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Postdigital English education: a productive narrative for resisting neoliberal logics

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ABSTRACT

This paper situates itself within debates surrounding the impact of neoliberalism on English education and proposes postdigital English as an alternative narrative. Drawing on Han's assertion that narratives are crucial for creating meaning and fostering social cohesion, this paper argues that a postdigital narrative for English education produces new forms of perception which counter the limitations imposed by neoliberal frameworks. The tension between neoliberal constraints and emerging postdigital possibilities are explored through the analysis of one experienced English teacher's negotiation of the digital/English nexus. Findings suggest that while secondary English teachers are constrained by current neoliberal structures, reimagining English differently is possible through postdigital frameworks. This reimagining embraces the entanglement of human and technological elements, recognises the blurred boundaries between digital and analogue, and fosters critical engagement with the sociomaterial complexities of contemporary communication.

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Introduction

> The narratives on which the neoliberal regime is based prevent the formation of a community. The neoliberal narrative of performance turns every individual into an *entrepreneur of his own self*. Everyone competes with everyone else. The performance narrative does not produce social cohesion – it does not produce a we. (Han 2024, 62)

English education scholars from across the Anglosphere have argued for some time that ours is a field increasingly squeezed by forces of neoliberalism (Brass 2014, 2015; Doecke 2024; Moffett 1981; Parr et al. 2021). This pervasive influence has reshaped the content and practice of English, including the subject's ability to foster empathy (Smagorinsky 2024). As neoliberalism emerges as the grand narrative of our present (Monbiot and Hutchison 2024), English educators are left grappling with fundamental questions: What are we to do with school English in a neoliberal age? How can we resist and transgress the neoliberal turn? What alternative narratives are possible for producing different futures?

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Simultaneous to this challenge, the field has had to contend with the Sisyphean task of becoming digital. The digitisation of schooling, evidenced through the embrace of metrics and the datafication of learning, has transferred authority to digital platforms and algorithms while deprofessionalising teachers (Anderson 2022). The ubiquity of digital technologies in schools has also led to calls for their integration into English curricula, often framed as a means to make the subject more contemporary, increase student engagement, and align with learners' interests. Not to be overlooked, concerns about young people's digital and online activities have resulted in new expectations that English teachers will resolve the digital literacy challenges of our times, rather than legislating that technology companies are required to create safe online spaces. The negative externalities of the faith in free markets are borne by teachers required to carry an unmanageable burden.

We need a narrative that breaks from the obsession with unbridled competition, performance and individualism that characterise contemporary education, and can address our complex relationships with the digital world.

This paper draws on Han's (2024) theorisation of narrative to argue that a postdigital orientation to English offers a productive frame for resisting the totalising effect of neoliberal structures while also engaging meaningfully and critically with the digital. It begins with an introduction to Han's theory of narration, situating current approaches to English within neoliberal forces, such as standards, accountability, workforce preparation and competition, and exploring the limitations of such frames. It then explores the rise of the postdigital concept in the humanities and education, detailing the characteristics of the concept and its emergence in the field of English education. The paper then works empirically with one English teacher's reflections on the place of the digital in English, juxtaposing their discourse in terms of neoliberal and postdigital approaches to English. The paper concludes by exploring what is gained and lost by a postdigital English.

Narratives as structuring forces

Byung-Chul Han's *The Crisis of Narration* (2024) posits a theory that emphasises narratives as crucial shapers of human experience and society. Far from mere entertainment or communication tools, Han contends that narratives serve as essential structures through which we interpret the world, form identities, and establish connections with others. These narratives provide a framework for organising experiences and ideas temporally, enabling the creation of meaning. By offering shared reference points and understandings, narratives foster social cohesion and collective action. They not only build empathy and serve as our anchor but also, significantly, produce closure.

Han conceptualises narratives as concluding forms that establish a closed order. This concluding nature, Han argues, is vital for our cognitive and emotional processing. It allows us to synthesise experiences into a meaningful whole and extract lessons or insights from them. Such closures comprise things within conceptual frameworks that make them graspable.

These closures are productive, but not always positive. For example, Han is critical of the negative effects of the structures that hold-up neoliberal narratives. These structures prevent the formation of community, turn individuals into entrepreneurs that must

compete with each other and separate individuals from one another. The performance and individualism imperatives are counter-productive to the development of social cohesion. "It does not produce a we" (Han 2024, 62).

In the realm of education, neoliberalism has emerged as the dominant, arguably inevitable, grand narrative. It has become our anchor in late modernity, a period characterised by significant social, economic, and technological shifts since the mid-twentieth century. Dardot and Laval (2014) argue that neoliberalism accelerated during the 1970s and 1980s, coinciding with the decline of modernity's grand narratives, and creating new forms of subjectivity. Peters (2012) traces the evolution of neoliberalism as a discourse to the concept of *homo economicus*, viewing humans as rational, self-interested "utility maximisers" (63) in market contexts. However, neoliberalism has expanded beyond an economic doctrine into a comprehensive rationality shaping all aspects of life.

The practices of the neoliberal English classroom are characterised by a rigid adherence to standardisation, intense accountability measures, and a narrow focus on workforce preparation and competition. In this environment, teachers often find themselves constrained by mandatory curricula and standardised assessments, limiting their professional autonomy and creativity (Comber and Nixon 2009; Wescott 2022; Wood 2014). Students are typically engaged in activities that prioritise measurable outcomes and "useful" literacy skills, with an emphasis on individual performance and competition rather than collaborative learning (Tarpey 2017). Critical literacy approaches and humanist goals, such as developing empathy (Horton 2024) or fostering meaningful connections (Choo 2014), are frequently sidelined in favour of economically driven competencies. This results in a learning environment that privileges quantifiable results over other, less tangible and harder-to-measure objectives, such as democratic and ethical education.

In the neoliberal English classroom, the rigorous standardisation of content results in a homogenised curriculum across schools. Nationally or state-mandated frameworks dictate a uniform set of texts, skills, and knowledge, leaving little room for teacher discretion or local relevance. As well as a focus on print-centric texts (see Bliss and Bacalja 2021; Jogie 2015), the literary canon is narrowed to favour works that align with prescribed learning outcomes and lend themselves to measurable assessment. Writing instruction often prioritises rigid structures and "correct" forms over creativity and individual voice (McKnight 2023). This standardisation ensures that the content delivered is virtually identical regardless of location or teacher, ostensibly promoting equality but effectively flattening diversity and producing a one-size-fits-all package, as is evident in the push towards government produced and standardised lesson plans for all teachers to follow (see Mockler and Stacey 2024)

Elsewhere, I have described the cohesion of these factors as the McDonaldisation of English (Bacalja et al. in press). This description borrows from Ritzer's (1983) use of the term "McDonaldization of society" to capture the process of rationalisation occurring across American society at the time. My use of the term highlights how rationality in English education emphasises efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control. However, rhetoric focusing on the benefits of rationalisation in English rarely addresses the irrational consequences often resulting from such supposedly rational systems.

The neoliberal narrative proves inadequate as a foundation for structuring English teaching for two primary reasons. Firstly, its focus on economic outcomes, through the emphasis on skills and individual competition, fails to address the plurality and complexity

of contemporary life. It ignores the need for experiences of schooling where collaboration is prioritised, a disposition that any observer of current world events would recognise is fundamental for resolving the seemingly intractable problems we face at the present (environmental collapse, growing social inequality, genocide, etc). A sole focus on productivity, through the preoccupation with skills, is also ahistorical and neglects the social and cultural objectives that have long been ascribed to, and embraced by, the profession – just one of which is maintaining a healthy democracy (particularly important right now given the renewed popularity of fascism (Traverso 2019)). The economic focus of a neoliberal English lacks an ethical dimension.

Secondly, its approach to the digital realm is insufficient for preparing students for a postdigital age, a period following the widespread adoption and integration of digital technologies, where the novelty and disruptive nature of such texts have become normalised. English education informed by neoliberal logics has no interest in critical orientations to the digital. It limits its scope to learning objectives that can be demonstrated on standardised measures and which meet the needs of business. As Monbiot notes:

> One of capitalism's greatest successes is to shut down our imaginations. With the help of its favoured tools – neoliberalism and fascism – it persuades us that "there is no alternative". Our first task is to re-ignite our moral imaginations and name our alternatives. (2025)

Postdigital theory offers English educators a narrative that neither denies our inescapable entanglement with the digital, nor succumbs to those discourses that sell the digital as a solution to current problems in education (Selwyn 2016).

The postdigital turn

The concept of "postdigital" has emerged as a critical lens for examining the complex relationships between technology, culture, and society. For some, the "post" in postdigital signifies a period after the initial upheaval caused by computerisation and global digital networks (Cramer 2015), while for others, the post is less a chronological marker and instead a reference to a state of critical reflection on the digital era (Peters and Besley 2019). As Jandrić (2023) notes, the term's origins can be traced back to the early 2000s, evolving through two distinct phases: Postdigital Arts and Humanities, and Postdigital Science and Education. The first phase marked a shift away from the initial fascination with digital technologies, incorporating disenchantment and critique of the digital age. The second phase focused more on the concept's application in education, emphasising the analysis of political economy and the relationship between educational technology and learning.

The postdigital turn represents a significant shift in how we perceive and interact with digital technologies. It acknowledges that we have entered a postdigital age where the digital is so deeply embedded in our daily lives that it has become unremarkable (Lacković, Olteanu, and Campbell 2024). This turn moves beyond the simplistic binaries of digital versus analogue, online versus offline, or virtual versus real. Instead, it recognises the hybrid nature of our experiences, where the digital and physical are inextricably intertwined (Gourlay 2023). The postdigital age is characterised by a more nuanced understanding of technology's role in society, rejecting technological determinism and embracing a more contextual and critical approach.

The rejection of techno-determinism is an important feature of the postdigital perspective, one which seeks to respond to those who view technology as an autonomous force driving social change in a linear, predetermined manner (Jandrić and Knox 2022). Both the utopian hype surrounding technology's emancipatory potential and the dystopian fears of its dehumanising impacts stem from this deterministic thinking. Instead, the postdigital foregrounds how technologies are always already entangled within complex socio-technical assemblages (Fawns 2019), co-shaping and being co-shaped by the cultural, political, economic, and environmental contexts they emerge from and operate within. The concept of entanglement highlights the profound interdependencies between human and non-human actors (see Barad 2007), where agency and meaning-making are distributed across networks rather than residing in any single locus of control. Through this lens, digital technologies cannot be viewed as discrete, stable objects imposed unilaterally onto social spheres. Their design, functionalities, and implications are tied to the wider material-discursive arrangements they are imbricated within.

Crucially, the postdigital challenges the notion of the digital as a grand narrative of our time. It offers what Peters and Besley (2019) refer to as a "critique of digital reason" (p. 30), and the development of a critical attitude that inquires into the digital world. This critique examines the fundamental nature of digitality itself, its underlying theoretical frameworks, and its widespread consequences across domains. It questions the assumption of "digitalism" - the idea that all phenomena can be fully comprehended and translated into digital terms without loss of meaning.

English education scholars have long grappled with the relationship between school English and the digital, their perspectives evolving alongside technological advancements. In the 1980s, Moffett (1981) explored the instructional potential of video cassettes and laser discs, emphasising the importance of integration to avoid passive consumption, while Moore (1986) drew parallels between computers and books as communication tools, highlighting the programmer-user relationship. As digital technologies proliferated, Kress (1995) identified their profound impact on social relations, authorship, cultural reproduction, and the broader semiotic landscape. Goodwyn (2000) advocated for an innovative curriculum to address the "new order" brought by the computer age. Buckingham's work (Buckingham 2006, 2013) emphasised developing critical approaches to digital media as a prerequisite for effective learning. Green and Beavis (2013) envisioned an English education fostering powerful literacy in the digital age, recognising media use as embodied social practice. More recent scholarship has further expanded these ideas: Ehret, Hollett, and Jocius (2016) explored more-than-human entanglements in youth media making, moving away from representational logics. Mirra, Morrell, and Filipiak (2018) theorised four types of critical digital engagement, encompassing consumption, production, distribution, and invention. McLean Davies et al. (2020) examined the unique character of on-screen reading, while LeBlanc et al. (2023) addressed concerns about data privacy and surveillance in digital platforms. Stornaiuolo et al. (2023) conceptualised writing instruction in terms of new learning ecologies entangled with AI technologies.

This brief and inevitably incomplete sojourn into historical efforts to theorise the digital/English relationship reveals that perspectives have evolved towards nuanced, ecological, and entangled understandings of digital technologies in English education. Explicit engagement with postdigital frameworks remains largely unexplored,

suggesting a fertile area for further theoretical development. While postdigital literacies represent a burgeoning field (Bhatt 2023; Campbell and Olteanu 2024), English education has been far less enthused by the postdigital. The explicit use of postdigital theory to theorise English remains novel. Some have used the term to write about English teaching as being in a current "postdigital" state or condition (Bax, Kroon, and Spotti 2024; Spiegel 2021). Others use the term descriptively, to refer to specific kinds of "postdigital" practice, for example, postdigital stylistics (O'Halloran 2022) or postdigital literary literacies (McLean Davies et al. 2020). Those working most closely with the postdigital as a perspective for reframing English education see it as an analytical tool or perspective that reorients how we make sense of "things" in English, be they digital writing platforms (Stornaiuolo et al. 2024), videogames (Koutsogiannis and Adampa 2022), or play (Pettersen and Ehret 2024). In my recent work (see Bacalja 2025b), I have sought to explore the possible rise of a postdigital English through analysis of iterations of New Zealand English curricula, differentiating between key knowledge and skills that align with features of predigital, digital and post digital English.

For English teaching, a postdigital lens offers valuable insights and approaches. It encourages educators to move beyond viewing digital technologies as mere tools or platforms, instead interrogating their broader socio-cultural and political implications. In a postdigital English classroom, students might engage with a diverse range of texts that blur the boundaries between digital and analogue, such as:

- Transmedia narratives that span multiple platforms and formats
- Digital poetry that incorporates interactive elements and algorithmic generation
- Social media threads and memes as forms of contemporary storytelling and rhetoric
- Augmented reality literature that merges physical books with digital overlays

Activities in such a classroom could include:

- Collaborative writing projects using real-time editing tools, exploring the changing nature of authorship
- Critical analysis of AI-generated texts alongside human-authored works, examining issues of creativity and authenticity
- Creating and curating digital archives of local stories, investigating the intersection of technology, identity, and community
- Developing "choose your own adventure" stories using hypertext, exploring non-linear narratives and reader agency

In this postdigital English classroom, the focus shifts from merely using technology to critically engaging with it, fostering students' ability to navigate and critique the complex, technology-infused world they inhabit. The goal is not just digital literacy, but a deeper understanding of how the digital and the traditional are inextricably intertwined in contemporary communication and cultural production. By adopting a postdigital mindset, English teachers would approach technologies as already entangled with existing systems of power, cultural values, and societal structures, and understand their use in terms of both computational racial capitalism (Robinson 2023) and in terms of contingent

affordances (Gaver 1991). This could manifest in activities such as analysing the racial and cultural biases in AI language models or exploring how digital platforms shape and are shaped by users' linguistic practices.

Suffice to say, that English studies scholars are yet to engage with the postdigital as a structuring force with the potential to construct a narrative for organising meanings within our field. It is to this goal that the empirical basis of the rest of this article is oriented.

A case study of competing narratives

To explore the contingency of postdigital English as a frame for structuring the subject, I return to a study with Australian English teachers from 2019. Just prior to the outbreak of COVID19, I began a research project exploring English teachers' perspectives towards the study of digital texts in English. The aim was to understand how teachers from a range of contexts conceptualised the capacity of the subject to integrate the digitally mediated textual world. The project had human ethics approval from the lead researcher's Human Ethics Sub-committee (project id:1851728.1). Informed consent was obtained through provision of a plain language statement and a signed consent form. Unfortunately, numerous interruptions limited the data collection and the project was abandoned. However, dialogue with one participant was particularly salient and I return to this data here with a new line of inquiry.

Claire (a pseudonym) was a highly experienced English teacher working in Melbourne, Australia, who at the time of the interview had taught for almost 30 years. Her area of specialisation was secondary English and literature teaching, and she had served as the school's English Coordinator for over 5 years. She had extensive experience teaching and assessing the high-stakes final year examinations of senior students and had worked collaboratively in clusters of schools focused on academic achievement in English. The vast majority of her teaching experience was in her current school, an elite girls' single-sex school in one of the wealthiest suburbs of Melbourne. The school was in constant competition with neighbouring independent girls' schools for enrolments and thus relied on the marketing of the high achievement of its students as a means of attracting aspirational high-income families. Claire's "case" is not intended to produce universalising claims about English-digital relations. Rather it offers an example of the complex entanglements between phenomena. These entanglements, as Barad (2007) reminds us, are not generic or universal "coproductions" (x), but rather highly specific configurations, shaped by particular contexts, histories, and material conditions.

Themes for analysis were developed *a priori*, drawing on previous conceptual work exploring how changes to New Zealand English curricula could be understood in terms of predigital, digital and postdigital orientations to English (see Bacalja 2025b). In that analysis, a predigital English was conceptualised as focussed primarily on traditional literary texts and print-centric literacy and was noteworthy for the absence of explicit reference to digital texts or technologies. A digital English orientation highlighted digital texts and digital literacy practices alongside traditional texts, acknowledging the role of technology in English education, with a primary focus on functional skills and valuing the digital for increasing engagement and motivation. A postdigital English orientation critically examined the relationship between digital technologies and social, cultural,

and material contexts, moving beyond technological determinism and seeking to engage with the entanglements between the analogue and digital worlds. While the categories imply distinct differences between each, the boundaries are far more blurred. I utilise these orientations less as a way to represent reality and more as tools for identifying and comparing conceptual differences in the relation between English and the digital.

Neoliberal logics

Claire highlighted curriculum and assessment structures as constraints to what could be done in the English classroom. She made overt and critical references to VCAA (the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority), the educational body with authority over senior curriculum in the state, which dictated the key knowledge, skills and assessment framework within which English must be taught in the senior years (ages 17–18) in the jurisdiction within which Claire taught. When asked about the possibility of doing critical digital literacy work in English, Claire responded:

> I think that VCAA have a lot of catching up to do in that space . . . There's a huge disconnect at the senior end so we're quite limited, I feel, on what we can do. I think we do as much as we can but unfortunately we're mandated by a very traditional exam-based structure.

Elsewhere, Claire reiterated these constraints and commented on their impact on student skill development:

> We're very exam-based. We're very structured. We're playing to how well a student can memorize and recall, rather than creating a critical thinker.

The standardisation of assessment to validate performance on high stakes, timed and externally assessed tasks produced an effect where working outside of such systems seemed impossible. Not only did the high-stakes exams, whereby students demonstrate their expertise on mandated, and generally print-centric literary texts from a set-text list, dictate the constraining effect of assessment, they also limited which skills could be developed. As Claire commented, "we're time poor", and this made working outside of such structures challenging.

Claire differentiated between what was possible in the junior years (ages 13–16) and senior years (ages 17–18) of school English. She lauded the Australian Curriculum years 7–10 curriculum (ages 13–16) for the way its explicit interest in specific "capabilities, and critical and creative thinking" related to the digital. However, Claire also made clear that her school had not taken up these opportunities and largely neglected the focused study of digital texts across all years of schooling. Instead, strategic decisions were made to ensure students were best prepared, over the lifetime of their secondary English learning, for final year examinations. Teachers at Claire's school would "back-end a lot of what is stipulated in the VCAA and we'll try to bring it back to year 7–8, and make it different, and creative, and engaging, but still looking at the big focus". Thus, the neoliberal imperative to maximise performance constructed what was valuable for learning, through both obedience to external forces, and internal self-discipling.

Accountability regimes operated within Claire's school that framed notions of risk in terms of individualism and competition. The suggestion in interviewer questions that a critical digital orientation to English was a necessary response to young people's

engagement with the digital world was accepted by Claire, but then also immediately reframed as risk. These questions implied that an English education which did not give students the learning experiences necessary to be critically users of technology presented a current and future risk to those students. Claire instead saw the risk in terms of exposing the teachers and school to under-performance. "Teachers don't like risk", she said, and "I think it depends on who you've got on your staff. I think it depends on your leadership in the school, and how receptive they are to going a little bit of a different pathway and taking a risk". For the teachers, the risk was framed as both uncertainty about the knowledge needed to teach such texts (see further below), and risk in terms of teaching performance. Unlike Ohki's (2021) articulation of pedagogic risk as a necessary condition for learning, building on Vygotsky (1987) assertions that all learning should be understood as an inherently risky process, risk was framed as something to be avoided.

Neoliberal ideas such as competition and individualism have become deeply embedded in educational systems (Peters 2012), fundamentally reshaping the landscape of teaching and learning. These principles have been institutionalised through policies that emphasise standardised testing, school choice, and public declarations and comparison of performance which reframe the nature of risk in schools like Claire's. Competition with neighbouring schools for the same small selection of high-income families make measurable outcomes even more high stakes. Thus, while reframing English in terms of the postdigital might address holistic goals, like minimising the risk that comes with living, working and learning in a digitally saturated environment, the risk to the school (that it will lose enrolments due to poor relative performance), the risk to students (that they will underperform relative to peers in other schools), and the risk to parents (that their children will not be able to compete post-schooling) all serve as markers of the neoliberal focus on personal responsibility and self-improvement that make new narrative of schooling difficult to grasp.

Where the digital is accepted is in terms of the development of discrete skills deemed necessary to compete for future employment – but not for everyone. Claire was asked a number of questions about her response to teaching different specific digital technologies. When asked about the value of teaching video games in English, she responded:

> I actually think that it is such a key area for kids to be allowed to explore the parameters of, because I feel like there's a whole wealth of jobs and careers that probably are not even in existence yet, that we are probably not preparing them for very adequately.

Here, we encounter English's inescapable entanglement with the logics of market discourse and the revival of *homo economicus* (Peters 2012). For change to be deemed worthwhile, it must be measured in terms of its relationship to economic productivity. In this case, videogame play and study are valuable in so far as they contribute to future employability. This kind of thinking perpetuates neoliberalism's commodification of education (Savage 2017), which now permeates English's obligation to develop functionally and digitally literate future workers (Bacalja 2023).

Postdigital possibilities

Despite discourses of neoliberalist rhetoric throughout Claire's responses, also present were ideas about changes to English teaching that highlighted postdigital

possibilities, even if the term "postdigital" did not appear anywhere in the data. These futuring discourses have their basis in assertions about the knowledge and skills that students need to be active participants in a democracy. Reflecting on the nature of standardised assessment within English, Claire conceded that while teachers at her school did a "great job" of playing to standardised systems of externally assessed tasks, she was "not sure whether we are preparing those students adequately for post-school life and learning". The misalignment between what students need from their teachers to compete against other students in high-stakes examinations and what they need for post-schooling success was a theme throughout the data.

Rather than reject the Australian Curriculum: English's emphasis on students' developing knowledge about how digital texts "work", Claire expressed a willingness to imagine English differently. The curriculum that Claire referred to, unprompted by the interviewer, includes references to studying digital texts, taking into account digital contexts, exploring communication in digital forms, and familiarity with digital settings for writing (ACARA 2011). Instead of seeing such innovations as a threat to print-centric English, Claire praised the "capabilities and critical and creative thinking" found in the national document as moving in the right direction. She even suggested that an English elective subject could be developed at her school where such learning could take place. While this was a very small step in the direction of a postdigital orientation to English, Claire could easily have rejected such suggestions (as has become common amongst Australian politicians who have responded to the issue of youth engagement with digital media through policies that ban mobile phones in schools and laws that restrict youth access to social media).

Claire's responses to questions about the integration of specific digital technologies into English are noteworthy. When asked three separate questions about whether English education should accommodate the study of podcasts, interactive documentaries and videogames, Claire responded to all three with an emphatic "yes". Although her initial elaboration to all three responses began with references to increasing student engagement, she was also explicit about the need to use each text for critical analysis. For example, on the question of podcasts, she said: "I'd want to see a bit of depth and analysis to the podcast". She supported the study of interactive documentaries: "particularly if there's a few different elements to [the documentary], where you're getting that socio-historical-cultural context understanding". On videogames, she said that kids "should be allowed to explore the[ir] parameters". This openness to bringing the digital into English for considered study is a necessary pre-condition for postdigital attention and should not be underestimated in a field that has historically resisted movement away from the canon (Bliss and Bacalja 2021; Jogie 2015). Claire's suggestion that such a movement could begin with experimentation in an elective subject further reflects this willingness to think differently about future possibilities.

The notion that students may need knowledge and skills to navigate the digital world which they do not currently possess was also present in the way Claire spoke about English teaching in her school. Much of this rhetoric focussed on the development of functional digital literacy skills, such as accessing databases, synthesising online materials, operating plagiarism checkers, and using software suites, such as Microsoft Office. But there was also a nod towards the development of what Peters and Besley (2019) refer to

as a "critical attitude (or philosophy) that inquires into the digital world" (p. 30). When Claire spoke of what the goals of a school-based digital literacy education might be, she talked of students

> able to navigate, synthesize, and siphon their way through the mess of online resources, and media, and whatever else they're getting bombarded with. Because, I feel like while they're getting there a bit, they're not as competent in that ability to be self-critical online.

Going beyond technical skills, and looking "behind the screen", suggested an inclination that is more than instrumentalism, consistent with how postdigital theorists conceive of its pedagogic potential (see Jandrić and Knox 2022).

The emphasis on developing skills necessary to be critical users of technology also extended to Claire's reflection on her own expertise, and that of her colleagues. Claire supported the idea of bringing videogames into classrooms for study but also exclaimed "How I would do it? I have no idea". She noted that her functional digital literacy knowledge was lacking, admitting that when using digital technologies in the classroom, "the girls are a lot more au fait with that digital space than probably I am, so they're teaching me a lot, and showing me a lot". Claire acknowledged that her staff were in a similar position. "I don't think the teachers are as confident in that digital literacy space as we are in the more traditional space ... I think there's still a lot of work to be done in that [digital] space". While these discourses of digital deficit are signs of an obstacle to postdigital English teaching, they are also evidence of a reflective stance that can differentiate between different kinds of knowledge necessary to study the print and digital world. They reflect a need to develop knowledge about teaching digital texts that is important to teaching English in a postdigital age.

Discussion

Challenging the logics of neoliberalism that structure school English will not be easy. As Brass (2015) has demonstrated, this will require interrogating how educational policies mobilise ideas and practices to steer English teaching towards particular norms and ideals. Claire's account of the importance of attuning English teaching to narrowly conceived high stakes examination performances focussed on print-centric texts, in a context where schools are competing against each other for "excellence", highlights the bind that leads English teachers to self-govern, setting aside personal beliefs and commitments to think in terms of how they "value-add" and live an existence of calculation (Holloway and Brass 2018). Quite ironically, the "digital reason" that struggles to find a place for considered study in English maintains a stranglehold on the systems of measurement and evaluation through which teachers are judged and judge themselves (see Anderson 2022; Lupton 2016).

A postdigital English offers new narratives for English education which challenge neoliberal narratives and produce new forms of closures. These new closures are productive. As Han (2024) argues, new narratives allow for new forms of perception. Through the construction of English through a postdigital conceptual framework, we re-imagine how we make sense of key activities in our discipline. A predigital English might conceive of the digital as antithetical to story-telling. A digital English might sell the hype that digital

texts are superior to the non-digital. A postdigital English troubles both accounts and complicates analogue/digital boundaries in ways that reposition how we think about both print and digital texts in English.

However, as is evident in Claire's commentary on what her and her team lack, the shift to postdigital English will require asking difficult questions about the knowledge needed to have critical conversations about contemporary digital technologies. Consider Nichols and Garcia (2022) examination of digital platforms in education and the social, technical and political-economic dimensions that underpin activity on such platforms. Within the technical dimension alone, Nichols and Garcia suggest that knowledge about code, data, algorithms, interfaces, protocols and hardware is needed to understand how aspects of the digital that sit behind the screen govern how we engage with such platforms. Though such knowledge will be initially intimidating for many teachers, it is also productive, contributing to networks of relations that can be deployed to support the study of digital technologies beyond platforms.

Theorising school English from a postdigital perspective opens up possibilities, even as it challenges existing structures. While neoliberal English has prioritised easily measurable workforce skills, a postdigital reorientation encourages exploration of less-concrete but equally vital competencies such as critical thinking/literacies, digital citizenship, and ethical engagement with technology. By resisting standardisation, postdigital English creates space for diverse, context-sensitive curricula that respond to local needs and emerging digital realities. This approach enables the development of assessment methods that capture the complexity of learning processes in our hybrid analogue-digital world. Moving beyond reductive accountability metrics like test scores and performance data, postdigital English reimagines English education as responsible for producing a "we" that intentionally seeks social cohesion and community, and that might be mediated through digital technologies, without being subservient to them.

Han's theory of narration argues that theory designs an order of things, setting them in relation to each other (2024, 50). In the context of a postdigital English, this includes considering relations between print-centric literary texts and their antithesis, digital and computationally generated texts. Bringing the digital into English does not necessitate negating or denigrating print-centric texts. Part of a postdigital response to the disruption caused by our postdigital age is to highlight what Knox (2019) calls the many "continuities, histories and endurances" (p. 258) through which we can understand technology. Within such a paradigm, ways of teaching and studying technologies like podcasts, interactive documentaries and platforms will inevitably be shaped by the literary knowledge that is foundational to English studies, as I have found in my own work supporting teachers to bring videogames into English (see Bacalja 2025a). Likewise, how we approach the study of print-centric reading and writing will need to account for what we now know about how digital reading and writing practices are reshaping textual interpretation and textual production (for examples, see: Jensen, Roe, and Blikstad-Balas 2024; Murray 2018; Pianzola 2021).

Conclusion

How we theorise subject-English matters. Such theorising is not a distraction from practical classroom skills and strategies. It rather establishes the frames through which

such teaching makes sense. Postdigital theory will likely be viewed with scepticism by those who have encountered many efforts to frame English in terms of different "posts". Surely, after postmodernism, poststructuralism, posthumanism, postcolonialism, and post-critique, we are all 'post'ed out. To the contrary, the intensification of neoliberal interventions into English teaching requires us to activate as many theories as possible to question the logics that govern contemporary English education. The postdigital offers a conceptual framework that has gained traction in digital literary studies (Abblitt 2019) and digital literacies studies (Bhatt 2023). The new forms of perception that the postdigital offers English education, both in terms of our own engagement with the digital world, but also in terms of challenging neoliberal narratives, makes it worth considering the value of at least one more "post".

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