement, and the post indicates that this movement is only possible after some things that have occurred in the digital era.

Other ‘isms’ may indicate a prejudice of some sort, and give a name to this, such as ‘Sexism’ or ‘Ageism’. Thus the suffix ‘ism’ is added to words that are nouns and these remain nouns, even with the suffix included. Whilst the key terms we have chosen to examine in this article are also discussed as ‘isms’ (postmodernism, posthumanism, postdigitalism), it is the activity undertaken by the prefix ‘post-’ that has caught our interest

and remains our focus. However, the fact that post- might be attached to adjectives or nouns (including -isms) does provide an explanation for some of the complexity we have encountered. When we come to think more closely about postdigital and postdigitalism, we shall need to be aware of the different nuances presented by prefixes, suffixes, and grammatical functions—including their historical precedents—in order to see how they might modify the meaning of the main part of the word. And, as we have discovered, post- does not necessarily (and certainly does not simply) mean, after.

It Matters What and Whom You Think-with

It matters what thoughts think thoughts; it matters what stories tell stories.
(Haraway 2016: 38)

Haraway herself has given us compost to think-with, which we discuss later—and her point about the importance of thinking-with as a practice is relevant to the initial choices we made.

There does seem to be an abundance of ‘post-’ words around, but we selected posthuman and postmodern for examination as their scope seemed likely to coincide with issues arising with postdigital, such as a stance towards western Enlightenment values, the role of technology in changing human practice, and to the application of the new term in educational contexts. We also had a sense that there were some slightly different grammatical issues between postmodern (ism) and posthuman (ism), which might lead to different forms of linguistic and conceptual work being done by the prefix post(-).

We particularly sought out writers who commented on the prefix, to allow us to get a sense of this work. Pepperell (2003) has pointed out that post-human is a ‘rather speculative term’, and he replaced it with the compound posthuman in the second edition of his monograph *The posthuman condition: consciousness beyond the brain*. The convention that dropping a prefix to turn the word into a compound has a normalising effect has been around for some time (Crystal 2001); indeed, it has shown up in house rules for publication (*Wired Style*) that writers should ‘accelerate the future’ by not hyphenating compound words (Hale and Scanlon 1999). Thus writers who use a hyphen are more likely to be speculative about the resulting construct or the work of the prefix; those who go straight to the compound may want to indicate that it is old-fashioned or unnatural not to do so. These subtle distinctions are present in our findings from the literature.

Before looking at the work done by the prefix ‘post(-)’, therefore, we searched for writers with a view on this. The main example that initially emerged from the search is a book chapter with a section entitled ‘The Proliferation of the “Post” Prefix’ (Carpentier and Van Bauwel 2010). This whole chapter is interesting in that, although they do provide a strong discussion on prefixes, the authors seem to miss some of the nuances of the work of ‘post’ in ‘posthuman’ and ‘postmodern’ that we found in other writers.

How the Post(-) Prefix Works with Modern/Modernity/Modernism

Before considering the work of the prefix post, in relation to postmodernism, it is worth reflecting on modern life in terms of human experience and the drive for

development. David Harvey suggests that key in the history of modernism is the ‘conjoining of the ephemeral and the fleeting with the eternal and immutable’ (Harvey 1989: 10). Modernity, as a body of experience is discussed by Berman as ‘an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and at the same time that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are’ (Berman 1982: 15). Harvey suggests that if this is the case then ‘modernity can have no respect for its own past, let alone that of any premodern social order’ (Harvey 1989: 11). This makes it difficult to preserve a sense of historical continuity because this then has to be defined from within the flux of change. This is ‘a maelstrom that affects the terms of discussion as well as whatever it is that is being discussed’ (Harvey 1989: 12). It is through what Habermas (1983: 9) discussed as ‘the project of modernity’ and the efforts of Enlightenment thinkers to develop objective science and rational forms of social organisation and thought during the eighteenth century that promised liberation from myths and superstition (Harvey 1989: 12). Enlightenment thought embraced the idea of progress, but according to Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), this is a rationality underpinned by a logic of domination and oppression.

Postmodern as an Evolution of the Modern Being

If the objectivity of modernism has ‘failed to pay attention to important disjunctions and details’ then the ‘post’ in postmodernism could be said to aid an acknowledging of ‘the multiple forms of otherness as they emerge from differences in subjectivity’ (Harvey 1989: 113). In this respect postmodernism would then be simply for the most part ‘a wilful and rather chaotic movement to overcome all the supposed ills of modernism’ (Harvey 1989: 115). Harvey adds though that it is problematic for this to involve a simple writing off of modernist practices, citing Marx’s account of modernisation as ‘exceedingly rich in insights into the roots of modernist as well as postmodernist sensibility’ (Harvey 1989: 115).

Perhaps then, if Badmington sees posthumanism as a ‘working-through’ of discussions around humanism (Badmington 2003), then applying this argument to postmodernism, this would be about working through discussions of modernism. If as Lyotard argues, ‘postmodernity is not a new age, but the rewriting of some of the features claimed by modernity’ (Lyotard 1991: 34) then understanding the ‘post’ in this as enabling a rewriting within, rather than beyond modernity itself, could be a helpful approach towards our later discussion of the postdigital.

Postmodern and Postmodernism

Harvey argues that ‘there is much more continuity than the difference between the broad history of modernism and the movement called postmodernism’ (Harvey 1989: 116). He suggests we understand postmodernism as a crisis within modernism. Here the ‘post’ in postmodern might be considered a rather dangerous prospect, as whilst it radically opens up the authenticity of other voices, ‘post-modernist thinking immediately shuts off those other voices from access to more

universal sources of power by ghettoizing them within an opaque otherness, the specificity of this or that language game' (Harvey 1989: 117).

How the Post(-) Prefix Works with Human/Humanism/Humanist

In their chapter on 'The Proliferation of the Prefix', Carpentier and Van Bauwel (2010) are particularly concerned with the prefixes 'trans' and 'post' (their book is exploring trans-reality television). They claim that such prefixes allow 'authors to either critique the "original" concept, and/or to symbolize changed realities which require a conceptual reconfiguration.' (Carpentier and Van Bauwel 2010: 298). There are various features associated with these changes—including fluidity, self-reflexivity and rupture. In the case of other '-isms'—postmodernism, poststructuralism and several others—the authors' emphasis is on the full expression, and a discussion of the underlying philosophy and political implications. With posthumanism, however, the emphasis is on the human rather than on humanism.

Posthuman as an Evolution of the Human Being

For Carpentier and Van Bauwel (2010: 301) 'post-humanism has left the materiality of the body behind'. Their concern, therefore, is mainly with an ending that has yet to happen—and they are possibly more interested in the 'trans' prefix. They see transhumanism—the notion that humans enhanced by technology are a different kind of human—as the process towards a posthuman future where the human body is no longer necessary. They refer particularly to the replacement of the human with 'a different construction called the post-human' as envisaged by Katherine Hayles.

Hayles herself has commented on the role of the 'post' prefix, saying that it has the 'dual connotation of superseding the human and coming after it' (Hayles 1999: 283). She does not subscribe to the view that this means the end of humanity and mentions several instances of this view, adding: 'Fortunately, these views do not exhaust the meanings of the posthuman.' (Hayles 1999: 283).

The expression 'the posthuman'—like 'the human'—can refer not only to a kind of being but also to attributes, qualities and other abstractions to which the adjective 'posthuman' can be applied. It can sometimes be difficult to tell the difference, though a view of posthuman as having a (dis) connection with human bodies comes across strongly in Hayles and commentators on her work. There are some fascinating discussions associated with the shared imaginary of the posthuman in this cybernetic being sense of the word. For instance, Carpentier and Van Bauwel also cite Bostrum (2005). Bostrum's paper makes a plea for the dignity of those who might 'one day succeed in becoming what relative to current standards we might refer to as posthuman' (Bostrum 2005: 213). This version of the 'posthuman' does not yet exist—it is our potential descendant and the end result of a process of transhumanism.

Consideration of the posthuman as the end point of the transhuman naturally invokes the cyborg. However, an acknowledgement that the post- prefix might have an alternative use comes in a footnote by Carpentier and Van Bauwel referring to the cyborg in Haraway's work:

At the same time, it should be noted that Haraway is uncomfortable with the appropriation of her work by posthuman theory, as she is more interested in posthumanism than in the posthuman.

(Carpentier and van Bauwell 2010, footnote 33)

This note does not, however, explain the difference: a difference that they do not acknowledge with their own use of the word ‘posthumanism’. Nor is the answer to be found in the work cited. In that interview with Nicholas Gane, Haraway actually says she avoids posthumanism for being too restrictive: ‘The reason I go to companion species is to get away from posthumanism.’ (Gane and Haraway 2006: 140). However, a clearer commentary on the post- prefix is seen in a later interview with Sarah Franklin, when Haraway sees the futuristic notion of the ‘post-human’ as a colloquial and not a useful term, depicting a ‘space-race’ type of human who has left the planet. However, she recognises the value of the work of posthumanism, saying:

The prefix ‘post-’ is a kind of marking of an examination and an inquiry into the histories, and meanings, and possibilities, and violences, and hopefulneses of human-ism, which has a terribly complicated history. And I don’t feel, by any means, comprehensively critical of ‘post-humanism’.

(Franklin and Haraway 2017: 50)

Haraway does, however, now feel inclined to rename posthuman (ism) as ‘compost’ (Haraway 2016: 31)—a surprising and puzzling substitution, for us at least. We return to this later in the paper in our discussion of the compost metaphor. For now, we are making the point that posthumanism does not mean the end point of transhumanism for all writers, even though it does for some.

Posthuman and Posthumanism

The problem with posthumanism is that it might mean that *post* is applied to human, and the suffix -ism turns the result into a theory or philosophy. Alternatively, it might mean that *post* is applied to the term ‘humanism’. As Badmington put it:

Both halves of the signifier in question demand attention: posthumanism, as I have argued elsewhere, is as much *posthumanist* as it is post- *humanist* (Badmington 2003: 15)

Badmington’s paper seeks to theorise posthumanism, especially because he wants to make a point about the prefix:

the ‘post-’ of posthumanism does not (and, moreover, cannot) mark or make an absolute break from the legacy of humanism.

(Badmington 2003: 13)

Rather than moving on from humanism, Badmington sees posthumanism as a ‘working-through’ of discussions around humanism. Badmington is, in turn, cited fairly extensively by Chatelier (2017) who points out that ‘humanism’ is not itself a fixed entity and in some

of its forms it actually embeds (self) critique. Here, he disagrees with Braidotti who sees humanism as having a ‘restricted notion of what counts as the human’ and indeed claims that this is what has led to the need for posthumanism (Braidotti 2013: 16), though this does not mean that humanism is straightforward. In establishing her modified anti-humanist position, Braidotti frequently cites the post-colonial work of Edward Said as particularly influential in critiquing the manifestations of Enlightenment liberal humanism. Chatelier is also a champion of Said’s work but wants to preserve humanism because of this work, rather than displace it. In particular, Chatelier wants to claim that Edward Said’s non-essentialist democratic and self-critical humanism is in keeping with critical posthumanism, which might even be seen as a part of it.

There is a direct parallel with what Lyotard says about postmodern.

Postmodernity is not a new age, but the rewriting of some of the features claimed by modernity and first of all modernity’s claim to ground its legitimacy on the project of liberating humanity as a whole through science and technology. But as I have said, that rewriting has been at work, for a long time now, in modernity itself. (Lyotard 1991: 34)

It seems clear that the prefix ‘post’ encourages a critical discussion about both the human subject and the philosophy of humanism. It does not necessarily imply fully displacing either of them. However, it is also true that it means different things to different writers.

Critical Posthumanism

Knox (2016) uses Braidotti’s (2013) stance against the binary of humanism and anti-humanism to ‘clarify the specific use of the prefix ‘post’ in critical posthumanism’ (Knox 2016: 34). It is not about what comes after humanism but it is about what destabilises it. For Knox, the prefix ‘questions the incontrovertibility of the foundational subject’ (Knox 2016: 34–35).

The questioning of humanism does entail the questioning of its assumptions about the nature of the human subject and especially the role of those assumptions in building theories and practices on the basis of this essentialised nature. So the ‘post’ in critical posthumanism does still apply to the human as well as to humanism. However, it is not in the cybernetic sense identified at the start of this analysis. In another quotation that draws attention to ambiguities caused by word use, Wolfe (2010), who rejects the notion of ‘the human’ we have been given by the European Enlightenment and continue to retain, observes:

posthumanism in my sense isn’t posthuman at all—in the sense of being ‘after’ our embodiment has been transcended—but is only *posthumanist*, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself. (Wolfe 2010: xv)

That last phrase is important: it highlights that it was humanism that encouraged some of the dystopian consequences of Enlightenment thinking and even led to the cybernetic

version of the posthuman. While some writers might want the prefix post- to refer to what comes after the human body, critical posthumanists are wrangling over what we are still inheriting from humanism. Although common sense might suggest that humanism necessarily precedes posthumanism, ‘after’ is not the main signification of post- in critical posthumanism, at least not in the sense of a complete break with the past.

The Work Done by Post(-) in Posthumanism

The brief analysis above suggests that the work done by post(-) may depend on what is being ‘posted’: the human being, or one of the philosophical forms of humanism. Turning the prefix into a verb in this way is a technique used by Friesen (2018) to express concern over the implications of posthumanism for education:

It is ... autonomy and the exercise of agency, will and choice that are seen as at an end, that are “posted” in posthumanism.
(Friesen 2018: 1)

Making post(-) a verb, does clearly bring to the surface the understanding of the work that it does. For Friesen, it means seeing something as at an end. The paper that has prompted this concern (Bayne 2018) does provide evidence that some posthumanist writers propose an end: to humanism, to a particular conception of the human, and even to learning. However, Bayne also refers to posthumanist writers who are willing to retain some aspects of humanism, such as Braidotti (2013) and Wolfe (2010)—post(-) does not have to mean seeing something as at an end, but rather (as we have already elaborated) as in need of questioning and reworking. Post(-) does not have to do the work of erasing or consigning to history; however, the fact that a reader looks for this work in the use of the word needs to be taken into account. We are not critiquing Friesen’s (2018) argument about posthumanism and education here, but are instead simply using it to explore the work of the prefix which might be intentional or not. Post(-) meaning following the end of something will be widely found in dictionaries, and so this work should not be ignored. However, the implications of other understandings should not be ignored either, especially where they may lead to contradictions and confusion. And if something is being ended, we need to be very clear what it is.

Once a compound word such as posthuman exists, it can itself do some ‘work’ in our conceptual thinking, for example about education or technology. The word posthuman (in all its senses) is of course very much associated with technology. In the sense of ‘what comes after humans’, the word may be supporting a determinist view of technology: the external machine displacing the human being. In other senses, the association with technology might be more ‘that of an *extension* to human existence’ (Pepperell 2003 e-book Location 2601). The technology—and indeed the rest of the material world (or nature)—are not as separate from our existence as the humanist perspective would suggest. For Pepperell, the extensionist view does not rule out the possibility of synthetic beings, but he still asserts that posthumanism is about the end of humanism rather than the end of man. Furthermore, Pepperell sees the posthuman era as being about the lack of distinction between humans and nature (Pepperell 2003)—a point he takes forward to later work on the postdigital and that we shall also revisit.

Insights for the Postdigital: Preparing the Com-Post

Our explorations of the post in postmodernism and posthumanism have illuminated for us the importance of examining the role of language in bringing separation rather than continuity to an analysis of human experience. Whilst we may apply the prefix post to words like modern and human, the ‘post’ in postmodern still applies to the modern and the post in posthuman still applies to the human. Whatever rupture the post is, it serves as a reminder that such a movement took place. Otherwise, we may shut off rather than open up new avenues of debate. Furthermore, if we throw the post in the bin or compost heap, we lose this connection. However, than losing it carelessly in a compost heap, we seek to retain the two prefixes com- and post- in the idea of ‘with post’. In playing with the compost and then applying these ideas to the postdigital, it is then necessary to consider, what is digital?

Haraway as Compostist

As we signalled earlier in the paper, Donna Haraway has suggested replacing the notion of posthuman (ism) with *compost* and humanities as *humusities* (Haraway 2016: 32). She is simultaneously playful and serious in describing herself as: ‘Philosophically and materially, I am a compostist, not a posthumanist’. (Haraway 2016: 97) Haraway is always interested in the etymology and associations that words bring and in an interview with Sarah Franklin, she observes:

But ‘humus’ is a term I’m very attached to, that we make with, and we become with each other, as in compost. We are truly with.
(Franklin and Haraway 2017: 50)

Haraway’s reasons for substituting posthumanism with compost are not entirely clear to us but her book is about ‘staying with the trouble’ and recognising what we have available to think-with, which can no longer be bounded individualism. But our thinking-with the compost metaphor has led us to share some of Haraway’s philosophical thinking and, importantly, drawn our attention to its material counterparts—actual compost heaps and related ecological issues.

What we hope to explore in the remainder of this paper is what com-post—or ‘with the prefix post’—might mean for the word ‘digital’. And we’ll mess around in the compost heap as well.

Digital Compost

Our own thoughts for this paper were inspired by a colleague who used Haraway’s idea in a conference presentation on ‘digital compost’ generated through data from networked shared stories (Boyd 2018). Boyd’s study reflects how attention to networks of humans, more-than-humans, things and places can be used to support place-based learning for students studying at a distance. The stories Boyd’s students tell provide fertile ground for meaning-making and recognising the interrelatedness of ideas and understandings that go well beyond the virtual or physical classroom. There is both metaphor and physical place in Boyd’s work—and an important reminder that the latter is always with us.

Boyd is not the only writer to connect the digital with compost. In the editorial that introduced the journal *Postdigital Science and Education* (Jandrić et al. 2018a), the authors cite Negroponte, who had claimed 20 years previously that:

the connotation [of the digital] will become tomorrow's commercial and cultural compost for new ideas
(Negroponte 1998)

Interestingly, Negroponte made a comparison with plastics—he was looking back 30 years to the late 60s when plastics had been presented as ‘the future’. From that future in 1998, he saw plastics as banal and foresaw the same fate for the digital. That may indeed be the case, but by 2018 our relationship with plastics—and indeed compost—had become altered. The environmental threat of plastics has provided a stark reminder of how materials, technologies, people, animals, plants, inorganic matter and their environments all interact and intermesh. Moreover, as Taffel (2016) asserts, Negroponte was premature in assuming the death of the digital revolution.

As Haraway points out: ‘you can do compost badly’ (Franklin and Haraway 2017: 51) and this is important if we are going to use the metaphor. It can contain inappropriate ingredients (such as inorganic or inert matter), be the wrong temperature (often not hot enough) and not looked after appropriately. If the digital is ultimately to become compost, we need to ensure that it is well made, nourishing and sustainable—not causing us similar problems to those we have seen in plastics. Are we in time to ensure that digital ‘with post’ does appropriate work to this end?

These can be literal composting problems as well as metaphorical ones—the materiality of the technology that supports our digital practices is often overlooked, but inorganic and energy-consuming residues from digital work make composting of the digital even more of a problem and an environmental priority than plastic alone (and there is plenty of plastic residue as a side-effect of technology). There is an urgent need to recognise that our current digital practices are unsustainable (Selwyn 2018)—see <http://newmediaresearch.educ.monash.edu.au/lnm/edtech-within-limits-toward-the-sustainable-use-of-digital-technology-in-education/>

The work of the post in postdigital will need a thorough grounding in our understanding of the digital.

The Work Done by Post in Postdigital

In a review of uses of the term postdigital, Taffel (2016) considers where and how the term is used and finds a broad range, including contradictory uses, and finds it interesting to consider ‘the way in which these incongruities might be a way of refocusing attention onto examinations of the digital’ (Taffel 2016: 330). He attributes the confusion to the lack of specificity about what ‘the digital means’, and the lack of attention to the material conditions of its production, as well as the wide-ranging contexts in which the term is used. Taffel does not specifically mention the work of the prefix post(-): however, we can infer that it works in various contradictory ways. These include to challenge the assumptions of the term that follows (digital), to draw attention to the flaws in the digital, to synthesise the digital with its former antonyms, to indicate a rupture (a coming-after), and to escape from the novelty

associated with the digital. This ‘work’ invokes a number of debates—and this is what Taffel sees as the fundamental value:

whilst the contradictions inherent in contemporary discourses surrounding the postdigital render the term itself of little critical value, particular tropes and figures it alludes to articulate numerous issues are pivotal to comprehending the contemporary digital landscape.
(Taffel 2016: 335)

In other words, as we have already discovered with posthumanism and postmodernism, the prefix post(-) signals that we have something to talk about. Digital ‘with post’ (compost) should be fertile ground, and that is our hope for this journal.

Anticipating what this might mean for one’s own postdigital work is likely to depend on the field one is in—and the postdigital, as Taffel points out, is associated with many fields, not only in humanities. Our own interest as authors of this paper is in the field of education, itself a broad ranging field intersecting with numerous others including all in the scholarly fields identified by Taffel as using the word ‘postdigital’. These are ‘music, architecture, design, art, advertising, photography, e-learning, marketing, media studies and film studies’ (Taffel 2016: 326). We could also add informatics, science and technology, physics, electronic engineering and many others. Each of these could be followed by the term ‘education’, and the ensuing debates about the pedagogy of each field are likely to be wide ranging and sometimes incompatible. As all of these fields use ‘digital’ in different ways, the prefix post(-) will potentially confound problems already associated with ‘digital education’—or may indeed be brought in to avoid such confusion.

In another paper in this issue of *Postdigital Science and Education*, Fawns (2018) points to the lack of conceptual clarity in digital education and the problems that this brings. He usefully questions whether we can actually separate the digital from the non-digital without creating damaging limitations about how we can talk about education. For Fawns, the term postdigital offers a prospect of moving away from such binaries. This reminds us that our root word ‘digital’—once associated with fingers and toes – is now frequently associated with binaries. Indeed, in some of the fields listed above, it predominantly refers to the binary system. In introducing his review of uses of postdigital, Taffel (2016) points to both scholarly and mainstream assumptions that the post(-) prefix indicates a moving on from the binary system. The scholarly view on this is represented by Pepperell and Punt (2000) who identified the dangers of the ‘digitisation of society’ as a dubious aspect of the ‘vogue for binarism’. Having shown that social aspects of life are resistant to binary encoding, Pepperell and Punt ask us to consider a metaphor of ‘the postdigital membrane’: a way of connecting and separating distinctions that we have imposed on the world and that are no longer useful.

Taking this further, and overlapping with another understanding of ‘postdigital’, Taffel cites Neil Spiller claiming: ‘It is impossible, anymore, to talk of digital architecture as a binary opposition to normal real-world architecture.’ (Miller, cited in Taffel 2016: 327). We believe that this statement has recognisable parallels in all educational fields.

Taffel connects this position with the posthumanist narratives we have already discussed and ecological perspectives that are starting to emerge from our own analyses

here as requiring attention. Rejection of binaries (with or without explicit acknowledgement of the binary system) is not, though, the only reference point for postdigital. Indeed, some of the original understandings of digital technology have been rendered invisible because of its ubiquity, and the debates about the postdigital serve to bring it back into focus. For us, the use of the post(-) prefix reminds us that the digital takes place in a material world as well as a virtual one. We are being aided in an extension of the ‘compost’ trope by Taffel’s analysis and subsequent discussion of ‘digital hypermaterialism’ as expounded by Bernard Stiegler. When everything is transformed into information, there are massive implications for the ‘matter’ that carries it, yet it is at the same time rendered invisible or hidden away.

When the prefix post(-) triggers us to recognise that there is something to talk about in the term that follows, with the word ‘digital’ it signals that we have not done with the digital and there are some material aspects of the digital that cannot be physically composted. This is of major environmental concern. Yet the metaphorical value of com-post (in the sense of ‘with post’) allows us to conceptualise a way out of our educational conundrums by recognising the interconnections of everything in ways that can be used as required and discarded when not. The fact that we have been forced to end up with ‘an overly-inclusive and indiscriminate definition’ of digital education (Fawns 2018) suggests that the composting process has possibly begun. If we want definitions (however temporary) that do not close down or restrict our practices, then we need to be open to the cross-fertilisation process and not allow it to become cross-sterilisation. But if this is true for the metaphorical, it is even more pressing for the material.

Compost: A Conclusion and New Beginnings

In this paper, we started with the prefix post and concluded with the com-post, and in between we have looked at the work being done in postmodern, posthuman and postdigital. As it matters to us what and whom we think with, we are keen to expand our understandings of this work. We invite comments on whether our understandings of the prefix post(-) can support our shared space where ‘old’ and ‘new’ media are now ‘cohabiting artefacts’ that enmesh with the economy, politics and culture (Jandrić et al. 2018b). We need to grow our ideas together using the best forms of compost, both figuratively and literally.

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