Empowering educators in the age of AI

By Armand Doucet



More than a year has passed since the public launch of ChatGPT, representing Artificial Intelligence's (AI) significant arrival in education. This development has unfolded in the aftermath of a pandemic, that we continue to grapple with, trying to comprehend the lasting effects it has had on our education systems, classrooms, learning environments and most importantly our students.

There should be no doubt, we are in the vortex of a major storm.

As we venture into 2024, AI no longer stands as the proverbial elephant in every classroom, staffroom, school, departments and communities, but as a prominent and unavoidable aspect of education.

We find ourselves at a crucial juncture, prompting reflection on various fronts — the urgency to find solutions and the imperative for these solutions to be firmly anchored in a framework rooted in the fundamental principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It has led me to reflect quietly on potential scenarios, read, experiment and test, feeling a mix of concern and excitement. Internally, I strongly feel the whirlwind, mirroring the external reality of being a classroom teacher at this moment.

Educators, students, administrators and parents alike are grappling with the implications of this technological advancement.

What now?

In our current polarised world, it's rare to take a balanced perspective, considering both the positive and negative aspects. Opinions on AI, such as ChatGPT and others, vary widely. Some hail it as the ultimate educational tool, while others envision doomsday scenarios. The integration of AI in education, encompassing benefits such as improved planning, personalised learning and administrative efficiency, as well as challenges such as bias, data privacy and changing roles, elicits strong emotions among educators due to its multifaceted impact on classrooms, schools and pedagogy. It is creating

a landscape where navigating change is imperative, whether we embrace it willingly or not.

Education has always unfolded within a paradox, where unceasing change clashes with our yearning for the perception of stability. AI has now unimaginably amplified the changes happening, leaving any sense of stability seemingly elusive especially in secondary and tertiary education. Educators find themselves struggling with the swift impact and transformations in education, feeling a sense of inadequacy when they are piloting some form of AI integration or experiencing the frustration of being left behind for not attempting it.

This forced transformation prompts a profound reflection. We now face a crucial choice: Face the evolving landscape head-on or risk losing our bearings, adjusting our direction as needed. In this process, we aim to embody what we aspire for our children — the ability to be lifelong learners.

Time for action

“Grouille ou rouille” is a French expression that I often use at home and in my classroom. It translates to “hustle or rust” in English. We will need to keep moving forward, embracing our own learning and challenges, and be proactive to avoid the perception of stability through complacency. This is not about change for change’s sake in our practice and classrooms. It is about making our lives easier, more efficient so that we can concentrate on what’s important in the classroom and how learning happens, through our collective humanity.

We have faced a roaring debate in education between what should and should not be part of a student’s education journey. At times and in certain circumstances or regions, this debate has been very contentious, embroiled in beliefs, values, politics, economics, religions, cultures, etc.

The question at the core of this debate revolves around the role of education: Is the journey solely focused on curriculum and academics, or is it centred on a holistic education that includes academics, emotional intelligence, social skills, wellbeing, civics, competencies and life skills? Obviously, this is a simplified question and is never this clear cut.

But in essence, you can find in this question why many fear AI in education, and why there is a lack of broad willingness to engage with it, especially in the classroom.
In certain instances, AI has emerged as a personalised tutor for students, seemingly achieving the elusive one-to-one ratio for learning. However, its current focus tends to be predominantly specific to academic and curriculum tasks and in many instances does the step-by-step explanation extremely well. What it can’t do and overlooks is the intricate interconnectedness of all facets within a holistic education.

This neglects the vital role that professional teachers play in navigating the broader dimensions of learning for each student, but it can be an incredible support if treated appropriately and within the learning process.

With our social contract eroding in democratic societies, a prevalent concern arises that the rush to implement this one-to-one AI ratio at all grade levels may lead to privatisation in education and the prioritisation of profit over the comprehensive wellbeing of students.

I hold great respect for Chris Dede, a senior research fellow at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and an expert in the history of educational technologies, reading whatever I can find on his thoughts of AI in education. Yet, I humbly disagree with his recent statement in a TIME magazine article: “Generative AI is certainly not, in my opinion, some kind of enormous breakthrough that’s going to transform education.”

This isn’t an isolated issue that we can address by treating only the symptoms; it’s comparable to a stage four cancer that has spread extensively. That being said, I agree with his explanation in the Edcast, Educating in a World of Artificial Intelligence, in which he describes “the trick about AI is that to get it, we need to change what we’re educating people for because if you educate people for what AI does well, you’re just preparing them to lose to AI. But if you educate them for what AI can’t do, then you’ve got Intelligence Augmentation.”

Our approach demands a complete rethink, necessitating collaboration across sectors and involving the entire spectrum of educational players, not just the academics, policy makers and politicians.

Efforts have been made to rally together a partnership between many major education organisations in both the private and public sectors.

TeachAI is one example. They are trying to produce reports and guidelines for using AI in education and much more. My worry is that teacher and school leader voices are lost in these partnerships when in fact they are the ones who have the most up-to-date knowledge and understanding on how it is impacting learning, their classrooms and their students.

International bodies and frameworks, such as the United Nations High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession or the

OECD's Learning Compass 2030, should also pay close attention to the comprehensive integration of AI in education across all dimensions.
Failing to do so might render them outdated in no time. This, however, also begets the same issue for our policy makers, administrators, teachers, parents and students. How do we collectively look at this to empower us instead of becoming overwhelmed and obsolete.

Often a teacher's job will be compared to flying a plane and trying to fix it at the same time. Well, we now find ourselves on a rocket ship rather than a plane, navigating uncharted territories with storms both internally and externally.

What we know

In this vortex, the question that we should be asking is: How do we ensure that the invaluable role of professional teachers, with their nuanced understanding of holistic education, is not overshadowed in this shift and instead enhanced?
To find some sense of stability, here are some elements that I currently understand to be true:

1. No one – absolutely no one – possesses a comprehensive understanding of how to navigate this landscape in education. The literature and examples available often focus on isolated aspects of learning, management or assessment. We are all figuring it out and playing catch-up.
2. The concept of lifelong learning, with teachers as perpetual learners, is no longer a choice but an inevitable reality.
3. Ethics in AI, especially in education, needs to be at the forefront of this wave of integration. This is extremely hard as we try to integrate in real time.
4. AI is a permanent fixture in education, necessitating well-defined parameters that will significantly impact teaching, learning assessment, pedagogy, teacher training and virtually every aspect of education.
5. Every educational thought leader is saying that AI will not replace teachers, but what may happen is that teachers who do not use AI to enhance their practice will be left behind.
6. The ongoing debate within education about what to teach and what not to teach is more critical than ever. Defining non-negotiables, referencing foundational documents and determining the way forward are paramount considerations and need to be anchored in the Universal Declaration for Human Rights, needing to be student and teacher centred.
7. The current teacher professional development model and pre-service training will not meet the demands of our new reality without substantial funding and resource allotment for research and development, as well as a restructure of the current pre-service and training models to keep up with the needs and skills of the profession.
8. Teacher agency and empowerment as well as non-hierarchal communication structures within our education system are now more important than ever. We cannot have constant bottlenecks; decisions need to be made in real-time. This creates the urgent need for the guiding document of core principles mentioned above.

As the education discourse has matured, recognising the significance of context in implementing purported "best practices," it becomes imperative to grasp the current landscape.

And, keep in mind, student/teacher wellbeing, learning and agency must be at the centre of education moving forward, while we constantly refresh our practices based on our ever-evolving world.

My second article in this three-part series (to be published in future issues of *Western Teacher*) aims to lay bare my vulnerability in grappling with these existential questions and looks at possible solutions on integrating AI in classrooms/schools.

Every facet of education is swept up in this transformative wave, either causing chaos and calamity or carving out new pathways for exploration. The willingness to engage is paramount, it will change how we educate.

Armand Doucet, a member of the Order of Canada, is a globally recognised thought leader for his innovative contributions to education. With a focus on student engagement and the integration of technology, he has become a prominent figure in shaping progressive teaching methodologies. His commitment to fostering inclusive learning environments and advocacy for positive changes in public education has established him as a leading voice in the field. The opinions expressed in this article are that of the author and does not necessarily reflect any official policies or positions of Education International, the AEU or SSTUWA. The article was first published on the Education International website and has been reproduced here with permission.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
ABN 54 478 094 635 © 2026