The Wishford Journal of Innovation in Education

THE FUTURE: FEAR OR FLOURISHING?

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THE WISHFORD JOURNAL OF INNOVATION IN EDUCATION

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WELCOME TO THE FIRST EDITION OF THE WISHFORD JOURNAL OF INNOVATION IN EDUCATION

This journal is one of several initiatives from the Wishford Centre for Innovation, which exists to place Wishford at the heart of the conversations that matter most in education today. We are delighted to present contributions from authors across a wide range of schools, disciplines and organisations, all responding to our theme for this edition: The Future: Fear or Flourishing?

That question feels more pressing than ever. Since ChatGPT entered public consciousness in November 2022, artificial intelligence has moved from being a novelty to a daily necessity at a pace that has left many teachers and schools struggling to keep up. The disruption is real, and it is not simply confined to the tech industry. It is happening in our classrooms, right now, providing a fundamental challenge to our established ideas about homework, assessment, feedback and learning in general.

If AI can automate content delivery, generate personalised feedback and assess understanding more efficiently than any individual teacher could, we are forced to ask some existential questions. What is the core purpose of a teacher? What is school actually for? What is the purpose and, indeed, the definition of 'education'?

These are not new questions, but AI gives them new urgency. The risk is not simply that pupils will use AI to shortcut their learning, although that is a real and immediate challenge to how we think about homework and independent assessment. The deeper risk is that we sleepwalk into an impoverished version of education, one that optimises for efficiency and loses sight of what makes learning genuinely human.

That is why the theme of this journal sits alongside our conference, AI x EI, which explores the balance between artificial intelligence and emotional intelligence in education. The articles gathered here all contribute, in different ways, to that conversation. Anja Nielsen and Gloria Cook Moreno from Sustainability at School open with a timely reminder that AI carries an environmental cost we cannot ignore, and an opportunity to bring sustainability to life for students in new ways. Ben Urquhart of Wycliffe College explores how AI can accelerate learning in modern languages A Level, without sacrificing the analytical depth that the qualification demands. Hattie Franklin makes a compelling case for protecting intellectual curiosity and the joy of deep thinking in an age of instant answers. John Fitzgerald of Cricklade Manor Prep argues that AI literacy must begin in primary school, and that the skills we need most - critical thinking, metacognition and resilience - are the same ones most at risk. Jon Garner-Richardson of King Edward's School, Bath, draws on original research to argue that the real barrier to meaningful AI adoption in schools is not technical, but cultural.

Together, these pieces offer a range of honest, informed and human perspectives on a challenge none of us can afford to ignore.

Should we be fearful of the future? Or can we find, in this moment of disruption, an opportunity to rediscover the meaningful centre of education, one that allows pupils to flourish precisely because the more routine aspects of work can be automated, leaving space for creativity, connection and genuine thought?

We hope this journal is a contribution to those conversations and an opportunity for us to collaborate as a sector. We would love to hear from you.

AI: SUSTAINABILITY FRIEND OR FOE?

Anja Nielsen and Gloria Cook Moreno, Sustainability at School

In a rapidly changing world, sustainability is fast becoming a non-negotiable, essential for schools and students alike. Sustainability action helps mitigate the impacts of climate change, empowers learners, addresses students' climate anxiety, and builds essential skills for the future. This impact is being well-recognised, with over 90 governments now endorsing a Declaration on Climate Education launched at COP28 (UNESCO, 2025).

The expected impacts of climate change and the need for adaptation and mitigation are also pushing sustainability-related roles up the list of fastest-growing jobs. The World Economic Forum predicts that climate change adaptation could contribute an additional 5 million net jobs by 2030, making it the third-largest contributor to net growth in global jobs (World Economic Forum, 2025). This puts sustainability right alongside other key sectors for employability and skills development.

With sustainability such a critical issue for schools and employers alike, it follows that it should be a key consideration when exploring innovation in education. In this discussion piece, we begin to consider the sustainability impacts and opportunities of a major focus of global innovation: Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Why consider AI and sustainability?

In recent years, AI has become one of the most prominent innovations shaping the global education discourse. From marking to metrics, AI is joining sustainability on the rise up the education priority list. These two key topics are neither mutually exclusive nor inherently complementary – and as a result, careful consideration is needed to balance innovative use of AI in a sustainable world.

The impact of AI on our planet

The most prominent sustainability impact of AI is energy use. The popular AI platform ChatGPT, for example, uses almost 10 times as much energy as regular search engines (de Vries, 2023). Data centres already accounted for 1.5% of the global electricity consumption worldwide in 2024 (IEA, 2025). As the use of AI grows, energy consumption from data centres will only grow exponentially, predicted to double by 2030 (IEA, 2025).

Beyond energy use, these data centres result in both direct and indirect carbon emissions, with one recent report suggesting emissions to be equivalent to the carbon footprint of New York City (de Vries-Gao, 2025). With experts already suggesting that the world has just three years left of our collective carbon budget, these emissions only risk furthering the climate crisis (Forster et al., 2025). However, the complexity in contributions to these emissions means that it is hard to track all aspects of the footprint. As such, indirect emissions are still approximations that urgently need to be tracked to understand this scale in a much more transparent way.

Environmental concerns do not stop at energy usage and emissions. Practically all energy used by data centres is converted into heat (Yuan et al., 2025). Waste heat contributes to an already rapidly warming climate. The placement of data centres is thus a critical consideration to limit the consequences of the rapid spread of AI.

Furthermore, to cool the processing centres, large volumes of water are needed. A report by the UK Government Digital Sustainability Alliance predicts that by 2027, water consumption to run AI will increase to the equivalent of more than half of the UK's total water usage (Kenny, 2025). At a time when 'almost two thirds of the world's

population – experience severe water scarcity for at least one month each year' (UNICEF, 2020), this spike in demand will bring local and global challenges to water supply.

The impact of AI on our people

The ethical implications of AI are well-documented and highlighted across a broad range of education issues. Relating to sustainability specifically, we pose three ethical implications of AI to consider.

First, it is important to consider where the information provided by AI is drawn from. Are Indigenous, traditional or nature-based perspectives included? What information is not reflected in the dominant discourse, and thus omitted from results?

Second, if this information is included, how is it credited? Sustainability education, like all education, has developed over a long period and with the input of many experts and communities. Are these inputs adequately referenced and acknowledged?

Finally, what benefits of sustainability action are excluded when using AI? Sustainability action can help spark analytical thinking, drive empathy, and support leadership and social influence - all skills that are considered core skills by employers (World Economic Forum, 2025). In terms of nature-based learning, the importance of building intricate relationships with nature directly correlates to a stronger attitude towards protecting it (Mackay and Schmitt, 2019). As such, an overreliance on AI and technology at the expense of outdoor learning or sustainability action could have compounding effects, both impacting the environment and limiting students' ability and attitudes to sustainability action.

Thus, while no one suggests that education moves to AI-based learning entirely, how do schools balance efficiency and innovation with the important skills-based learning that arises from sustainability action?

Sustainability opportunities for AI

While there are sustainability concerns relating to AI, there are also significant opportunities for sustainable innovation through this emerging technology. For instance, AI can be an opportunity to accelerate sustainability if it is used to facilitate and foster decision-making (Nishant et. Al., 2020). To achieve long-term changes in environmental impacts, schools must go through the process of identifying points of change and inefficiencies. While certain changes are easy to identify, AI can help identify areas of greatest impact and how to address these. Given so many competing priorities, maximising student and staff time to deliver measurable change that shows the impact of sustainability action can help inspire and motivate the whole school community. In our work, we have found that seeing the impact students and staff are having is one of the greatest motivators for further action. This helps create a virtuous circle of action, showing that what students and staff do has a real, tangible impact. If AI can kick-start this action, it will in turn have a positive and compounding effect on a school's sustainability journey.

More specifically, AI can help schools in certain areas, such as energy use. While AI itself uses huge amounts of electricity, it can also be used to enhance technology and efficiency to reduce energy use at source. For schools, this is important: energy strategies are one of the largest topics of concern in schools' sustainability journeys, whether it be through energy reduction, improved efficiency or sustainable sources of energy. By incorporating AI in identifying and implementing energy saving strategies, schools can accelerate their sustainability journey.

Recent decades have been marked by growing interest in delivering sustainability action at schools. AI offers

an opportunity to speed up change making in schools and reach measurable emission reductions and greater sustainability action.

Giving students the full picture

Given the significant energy, water, and carbon impacts of AI, sustainability should be a key consideration for staff and students alike when choosing to use this innovative technology. Engaging students in discussion about the full picture of AI can be a meaningful way to bring sustainability to life, and make it feel far more relevant for their daily lives. Too often, sustainability is pitched as something far removed from students' interests or realities, rather than something that affects – and is affected by – their everyday actions. Connecting AI and sustainability is a great way to bring two emerging themes together and challenge students' critical thinking in a way that feels both relevant and meaningful.

Consider asking students to research the sustainability impacts of AI, and then facilitate a group discussion. Discussion questions can include:

- What is the environmental impact of AI?
- How could AI help our sustainability journey?
- Do you need AI? Why or why not?
- What does AI not tell or give you?
- Is AI a net positive or net negative for sustainability?

Is AI good for sustainability?

Innovation is a core priority for many schools, with AI a prominent part of the journey. But while AI can be used to effectively accelerate innovation and efficiency, it is not without challenges. Exploding energy use, water consumption, and carbon impacts mean sustainability should be a factor when considering when and how to use AI in education. AI can be used to accelerate sustainability journeys, but can also problematise – and even undermine – impact. Balancing responsible use of AI with sustainability action can help to ensure schools not only reap the benefits of innovation, but also ensure students gain the skills, knowledge, and experience that employers demand. Engaging students in discussion around this topic can help bring sustainability to life in a way that directly impacts children's everyday lives. It is an impact and an opportunity not to be ignored.

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HITTING THE ACCELERATOR: AI-ENHANCED LEARNING IN A LEVEL MODERN LANGUAGES

Ben Urquhart, Head of Languages at Wycliffe College

When I was in a Gifted & Talented Coordinator role in my first school, a wonderful parent introduced me to SOLO Taxonomy. It was an excellent way for me to understand and articulate the accrual and application of knowledge and skills. The SOLO (Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes) Taxonomy is a model that classifies the depth of a student's understanding into five progressive levels: Pre-structural, Unistructural, Multistructural, Relational, and Extended Abstract, moving from surface-level understanding to deep, applicable knowledge. Developed by John Biggs and Kevin Collis, it helps teachers design tasks and provide feedback that guide students to build connections between ideas, culminating in the ability to generalise and apply learning in new situations, supporting deeper thinking skills.

Here are the levels in more detail:

Prestructural Level: Here, students exhibit a lack of understanding, often missing the point entirely. It's the first stepping stone, a difficulty level that needs overcoming before progressing.

Unistructural Level: At this stage, students can identify singular aspects of knowledge, and their understanding is limited to isolated disciplinary knowledge. For instance, a student might identify that water boils at 100 degrees Celsius but may not understand why this happens.

Multistructural Level: The quantity of knowledge increases at this level. Students begin to gather multiple pieces of information, but they struggle to relate them coherently. For example, a student in this stage might know the boiling point of water and that heat energy is involved yet fail to link these facts.

Relational Level: This is where the magic of student-led learning starts to manifest. Students begin to connect the multistructural elements into a coherent whole. Their level of thinking becomes more complex, and they start to understand the relationships between facts. For instance, a student at this level would understand that water boils at 100 degrees Celsius due to the increased kinetic energy of water molecules.

Extended Abstract Level: The zenith of the SOLO taxonomy. Here, students not only connect facts but extrapolate and hypothesize beyond the given context. The attainment level is high, and students exhibit the ability to apply their coherent knowledge to new, abstract scenarios. For example, a student at this stage might predict the behaviour of other fluids based on their understanding of water's boiling point.

Main, P. (2021) What is SOLO Taxonomy? Structural Learning.

The following diagram has been effective with our students when summarising the above levels:

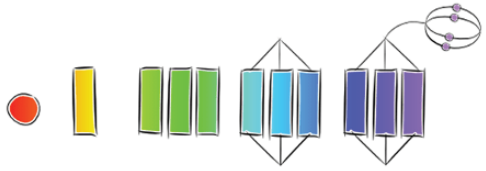

Figure 1: SOLO Taxonomy Levels.
Source: Main (2021).

In A Level modern languages, there is a lot of research to be done on the cultural works (books/films) studied. We want to get students to the Multistructural level, then apply their knowledge in essays, demonstrating correlational understanding (Relational Level) and, ideally, an ability to be

comfortable with abstract scenarios (Extended Abstract Level). During my time at university, the research required to be anywhere near Extended Abstract Level required me to search the library database for keywords, then traipse up four floors to try and locate a book that may or may be there and may or may not contain useful information. This process had to be repeated several times, and I became fairly creative at establishing correlational findings.

Productive use of AI can accelerate our students through the levels. I am comfortable with students using AI to research the impact of film techniques in La Haine if they can show that they have understood their research. They must also prove that they can apply their research with precision, making good selections and using them effectively to answer essay questions. The A Level modern language essays demand that students make detailed, logical arguments and conclusions that consistently link together. Students are reminded that in the exam they must keep asking themselves whether they are answering the question, therefore blind application of AI-generated content will not suffice.

We have encouraged students to use AI to identify systemic errors in their written work. The results have provided very useful summaries of corrections required, grouped under themes, as well as suggestions for improvement. Consequently, it is much easier for students to tackle a theme requiring development and to show improvements in a later draft or essay.

The Human Touch

There are, of course, some pitfalls. We recently compared AI marking of essays with that provided by teachers. There was widespread agreement that the depth and quality of the written comments provided by AI was outstanding. However, the marks awarded were much harsher than those awarded by teachers. This included the sample of exemplar essays provided by the exam board. We concluded that AI can provide excellent insights but the final process of awarding marks is nuanced and sensitive, calling for the human touch.

We have also done some work on using AI to analyse and improve essays once mocks week is over. A hand-written essay can be dictated in minutes to produce a Word document which is then analysed against assessment criteria and improvements suggested. Students have been very good at recognising improvements that they could use further down the line whilst also acknowledging aspects of the critical register as aspirational.

Then there are the risks of over-reliance on the data and a diminishing ability to apply critical thinking. Here, we need strong digital literacy education, and a real appetite to be first adopters of new development. Though generative AI may provide a quick fix, analytical thinking remains a highly sought-after skill. According to the World Economic Forum Future of Jobs Report 2025, analytical thinking remains the top core skill for employers, with seven out of ten companies considering it as essential. 2025 was the third year in a row that it was rated as the top core skill. Therefore, positioning the appropriate and effective use of AI within wider digital literacy education may allow those entering the job market to better understand that one must seek a variety of sources in order to think analytically and to solve a variety of problems. Just as in the above scenario of writing an essay, it is a question of the application of knowledge rather than mere possession. The employees of the future will still need to harness persuasive language and to sensitively use data to back up an argument. There is still a temptation to pass off facts and figures as one's own knowledge. To pursue knowledge in this way is to become dangerous in a pub quiz and perhaps nothing more. The real objective should be to apply coherent knowledge to new, abstract scenarios.

Working within the lines

There are measures that need to be taken to ensure responsible use of AI. AQA states that students must not submit AI-generated or AI-paraphrased work as their own and that students may use AI for early, low-stakes research tasks such as finding sources and gathering background information, summarising long articles, conducting preliminary research, and using language-learning AI tools for general skill development. JCQ's guidance can be summarised in four rules:

- AI may be used as a tool
- AI must not be used to generate assessable content
- Teachers must ensure authenticity
- Failure to acknowledge AI = malpractice

The reliance on teachers in ensuring authenticity may pose some problems. In a 2025 Bett/Lenovo report, the authors observed that 48% of schools have not officially implemented AI (though this represents an improvement from 69% in 2024). The gap between how individual teachers use AI and how schools implement it at an institutional level highlights a potential lack of strategic planning. Many teachers are left to explore AI tools on their own, often without direction, structure, or meaningful support from senior leaders. Nearly half (46%) say they have received no AI training or assistance from their school, and this absence of guidance appears to contribute to deeper professional discomfort. Of note, 44% of teachers feel as though they are "cheating" when they use AI for essential teaching tasks, and the same proportion worry that doing so means they are failing to fulfil their professional responsibilities.

A future between syntax and silicon

AI has the potential to significantly accelerate learning in A Level modern languages, helping students progress more rapidly through the SOLO taxonomy and refine their analytical thinking. When used appropriately, it can reduce workload, support effective research, and enhance the quality of student writing. However, its benefits depend on clear guidance, strong digital literacy, and a commitment to maintaining academic integrity. With national bodies emphasising authenticity and responsible practice, and with some teachers still lacking training or confidence, schools must take a strategic approach to implementation. Ultimately, AI should serve as a supportive tool – enhancing, rather than replacing, the human expertise at the heart of excellent language teaching.

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BEN URQUHART

Ben Urquhart is the Head of Languages at Wycliffe College. Having previously had a career in financial services, Ben took up teaching in 2009 and has worked in both the maintained and independent sectors. In his current role, Ben is passionate about driving linguistic curiosity and innovative pedagogy, and he champions the skills required for the workforce of the future.

INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF AI

Hattie Franklin

'The unexamined life is not worth living for man' (Plato, Apology, 38a5-6); so pronounced Socrates in his defence when on trial in 399 BCE, accused of impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. His crime, he argued, was his relentless pursuit of knowledge and he asserted that this quest for knowledge through intellectual curiosity was an essential part of what it is to be human. His central tenet, that to feel truly fulfilled is to think deeply about who we are and the world around us, remains fundamental to the purpose of education today and to how we design curricula in schools to ensure that our students acquire knowledge and thinking skills which will allow them to flourish in the school environment and beyond.

However, in recent years, the ever developing and advancing world of AI has presented an unprecedented challenge to the acquisition of thinking skills for students, with the technology available to students being so sophisticated that shortcuts for reading, research and writing are readily available and it can seem that the need for active cognitive engagement has been replaced with passive fast fixes. As educators, our priority must be to achieve a fine balance between embracing the power of AI to enhance learning, whilst mitigating its risks and ensuring that our students understand the value of developing independent thought and metacognitive skills.

In November 2025, the OECD published their Education for Human Flourishing report, which details an initiative to support education systems 'to develop new thinking on purposes, policy and practice in education... The dramatic emergence of new forms of artificial intelligence requires a bold account of human flourishing and education's role in its achievement.' (OECD, 2025). Building on the work of Aristotle, who identified the concept of flourishing as the ultimate end for humans and the state we reach when we fulfil our potential, the report explores the purpose of education today and suggests three principles to underpin education systems:

- To enable the next generation to design new societal, economic and organisational models for a century of unprecedented challenge
- To develop not only cognitive capabilities but caring and creative ones too
- To help young people find purpose and meaning through learning (OECD, 2025)

The premise is simple: when we equip young people with a sense of agency and purpose through learning, they are acquiring essential skills for life such as deep and critical thinking, problem solving, resilience in the face of failure and tools to navigate the road to success with confidence of self in all areas of their lives.

Humans are born curious about the world around us. Young children explore the world around them through play, experimenting and taking risks to make awe-inspiring discoveries and fuel their sense of wonder about their environment. As children grow up, they start to understand their sense of individual self and herewith begins their quest for understanding their place in the world and the human condition. The challenge for schools, particularly at secondary level, is to sustain that love of learning and intellectual flourishing in children and limit the harmful effects of the current digital landscape, not only on teenage mental health but also to curb the potentially limiting effects of AI on the development of cognitive capabilities.

Intellectual curiosity is inherent in every child and it is the purpose of education to encourage and stimulate that curiosity. A large percentage of time at

school is spent in the classroom in lessons, but it is important that learning is not seen as wholly performed in a classroom under a teacher's guidance. Across the school community, if we are to foster this sense of curiosity and celebrate learning for the sake of learning, we need to instil a sense of ownership, independence, responsibility and choice over learning.

One of the most effective ways to foster this sense of independence and intellectual curiosity in the Sixth Form is through the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), an independent research project investigating a topic of each student's choice. The result of the project is either a 5000 word essay or an artefact, and the project is assessed in such a way that the management of the project and of the underlying research, as well as the student reflection on the project, contribute just as substantially to the final mark as the realised project itself. Each candidate records their journey, from initial ideas to final summary and reflection on the project, in an online database – Project Q – which is marked by the candidate's supervisor alongside the assessment of the final product. The culmination of the process is a presentation from each candidate to demonstrate findings from the project, to share reflections on the process and to answer questions from the audience. This presentation, similar to a university viva, requires the candidate to be the 'expert' in the room on their topic, to respond to questions without preparation and to communicate clearly with their audience.

The EPQ is excellent preparation for university and beyond, teaching valuable skills such as: time management, prioritisation, research and note-taking, source evaluation, critical thinking, problem-solving, flexibility and adaptability of thought, resilience, structuring and writing academic essays, making evidence-informed judgements, communication skills (written and presentation skills), receiving and acting on feedback and the art of honest self-reflection. The opportunity to research an area of academic interest, which cannot overlap with any of the topics on the individual's A Level subject courses, is embraced by those who take the EPQ and much of the reflection at the end of the process is not only around the satisfaction of producing the report or artefact but in the welcome acquisition of transferable skills.

Much has been written around the influence of AI in the classroom and concerns over its detrimental effect on 'deep thinking' for students. Thanks to the rapid development of AI, it can be tempting to assume that any use of AI poses a real threat to critical academic thought, intellectual creativity and the development of metacognitive skills. However, we must be careful not to demonise the use of AI in schools; it can enrich learning if it is deployed creatively by students, under the guidance of teachers and in a transparent manner. Successful use of AI does involve human input and agency; in that students need to understand how to work intelligently with AI to ask the right questions, evaluate and interrogate the AI output and make critical judgements about that output.

In the case of the EPQ, the structure of the project allows pupils to use AI in an intelligent way. It is designed to be an independent project which, when successfully completed, demands careful planning, decision making and self-reflection to produce an original extended piece of work. A well-structured, academic essay with a persuasive thesis and counter thesis is convincing because it has a distinctive 'human' voice; something which is not guaranteed with generative AI. Neither can AI be used as a 'quick fix' in other aspects of the EPQ process, such as the journal account of the process in Project Q or the viva-like presentation at the end. However, during the initial brainstorm of ideas and research phase, intelligent and transparent use of AI is beneficial, and a large part of the taught content of the process focuses on how

to use the internet for research effectively, the need to critically evaluate sources and how to avoid plagiarism. If we focus on the benefits of AI for the creative process, particularly in research, and highlight the pitfalls and the need for thoughtful and deliberate use, AI truly can enhance academic endeavours.

Fostering a sense of intellectual curiosity is not, of course, limited to Sixth Form students; in fact, the 'damage' has been done if we lose the sense of wonder and enthusiasm present in Y6 students and attempt to reintroduce it at Sixth Form level in a bid to prepare students for self-directed learning at university. We need to retain the momentum of developing cognitive and metacognitive skills and habits to preserve them; it is only by repeating routines and habits that we maintain them. Providing opportunities for thinking, problem solving and testing intellectual resilience need to exist at all levels of the school. One such option is undertaking the HPQ (Higher Project Qualification) at Key Stage 3 to give a flavour of the skills gained from an EPQ in Sixth Form and provide an opportunity to give a sense of agency to students by learning to research a topic of interest and write about it in an organised, thoughtful and academic way. This is also a valuable opportunity to introduce critical thinking and evaluation of research conducted on the internet, as well as exploring plagiarism and the importance of thorough and accurate referencing. In Key Stage 4, harnessing academic curiosities and interests remains crucial – particularly against the backdrop of GCSE exams – and can be achieved by linking the school experience with 'real world' experiences; stimulating pupils' imaginations through attendance at lectures, museum and theatre trips, subject societies, collaborative projects and elective courses exploring areas such as medicine, journalism, psychology, law and finance. By weaving the thread of scholarship and academic enrichment through school life, we fuel imagination and prioritise human connections.

It is part of the human condition to value communication and connection with others; opportunities to think, to create, to adapt, to make decisions and to produce meaningful work give us a sense of purpose. Research into the positive psychology of 'flourishing' by leaders in the field such as Seligman (Seligman, 2011) and Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) argues that humans are at their happiest when they are working towards a meaningful goal, whether that be wrestling with a knotty problem, playing sport, practising a piece of music or engaged in any activity which absorbs their attention absolutely. When we lose ourselves in an activity, we experience true and deep happiness. This sentiment is intrinsic to the three principles from the OECD's Education for Flourishing; that education should help young people to shape the world around them, learn how to think and find purpose through learning. In order to reach the state of flow and fulfilment, learning must be an active undertaking, not a passive fix using AI to facilitate quick and easy solutions. It is our role as educators to model intellectual curiosity to our students and to provide opportunities for self-directed academic enrichment, not only as a means to end, serving a purpose for university applications and life beyond, but also to encourage the pursuit of happiness. It seems that Socrates was, in fact, making a very valid defence.

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Hattie read Classics at University College, Oxford and completed her PGCE at the University of Buckingham. Before finding her way to teaching, she worked in Financial Services for 13 years in marketing and client relations roles. In her spare time, she is a keen long-distance runner and an amateur but enthusiastic cook.

STARTING EARLY: EMBEDDING AI LITERACY AND MACHINE LEARNING IN THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM

John Fitzgerald, Head of Computer Science and Digital Learning at Cricklade Manor Prep

In 2026, the UK Safer Internet Centre's Safer Internet Day invited teachers and pupils to explore the safe and responsible use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) (UK Safer Internet Centre, 2026).

During the day's activities, I found my conversations with pupils both fascinating and, at times, made me reflect on pupils' understanding. As part of a Year 6 task on understanding the limitations of AI chatbots, I asked, "How does an AI chatbot work?" Their answers were superficial and non-descriptive, with many pupils confidently stating that "it just searches Google for the answers."

For pupils with limited exposure to AI models, this assumption is understandable. Most use smart devices or large language models (LLMs) much as we once used traditional search engines: to fetch quick answers to homework or general learning (Ofcom, 2025). However, if pupils begin their exposure to AI believing that it is nothing more than a glorified search engine, we are not preparing them for a future in which AI systems will play an increasingly significant role in their learning, work, and everyday lives.

This is why it is going to be important that today's primary pupils learn to use AI in a safe, critical, and informed way from an early age. As educators, we have a responsibility to support this through purposeful AI education and the introduction of machine learning concepts.

The Department for Education recognises this shift too. With expected updates to Keeping Children Safe in Education (Department for Education, 2026) and an upcoming National Curriculum review (Department for Education, 2025) planned for September 2026, AI education is likely to feature more explicitly within the primary curriculum. Yet I believe more is needed. Pupils should begin to understand, at an age-appropriate level, how technologies gain their apparent "intelligence" and how machine learning systems learn from data. Embedding these concepts within the primary computing curriculum will help develop pupils' critical thinking, data literacy, and confidence, skills that will be essential for navigating an AI-driven world.

Why We Need to Start at Primary Level

Pupils in primary education will barely remember a time when AI was not part of their daily lives, whether through AI assisted web searches, personalised recommendations, or the countless algorithms that shape their online experiences. They are growing up in an environment where information is delivered rapidly and fluently, but this brings significant risks: overreliance on quick, superficial answers; acceptance of biased or hallucinated outputs; and emerging concerns around wellbeing in the digital world.

One significant risk is the possibility of a generation of pupils who struggle to think deeply, critically, or independently. The real challenge of teaching this AI native generation is not how we help them master new technologies but how we safeguard and strengthen human thought. (Oxford University Press, 2025)

This, I believe, is the key to how teaching and learning must evolve in the coming years. Our focus should shift away from trying to master every new technological development and instead prioritise nurturing pupils to become masters of metacognition. Skills such as critical thinking, media literacy,

problem-solving, creativity, and resilience are far more valuable in an AI rich world than technical competency alone. Pupils who develop these abilities will be well-equipped to access, challenge, and create using AI tools effectively. Meaningful AI education should reinforce these skills rather than replace them.

This is precisely why we need to begin in primary education. Developing these capabilities early gives pupils time to practise, strengthen, and challenge their thinking long before they are typically permitted to use most LLMs. Many of these skills are already present within our lessons, in Computing, Science, English, and PSHE, but their importance now needs to be championed. Integrating AI education and machine learning does not require a radical overhaul of the primary curriculum in the short term. Rather, intentional signposting and purposeful connections to how technology learns and behaves could have a profound impact on pupils' understanding of AI.

AI Literacy

In recent years, education systems around the world have begun to embed AI learning within digital literacy curricula, whether through Finnish preschools' discussions about misinformation in early childhood settings (Associated Press News, 2025) or the newly created US Department of Labor's AI Literacy Framework (US Department of Labor, 2026) emphasising responsible engagement. It is clear that AI and media literacy are becoming vital skills for the next generation. The UK Government is promising reforms to digital literacy in England (Department for Education, 2026), which feels essential in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. While digital citizenship is included within the primary Computing curriculum, it may now be time to integrate AI literacy into further areas of the curriculum to address the ethical and social issues surrounding AI.

As identified by UNICEF (2025), AI can impact children in both positive and negative ways, including some unintended consequences. Children are experiencing an increasing range of AI driven technologies, and emphasis should now be placed on teaching them to identify examples of AI in their everyday lives, understand the value of using AI, and recognise how it may affect them. Developing a curious and critical mindset towards AI is an important starting point. The AI Literacy Framework (European Commission and OECD, 2025) suggests activities such as listing pupils' common digital interactions and identifying where AI might be present or discussing how AI can amplify societal biases. Common Sense Media (2024) adds further ideas for helping children evaluate news, misinformation, and digital content.

Activities like these, when combined with ongoing digital wellbeing programmes such as Google's Be Internet Legends curriculum (Google, 2025), help pupils develop a foundational understanding of how AI works, its strengths and limitations, and the complementary human skills needed to use it responsibly. Importantly, these ideas can be embedded in a cross-curricular manner and introduced gradually throughout the primary years.

Machine Learning

If AI literacy helps pupils understand what AI is, how it works, how to use it, and the risks involved, then machine learning education can deepen their understanding of how AI systems actually learn and empower them to create with AI. While many traditional Computing lessons have focused on coding languages, the rise of AI assisted coding and "vibe coding" suggests that the skill of writing code in isolation may become less important. As Shuchi Grover (2025) argues, the rise of AI is ushering in a new paradigm of Computing, one that shifts from a step-by-step algorithmic model towards a more data driven approach.

This means that computational thinking skills are perhaps more relevant than ever before. The ability to problem solve, evaluate algorithms, and employ components such as decomposition, pattern recognition and abstraction will be essential when working with data or reviewing outputs generated by AI models.

Many of these skills can be taught through unplugged activities and I envisage these becoming more prevalent or explicitly signposted across subjects such as Mathematics, Reasoning, Science, and STEM. Lessons focused on pattern creation and recognition in Early Years and Key Stage 1 Mathematics present ideal opportunities to introduce these foundational ideas. Instructional writing in English or the use of decision trees in Science can also strengthen children's early understanding of complex machine learning concepts.

As pupils move into Key Stage 2, they can begin exploring predesigned models such as Google's (2026) Teachable Machine, Micro:bit's Create:AI (Micro:bit Educational Foundation, 2026), or Dale Lane's (2024) Machine Learning for Kids projects. These allow pupils to experiment with how machines learn from data, leading naturally into important ethical discussions around the use of images and personal data to train models.

Conclusion

Looking ahead, a key priority should be the intentional integration of AI within the Computing curriculum. To begin this work, I have developed a Year 6 unit dedicated to machine learning and plan to build additional AI literacy and unplugged computational thinking elements across the primary curriculum over the next year. However, I anticipate that this alone will not be enough. We are likely to see further integration of AI related learning within PSHE, Citizenship, and potentially other subject areas, leading to perhaps a future where AI is taught as its own standalone subject.

In the coming years, we have a significant opportunity to build a school curriculum that places 21st century skills at its heart. While it will always be essential to mitigate and safeguard against risks related to AI usage, this is also a chance to prepare our youngest pupils with the skills and understanding they need to thrive in an AI driven world.

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BEYOND THE MANDATE: NURTURING A SOCIAL CULTURE OF AI LITERACY IN SCHOOLS

Jon Garner-Richardson (MEd BSc), AI Lead and Digital Learning Lead at King Edward's School, Bath

Introduction: The Tipping Point of Innovation

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has entered the heart of our schools at a time when the teaching profession is already at a tipping point. As practitioners, we are currently navigating a landscape defined by what Connolly (2024) identifies as "time poverty," where every new initiative is often viewed through a lens of exhaustion. When a transformative technology appears, the immediate cultural reaction is frequently one of defence: "not another thing to learn." This is a rational response to the perpetual cycle of statutory training and policy updates that define modern education. Additionally, AI is viewed in many different lenses by individuals, from those who are embracing the technology to those who resist the advent of such significant change. This creates a perfect storm where a "sit down and listen" approach won't work nor provide educators with the required skills and confidence they need to navigate AI – having a message or a quote to repeat to students is not going to make the cut.

We live in a digital world that cannot be ignored. Fundamentally, regardless of personal beliefs, we have a responsibility to prepare young people for a future where AI is quickly becoming a fundamental infrastructure. If you take two moments to look outside of education you can see and hear about its far-reaching impact, but also how knowing it well helps excel progress and not knowing it well or using it poorly – unsurprisingly – leads to poor outcomes (Bauer et. al. 2025). Since conducting my BERA-funded research into teacher preparedness (Garner-Richardson et. al 2026), I have come to realise that the real barrier to significant change is not the technology itself, nor necessarily the digital skills of educators, but the culture in which it is introduced. To move from a culture of "mandated use" to one of "empowered stewardship," we must stop treating AI as a technical problem and start treating it as a social one.

The Myth of the Expert and the Cultural Wall

One of the most significant inhibitors to progress is the "cultural wall" that exists between the classroom teacher and the digital expert. In many institutions, the AI champion or the digital lead is perceived as being disconnected from the daily reality of the classroom. There is a curious paradox here: teachers often express a desire to be told exactly what to do to save time, yet they simultaneously struggle when told what to do by a "techie" person who may not share their pedagogical priorities.

This disconnect echoes Neil Postman's (1992) warning about "Technopoly," a state where we surrender our culture to technology and allow the tool to dictate the goal. When AI literacy is fed from the top down, it risks becoming another bureaucratic hurdle. Postman argues that new technology does not just add or subtract something; it changes everything. If we allow the "experts" to define the culture, we risk surrendering the professional autonomy of the teacher. To climb the cultural wall, we must move away from the "Expert in the room" model of training, where an expert delivers a sermon to a passive audience, and instead move towards what Lave and Wenger (1991) call "Communities of Practice."

Social Contagion: The Power of the Early Majority

In our BERA study, we observed a fascinating link between social

interaction and AI adoption. It was rarely the formal training session that inspired a hesitant teacher to "dabble." Instead, it was often a conversation with a trusted colleague, a friend, or even a loved one. This is what we called "social contagion." When someone we value shares a way in which AI has worked for them, or even more importantly, a way in which it has failed, it mitigates the fear of the unknown.

This aligns with Everett Rogers' (2003) 'Diffusion of Innovations' theory. While innovators and early adopters are important for seeding ideas, they are not the ones who shift the culture of a school. It is the "early majority" that holds the greatest power. More significant change happens when the teachers who are usually the most sceptical start to see their peers, rather than the expert, using a tool successfully. By creating a socially engineered process rather than a technical one, we allow for dialogue and experiment.

We found that teachers are far more likely to engage when they are given the "free reign" to explore within the safety of ethical guidelines and prompts. Those who are on the "periphery" of the digital world are more likely to get involved if they see AI as a social object to be discussed rather than a mandate to be followed. This social learning ensures that even those nearing the end of their careers, who may feel they have no reason to learn these new tools, feel empowered to join the conversation without feeling forced to become an AI expert themselves. This returns us to the significant challenge of Connolly's "time poverty" and how we work in that environ to create an interest in life-long learning that spans the whole of an individual's career and even beyond, that fundamentally providing more opportunities to those educators that do (Giray 2024).

Building Relational Trust and Stewardship

Fundamental to a shift in culture is that school leaders must prioritise what Bryk and Schneider (2002) call "relational trust." Teachers need to trust that their leadership understands the complexity of their work. They need to know that they have the power to say no to AI if it does not fit their pedagogical values. If we nurture a culture where AI is forced, we risk what Sherry Turkle (2015) describes as the "flight from conversation," where deep human mentorship is replaced by frictionless, algorithmically driven solutions.

The fundamental shift we are looking for is a move from "skill-based" training to "pedagogical stewardship." A steward is not someone who knows all the answers, but someone who knows how to ask the right questions. We want our educators to be able to make judgements about where AI has a place and where it does not. This is particularly important when considering the wider curriculum. AI isn't a flawed technology that we are trying to fix; rather, it is a mirror that is showing the flaws in some of our traditional educational structures. If an AI can complete a homework task perfectly, the problem may not be the AI, but the task itself. It's then the role educators at all levels to adapt and change curriculums to factor this in.

The Triad of Engagement: Students, Parents, and Teachers

However, a cultural shift involves more than just leadership and educators. A truly AI-literate culture must involve all three pillars of the school community. For students, the challenge is getting a shift from them seeing AI as a shortcut to seeing it as a tool for higher thinking. We must teach them that using AI as a shortcut saves time but sacrifices the "struggle for learning" that develops their own thought patterns.

For parents, particularly in the independent sector, there are unique

pressures. Parents will have high expectations and rightfully concerned regarding the impact of AI on their children's grades or futures. Transparency is the antidote to this anxiety. We must communicate that this is an inclusive educational process, not a forced march. We are educating people in its use so they can navigate a society that is being undeniably changed by this technology.

Finally, for educators, the goal is ownership. We want teachers to move from being passive recipients of policy to being leaders of the discussion. This is what Jasanoff and Kim (2019) call a "Sociotechnical Imaginary." Instead of reacting to a mandate "dropped" from on high, the school community collectively decides what its desirable future looks like. We should be creating "curiosity labs," subject-specific clinics, and cross-departmental spaces where teachers feel empowered to talk. This is the key lynchpin of many AI frameworks, a human-centred approach (UNESCO 2024, Robertson 2025, Chartered College of Teaching 2025).

Conclusion: A Community-Led Approach

Education is a human endeavour. Teachers are passionate about their work, and their fear of AI is often rooted in a very rational concern that it will remove the human element from education. We must empower teachers to hold dialogues. It is not about getting everybody using AI; it is about getting an AI-literate culture where we can collectively decide where and when to use it based on our values.

Nurturing this culture is a much more powerful intervention than dropping a policy on a staff body. It requires us to absorb the cultural shift across the whole institution. By facilitating dialogue, building relational trust, and encouraging social contagion, we can ensure that we are not just following a technological trend, but leading a human-centred evolution. In an era where technology is advancing at an unpredictable pace, our greatest asset is not the algorithms we use, but the community we build to understand them.

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THE HUMAN HEART IN A SYNTHETIC BODY? GENERATIVE AI, CURRICULUM AND A NEW AESTHETIC NORM

Victoria Hedlund

I start by asking you to reflect on how early can a child now create 'art' without holding a brush or pencil? There is an interesting situation surfacing, because as soon as a child can create basic sentences via speech, they can create 'advanced' or detailed works of art through the use of speech to text ('voice mode') in Generative AI.

For the first time in history we are in a situation where a child can 'create' works of 'art' before they have developed a tripod grip on a pencil.

To illustrate this change, consider child development around age 2-3 years. During this phase, language is developing with guidance on speech and language putting the 'statistical norm' of children knowing 300+ words and creating 4-5 word sentences (Gloucestershire Health and Care NHS Foundation Trust, 2025). Contrast this with fine motor skill ability for holding a pencil, pen or brush which is still in its infancy (Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, 2020). We know that children pass through different grip stages until they develop a static tripod grip around age 6. You'll have noticed that there's an important mismatch here between fine motor skill and word use. Couple this mismatch with a natural language processing mechanism such as generative AI, and a potentially very impactful scenario arises that threatens to impact the early creative development of children.

John Matthews (Matthews, 2003, p. 201) stated that 'as a rough rule of thumb, everything that very young children do, unless proven otherwise, is art.' How does this translate to the use of speech to create art via generative AI? Are early words now the new paint?

I remember watching with intrigue the first marks my children made. In sand, in mud and with their food (yoghurt seemed popular!). Like Piaget (and to the dismay of my husband!) I documented them all. I kept, photographed and chronologically ordered the first marks they made with pencils, crayons and brushes. I was fascinated with the emergent capabilities of my human intelligences. Piaget (Piaget, 1952), would be proud.

I've been forced to reflect on this emerging impact of AI on early creative development by a situation recently where my daughter (who has always been extremely creative and a lover of all things expressive), has started to feel unhappiness and unease with the 'quality' of her artworks. Upon discussing and exploring this with her, she states it's because they don't 'look like complete things'. This frustration results in her not approaching creative pastimes with the same enjoyment and sense of fulfilment as she did prior.

As an artist myself, I've studied the development of artistic identify for a long time, and I know that this frustration with a lack of figurative realism is an existing part of artistic development (Gardner, 1990). But how have the capabilities of generative AI impacted this? It could be argued from an accessibility point of view that being able to craft images with words is a positive functionality and could positively impact children. I do not deny this emergent use case.

My worry is that she's started to use Gemini at school. She sees us use Gemini. We co-create images together and explore prompts and styles. It seems that her experience of art generation and development is now overwhelmingly that of an LLM producing 'perfect' images. We paint

and sketch together, I show her my abstract art, but to an 8 year old, unless the banana looks like a banana, she's not impressed.

Generative AI use in early (and probably all phases of) childhood is creating a new aesthetic ideal. We've all felt this through trends such as Studi Ghibli. What's behind the prompt hides the productive struggle within the creative process. It becomes about immediate output (the image), not the process of creation.

With Generative AI on the scene, where will children now feel this productive struggle? Their teacher won't hand-draw a snowman now if they can quickly and easily create a Pixar style one in seconds using NanoBanana. Their parents won't doodle or sketch out a birthday card or attempt bubble writing if they can quickly use Canva, Gemini or ChatGPT to do it 'flawlessly'. What are we modelling to our youth?

The lack of productive struggle due to generative AI is not new, and about a year ago we saw the flurry of 'learning modes' rolled out from all major AI companies in attempt to address this tension. These modes had the aim of guiding the learner through the 'learning process' rather than giving them 'the answer' (Anthropic, 2025; OpenAI, 2025).

Why is there nothing similar for artwork creation?

If a child asks generative AI for an image of a person, could it respond showing a sensitivity to the age of the child and their rough stage of development? For example, creating the 'potato people' that are common at a young age, rather than a fully figurative photorealistic image of a person.

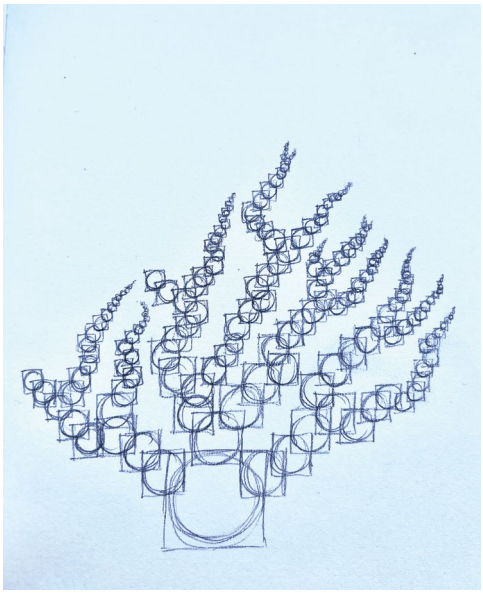
It helps to consider an example, or use-case as tech would put it (a human!). My son's first fascination was with stars (the shape). If he was a 3-year-old today he could walk to a home assistant (Google, Alexa etc.) and simply say 'Draw star' and get the image. All children need to master from an early age is a few important action verbs: draw, make, show, create. Then generative AI can do the rest. Do children need to be able to create in the 'old fashioned way' anymore? To answer this, we have to consider what early artistic development actually is. Is it the process of making oneself known? Is it representing the world around us? Is it an emergent reaction from our cognitive system to subjectively experiencing the world? The answer to this could be subjective and personal.

Let's look at the first case, where art is about making oneself known. If an image holds a high level of figurative realism, then a child can use generative AI to make themselves known more effectively. They can ask for images and respond when it shows the thing they are wanting, rather than the frustration of the adult having to guess what words mean.

The second and third cases are personal for me, and where my concern and reflections are drawn from. I have always painted and drawn to either respond to the world or to create something new (it's an emergent response to my lived reality). Gemini can do that for me now. Before generative AI, I would have created my Bias Girl images myself, by hand and coloured them in with markers. Now I lose that tactile experience and the sense of 'flow' that I get from engaging in an affective process (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Canva takes that. I give my agency away for the return of 'saving time' and being more productive.

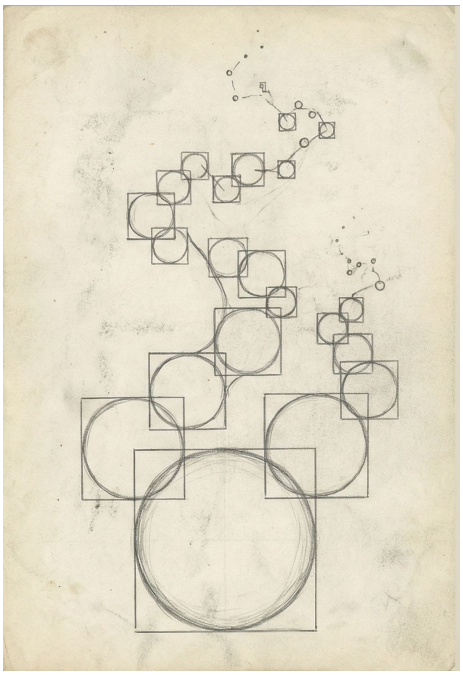
If artwork creation is about interpretation of our environment and lived experience, and the unity of objective and subjective self, then simply adding prompt instructions on to a prompt such as 'ensure the image conveys a feeling of mystery and anticipation' involves nothing of the individual being imprinted on the image, and everything of the statistical norm being returned.

Take these two images for example. The first is my sketch I did at the Association for Science Education conference when I was considering the interconnectivity of learner bubbles that will occur if 'personalisation at scale' leads to unique curricular for each child (Hedlund, 2026). It was drawn from a position of frustration, connectivity and bounds.



The second is showing how easily my style can be reproduced through inclusion of specific graphic elements and direction. The prompt used was:

'Create an image of a series of pencil drawn circles constrained with boxes. They start with one central circle in a box at the bottom of the page. three other, separate circles in boxes emerge from the first circle in a box at approximately 12, 10 and 2 o'clock to the original, larger circle. The boxes overlap the original circle in a box very slightly, so they look as if they are linked. The image then grows organically, almost like ivy does, with each circle in a box connected to the one before it, and getting slightly smaller each time until it is just a dot. The image reaches up to approximately 75% of the paper's height. It is not symmetrical.'



There was no inclusion of position or feeling. Just mechanistic instructions. Creating that prompt and image did not give me a sense of enjoyment, embodiment or flow that I achieved from the drawing of the first.

Is this what a 'beating human heart' feels?

It worries me how the use of GenAI will impact how the child engages in these affective processes, and how it impacts their growing sense of what art and creative work/process is. That as much as generative AI can enable, it can also disable and disconnect – it can take away flow, embodied learning and tactile sensations; the messiness of being human.

Let me add a final reflection to illustrate the issue. My son was set homework to recreate Monet's Haybales. We sat and discussed colour, composition, expression and brush strokes. The new aspect here is that I now had to 'expectation set' for him - because his friend used Gemini, and my son's version will not be as 'perfect' a copy as his friend's submission. I want to draw attention to considering how much more my son will have gained from this process through experiencing artwork

generation himself. What will he have learnt about the artist, about his perspective and view of the world, about the haptic feedback, about fine motor control, about colour mixing?

How much will be lost in childhood if processes and experiences like this dissolve away?

I see this as an emergent policy issue for the development of the curriculum in a generative AI enabled era. How can the new, and future iterations of the curriculum address these issues? The gains, the losses, the stagnation, the invisibility of the creative process?

I am a believer that to keep humans as 'the beating heart' of education, we need to create opportunities for children to engage meaningfully in affective past times. As well as a policy issue, this is also training need. Having had two children go through primary school, I have experienced the fallout from where they have been repeatedly belittled because their snowman Christmas cards didn't look enough like the teachers' 'perfect' example.

Children are not photocopiers.

In an age where it is becoming more apparent, we need to be able to know what it is to be human, we need to prioritise engagement with the affective arts as well as the 'learning sciences' that underpin generative AI tools. That's said from my position as both physicist and artist.

We stand at a crossroads and I feel the tension: I love the capabilities of generative AI, but I am also a believer in affective flow. How do we operationalise this in the sector? How can we maximise the use of generative AI in education (and remember the memorandum of understanding Google DeepMind has with the DfE for Gemini to be involved in the new curriculum (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 2025)) positively, and still churn out tiny humans who can engage in affective pursuits without feeling wanting or like failures?

The Victorian ideal of education for economic productivity no longer holds. As generative AI is looking set to handle our productivity, shouldn't the sector now repurpose to advance and focus on the messy, creative skills of organic beings?

We've had decades of bricks in walls, what we need now is some architects.

So, whilst I am keen to hear from the education secretary (Phillipson, 2026) that teaching will retain a human heart, without appropriate intervention, I am wondering this if this human heart is actually being placed in synthetic body?

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AI X EI: WHY THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION DEPENDS ON GETTING BOTH RIGHT

Simon Balderson

The Paradox

Picture two Year 11 pupils. One is coding a Python application by hand: slowly, carefully, learning syntax and logic. The other is mediating a heated dispute between teammates. In a world where AI generates flawless code in seconds, the second pupil, the one who can navigate human complexity, build consensus, and lead through conflict, will be the one driving innovation and thriving. This is the central paradox facing schools today.

Schools are preparing pupils for a future that appears to demand two opposing capabilities: technical ability and the uniquely human capacity for emotional intelligence (EI). In reality, these are not in opposition, they form the complementary foundation of what pupils need to thrive. The World Economic Forum's (2025) Future of Jobs Report confirms that future success will not be decided by technical skills alone, but by people-centric capabilities. The result is a multiplier effect: when AI capabilities and emotional intelligence combine, each amplifies the power of the other.

The Strategic Case for Emotional Intelligence

While machines can analyse complex datasets in seconds, they cannot inspire teams, mediate conflicts, or lead with empathy. As AI advances, being distinctly human becomes the key differentiator. The evidence is compelling: the World Economic Forum ranks EI among the top ten skills for the fourth industrial revolution, with 71% of employers valuing it more than technical skills (World Economic Forum, 2025). OECD research across ten countries found that over 50% of job vacancies in AI-exposed occupations require at least one social or emotional skill (OECD, 2024). McKinsey Global Institute (2022) projects that time spent using social and emotional skills at work will increase by 26% by 2030, outpacing demand for both manual and cognitive skills. Meanwhile, 67% of CEOs now cite EI as a top skill for leadership success (Wingard, 2025).

Three dimensions of this case deserve particular attention for school leaders. First, as AI surpasses human performance in cognitive tasks, social and emotional skills form our comparative advantage in roles that machines cannot fulfil, from building trust with pupils and parents to leading teams through change (McKinsey Global Institute, 2022). Second, high-EI teams outperform because they collaborate and adapt more effectively; AI excels at task completion, but humans with high EQ excel at asking the right questions and uniting people around solutions (Roche Martin, 2024). Third, emotional intelligence underpins leadership in times of change, driving resilience, staff well-being, and the capacity to guide institutions through digital transformation.

High-performing schools have long understood that educating the whole child matters, through co-curricular programmes, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, peer mentoring, and school councils. These are not enrichment extras; they are structured opportunities for pupils to develop the resilience, empathy, and interpersonal capability that no exam syllabus explicitly tests but every employer and university increasingly values. What is changing is that these activities are becoming central to the core mission rather than peripheral to it. The question is no longer whether schools should develop EI, but how deliberately and systematically they choose to do so.

International Evidence

Remarkably, when research from entirely different sectors is examined - business consultancies, international education bodies, CEO surveys - the same pattern emerges. The World Economic Forum (2025) ranks emotional intelligence and interpersonal ability alongside technological literacy as core skills, noting that resilience, leadership, and social influence have all increased sharply in importance since their 2023 report. The OECD (2024) highlights that social and emotional skills will only grow more important as AI handles routine work and, crucially, that these traits are teachable rather than innate, making their development a key priority for curriculum design. McKinsey's framework for future foundational skills positions teamwork, empathy, self-awareness, and adaptability as equally foundational as digital literacy (McKinsey & Company, 2021).

This consensus is reinforced by emerging educational research. The AIEOU shared research agenda, developed by the Department of Education at the University of Oxford, identifies the integration of AI and social-emotional development as one of the most pressing unresolved questions in contemporary educational research, highlighting the need for coordinated approaches to preparing both pupils and educators for an AI-enabled world (Ratner et al., 2026). The agenda is significant not only for what it identifies as important, but for its call to action: the field requires structured, collaborative research to translate this broad consensus into evidence-based practice that schools can actually implement. Just as coding and data literacy became essential in the last decade, emotional literacy is equally essential for the decades ahead. The research base to support schools in developing this is only just beginning to mature.

Why Schools Should Act

Investing in EI is not a distraction from academic priorities, it is integral to them. OECD research shows that pupils with stronger social and emotional skills achieve better academically and lead happier, healthier lives (OECD, 2024). Programmes that improve social-emotional competence also improve academic achievement on average, through better attitudes, focus, and classroom behaviour. Beyond test scores, EI development prepares well-rounded individuals for life: employers increasingly seek those who can communicate effectively, work in diverse teams, adapt to change, and cope with stress. Those whose roles survive automation will be those who add value beyond what AI can replicate.

The honest answer to why not all schools are already prioritising EI alongside AI fluency is that it is hard. Timetables are packed and exam pressures are real. But this frames the challenge incorrectly. The more productive question is not how to add EI on top of everything else, but how to fundamentally rethink what school is for. If content delivery can be automated, if assessment can be AI-powered, and feedback instantaneous, what remains? Perhaps it is time to question why schools group pupils by age rather than readiness, why timetables are designed for organisational convenience rather than individual development, and why learning is organised around subjects when the problems of the future will not respect those boundaries.

The Oxford AIEOU research agenda calls for precisely this kind of coordinated rethinking, developing the evidence base schools need to make strategic decisions about curriculum and pedagogy with confidence (Ratner et al., 2026).

The Multiplier Effect

The multiplier effect of AI and emotional intelligence working together is the strategic reality facing every school leader today. Schools that treat EI as peripheral, addressed in tutor periods or PSHE while the 'real' curriculum focuses elsewhere, risk producing graduates who are technically capable but inter-personally underdeveloped: proficient with the tools of the digital world but poorly equipped to use them in service of genuine human flourishing. Conversely, schools that ignore AI fluency risk leaving pupils unprepared for the workplace they will actually enter.

The evidence from across sectors is clear: the future belongs to individuals who can combine technical capability with emotional intelligence, who can work alongside AI while bringing the distinctly human capacities that it cannot replicate. This is not a soft aspiration, it is a measurable, teachable, and strategically vital set of skills backed by robust international evidence. School leaders who recognise this now, and who are willing to make the structural and curricular changes it demands, will be those whose pupils are genuinely prepared for the world ahead.

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