Empowering educators in the age of AI - Part four

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The more I learn, the more I realise how much I don't know, solidifying my goal to be a lifelong learner.

But one thing certainty stands out in this era of rapid change: **the time for action is now**.

As educators, we must actively engage with the Age of AI; we cannot afford to be bystanders. Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) has permeated our classrooms, schools, universities, communities and the workforce. While some view this development as a crisis, I see it as a potential golden opportunity.

How could Gen AI enhance your current teaching methods, make your life easier by working smarter, or enhance the capabilities and skills of your students? We all know in education that reflection is the first step towards meaningful change and this is what we need to do now, reflect on how to proceed in a positive way.

However, this optimism isn't universally shared, for a variety of valid reasons.

Confronting ethical considerations hands-on

As we try to integrate Gen AI into our educational environments, we find ourselves navigating a complex web of ethical considerations. Foremost among these is the need to protect our students and ourselves, encompassing privacy and data security concerns.

It's critical that our Gen AI tools and use of them not only comply with existing policies but also adapt to the rapidly evolving technological landscape, which often outpaces current regulations and ability.

Addressing potential biases in Gen AI algorithms is equally crucial, as is ensuring transparency in their operation and decision-making processes. Another element we must confront as teachers and school leaders is the digital divide.

To prevent widening educational disparities, especially in socio-economically disadvantaged regions, ensuring equitable access to Gen AI tools is essential. This
endeavor must go together with the guidance of qualified professional educators.

Additionally, we must prepare educators and students for ethical interactions with Gen AI. This involves embedding AI ethics and academic integrity into teacher training, ongoing professional development for the existing workforce and student curricula, thus promoting an environment of informed and responsible technology use.

These considerations, alongside the task of balancing innovative Gen AI applications with tried-and-true educational practices, highlight the need for a careful assessment of Gen AI's impact on student development and learning.

In navigating this complex landscape, our focus must be on creating an AI-augmented educational era that is not only technologically advanced but also ethically sound and inclusive.

Supporting teachers along the way

Yet, these are not our only concerns with Gen AI. A recent EdWeek survey reveals that "two out of every three educators haven't used AI-driven tools in their classrooms." The reasons include preoccupation with more pressing issues, concerns about student dependency and loss of independent thought and a lack of knowledge or support in implementing AI. These concerns, echoed in my discussions with colleagues both locally and internationally, highlight the need for caution. We must avoid past mistakes in adopting new tools and pedagogies and not succumb to misinformation driven by fear.

Indeed, we need comprehensive guidelines, professional development and a communication feedback loop to adjust along our journey. However, we cannot ignore this new reality. From my experience, it's clear that with well-defined strategies and vision, Gen AI can help us work smarter, not harder.

Our foundation in using these tools should enhance our practices, help us envision our future classrooms, understand the role of Gen AI and consider how it can free up time for more important tasks.

This includes generating ideas for classroom activities, course material, research and transforming our teaching and assessment methods to enhance academic learning. All this requires careful consideration, brainstorming, discussion, debate, planning and time.

While I understand that we have multiple priorities as teachers and that professional development and support have not arrived quickly, the difference with Gen AI compared to other changes we have seen in education is its inevitability.

Gen AI is everywhere, changing the world of work at an exponential pace and it will similarly transform our professional duties, teaching practices, how our students learn and so much more.

It is not just about teaching AI, which is important, but also how to use Gen AI in all its forms. A true K-20 approach to integrating AI is needed for teachers and students to seize this opportunity in a balanced way.

In rethinking education in the Age of AI, we must confront our historical struggles with change in education. Balance, often forgotten in educational implementation, is key.

Developing and adjusting approaches on-the-go

Often, research in education is too narrowly focused to be implemented without considering its broader impacts, both positive and negative. A new technology arrives and we struggle to understand how it fits together in our classrooms, schools and the wider system.

Anything implemented can have positive effects but can also cause collateral damage. We often encounter problems when we apply inflexible policies or guidelines that don't consider varying contexts, and most importantly, when we fail to adjust our approach based on trial and error, or worse, ignore what we, as professionals, observe to be faulty implementation. Education is complex and inherently human; we must be willing to adapt when we realise things aren't perfect.

Rarely do we see clean-cut and easy implementation of research, new pedagogies, policies, or technologies in education.

Thus, I argue that we must find balance as educators, school leaders and policymakers. We need to be willing to engage in difficult conversations, confronting truths and becoming comfortable with discomfort for a while.

One of the reasons educators were hesitant in the survey mentioned above is due to a lack of resources and support. However, we are now seeing guidelines and policies being developed by (US) states like California, Oregon, West Virginia, North Carolina, and now Washington. What excites me most is that these are acknowledged as working documents.

As we start, trial, learn, reflect and adjust, we must do so without discarding the strong foundation we have as professionals, which is based on sound pedagogical research.
We cannot simply throw out everything we know to be true in our practice and student learning. The integration of Gen AI in teaching and learning will not and should not look the same across all K-20 education.

In-depth discussions and deliberations are needed to understand what Gen AI can and can't do, how it should be scaffolded and implemented. This includes how we use Gen AI in all its aspects, as well as teach it, and teach the use of it.

Where to start

Here are five possible steps you can take as a teacher if you are yet to embark on this journey:

1. Reflect on your current practice and professional duties in how you can work smarter and enhance your practice and student learning.
2. Start a conversation with your colleagues or school leadership about the rise of Gen AI, especially if you are feeling uneasy. You are not alone. Approach the conversation with honesty about your comfort level and willingness to learn. Seeking clarity and support is a sign of professional strength, not weakness. We want to develop supportive networks as we all navigate this new territory.
3. Engage in professional development opportunities focused on Gen AI, staying informed and trying things are key to thriving in this new era. If you are engaging in conversations with your school leaders, union, government, let them know you need support and professional development. Remember … balance.
4. Participate in community discussions whether it be forums, unions, webinars, professional learning communities, etc. Our collective voices matter, your experiences in the classroom matter.
5. Start small but start now. Experiment with Gen AI and as you evolve, think of strategies to use it efficiently and how you want your students to use it. Remember that practical experience is invaluable to observe the outcomes and reflect on how to move forward as you try new tools. AI for Education and Teach AI have some interesting resources to help guide your first steps.

It is extremely early in this Age of AI in education. If we have the right guidelines and environment, coupled with proper professional development to confront these hard conversations, we have proven that we can rise to the challenge. We need to face this challenge together, transparently, communicating with each other so that we and our students succeed.

As teachers, this is a no-brainer. If we're truly about our students, we owe it to them to learn fast, embrace the undeniable truths and adapt our practices for their wellbeing. Let's welcome the chaos this will bring because, as Brene Brown says, "the magic is in the mess."

Panic is not an option; leadership and action are a must. Instead of focusing on what can't be done, let's focus on what we can achieve. The future is uncertain, but we have the power to seize the moment and lead our students where they need to go.
It's essential that policy development and classroom practice inform each other, that governments and our professional unions work together. As teachers, we don't give up in the face of challenges in our classrooms.

Let's find solutions and transform this challenge into that golden opportunity. Together, we can figure out the "how" of Gen AI integration in a way that benefits our entire educational community.

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