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Postdigital Education and the GenAI-Human Relation: Orientalism, Paternalism, Extractivism

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Abstract

This article argues that Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI)-human relation in postdigital education takes shape through three tendencies: orientalism, paternalism and extractivism. Orientalism renders the textures of student life (expression, hesitation, revision and attention) legible in advance; paternalism enacts care that pre-emptly student authority and extractivism treats those textures as available for yield. The first two tendencies, in the current conjuncture, increasingly operate within the ambient conditions set by the third. What each tendency shares is a structural move of presupposing, in advance, who the student is, and then organising the student's doing and knowing accordingly. Drawing on Heidegger's ontological difference, the article develops a postdigital occupational framework in which being, doing and knowing are held as a unity, and through which the who-question can be kept alive against the pressure of ontic multiplication. The article contributes to postdigital theory by naming the normative organisation at work beneath entanglement, and to postdigital research by showing how ontological difference can function as a methodological passageway across ontic phenomena and existential stakes.

Keywords Postdigital education · Ontological difference · Generative artificial intelligence · Being-doing-knowing · GenAI-human relation

Introduction

We inhabit a postdigital reality in which technology, embodiment, labour, capital and education are inextricably entangled (Jandrić et al. 2018). The postdigital can be understood as an inescapable condition in which existence unfolds, rather than as a domain one may elect to enter or leave (Friesen et al. 2025). Education today can no longer be neatly divided into the digital and the analog, because educational

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experience is always already entangled with digital, material, social and pedagogical dimensions (Fawns 2019). As Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) applications, screens, monitors and online assessment tools become woven into the everyday environments of teaching and learning, and encountered as ambient conditions, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain any fantasy of purity: ‘there is no such thing as “purely digital” dialogue or “purely analogue” dialogue’ (Jandrić et al. 2019: 163). With the entry of GenAI into education, the conditions of possibility for knowledge, trust, pedagogical judgment and democratic participation are being reconfigured (Peters and Kourkoulou 2025; Jandrić 2026; Jandrić and Forsler 2026).¹

Postdigital scholarship on postdigital humans has explored moving boundaries between embodiment, technology, injustice and transformation (Jandrić 2021; Reader 2021; Savin-Baden 2021), while scholarship on postdigital agency has emphasised distributed, relational and contested forms of action in AI-saturated environments (Reader 2023; Thomas 2024; Code 2025). These interventions are indispensable. At the same time, educational discussions of GenAI still too often stop at the level of entanglement, literacy, governance or measurable impact. What remains under-theorised is how educational GenAI relations normatively organise the student as a particular kind of postdigital being.

This article enters that conversation by arguing that, in the present conjuncture, the world increasingly appears in three ways: as something to be othered, as something to be protected through infantilisation and as something to be mined. To name these tendencies, I develop a tripartite framework of GenAI-human relation in education: orientalism, paternalism and extractivism. Read together, they show that postdigital entanglement is increasingly organised through recurrent reductions of the student into the knowable, the protectable and the extractable.

Ontological Difference as Methodological Passageway

In discussing technology in postdigital education, I take Heidegger’s (1995: 358) ‘ontological difference’, or the difference between beings and Being, as an indispensable methodological point of departure. The distinction is indispensable because it allows the analysis to hold ontic phenomena (platforms, interfaces, classroom practices) and existential stakes (modes of being-a-student) in view at once, without collapsing one into the other. What I depart from, in taking up this distinction, is ontic-only analysis, by which I mean analysis that remains at the level of identifiable entities and practices: platforms, interfaces, detection tools, policies and student

¹ In this article, I use GenAI to refer specifically to systems that produce text, images, code or other outputs in response to prompts. I use AI when the discussion concerns the broader algorithmic infrastructures in which GenAI is embedded, including learning analytics, classification systems, detection systems, predictive dashboards and the datafication of education more generally. I also retain AI where the cited literature uses this broader term, especially in discussions of AI literacy, AI-saturated environments and AI-rich pedagogical settings. The article focuses on the GenAI–human relation while situating that relation within these wider AI and data infrastructures.

behaviours. Such analysis can describe what these things are and how they function, but it does not, on its own, ask how they shape the student's way of existing within education.

Policy analysis, learning analytics and literacy frameworks do necessary descriptive and regulative work at the level of beings (e.g. mapping practices, measuring outcomes and shaping rules of legitimate use), yet they leave a further question untouched: what modes of being a student are being shaped and normalised when education is organised through these arrangements? Ontological difference holds this question open. What follows is a constructive deployment of ontological difference for the analysis of postdigital educational arrangements, rather than an exegesis of Heidegger's own thought.

Beings, for Heidegger, refer to things we can encounter, identify and speak about: computers, mobile phones, smart glasses, interfaces, datasets, policies and GenAI that appears to us across everyday infrastructures of teaching and learning. Being is not another thing among things, but the being of beings—the question of what it means for anything to be at all. This distinction is methodologically useful because it prevents the ontic and the ontological from being conflated. A dashboard, a detection tool and a GenAI chatbot are beings; the question of how educational existence is being organised through such beings is a question of Being.

A being for whom its own being is an issue can be called *Dasein*, or 'being-there' (Heidegger 1962: 81). The hyphen is important because it points to our situation in which we always already find ourselves amidst a world, entangled with others, concerns, tools and situations not of our own making. A student who opens a GenAI interface to draft an assignment does not first exist as an inner subject who then chooses to engage an object. They are already there—already in a world in which the tool, the institution and the expectations placed on them are given together, before any moment of individual choice. In a Heideggerian sense, the article's concern is not the being of GenAI itself, but the question of being in the epoch of technology, transposed into educational terms.

Feenberg's (2000) critique of Heidegger's (1977) claim that technology enframes Being is compelling. Relations between computers and language, for instance, did not simply compress human saying into signs in the way Heidegger conceptualised. People have continued to express, disclose and communicate themselves through technical media in multiple ways. What is especially interesting in Feenberg's (2000) critique is his claim that Heidegger's (1977) ontic misjudgments about technology also suggest a problem at the ontological level. In other words, if Heidegger repeatedly misreads particular technologies, this may not be a merely empirical failure sitting beneath an otherwise untouched philosophical truth; it may reveal something about the limitations of his understanding of technology more fundamentally.

Yet, as Feenberg (2000: 448) writes, 'the ontological appears in the ontic; the ontic strikes back at the ontological'. For Heidegger (2012: 314), the ontological difference is therefore less a rigid separation than a methodological 'passageway'. It 'holds Being and beings together at a distance' (Heidegger 2003: 48) while they remain 'nonetheless connected' (Heidegger 1982: 155). A useful way to understand this is to say that while technological forms may change, the question of our own existence does not disappear. If we are indeed the beings who can ask what it means

to be, then every technological age continues to disclose something about how we are in the world. Heidegger's (2008: 26) own aversion to the atomic bomb or to the hydroelectric plant on the Rhine reveals his own relation to nature, and his resistance to the 'one-track' thinking produced by the metaphysical separation of subject and object. His judgments are not external to the technologised world; they are themselves disclosures of a way of being within it.

I use ontological difference to interpret current tendencies in GenAI-human relation in education. It helps us avoid collapsing entities such as the 'student', the 'teacher' and 'GenAI' into our being-there, while also preventing us from imagining that the question of existence can be grasped by simply leaping over the ontic level. The moment our being is grasped in a too focused manner, it hardens into an object of inspection. Although Heidegger's philosophy has often been criticised for its obscurity, and although his political background rightly remains troubling, his treatment of Being and beings remains productive. Ontological difference allows us to think entities and existence together: on the ontic side, we can observe what takes place in classrooms, platforms, interfaces and policy discourses; on the ontological side, we can ask what kinds of ways of being are being enacted, normalised and concealed through these educational arrangements. This double attention is especially urgent in the postdigital condition, in which educational life unfolds through entanglements that ontic description alone cannot adequately disclose.

Recent scholarship has taken up this situation primarily by asking what becomes of the human under postdigital conditions. The postdigital condition, as Jandrić et al. (2018) and Fawns (2019) have described it, is itself an ontological situation rather than a technical one. It is not that digital tools have been added to a pre-existing educational world, but that the conditions under which educational existence unfolds have been transformed at a more fundamental level. It is against this background that Savin-Baden (2021: 3) asks 'what are postdigital humans?', framing the challenge as recognising how technologies such as algorithms, machine learning and facial recognition can foster injustice while transforming the conditions of human life. Jandrić (2021) approaches the question evolutionarily, examining what it means for humans to take their own transformation in hand through technological entanglement. Reader (2021) explores how algorithmic imagination reshapes the boundaries of human cognition, asking whether the human remains a coherent subject under conditions of pervasive digital mediation. These accounts have significantly expanded how postdigital scholarship understands human transformation under conditions of technological entanglement.

These accounts have opened a question that their own framework does not fully settle. In asking what postdigital humans are becoming, they necessarily engage beings; the transformed, hybridised, unjustly configured humans that technology produces. This is indispensable work. Yet Heidegger's (1995) distinction between beings and Being suggests that a further question remains: not what kind of being the human is becoming, but what it means to be at all for the being undergoing that becoming.

Dasein, in Heidegger's (1962) analytic, is not the human as a natural or social kind; it is the being for whom its own being is an issue, the being that can ask what it means to be. The latter question belongs to the order of beings; the former belongs

to the question of Being. To say this is not to criticise the postdigital human literature for failing to do something it was not attempting to do. It is to identify an opening that the ontological difference as methodology is positioned to hold. If we wish to understand not only what is happening to students in postdigital educational environments, but who is undergoing that happening—who is the being whose existence is at stake in the GenAI encounter—then the ontic analysis of the postdigital human must be held open to a question it cannot answer from within its own terms.

The methodological wager of this article, then, is that attending to both levels simultaneously—the ontic and the ontological without collapsing one into the other—allows us to read postdigital education as something more than a policy problem or a pedagogical challenge. The wager is against the sufficiency of ontic analysis alone, however sophisticated. It allows us to read it as a disclosure of how we currently understand ourselves, others and the world we share. The three tendencies examined in what follows—orientalism, paternalism and extractivism—are offered in that spirit: read across the ontological difference, they reveal something about the existential situation of education in the present conjuncture.

Before turning to these three tendencies, one further clarification about their relation is in order. Orientalism and paternalism, as developed in what follows, name distinct logics of relation with their own histories and conceptual vocabularies. Extractivism, in its present configuration, has increasingly become the ambient condition within which the other two operate. The three are not three separate logics of equal weight, nor three sequential stages of a single process. They are distinct tendencies that, in the postdigital conjuncture, are increasingly being reorganised around the logic of yield. The ‘Extractive Ways of Being in the World’ section returns to this asymmetry directly.

Orientalist Ways of Ordering the World

The use of orientalism in this article requires careful justification, since the concept has a historically specific meaning in Said’s (1979) original analysis and a wider structural application in subsequent scholarship. The justification offered rests on a distinction internal to Said’s own account. Alongside the historically specific regime through which European-Atlantic power constituted the Orient as an object of knowledge and rule, Said identifies orientalism as ‘a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statement about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it’ (1979: 3). This is not merely a description of nineteenth-century area studies. It is a claim about a form: a structure in which one side is authorised to know, classify and improve, while the other is constituted in advance as that which is to be known, classified and improved. Said himself traces this form back to Aeschylus (1979: 21), who makes clear that its identification is not tied exclusively to the colonial archive from which it was named.

This structural dimension of Said’s concept has been carried forward, beyond the historical geography of European colonialism, by scholars whose engagement with orientalism is analytic rather than illustrative. Pálsson (1996), working in environmental anthropology, extended the concept to human-environmental

relations, arguing that orientalism names a stance of mastery in which the world is approached as available for inscription and technical management. More recent scholarship has tracked the same structure into algorithmic systems. Noble (2018) demonstrates it in the classification of women of colour as hypersexualised objects of knowledge; Benjamin (2019) traces it through the New Jim Code, where colonial classificatory logics are encoded into systems presented as post-racial; Couldry and Mejias (2019) name it as data colonialism, arguing that the appropriation of human life through data relations is not analogous to colonialism but its contemporary form. The transfer from Said (1979) through Pálsson (1996) to these analyses of algorithmic systems is not a series of metaphorical borrowings but a cumulative tracking of the same form across domains.

Postdigital education is a further site of this continuity. Algorithmic systems in education, including but not limited to GenAI, increasingly position students and educational life as that which must be made legible, classifiable and improvable. This is not to argue that the educational AI encounter reproduces nineteenth-century orientalism, nor that students stand in the position colonised peoples have historically occupied. It is to argue that the structural logic Said (1979) identified—and that subsequent scholars have tracked into algorithmic systems—also shapes how postdigital education encounters the student. Readers working within decolonial traditions may reasonably ask whether orientalism is the most precise term for these tendencies, or whether a vocabulary of algorithmic colonialism or classificatory violence would serve better.

Within the triadic framework developed in this article, orientalism does specific work these adjacent terms do not. It names not the extractive capture of resources, which is the work of extractivism (developed in *Extractive Ways of Being in the World*), nor the administration of injury, which classificatory violence partly but not wholly names, but the epistemic posture through which the student is rendered knowable before being encountered. This is the posture Said's (1979) analysis isolates. Retaining the term is therefore not a refusal of decolonial critique but a participation in it. The scholars cited above themselves work within decolonial traditions while continuing to use the vocabulary of colonial and orientalist structure, precisely because these terms name continuities that other vocabularies obscure.

In the postdigital context, an orientalist tendency manifests as the assumption that educational life must be made legible before it can be properly engaged. The vocabulary through which this assumption operates—detection, alignment, transparency, personalisation, intervention—signals a prior commitment to rendering before encountering (Williamson et al. 2023). Educational management, in Pálsson's (1996: 68) expression, becomes 'simply a technical enterprise': the rational application of models, metrics and predictive systems to what are, fundamentally, ambiguous human situations. Specific consequences of this tendency have been documented: AI systems reproduce narrow standards for fat bodies (Sobey 2025), generate aesthetically estranged images (Smith and Southerton 2025), and perpetuate racial classifications in their outputs (Ismail 2025). These are not isolated failures of representation. They are symptoms of a prior ontological stance in which the world must be submitted to intelligence before it can appear at all.

The category of *student* is where this tendency becomes educationally consequential. Studenthood is not a natural kind waiting to be neutrally described; it is already shaped by institutional expectations, hidden curricula and norms of who counts as a proper participant in higher education. Research on the ideal student shows how universities silently organise standards of behaviour and self-presentation (Koutsouris et al. 2021), while work on learning analytics demonstrates how students are rendered as behavioural patterns, measurable risks and targets of intervention (Guzmán-Valenzuela et al. 2021). What AI adds to this existing apparatus is a more comprehensive regime of legibility: a student who can be profiled, benchmarked, monitored and differentiated in advance. If Noble (2018) is right that algorithmic classification constitutes its objects through structural authority rather than individual error, and if Benjamin (2019) is right that ostensibly neutral technical infrastructures inherit and encode colonial classificatory logics, then the datafication of education is not an exception to these dynamics but their pedagogical extension (Nemorin 2024; Traxler and Jandrić 2025).

A structural consequence is that suspicion toward GenAI-generated distortions tends to travel back to students themselves (Jandrić 2026). When institutions worry about fabricated or machine-like writing, students are drawn into regimes of verification. AI detection tools have been shown to misclassify non-native English writing as AI-generated, rendering some students suspicious for the sole reason that their writing does not approximate the dominant linguistic norm (Liang et al. 2023). The irony Pálsson (1996) associates with the orientalist paradigm applies directly here: the more precisely the system promises to know students, the more it flattens the very situatedness it claims to be protecting. Orientalism in education does not invent an East. It instals, at the level of institutional practice, the structural position of the knowable other—and then fills that position with the student.

Spanning the ontological difference, the question is therefore not whether particular systems represent students accurately or inaccurately. At the ontic level, one finds systems, outputs and classifications; at the ontological level, one finds a way of being in the world that seeks distance, legibility and mastery over involvement. Postdigital education increasingly places students into the structural position of that which must be made visible, known and improved from elsewhere.

Paternalist Ways of Protecting the World

The paternalistic paradigm shares, as Pálsson (1996) noted, several of the modernist assumptions of orientalism; it, too, presupposes human mastery and a distinction between those authorised to interpret and those whose conduct is interpreted. What distinguishes paternalism from orientalism is its moral register. Where orientalism organises relations through the authority to know, paternalism organises them through the authority to care. In educational terms, its vocabulary gathers around protection: safeguarding critical thinking, preserving independent judgement, maintaining language ability and preparing students for a world reshaped by AI. These are genuine concerns. They also reproduce a particular metaphysics of the student. Paternalism emerges where care takes the form of pre-empting student authority

and defining the conditions of proper intellectual conduct in advance. The care and responsibility that accompany such forms remain, for this article, indispensable to education.

In the postdigital condition, where GenAI saturates reading, writing, planning, communication and search, paternalism rarely takes the form of simple exclusion. Institutional responses increasingly combine regulation with the productive integration of GenAI, seeking guided proximity rather than prohibition (McDonald et al. 2025; Jandrić 2026). The stance of guided proximity itself illustrates the structure identified above: it presupposes, before any encounter, that the student requires guidance in deciding how to live with GenAI, and that the shape of legitimate guidance is something the institution already knows. Care is present, and so is responsibility; what is also present is the pre-emption.

Critical GenAI literacy frameworks exemplify this orientation: they aim at situated, reflective and ethically informed engagement (Rapanta et al. 2025), positioning the student as someone who needs cultivated guidance in order to remain fully present as a learner. Studies of teachers meanwhile report an insistence on professional judgement in AI-rich environments, particularly around creativity, assessment, and the human dimension of instruction (Moylan et al. 2024). The paternalistic stance is thus not simply institutional conservatism. It emerges from a postdigital situation in which there is no stable outside from which educational life can be secured, and anxiety takes the form of expert care.

The anxieties are empirically substantiated. Students report concerns about originality, misinformation, and future employability under conditions of rapid GenAI change (Chan 2024; Qu and Wang 2025). Systematic review evidence links overreliance on AI dialogue systems to diminished critical thinking, analytical reasoning and motivation (Zhai et al. 2024). Meta-analytic findings suggest that GenAI can improve language performance, but the conditions under which it does so (GenAI literacy, task planning, active teacher involvement, human-led assessment) are precisely the conditions that require sustained pedagogical presence (Li et al. 2026). This does not disclose a simple causal chain from GenAI use to cognitive damage, but a structural dependency. The paternalistic impulse is sustained by real risks, and those risks are themselves products of the same postdigital condition that makes paternalism seem necessary.

Paternalism tends to figure critical thinking, authentic voice and linguistic competence as vulnerable possessions lodged inside the student, awaiting protection from automation and convenient substitution. In Pálsson's (1996: 66) terms, this is 'balanced reciprocity': humans are still masters, but they now bear responsibility toward what they have set apart as fragile. Writing and language education make this dynamic visible. Classroom interventions have asked students to critique GenAI-generated papers to ensure efficiency does not displace evaluation (Van Niekerk et al. 2024). What emerges from such practices is a pedagogy of guardianship—the teacher standing beside the student as custodian of revision, tone and argument. Crucially, this relation springs from care. The care does not dissolve the hierarchy; it softens it.

Across ontological difference, the significance of paternalism exceeds particular policies or teaching strategies. At the ontic level, one finds GenAI literacy modules,

permitted-use statements, guided feedback and human-centred assessment (Tian and Zhang 2025). At the ontological level, education increasingly resembles what Pálsson (1996: 70) calls a ‘protective contract’: a structure in which students appear as beings at risk of losing their judgement and presence to frictionless assistance, and educators occupy the position of those who know, in advance, how much assistance is too much. Paternalism does not abandon the orientalist logic; it surrounds it with concern.

Extractive Ways of Being in the World

Orientalism and paternalism name distinct logics with their own histories and vocabularies: orientalism an epistemic posture through which the student is rendered knowable in advance, paternalism a moral-pedagogical posture through which the student is cared for from above. Extractivism operates at a different level; it is an ambient condition within which orientalism and paternalism are being reorganised. Legibility produced by orientalist rendering and guidance produced by paternalist protection both tend to feed into a relation in which student life (expression, hesitation, revision, attention) is treated as yielding. Extractivism has come to function as the horizon against which orientalism and paternalism do their work.

Pálsson (1996) does not name extractivism directly; his third paradigm is communalism, which he proposes as a way of moving beyond orientalism and paternalism toward participation and generalised reciprocity. I retain this third position as a critical marker, but I replace communalism with extractivism—not as a normative endpoint, but as a diagnostic category for what the postdigital GenAI-human relation in education currently enacts. Where orientalism establishes a structure of knowing-at-a-distance and paternalism establishes one of protection-from-above, extractivism establishes a relation of yield: the world appears as that from which something can continuously be drawn out.

Ingold’s (2003: 269) observation that modern technology ‘places human society and its interests outside’ the physical world and equips it to control what it has thereby set before it names the basic posture. What is added in the context of postdigital education is the extension of this posture to the interior of educational life itself—not only to natural resources or data in the abstract, but to expression, hesitation, revision, attention and interaction. Heidegger’s concept of enframing is useful here. In *The Question Concerning Technology*, he describes it as the gathering together of a setting-upon that ‘orders the actual as standing-reserve’ (Heidegger 1977: 20): beings no longer stand over against us as objects but arrive already interpreted through their availability for unlocking, storing and redeployment. The thing does not disappear; it is encountered, in advance, as a resource awaiting conversion. Merleau-Ponty (1969: 252) sharpens the existential stakes of this when he observes that ‘science manipulates things and gives up living in them’—a thinning of inhabitation in which the world ceases to be that within which one is bodily implicated and becomes a field for operation.

In postdigital education, this operative posture has been extensively documented under the frame of data colonialism. Couldry and Mejjias (2019) describe

data colonialism as the appropriation of human life through data relations, treating human activity as raw material for capital accumulation. Applied to education, this means that the movements of learning (drafting, revising, searching, hesitating, responding) become available for capture and translation into value-bearing traces: engagement metrics, performance predictions, employability narratives, promptable language. When learning is operationalised through optimisation logics, knowledge contracts toward what can be processed and predicted, and what exceeds those logics becomes, from the system's point of view, noise.

The concern is therefore not exhausted by inaccurate outputs, weak policy or student overdependence. Those remain serious at the ontic level. At the ontological level, Being is disclosed here through a relation of extraction. Students begin to appear as reservoirs of potential output, language as a promptable resource, educational time as a site of constant conversion. Anxiety persists in such a world because nothing is simply allowed to be. Presence is shadowed by demand. Pálsson (1996) associates the orientalist paradigm with the metaphor of irony—the masters who, by their own practices, undermine the very mastery they assert.

In extractivism, something more than irony is at work: the depletion is not incidental but structural, built into the relation itself. Extractivism, in this sense, names a way of being in the world before it names a technical practice. It is the horizon within which orientalist rendering and paternalist protection increasingly find their meaning, and postdigital education needs to adequately reckon with this horizon.

A Postdigital Occupational Framework

Orientalism, paternalism and extractivism share a structural feature that has not yet been made fully explicit. Whether the student is ordered into legibility, sheltered within a protective curriculum or approached as a reservoir of yielding potential, an important question remains: Who is the student? This question invites answers about kind, category and possession. The student becomes a type: a learner with this profile, this language background, this dependency pattern, this level of AI literacy. Ontic investigation proceeds by sorting beings, and the richness of its methods (analytics dashboards, literacy surveys, systematic reviews and so on) lies in its capacity to render such sorting ever more fine-grained. Yet no accumulation of what-answers resolves the who-question, because the who-question is not a question about kind at all. It is, as Heidegger (1962: 150) illuminates, a question about the being for whom being itself is an issue: 'the question of the "who" is answered in terms of the "I" itself, the "subject", the "self". These answers remain superficial unless they are pursued at the level of existence rather than properties.

What-questions are not themselves illegitimate. Education cannot function without asking what students need, what they know, what they can do, what support their situations call for. The concern here is the what-questions' monopolisation of educational understanding, or the condition in which the proliferation of ontic answers comes to stand for engagement with the who-question altogether. The issue is one of proportion and relation. What-questions do necessary work when they remain answerable to the who-question; they become reductive when the who-question

disappears behind them. This pressure intensifies in the postdigital condition, where algorithmic mediation multiplies ontic answers faster than the who-question can be held open. Orientalism, paternalism and extractivism are all forms of this eclipse: they approach the student through the what-question while remaining structurally indifferent to the existential question.

A response requires holding together two intellectual lineages that have often been treated as incompatible: Heidegger's existential analytic and Dewey's pragmatist account of occupation. For Dewey (1916), an occupation is a sustained form of activity through which a person participates in social life (teaching, crafting, caring, studying) and through which they are formed as the kind of person they are becoming. It is more than a job title; it is a mode of continuous engagement with a world. Drawing on Quay's (2013, 2015) sustained reading of Dewey through Heidegger, I take up his argument that while Dewey's (1938) pragmatism is ontic in its practical dimension, his account of experience, as the movement through which self and world are mutually constituted, already operates at a pre-ontological register.

Dewey's thought converges with Heidegger's being-in-the-world at a pre-ontological register. The hyphens in being-in-the-world refuse to separate the person from the world they find themselves in, or from the concerns, others and tools with which they are already involved. Self, world and involvement are given together, or not at all (see Heidegger 1962). This is what allows Dewey's (1916) concept of occupation to do ontological work that Heidegger's analytic demands, even though Dewey himself did not set out to write ontology.

This convergence opens a way of understanding being-a-student that refuses to separate what a student is from what they do and what they know. Quay (2015: 20) formulates this as a single claim: 'an occupation is all three: who, how, what—being, doing and knowing'. While ontic thinking tends to see doing, knowing and being as separable components, it frequently presupposes a fixed, institutionalised category of being, the normative student, which then dictates what a student ought to do and know (Quay et al. 2022). Being-a-student—or more specifically, being-a-university-student-in-a-postdigital-world—is one such occupation. It carries its own modes of doing: reading, writing, arguing, revising, seeking feedback, navigating deadlines and engaging peers. It carries its own modes of knowing: disciplinary content, academic conventions, institutional expectations and the tacit capacities that allow one to function as a participant in intellectual life. And it discloses a distinctive way of being: one who is not yet formed in a final sense, who exists in the mode of possibility, who is always already oriented toward a future that education is supposed to help open.

This account of occupation as being-doing-knowing enters a conversation that postdigital scholarship has been developing through the concept of agency. Recent work has reconceived agency in postdigital conditions as distributed and ethically contested (Thomas 2024), as relational and multidimensional within algorithmically mediated learning environments (Code 2025), and as a question about what remains of distinctively human authorship when epistemic processes are increasingly mediated by algorithmic systems (Reader 2023). These frameworks examine how agency is distributed, mediated and re-constituted across sociotechnical networks—who acts, with what affordances, under what constraints.

Occupation as being-doing-knowing asks a different and prior question. Before we ask how agency is distributed among a student, a GenAI chatbot, a learning analytics dashboard and an assignment brief, there is the question of what kind of existence is underway when a student is writing an essay at all—what counts as the doing, what counts as the knowing and who is the being for whom these matter. Occupation is where the ontic and the ontological meet. At the ontic level, it can be described as reading, writing, revising, consulting and submitting; at the ontological level, it is the place where a student's mode of being-in-the-world is disclosed. Postdigital educational thought requires both registers, and occupation is what holds them together.

With this framework in place, the three tendencies examined earlier come into sharper view. Each proceeds by presupposing, in advance, what a student is, and then organising the student's doing and knowing accordingly. The orientalist presupposition is of a student whose behaviours and patterns are available for legibility from a knowing position elsewhere. The paternalist presupposition is of a student who cannot yet recognise the risks of the technologies they use and therefore requires guided formation. The extractive presupposition is of a student whose expression, attention and revision are resources that yield value when sufficiently captured. The same structure operates, in a more familiar form, through identity labels that educational research and practice routinely attach to students.

International students, Confucian learners, digital natives... each label gathers a set of expected behaviours, capacities and needs, and then organises pedagogical attention around those expectations. These presuppositions may have had empirical motivations at some point, but their effect, once institutionalised, is to fix the being of the student before any actual encounter, so that doing and knowing can be organised to fit the label. Occupation refuses this separability. A presupposed being that dictates what students ought to do and know often fails to align with the being that the student experiences themselves to be. This misalignment is not a minor friction; it is where educational life is lost.

Consider a student who is encouraged to use GenAI for brainstorming but is then told not to use it when writing the essay itself. From the institution's side, the logic is clear: brainstorming is preparatory, writing is assessable. From the student's side, the doing is fractured. The same tool is at once invited and forbidden, and no account is given of why this inconsistency does not unsettle the occupation of being-a-student itself. Students know that their future employment will involve AI; they know that their current doing and their anticipated doing are continuous; they know that the coherence between who they are becoming and what they are being asked to do matters. When institutional arrangements treat doing as something to be managed in pieces—permitted here, forbidden there, detected elsewhere—the occupation does not hold together. Institutional concerns are not unfounded, yet they result in a framework built on ontological difference.

Writing, in academic life, has never been merely a skill for transcribing preformed thought (Jandrić and Forsler 2026). It is a mode of doing through which knowing is constituted and the self is disclosed. When Merleau-Ponty (1969) observes that science manipulates things and ceases to live in them, he identifies a relation to doing that no longer inhabits what it does. Something similar can be

said of the student who hands the writing to GenAI: the bodily, temporal and cognitively effortful process through which a thinker is formed and reformed is no longer inhabited in the same way (Jandrić 2026; Traxler and Jandrić 2026). If the self is, as Dewey (1916: 408) puts it, ‘something in continuous formation through choice of action’, then such reorganisation of action is a reorganisation of self-formation.

In educational terms, this means taking postdigital existence as more than entanglement. Entanglement names the fact that humans and technologies are already intertwined before any individual choice is made. But naming the entanglement is not the same as asking what kind of existence is being made possible or foreclosed within entanglement. The postdigital condition is not a corruption of some prior pure educational state; it is a genuine transformation in the conditions under which being-a-student unfolds (Fawns 2019; Jandrić et al. 2018). The present framework insists on a further question: What forms of being-doing-knowing are currently being organised through this entanglement, whose presuppositions are shaping that organisation, and whose lived occupations are breaking down along the way?

This is an argument for taking the who-question seriously. If we teach without attending to who education is addressing, we risk a situation in which postdigital education is technically sophisticated and ontologically thin. The student appears in dashboards, dependency metrics and literacy frameworks, but does not appear as the being for whom education matters in the mode of their own existence.

Keeping the who-question alive does not translate into a method, and this article will not provide one. It does, however, indicate where the question’s pressure falls. In assessment, it falls on tasks where integrity depends on student’s temporal unfolding rather than on verifiable output alone. In pedagogy, it falls on practices that protect student’s opacity (irreducibility to any pre-formed profile) against the steady institutional pull toward legibility. In the design of educational AI, it falls on what the system answers in advance on the student’s behalf, and on what it leaves open for the student to work through. These are some important sites where ontological difference makes itself felt.

Conclusion

This article argues that GenAI-human relation in postdigital education is normatively organised through three recurrent reductions of the student: into the knowable, the protectable and the extractable. These reductions share a structural move of presupposing in advance who the student is and then organising the student’s doing and knowing accordingly. The same move operates in a more familiar form through identity labels routinely attached to students in educational research and practice. Such presuppositions consistently fail the lived occupation of being-a-student—the coherence of being, doing and knowing.

Postdigital occupational framework developed in this article implies that this coherence is itself a criterion for whether educational arrangements are doing educational work. Its methodological contribution adds an ontological register to the conversation about postdigital research developed by Jandrić et al. (2023), Thompson (2023), Pallitt and Kramm (2023) and Tzirides et al. (2023). Postdigital inquiry

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