



Postdigital or Predigital?

Andrew Feenberg¹

Published online: 5 January 2019
© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2019

Keywords Digital · Postdigital · Predigital · Online education · Blended education

To understand postdigital education, we need first to explain the concept of digital education. This is a challenge since the digitalization of education has never been codified in a definitive form. What we have seen over the last 30 years is an obsession with computers and the Internet, especially on the part of the school and university administrators. Technology promises the modernization of supposedly tradition-bound institutions. Technology versus tradition justifies enormous investments and pressures for change. This is the meaning of the digital, not as a technical reality but as an ideological phenomenon.

However, it would be a mistake to ignore the technical dimension. For example, attempts to automate education using the new technology have not met with the expected success. This has to do with the very definition of education. That definition has involved human interaction since time immemorial. Of course, nothing human is forever. Could a redefinition crystallize around the technical powers and limits of computers and networks? This was the project that emerged from futuristic projections in the 1990s but it has now been put to the test. Neither students nor faculty has accepted automated substitutes for the “real thing.” It seems that the old definition of education is made of harder stuff than the technology that was supposed to shatter it.

The postdigital no longer opposes the virtual or cyber world to the world of face-to-face experience. The digital is integrated and imbricated with our everyday actions and interactions. This is the trend in education, where ambitious projects aimed at automation have given way to more modest attempts to integrate digital tools to conventional face-to-face courses. This “blended education” seems a good model of post-digitalization. The students access readings, images, and videos on the network while still meeting in class to listen and discuss. Sometimes, active online forums supplement classroom discussion. The seamless combination of the network and the classroom is a

✉ Andrew Feenberg
andrewf@sfu.ca

¹ Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6, Canada

far cry from the promised “virtual classroom” of the early days, but it is recognizable as education under the usual definition.

There is considerable ambiguity in the case of distance education proper, defined by the spatial dispersal of the student population. Regrettably, it is often treated as a cash cow. The fact that a new technology is involved allows a redistribution of roles and expectations. Automated solutions are marketed to students with few opportunities to participate in face-to-face classes. But distance education can be a legitimate substitute for education in the conventional settings where online discussion forums or other means of human contact supplement canned materials.

In reality, these terms “digital” and “postdigital” seem artificial. If the terms have something like the content I am ascribing them, then the postdigital preceded the digital and should be called the predigital instead.

The first online education program was the School of Management and Strategic Studies at the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute in La Jolla, California. This was an innovative distance learning program for people too busy to take time off to participate in on-campus studies. The program opened in 1982, offering courses for business executives. The courses were mostly led by teachers drawn from university departments of social science and philosophy and delivered by asynchronous computer conferencing.

At the time, computers were expensive and the Internet was not yet open to the public; going online was costly and technically difficult. Data moved slowly so documents and images could not be easily transmitted by the network but had to be sent through the mails. Technical and economic constraints thus compelled the adoption of an online pedagogy that resembled classroom discussion. The outcome was a reform of distance learning, adding human interaction on the network to materials distributed by mail.

It was only toward the end of the 1990s that college administrators became interested in online education. At the time, there was a crisis in educational funding that looked likely to get worse. Administrators were encouraged to believe that the Internet could save them money by futurists such as Peter Drucker and computer company salesmen. The key was the elimination of teaching staff. The automation agenda emerged from this constellation. Instead of adding human interaction to distance learning, the resources available on the Internet were to be substituted for it. Thus was born the “digital” out of the “predigital.”

I participated in that early experiment in online education and have followed the development of the field ever since. I have watched while an original humanistic technological design was transformed into a dehumanized one. And I have seen the adaptation of the resources made available for automation re-purposed to serve in a traditional context. It would be useful to document similar changes in other fields as we enter the “postdigital” age.