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A Brief and Begrudged Reflection on AI in Education

Erik Gustafson

The following short essay presented a brief reflection on AI in education. Within the essay it is argued that while artificial intelligence poses several threats and opportunities to the profession of teaching, the phenomenon itself is far from novel. By briefly highlighting how technology has always affected education it is shown that AI represents new challenge, but not an altogether foreign one. Past, present, and future instructors are implored to take on the challenge of deliberating for the education of the future.

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Teachers are reported to be one of the most trusted and respected professions in the world (Saad, 2022). As an educator, one is tasked with helping individuals develop personally, professionally, and socially. In return for their efforts, they are often paid meager salaries and expected to work long hours (Will, 2022). Of course, individuals entering this career are typically motivated by factors other than money or fame – teaching is often felt as a calling or a passion. However, technological developments continually change not only the day-to-day responsibilities of teachers, but also how we as a society conceptualize education, learning, and the role of the teacher within each. Which begs the question: what happens when what it means to be a teacher is transformed entirely?

Enter artificial intelligence. A blanket term for hardware and software that allows machines to perform tasks typically associated with human intelligence, artificial intelligence has sparked panic amongst educators (Ceres, 2023; Scott, 2023; Waxman, 2023). Increasingly sophisticated programs, such as ChatGPT, appear to threaten the need for students to develop basic reading, writing, and comprehension skills that traditionally have formed the bedrock of any education. Concerns have ranged in direction and veracity, but suffice it to say, educators are by in large less than ecstatic about the continued development of such technologies. To that reaction, I must begrudgingly write, as an educator myself, the following: that's too damn bad!

Artificial intelligence may be the newest iteration – and perhaps the scariest for educators of the 21st century – but humans have always sought to extend their methods and modes of knowing. Cave drawings served as guidebooks for ceremony and activity (Mullen, 2008). Literacy offered a code for recording human memory (Ong, 1982; Wolf, 2007). Typography allowed for the replication, distribution, and decentralization of materials and instruction (Einstein, 1979; McLuhan, 1962). The camera captured time and place (Sontag, 1977). The wireless telegraph separated time from space (Carey, 1989). Film and television transposed our images and imaginations onto and through screen (Corkin, 1985). The internet connected us all to all information at all times (Andrejevic, 2013). At no point in human history have the methods and modes of knowledge remained static.

With the advent of each new mode of knowledge, there have always been serious objections to each of the newest developments. Socrates bemoaned literacy as the demise of human memory and, consequently, knowledge (Havelock, 1963). Established religions scrambled to restore legitimacy in the wake of the printing press which allowed the creation and distribution of unsanctioned doctrine (Einstein, 1979). Painters saw photographs as inauthentic. Walter Benjamin condemned the film and any other artistic reproduction for destroying the aura imbued in art (Benjamin, 1935/2021). Scholars of all stripes continue to aim barbs at the internet for its fragmentary and illusory nature (Carr, 2020). No technological development is ever without detractors.

Of course, this does not mean that we should be excited – or even accept – each new technological development as inherently positive and inevitable to be adopted. Such deterministic views rooted in technophilia are equally as dangerous as deterministic views rooted in technophobia. However,

Erik Gustafson (Ph.D., North Dakota State University, 2022) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Texas at Tyler. Address correspondence to the author at egustafson@uttyler.edu.

what this does mean, is that we as educators must accept – really accept, not just tolerate – that *change itself* is inevitable. Paradoxically, the previous statement is deterministic in nature, but it is deterministic in the phenomenon of change, not deterministic in regard to the manner in which we treat these changes.

In education specifically, it would be naïve to assume that we have been untouched by technology – even on the most basic of skills. While the skills of reading, writing, comprehension, and oratory go back to ancient times, they have not existed in isolation in quite some time. Calculators replaced abacuses, word processors replaced typewriters and handwriting, search engines replaced brick-and-mortar libraries, and so on. Through time, the processes of writing and reading have been supplemented, augmented, and streamlined by technology. The point here is not that new technologies always improve education. Rather, the point is that technology will always impact education. Though we lose certain modes of knowing, we create new ones. It is the educator's task to assess and evaluate the good, bad, and ugly of these new modes of knowing. Change is inevitable (just ask a physicist), but how that change manifests is the most important, and perhaps painful, deliberation educators will make in the 21st century.

As educationists have long pleaded, it is integral for educators to accept our responsibility to prepare students for their worlds – not ours (Dewey, 1938/1994). While we may wish to impart knowledge and sensibilities that have helped us to make sense of our worlds, it is still our responsibility to prepare students for their world – a world which we will never actually see (Postman, 1994). If we are not able or willing to put aside our own biases for this mission, perhaps it is time for us to switch professions.

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