Meeting in the Forest: Education in a Posthuman Era

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the current worldwide growth of forest school practice in education settings via the related concepts of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism. Initially I use the popular nature documentary My Octopus Teacher to illustrate Braidotti’s notion of a posthuman conceptual convergence. I use this film to exemplify some posthuman concepts (the gradual relationship-building and reframing between human and non-human, the reversal or levelling of power hierarchies and the more-than-human healing potential of nature); notions which I then apply to the current growth of forest school programmes. Focusing particularly on the intriguing status of forest schools within the UK education system, I suggest that an oppressive, outcomes-driven framework may be a motivating force behind teachers’ desire to escape into the forest. I then use post-anthropocentric concepts to consider forest school as a positively disruptive force for changing the way we think about learning. Ultimately, I argue for the radical potential of forest schools to offer new posthuman perspectives and to disrupt the limiting boundaries of existing education systems.

Keywords: Children, forest school, posthumanism, post-anthropocentrism, pedagogy

A Moment of Convergence

“People ask, “Why are you going to the same place every day? ” But that’s when you see the subtle differences. And that’s when you get to know the wild.”

(Ehrlich & Reed, 2020, n.p.)

This quote is taken from a recent nature documentary about a man and an octopus, My Octopus Teacher¹ (Ehrlich & Reed, 2020). It is a film extremely modest in scope, certainly by any of the normal rules of Oscar-winning nature blockbusters. It tracks the year that wildlife filmmaker Craig Foster spent filming one wild common octopus in an isolated South African sea kelp forest. And yet its impact on audiences and critics was far from modest (Walsh, 2021). The final film evolved from unplanned beginnings. Finding himself burnt out by his career and suffering from chronic depression, Foster began daily free-diving off the most dangerous of Atlantic coasts in an almost instinctive search for a therapeutic place in which to heal. He encountered a small, female octopus and seemed to win her trust, simply by being by her side and showing no threat, day in and day out. This curious octopus eventually accepted her large companion and began to go about her octopus business unafraid. The two living creatures developed a mutual relationship and audiences

¹ Winner of Best Documentary Feature at 93rd Academy Awards, 2021, directed by Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed, starring Craig Foster and an octopus.
were drawn into the subtle interplay between the two beings. The octopus reaches out a tentative, curious tentacle and touches Foster. At one point she appears to caress him affectionately. The octopus is distinctly aware of Foster’s presence. One might say the octopus is *almost human*. Indeed the (somewhat playful) cast list of the film’s Wikipedia entry cites her role in the production: “an octopus, as herself” (*My Octopus Teacher*—*Wikipedia*, 2021). And yet what is very clear throughout the film is that the octopus is *not human*. This is no traditional anthropomorphic tale and Foster avoids the Disney-esque temptation to give the creature a name. The film’s title deliberately inverts the usual hierarchy of human dominion or man over beast. The expected hierarchical roles, reversed in the title, are thus revealed to be at least equal. The two creatures share parallel, overlapping experiences in the context of the vast intelligence of the kelp forest. What the two living beings share is perhaps *life*, a mutual awareness of and respect for each other as they exist within this unique environment. The film became both a viral and critical hit for Netflix in 2020, deep into the global pandemic (Walsh, 2021). I draw upon this film as a conceptual touchstone to frame my essay throughout.

The popularity of this small film may be understood in terms of our present shifting notions of *what it means to be human*; the current era that Braidotti (2019) has labelled a *convergence*. She describes this convergence as the meeting of two complementary (but genealogically separate) historical contexts that overlap and illuminate our present; on the one hand, posthumanism, and on the other, post-anthropocentrism. Viewing the film in posthumanist terms, it can be seen as a critique of “the Humanist ideal of *Man* as the allegedly universal measure of all things” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 2). There are times in the film when Foster measures himself against the octopus and finds himself wanting (for example, he learns from the way that she deals with trauma, and this experience inspires the film’s title). Throughout, we experience the deliberate move on his part to view this singular creature on an equal footing. And from a second perspective, viewing the film from a post-anthropocentric position, we see that this approach aligns with the move away from species hierarchy which positions the human being as the exception, standing apart from the natural world. *My Octopus Teacher* deliberately avoids the traditional tone and stylistic tropes of the classic nature documentary. Evidently this is no dated, semi-dramatized tale of man’s dominion over nature. Yet, it also avoids the reverential tones of subject knowledge transfer that positions the expert narrator just outside of the natural world, looking in. Instead, in this film there is a carefully articulated equality between the two species, and the human/non-human division seems to merge or become less important. And so, the film exemplifies and illustrates the new ways of looking at the world (and ourselves) which underpin Braidotti’s convergence. Braidotti describes this convergence of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism in optimistic terms; an era of potential (yet destabilising) growth and change (2019). She also notes the power of posthuman thinking to influence pedagogy both conceptually and methodologically, drawing upon (for example) collaborative, non-hierarchical teaching approaches that make room for non-human elements (2019, pp. 141-142). And, intriguingly, there is currently a burgeoning movement in education that does this. A movement which removes both teachers and students from the classroom, puts them in a wild space, and encourages (or at the very least, permits) this kind of growth to happen – forest school.

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2 For example, Nanook of the North, a 1922 American silent film set in the Canadian Arctic which first combined elements of documentary and docudrama.

3 A note about capitalisation: many studies choose to refer to forest school/Forest School in its capitalised form. In the UK, this usage often entails an adherence to the guidelines devised by the Forest School Association (2019). This essay foregrounds praxis relating to repeated visits to the forest itself, in both local and international contexts, rather than human-led national organisational structures, therefore lower case is used.
Forest school is a movement whose time has come. The term is broadly used to describe outdoor, woodland-based education programmes which encourage curiosity and independence, and with an emphasis on learner-initiated learning. Thus, forest school refers to both a pedagogical approach and a specific nature-site for education. The forest school movement has gained extraordinary worldwide traction with educators in the UK, Europe, China, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the USA increasingly investing in nature-based learning programmes (Harwood & Collier, 2017). In the UK, for example, numbers of forest schools’ programmes have hugely expanded from the mere handful that existed in the 1990s (Mycock, 2020). These statistics conceal the range and variety of forest school provision currently spreading through mainstream education. Naturally, labels for and definitions of forest school/nature-based learning vary according to cultural and geographical differences (for example, bush schools in Australia) Brookes, 2002), water/beach schools in coastal areas (Horvath, 2015)). They also vary in scope; some forest schools situate all the learning in the forest, some more mainstream schools incorporate forest school programmes as an add-on during school time, or an after-school experience, some use suitable spaces in their school grounds and some schools need to travel further afield to find their forest. However, underpinning principles recur across all these formats; that is, regular, repeated visits to the same wild place, and a child led, exploratory approach to learning (S. Knight, 2013). It is this regular, unstructured outdoor practice which seems to have taken hold in education. But why now?

Escape into the Posthuman Forest

“[The octopus] made me realize just how precious wild places are. You go into that water… and it’s extremely liberating. All your worries and problems and life drama just dissolve.”

(Ehrlich & Reed, 2020, n.p.)

Attempts to theoretically situate forest school (or perhaps justify it educationally) largely fall short in terms of explaining the exponential popularity of the practice, and this may be because such attempts often position the practice within the existing traditional humanist educational framework (albeit in a fringe position). For example, forest school has been joined somewhat retrospectively by certain commentators to the long lineage of historically alternative humanist educations (Cree & McCree, 2012), such as Montessori and the Italian Reggio Emilia schools (S. Knight, 2011; Sackville-Ford, 2019). However, defining any clear lineage and/or theoretical basis for the practice has proved difficult in this complex and largely practitioner-driven scenario (Cree & McCree, 2012). In the UK, for example, it is now embedded as an enhancement strand in many mainstream educational settings (particularly early years and early primary) (S. Knight, 2016). In contrast to the criterion-referenced framework of the English national curriculum (Department for Education, 2014), forest school features inclusive, child-focused values and enquiry-based play pedagogy (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). Thus, although very often taking place within mainstream school hours, forest school is regularly categorised as existing outside of mainstream schooling. For example, it is described as alternative (S. Knight, 2016), an informal antidote to the narrow focus of education (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019) and radical (in the sense of positioning itself both physically and conceptually “against the dominant [educational] discourses”) (Sackville-Ford, 2019, p. 52). Perhaps another perspective is needed. It is here that I highlight my own

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4 I use transcribed extracts from the film’s narration to introduce each section to underpin the affective tone of the piece, to show how it connected with my thoughts about posthuman aspects of education, and how these might resonate with forest school.
investment in puzzling out the spread of forest school; I spent several years as a teacher leading a weekly forest school programme within a UK mainstream school. During this time, I and a team of other adults (teachers, teaching assistants and parents) facilitated a weekly half-day trip to the woods for our two reception classes (children aged 4-5). We were fortunate that we were located close to an inner-city woodland within walking distance; a small wooded and wild area on the edge of a local park. And so, my personal documentation from that time and my multi-sensory memories of the programme cannot help but inform my present thoughts. What we experienced at forest school felt deeply liberating. In terms of seeing the forest school woods from the trees, I suggest that the power and reach of this programme may be more usefully analysed from outside and beyond traditional humanist pedagogical frameworks. In other words, one may view the emergence of forest school as the embodiment of a posthumanist reaction to the established educational discourse.

As Braidotti notes, “the system is exhausting” (2019, p. 15). This exhaustion is evidenced in teaching by a recent poll which reported almost half the profession planning to quit within the next five years (Media, 2022). There are affective parallels here with the professional exhaustion and depression which inspired the filmmaker Foster’s healing trips to visit the octopus in the kelp forest (Ehrlich & Reed, 2020). Teaching has not escaped the late twentieth century forces of performativity, codification and standardisation which have tended to suffocate and deprofessionalise teachers (B. Knight, 2017). This dominant discourse is presented to teachers “as though there is no alternative” (Sackville-Ford, 2019, p. 47). In other words, the profession is currently tied up in a professional and ideological straitjacket. The very nature of the relentless “performativity educational agenda” which dominates the UK educational discourse forces forest school into an almost maverick position (Waite, Bølling & Bentsen, 2016, p. 883). This uneasy position has been described as the “clash between English schooling and FS [forest school] cultures” (Waite & Goodenough, 2018, p. 35). The open-ended democratic “feel” of forest school seems to sit quite uneasily within the dominant outcomes-based framework. In the forest school movement, teachers have perhaps found a way to escape the classroom straitjacket not only conceptually but also literally – to leave the confines of the four walls and escape into the forest. Forest school is described as being both a conceptual “call to freedom” and a physical place of “cultural lightness” (Waite & Goodenough, 2018, p. 29). This forest antidote to the hegemonic norm offers something different – a positive disruption – although it is by no means a panacea for the ills of education. Firstly, fully embracing the forest school ethos can be challenging for educational practitioners (both conceptually and physically). This runs the risk of dilution of forest school ethos/practice by untrained practitioners (Blackwell & Pound, 2011). Conversely, the codification of forest school ethos (via accredited training programmes) may represent a move towards greater cultural density; in other words, a dilution of its radical freedom to something more “culturally acceptable” (Waite & Goodenough, 2018, p. 29). In addition, its widespread disruptive impact may be less than perceived, as schools who adopt these principles wholeheartedly may be those very settings where this type of pedagogical approach is already valued. And yet, uniquely powerful effects upon the participants of forest school continue to be reported (S. Knight, 2013; Murray, 2003). What that indefinable impact may be has been described by those involved in it as “something special… remarkable… astounding” (Murray, 2003, p. 8) but which may ultimately, elusively, be unmeasurable within the constraints of educational enquiry in the humanist tradition. There are aspects of relationality and engagement so key to the forest school experience that are not easily categorised, but that inject new life into the system.
Braidotti’s portrayal of the present “posthuman predicament” gives us a useful lens through which to examine this experience (2013, p. 3). For Braidotti, the posthuman serves as a conceptual framework which disrupts the notion of human exceptionalism and allows us to explore the “ontological intertwinements of human and non-human forces” (Susen, 2022). And so, the forest offers a conceptual and physical space for the blurring of boundaries and the “de-centring of humans” as children and adults jointly construct new “matter-meanings” (Harwood & Collier, 2017, pp. 336-337). When compared with the normal school environment, forest school is a rich, multi-sensory experience. For example, children’s sense of touch enjoys a much richer diet than that usually provided by, for example, the smooth inertia of plastic counting cubes. When we touch the natural world, the natural world also touches us; this powerful point of contact can defy categoric description. Karen Barad’s notion of “intra-action” (rather than interaction) is useful here – which posits the ontological inseparability of components that intra-act, meaning that specific properties and boundaries of things are only realised when they meet (2003, p. 815). Touching something, for example, is the “experience par excellence where boundaries between self and other are blurred” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 96). Puig de la Bellacasa notes both its literal and metaphorical power to embody involvement “when bodies/things touch, they are also touched” (2017, p. 99). These are new ways of looking at the nature experience that decentre the human subject. It is no accident that neologisms sprout wherever scholars attempt to use language “that has reached the edge of what it can express” to explore these agential intra-actions (Braidotti, 2020, p. 466). Barad rejects the reductive ontology that divides the world into words and things, calling instead for a move away from the “captivity of language” which habitually mediates our understanding of and access to the material world (2003, p. 813). Witness, for example, Donna Haraway’s concept of “naturecultures” (2008), and the recent research field of “childhoodnature” which aims to close the conceptual gap between the child and the natural world (Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles et al., 2020, p. 4). Returning to the underwater forest, Hayward (2010) coins the term “fingeryeyes” to express the visual-haptic-sensorial nature of encounters with underwater cup corals; or “vision as touch and touch as vision” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 115). In the film My Octopus Teacher, it was Foster’s ongoing sensory intra-actions with the underwater forest that had such a profound effect. “You slowly start to care about all the animals, even the tiniest little animals. You realize that everyone is very important. To sense how vulnerable these wild animals’ lives are, and actually, then, how vulnerable all our lives on this planet are” (Ehrlich & Reed, 2020). In other words, these small intra-actions gradually engendered a new perspective: a levelling between the species. Perhaps the forest school experience offers a similar posthuman dissolution of bounded hierarchies between species and, implicitly, between the adults and children in the learning space, too.

Finding a Post Anthropocentric Identity

“What [the octopus] taught me was to feel…that you’re part of this place, not a visitor.”
(Ehrlich & Reed, 2020, n.p.)

Repeated intra-actions with a wild place (be it an underwater kelp forest, or a small patch of scrubby woodland near a primary school) may infuse us with a new sense of belonging in nature, joyfully disrupting our very sense of what it means to be human. Post-anthropocentrism, the second conceptual element that underpins Braidotti’s posthuman convergence (2013, 2019), gives us a scientific/conceptual paradigm with which to explore this affective entanglement. The concept overlaps, informs, and shares some “interpretive elasticity”, with posthumanism (Susen, 2022, p. 66), as both critique the notion of humanity as a centre of power and a species exception.
But post-anthropocentrism draws its counter-paradigm from techno-scientific fields of investigation, rather than from the socio-cultural sphere of the humanities. Earth scientists have named the current era the Anthropocene; a disruption in Earth’s deep time by the blip of humanity (Adams, 2020; Haraway, 2016). Rather than seeing humans as a different, higher order of being, post-anthropocentrism understands humans as an Earth species and a constituent part of natural life. Correspondingly, it demands “accountability for the disastrous planetary consequences of our species’ supremacy” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 10). There is much overlapping ground between post-anthropocene notions and environmental philosophy, and such thinking can help us to understand how this damaging species division has come about. Environmental philosophies aim to counter divisional thinking which treats humans as somehow superior to and/or “outside nature” (Plumwood, 1998, p. 91) and reject the idea of the separation of the human from the natural world. This stance takes issue with the Western philosophical tradition which separates the thinking mind, or subject, from the material world of things, or objects (Abram, 1996). Environmental philosopher David Abram notes that, for the West, the publication of Descartes’ Meditations in 1641 was a historical watershed moment, after which point reality came to be spoken of as a mechanical, ordered world, which could be dispassionately observed by man/humanity. This conceptual stride paved the way for modern science and technology. However, as an explanation of the individual’s place in and relationship to nature, this division between human and natural worlds relegated nature to either a resource to be used or, alternatively, scenery for human activity. Within the classic dualistic Cartesian model, the distinction between human and non-human, bios and zoe (Braidotti, 2019), is now so ubiquitous as to be almost unnoticed. Via this invisible dualism “the fluid realm of direct experience has come to be seen as a secondary, derivative dimension, a mere consequence of events unfolding in the realer world of…measurable scientific facts” (Abram, 1996, p. 34). Post-anthropocentrism places humans in an ongoing reciprocal dialogue with nature; an integral part, not a different order of being. And this worldview seems to make natural, instinctive sense in the forest; subtly, gradually, undeniably.

Looking at forest school practice via a post-anthropocentric ontology offers us new ways of understanding its special nature. Children’s play and learning at forest school has typically been viewed in terms of tracking the development of the child’s knowledge and skills in social constructivist terms (S. Knight, 2016) thus “restricting any understanding of its role in learning to exclusively anthropocentric terms” (Mycoc, 2020, p. 430). For example, in one typical forest school impact evaluation, progress in the category physical motor skills is described over six weekly practitioner observations of a child: “Poor/Poor/Poor/Showing more confidence today/Moving with much more confidence now/Much improved/Now has the confidence to move freely and skilfully through the wood” (O’Brien & Murray, 2007, p. 256). In other words, the educational impact tracking is anthropocentric in focus, measuring the child’s performance in the natural space. However, this traditional approach leaves richer aspects of forest school under-explored. A post-anthropocentric epistemological understanding must reposition our dialogue (both conceptual and physical) with the forest itself front and centre, if we are to avoid side-lining the practice as just another iteration of alternative humanist child-led pedagogy (which could just as easily take place in a classroom as a wood). The challenge from post-anthropocentrism is that to ignore our symbiotic relationship with the natural place impoverished us and asks us to ignore the evidence of our own human senses. The evolving, multi-sensory relationship with nature that develops as a forest school programme brings children and educators back to the same natural place again and again over several weeks or months is key. This has a subtle relational effect on all the participants that is hard to describe. Filmmaker Craig Foster expresses it thus: “my
relationship with the sea forest... deepens...week after month after year after year. You’re in touch with this wild place, and it’s speaking to you. Its language is visible” (Ehrlich & Reed, 2020, n.p.). This sense of relationship may explain why the setting itself is often described as an active partner in the learning activities by forest school practitioner-experts (Waite, 2011). And indeed, the adults cannot escape developing a reciprocal dialogue with the forest space (in the same way that the children do). Recent ecological studies attest to the fact that even non-animal nature (such as trees) may have a much greater awareness of each other’s and indeed our own presence than previously thought possible (Simard, 2021). Thus, it seems that if we ignore our relationship with the living forest itself, its animals, insects and plants, our understanding of the power of forest school can only ever be partial.

So how might educators move towards more-than-human pedagogies that offer “non-human centric ways of re-imagining” learning in the forest (Mycock, 2020, p. 430)? Childhood scholar Lenz Taguchi has drawn upon Barad’s work to develop a comprehensive intra-active pedagogy which pays explicit attention to the relationship between “all living organisms and the material environment: things and artefacts, spaces and places that we occupy” (2009, p. 10). And this focus on intra-activity translates well into the forest space. For example, Harwood and Collier (2017) explored children’s intra-actions with sticks as “playful and improvisational literacy practices” (2017, p. 339), noting that matter (in this case the stick) is agential and becomes “animated in children’s hands” (2017, p. 344). They view children’s intra-actions with sticks as a range of responsive, improvisational, and playfully embodied literacies. Mycock (2020) draws upon Barad’s (2003) associated ontology of agential realism, and also from Haraway’s concept of worlding (2016), to explore more-than-human pedagogies arising from children’s forest school explorations with, for example, worms, beetles and mud. Her observations about children’s inter and intra-actions with smaller creatures (such as worms) raise interesting questions and problems about multispecies entanglements, and the different types of care. The rather dominating notion of care as a “controlling intervention upon the lives of others” (2020, p. 435) was observed in some children’s destructive actions upon worms. She also identified a contrasting mutual care that recognized shared vulnerabilities and emerged through children’s relational activities with the worms. Returning to the kelp forest, there are parallels here with the emerging relationship that Foster developed with the octopus, and his respectful unwillingness to dominate or intervene with the natural processes that he observed, even as he watched her through injury, recovery and ultimately death. In the film, Foster “struggles with his own emotions, in particular whether to interfere when the octopus is threatened” (Walsh, 2021). It was the gradual understanding of these “mutual vulnerabilities” (2020, p. 436) that so affected Foster, and led to his understanding that the octopus had a teaching role to play in his own life. And so it is that learning in the forest has a relational, vibrant, embodied quality that offers a uniquely more-than-social, more-than-human, but ultimately natural space to learn.

Conclusion: The Start of the Story

In this paper, I have suggested some ways in which the flourishing of forest school at this particular point in time can be aligned with two compelling historical narratives which now converge (Braidotti, 2019). From a posthumanist perspective, forest school positions educators both conceptually and physically “outside” of the established school way of being. Conceptually, the experience allows them to reconsider some long-held truths about the way in which education should be organised and carried out. And looking beyond the present Anthropocene era, I have suggested that prolonged human-nature entanglement and engagement – one of the key features of
forest school practice – may uncover new ways of thinking about learning and our human selves. This potentially destabilising experience may ultimately have a powerful democratising and empowering effect upon the participants. I have touched upon the experiences of the adult educators who take part, as well as the children, inspired by my personal experience as a teacher and leader of forest school programmes in the woods. The experience that something special happens to all the participants may, I suspect, be grounded in the repeated nature of the visits. In other words, change happens from the building of a dialogue between the human and the natural place. Even our language struggles to express this concept as the words themselves will always persist in separating the human from the environment. The child from the forest. Repeated and sustained contact is fundamental to the stated ethos of forest school (Forest School Association, 2019) even though, as an aspect of the experience, it is significantly under researched – and perhaps under appreciated. For the participants, the development of a reciprocal dialogue both with each other and with the natural world is unique to the experience. Returning to Craig Foster and his relationship with the octopus, both the human and non-human were affected by their relationship in the forest. It is easier to identify the positive effects upon Foster, the human, who ultimately considers the relationship as a friendship (Walsh, 2021). For the non-human octopus, there we can only speculate from behind the species barrier, which calls to mind Donna Haraway’s question “whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?” (2008, p. 3). Naturalist Godfrey-Smith (2018) notes that the evolutionary journey of the cephalopod, branching off so early from our own lineage, has delivered the closest thing to a truly alien intelligence on earth. But we appear to share some affective similarities; many species of octopus “have an opportunistic exploratory style of interaction with the world. They are curious, embracing novelty, protean in behaviour as well as in body” (2018, p. 98). Thus, I choose to consider the possibility that the octopus enjoyed an equal friendship with Foster. Ultimately, this paper is an optimistic exploration of the possibility and power of the forest (underwater or on land) to encourage a re-focus towards nature and to disrupt systemic barriers to change during this turbulent time in history. And here I include education. At times it can feel as if educators are embattled and suffocated from all sides. However, as Braidotti maintains, “despair is not a project; affirmation is” (2019, p. 3). Forest school as a regular and growing educational practice shows no signs of going away. And my overarching feeling is that forest school lets fresh air into a bounded and suffocating system, allowing educators to breathe more freely and view their profession from a different vantage point. It may be that the story of forest school is just beginning.

“And as I draw all these lines, all these stories are just being thrown up. It’s almost like the forest mind. I really could feel it…and it just keeps everything in balance. Everything seemed, at this point, sort of perfect in the forest.”

(Ehrlich & Reed, 2020, n.p.)
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