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Why AI Doesn't Worry Me...in the classroom, and why it does



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BY



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“Artificial intelligence isn’t going to teach our kids anytime soon – unless we haven’t learned from our earlier experiments with turning children into testing robots.”



Many of my educator colleagues have recently expressed concern about the rise of AI in our classrooms. I don’t agree. In fact, AI programs like ChatGPT do not worry me. I’m increasingly convinced that some futuristic version of education will not replace our classrooms, nor our teachers.

And the precise reason I am not worried is because I feel as though AI *already* been tried in our classrooms.

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I mean, what do we call a decades-long educational system that

eliminates recess, sports, art, history and science for many marginalized community schools in the name of higher reading and math scores? Or the National Reading Panel's finding in 2001 that reading for pleasure does not impact "achievement"? What would you call the literal scripting of standards-based instruction around key standards and test preparation?

More recently, how would we describe a virtual classroom where one non-credentialed teacher monitors nearly a hundred kids plugged into an online curriculum?

If these are not intelligences of an artificial nature, I do not know what is.

And here's the kicker: They've all failed — and failed spectacularly.

But why did these systems of AI fail, why are they failing now when put into practice? That answer is simple and needs no coding or algorithm. It's because kids are not computers, and what we must teach them to be healthy, happy and well-educated adults has never been less artificial.

AI cannot teach compassion

During the pandemic, a wave of articles and books found publication about the need for social emotional learning. I know, I published quite a few myself. But what the general public may not realize was that just

^ r to Covid, legislators were not interested in social and emotional learning. I know, as I was a policy fellow trying unsuccessfully to find

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champions for a bill in California to fund SEL. But then there was Covid and kids in front of computers expanded the SEL conversation.

Why? Because parents and educators alike want their children to grow in their social and emotional intelligence, not just in academics. Computers simply cannot teach compassion, and despite well-advertised efforts, they never will.

AI cannot teach work ethic

During the pandemic, realities on the computer made work completion optional in district after district. Soon, educators and educational writers were noting a brand new term too – learning loss. That's because it wasn't just a loss of access to technology during Covid. If that had been the case, only students not on their computers during class would have experienced *learning loss*. The simple fact is that AI cannot, nor can any technology by itself, replace a human teacher instilling the values of a work ethic in their students.

AI cannot teach stewardship for the environment

Climate change and STEAM science are at the top of many priorities nationwide. It's not just for employment sakes either.

AI can relegate tasks to students about environmental issues. AI can teach and even assess content about environmental issues. But AI

∧ not teach the type of stewardship for the environment that real humans do in various organizations nationwide. That takes real humans,

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in the very real and natural world, giving hands-on experiences.
Computer screens do not have hands.

AI cannot teach the appreciation of music, theater, dance or any other art

As a colleague recently told me, “Art is what brings them to school.” I couldn’t agree more. My best-attended classes during Covid were not mine, they were with our PE coach and our partners in STEAM who gave kids a chance to do hands-on science at home. But why can’t AI just teach these things somehow, someday? That’s because AI operates in the virtual world, and art is something that we experience in the real, tactile one. We can produce art virtually, but the experience of it requires a physical presence. And not just by ourselves. Art requires a shared experience from another real human being. Whether they are the watcher, the dance partner, the viewer or the eater, art requires not a person and an AI — it requires people in the plural sharing their feelings about the art. AI has no feelings.

AI will not be equitable, nor will it affirm anyone’s identity, culture or empower anyone

For AI to do a modern teacher’s job, it would have to complete all of the impossible tasks that a real human does just by being human. But there is more required, because a teacher must also consider equity, culture and identity in their classroom.

 Race After Technology by Ruha Benjamin, the author gives compelling evidence for why technology, including AI, can’t do our job

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humanely. She expertly illustrates that technology's track record is not something anyone should be happy about, whether you are in a minority or a majority. Additionally, AI does not, nor ever will possess the human ability to understand our differences, or the ability to understand why those differences are beneficial, and often, lead to bias that benefits one group over another.

I feel very sure that artificial intelligence isn't going to teach our kids anytime soon. Unless that is, we haven't learned from our earlier experiments with turning children into testing robots. That part does scare me a little. Because if we no longer prioritize very real human qualities like *appreciation, equity, stewardship, perseverance and compassion*, somebody, somewhere, wanting to earn a buck, is going to give it a try. And it won't take long until we terminate what is best in us as a society.

The good news is that to do that would be a very human decision. One which we, not AI's, control.

[REDACTED] *a 25-year educator and member of San Diego Education Association, was the 2021 Elementary District Teacher of the Year and a 2022 SDSU Guide Teacher of the Year. He teaches humanities, ELA and ELD at Millennial Tech Middle School.*

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