

I do find myself slightly disconcerted by my role in relation to AI. As a learning technologist, I am frequently asked to train people in how to use it, and to enthuse about all its possibilities. I am expected to generate engagement from academic staff – and to assure them that ‘AI is essential for Industry 5.0’ (or wherever we are up to now).

Now I don’t mean to suggest this is wrong. But I am disconcerted because of the lack of criticality – and lack of precision - underpinning our reasons for using it.

I am disconcerted because I rarely get asked to address the issue of *why*. Industry 5.0 itself appears to be rather vague guesswork about what the future is going to look like, and the concept of AI is itself amorphous: Constantly changing, and encompassing an impossibly broad set of ideas, systems, processes, functions and platforms.

To say ‘we must promote AI’ to equip students for ‘Industry 5.0’ just feels a little shaky, and unstable.

So I end up feeling like an attendant standing in front of a slide at a water park– sinisterly and enthusiastically encouraging people to dive into the tunnel, promising them how much fun it will be. When really, I have no idea where the tunnel leads. And nobody else seems to know either.

So in this session, I want to suggest 2 things.

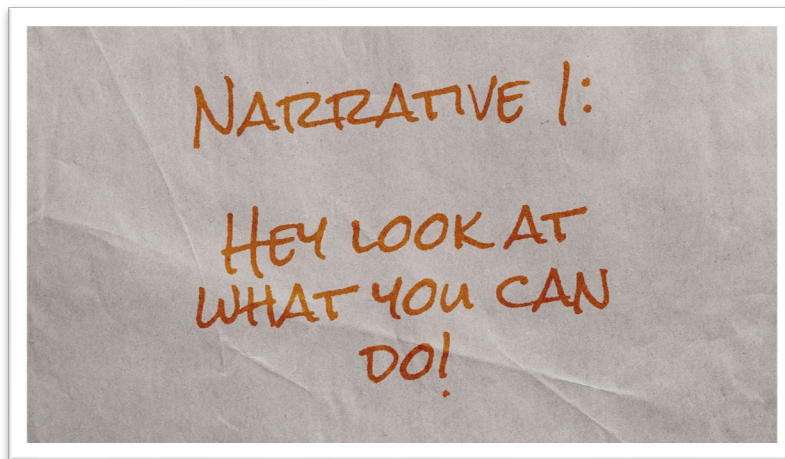
1. There are at present two dominant narratives around AI - Neither of which properly address *what people want from it* or *why we should be using it*.
2. These narratives appear to be perpetuated within Higher Education.

On the basis of these suggestions, I want to ask a question:

- Can we imagine a different narrative? If so, how? And would it be helpful?

So are we ready?

Then we can begin...



This is the first narrative – I call this the ‘hey, look at what you can do!’ narrative. This narrative focuses on all the cool stuff you can do with AI.

You know the kind of thing:

Hey look! – you can use AI to generate your own clipart, cute avatars or biologically improbable photos!

You can get AI to predict your email responses, organise your to-do list, and generate your own cartoon characters!

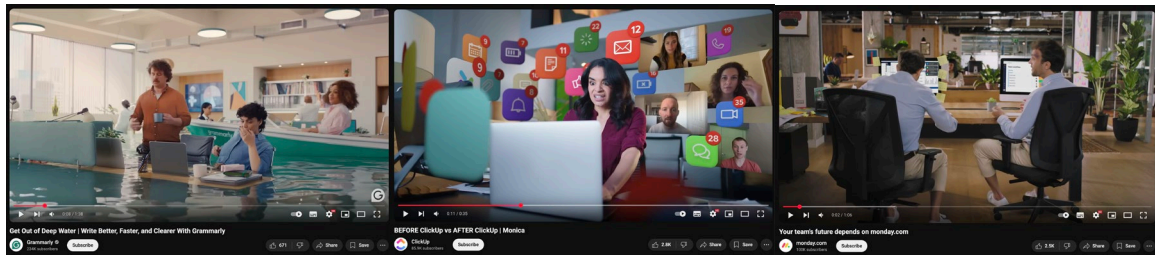
I have been suitably impressed by people who have sent me examples of how they have created AI videos of themselves conducting law lectures while riding horses in the wild west!

All very cool.

Of course, none of these were things you actually *asked* for, or thought you *needed*. And most of the time you don’t really understand *why* you’re doing it. And yet you feel that somehow you have to.

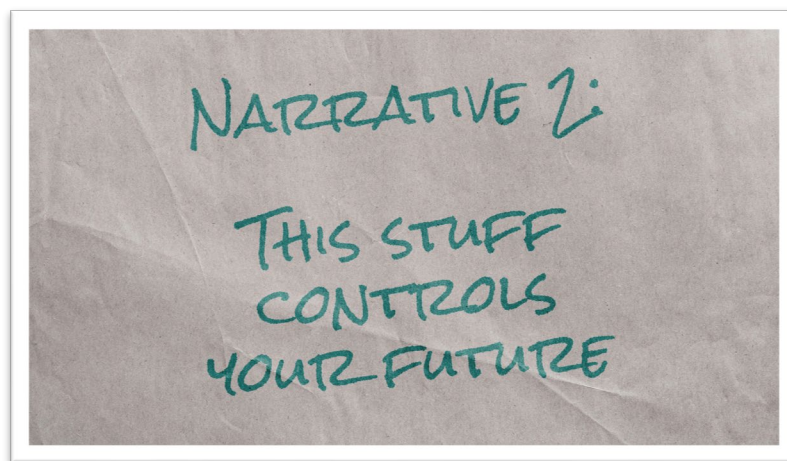
We can feel an imperative to use them – because if we don’t we run the risk of being an outsider. Disadvantaged – or something similar.

You can see this in adverts for platforms like ClickUp, Monday.com or Grammarly. The suggestion that you should be using AI to write proper sentences, organise your time and manage your projects – regardless of whether you feel you need support in any of those areas. And of course, if you are NOT using AI – then you are inevitably going to fall behind everyone else.



These tap into a feeling that is very much present when we think about AI. Are you willing to risk being the only one left can't use it? The person still trying to fax their job applications to potential employers?

AI is the simply the way things will have to be done in the future – so get on board with all the cool things AI can do, or be left at the station.

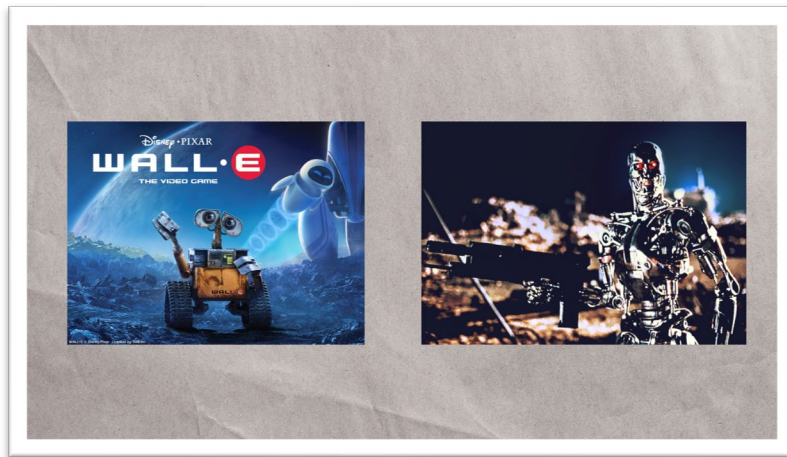


Alternatively, in the second narrative we hear about all the terrifying stuff AI is going to do to you, whether you want it to or not. I call this the 'AI controls your future' narrative.

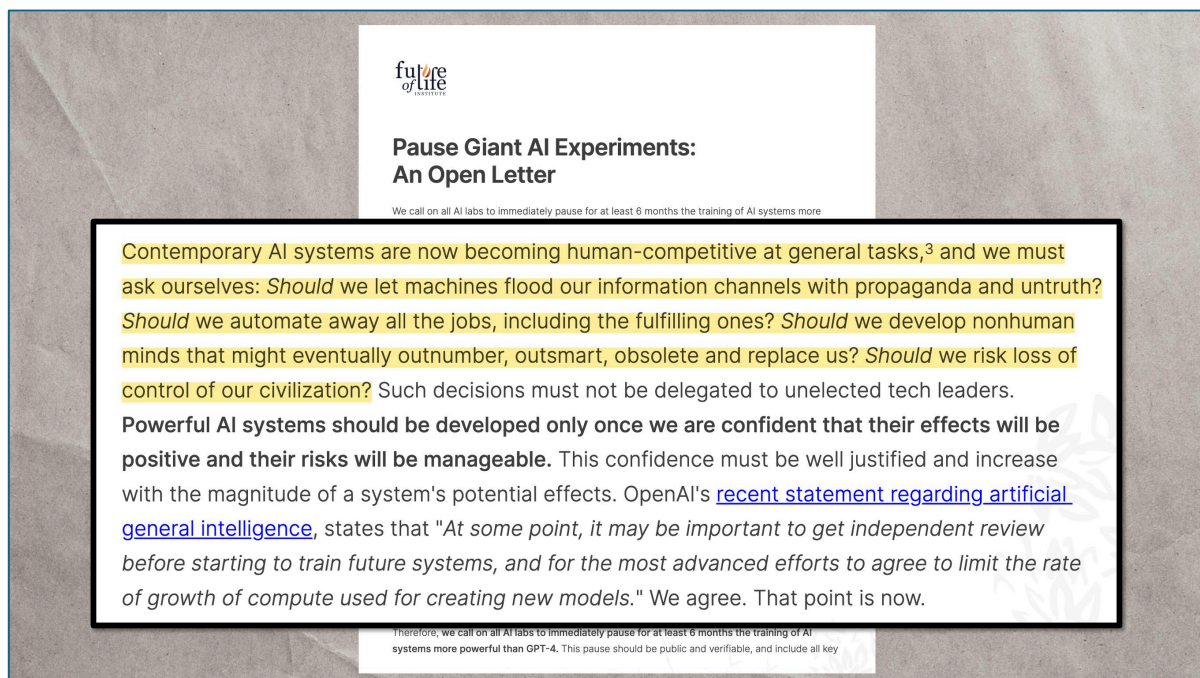
You know the kind of thing. AI is going to take over our jobs, make all our decisions for us, write all our songs and presumably, eventually conclude we are surplus to requirements and stick us in small tubes to function as a power source.

A lot of films have been based on this narrative – so it's a good one. People like it.

This is the narrative behind those headlines that imply that AI will control the future. It is a dystopian vision – where AI ends up either saving humanity or destroying it.



This narrative is reflected in the now-famous open letter sent by the Future of Life Institute in 2023 to ChatGPT:



> "Contemporary AI systems are now becoming human-competitive at general tasks, and we must ask ourselves: ***Should*** we let machines flood our information channels with propaganda and untruth? ***Should*** we automate away all the jobs, including the fulfilling ones? ***Should*** we develop nonhuman minds that might eventually outnumber, outsmart, obsolete and replace us? Should we risk loss of control of our civilization?"

According to this narrative, civilization is at a tipping point, and it is humanity itself that is at risk.

But even as we ponder the fact that Elon Musk was a signatory to this letter, we sense that there is an inevitability to all this. Mustafa Suleyman, one of the key figures in the development of gen AI, describes it as a wave of technology – that cannot be

“uninvented or blocked indefinitely” and that “leads humanity toward either catastrophic or dystopian outcomes”.

Underpinning this narrative is anxiety and a sense of powerlessness. Anxiety about the impact of AI, and a worry that there is absolutely nothing we can do about it. That we are in the last days of humanity – the last days where things like community, compassion, fallibility, imagination have value.

So – those are the two narratives.

AI represents either cool toys that you have to learn to use if you want to stay relevant. Or it a threat to humanity itself.

It is what you *can* do, or what you *must* do. What it isn't, is something you *want* to do.

Now you may already be ahead of me with this.

In the whole debate around AI in Universities, we largely seem to be perpetuating these two dominant narratives.

We appear increasingly desperate to find some – *any* way of incorporating Gen AI into our modules, partly because – hey look, isn't it cool? This might engage my students or make them interested, or impress my external examiner.

And partly because of the feeling we will be failing them somehow, if we don't immerse them in AI as soon as possible, because if our students are not able to use AI then how will they get a job?

So we try teaching them how to use Copilot to plan their assignments, how to use Claude to develop code, or how to use Gemini to teach them new software. Of course AI isn't necessary for any of these tasks – but if our students can't use this kind of tool, they might be left behind.

That's the **first narrative**.

At the same time Universities are immersed in the dystopian narratives in which AI poses an existential threat to the values of education.

A good example is the issues of academic integrity in the age of AI. The feeling that AI poses a threat to the integrity of education – to authenticity and ethics. I've lost count of the amount of times I have been told how urgent it is that we get AI detecting software for written assignments. Or how often I have hear people talk about how important it is to develop assessments where AI simply can't be used.

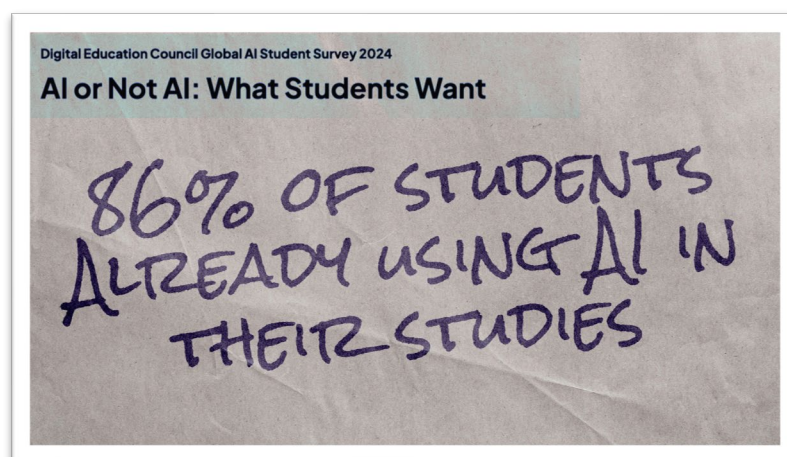
That's the **second narrative**. The one in which AI is a cataclysmic threat that needs to be countered.

Interestingly, we can see these narratives in **systematic reviews** listing the most-cited scholarly articles about the use of AI in higher education.

Have a look at the titles below and see if we you can spot these narratives at work...

Authors	Year	Title	Citations
Dwivedi et al. [46]	2023	"So what if ChatGPT wrote it?" Multidisciplinary perspectives on the opportunities, challenges, and implications of generative conversational AI for research, practice, and policy	291
Lee et al. [47]	2023	Benefits, limits, and risks of GPT-4 as an AI chatbot for medicine.	191
Rudolph et al. [48]	2023	ChatGPT: Bullshit spewer or the end of traditional assessments in higher education?	152
Tili et al. [49]	2023	What if the devil is my guardian angel: ChatGPT as a case study of using chatbots in education	141
Pavlik [50]	2023	Collaborating With ChatGPT: Considering the implications of generative artificial intelligence for journalism and media education	133
Salvagno et al. [51]	2023	Can artificial intelligence help with scientific writing?	129
Rudolph et al. [52]	2023	War of the chatbots: Bard, Bing Chat, ChatGPT, Ernie, and beyond. The new AI gold rush and its impact on higher education	82
Lim et al. [53]	2023	Generative AI and the future of education: Ragnarök or reformation? A paradoxical perspective from management educators	67
Cooper [27]	2023	Examining science education in ChatGPT: An exploratory study of generative artificial intelligence	61
Crawford et al. [54]	2023	Leadership is needed for ethical ChatGPT: Character, assessment, and learning using artificial intelligence (AI)	53

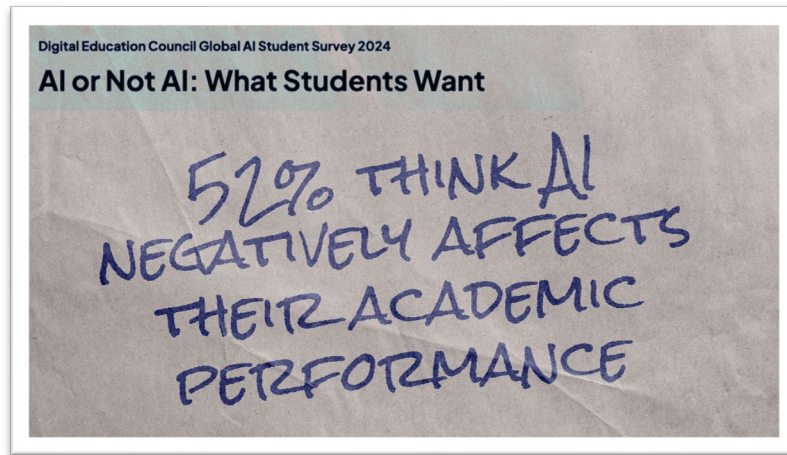
We can see these narratives in student surveys as well.



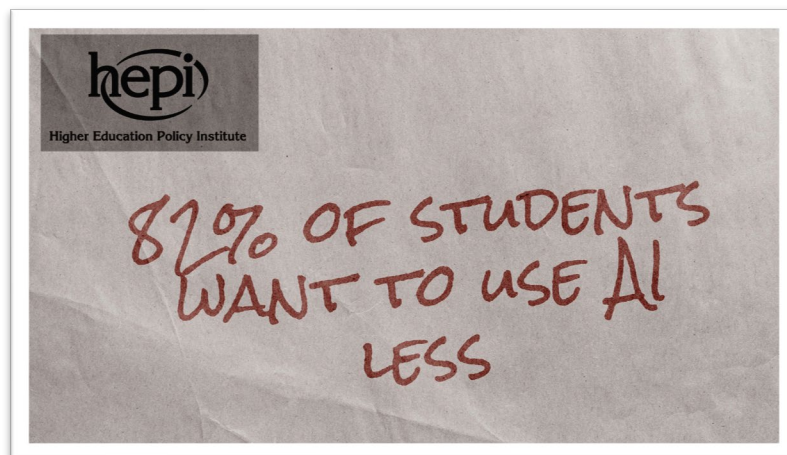
Last year, the Digital Education Council released its report on student expectations about AI – titled ‘What Students Want’. Among their findings, they found that 86% of students surveyed "claim to use AI in their studies" - with a similar study from HEPI has

this as high as 92%. Mostly they are using it to research for information, and other uses include grammar checking, summarising, paraphrasing, and drafting.

But the interesting bit is when you look for evidence of what is driving them.

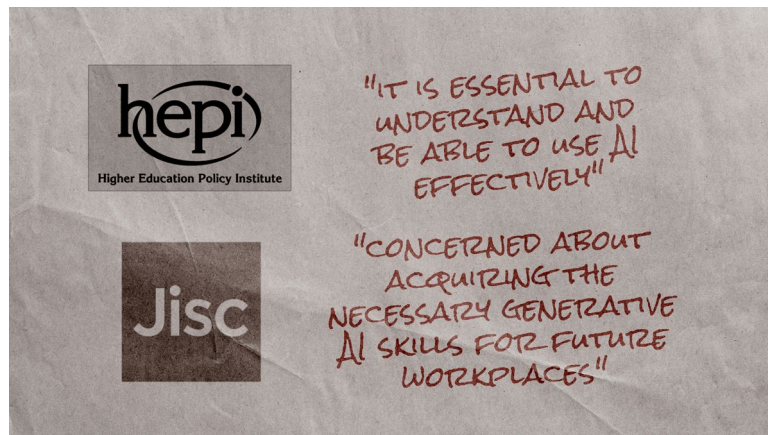


Because the DEC survey showed 52% of students actually think AI negatively impacts their academic performance –



and the HEPI survey has 82% of students wanting to use AI less.

So why are they using it?

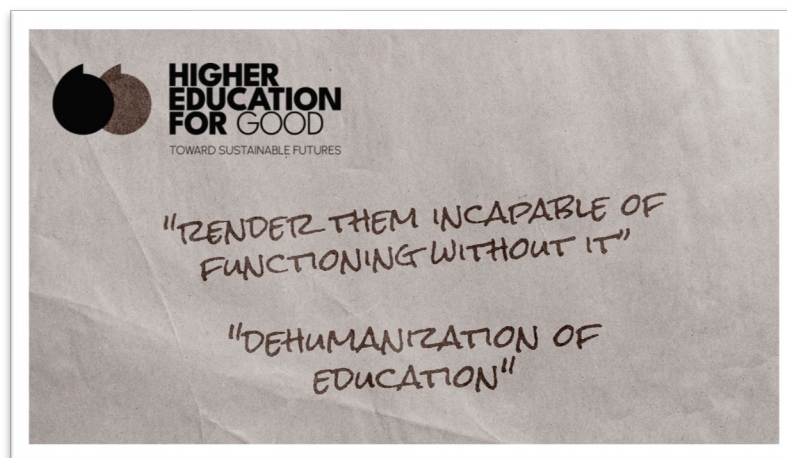


Well, according to the HEPI survey students believe "it is essential to understand and be able to use AI effectively".

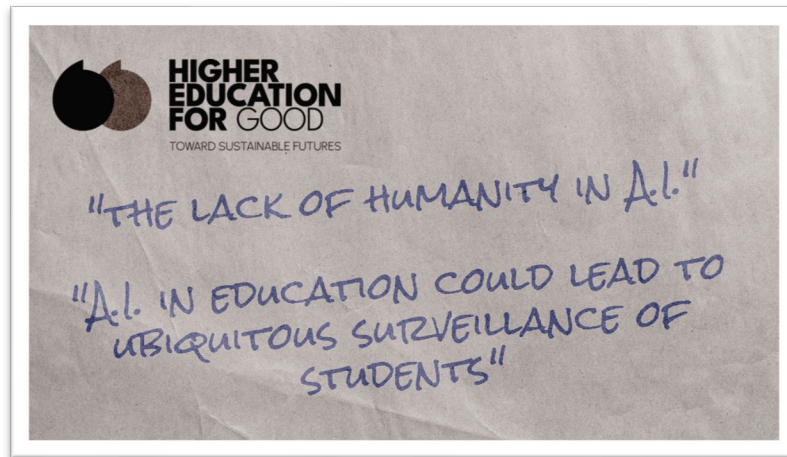
The JISC survey similarly found that students were "concerned about acquiring the necessary generative AI skills for future workplaces".

This is the first narrative.

But there is anxiety too.



A Higher Education for Good survey found many students expressing the worry that AI will "render them incapable of functioning without it", fearing the "dehumanization of education".



The same report highlights concerns about "the lack of humanity in A.I." and that "A.I. in education could lead to ubiquitous surveillance of students".

In all the surveys there is a common thread in which students express implicit or explicit fears about how AI threatens the very humanity of educational communities.

They demonstrate fears of dehumanization, a distrust of AI, and the feeling that AI will never be able to provide the same value as human production.

This is the second narrative.

And still – we are no closer to understanding what people actually want.

Back in February, I asked some people 'what do you wish AI could do for you?'. The results were singular. Staff wanted AI to ease the burden of marking for them. Students wanted AI to help them with time management.

And to help with tidying.

They picked the one thing that was they found the most frustratingly difficult and said this was what they wanted AI to help them with.

And I think it is significant that staff did not suggest they wanted AI to create their teaching resources for them or write their lectures for them – although at many events like this, that is what they are being shown they can do.

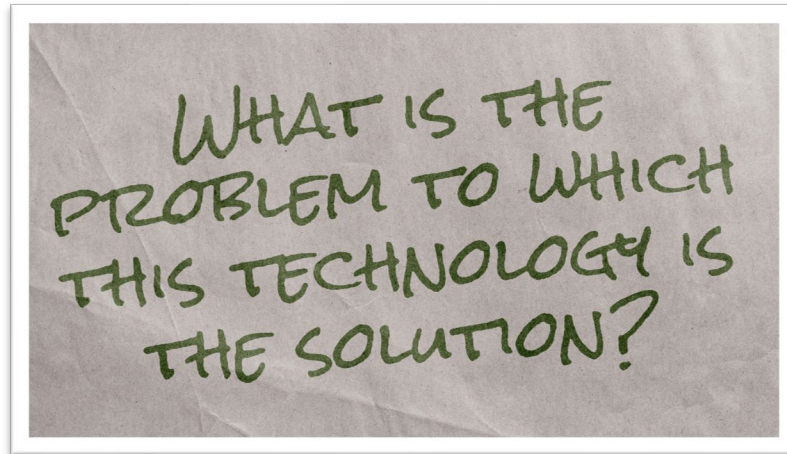
And it is significant that students did not suggest they wanted AI to write their essays for them –perhaps because they were worried about admitting it. But they didn't want AI to handle their childcare. Or do their cooking.

Because some things are difficult, yes. And time-consuming, yes. But they are also fulfilling on a human level – and as the open letter to AI said, we don't want AI to take over those very human things. If AI is going to do things for us - let it be the mind-numbing, soul-destroying stuff that makes us feel less human.

So, what are those things? Not 'what can AI already do for us', or 'what we *must* learn to do with AI'. But what - in an ideal world - would we actually *want* AI to do for us?

Or let me put it another way: In the words of Neil Postman...

“What is the problem to which this technology is the solution?”



Think specifically about yourselves as educators – and your students. And try and avoid falling into the two dominant narratives.

Bibliography:

Attewell, S. (no date) *How will generative AI affect students and employment?*, *Luminate*. Available at: <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/how-will-generative-ai-affect-students-and-employment> (Accessed: 28 May 2025).

Batista, J., Mesquita, A. and Carnaz, G. (2024) 'Generative AI and Higher Education: Trends, Challenges, and Future Directions from a Systematic Literature Review.', *Information* (2078-2489), 15(11), p. 676. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/info15110676>.

Brynjolfsson, E., Li, D. and Raymond, L. (2025) 'Generative AI at Work*', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 140(2), pp. 889–942. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjae044>.

Chan, C.K.Y. (2024) *Generative AI in Higher Education; The ChatGPT Effect*. London: Routledge.

Digital Education Council Global AI Student Survey 2024 (2024). Digital Education Council. Available at: <https://www.digitaleducationcouncil.com/post/digital-education-council-global-ai-student-survey-2024>.

Freeman, J. (no date) 'Student Generative AI Survey 2025'.

Geburu, T. et al. (2024) *Statement from the listed authors of Stochastic Parrots on the "AI pause" letter*, Dair Institute. Available at: <https://www.dair-institute.org/blog/letter-statement-March2023/> (Accessed: 28 May 2025).

Gulati, P. et al. (2025) 'Generative AI Adoption and Higher Order Skills'. arXiv. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2503.09212>.

Hashem, R. et al. (2024) 'AI to the rescue: Exploring the potential of ChatGPT as a teacher ally for workload relief and burnout prevention', *Research and Practice in Technology Enhanced Learning*, 19, pp. 023–023. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.58459/rptel.2024.19023>.

Jacobides, M.G. and Ma, M.D. (2024) 'IoD | London Business School Policy Paper - Assessing the expected impact of Generative AI on the UK competitive landscape'.

Laura, Ronald S. and Chapman, A. (2009) 'The technologisation of education: philosophical reflections on being too plugged in.', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 14(3), pp. 289–298. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13644360903086554>.

Leaver, T. and Srdarov, S. (2025) 'Generative AI and children's digital futures: New research challenges', *Journal of Children and Media*, 19(1), pp. 65–70. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2024.2438679>.

Ogunleye, B. et al. (2024) 'A Systematic Review of Generative AI for Teaching and Learning Practice', *Education Sciences*, 14(6), p. 636. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14060636>.

Pang, W. and Wei, Z. (2025) 'Shaping the Future of Higher Education: A Technology Usage Study on Generative AI Innovations.', *Information (2078-2489)*, 16(2), p. 95. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/info16020095>.

Postman, N. (1999) *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century: How the Past Can Improve Our Future*. New York: Vintage Books.

Student perceptions of generative AI report (2024). JISC. Available at: <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/student-perceptions-of-generative-ai>.

Thomson, H. (2025) "Don't ask what AI can do for us, ask what it is doing to us": are ChatGPT and co harming human intelligence?, *The Guardian*, 19 April. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/apr/19/dont-ask-what-ai-can-do-for-us-ask-what-it-is-doing-to-us-are-chatgpt-and-co-harming-human-intelligence> (Accessed: 1 May 2025).

Wei, X. *et al.* (2025) 'The effects of generative AI on collaborative problem-solving and team creativity performance in digital story creation: an experimental study.', *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 22(1), pp. 1–27. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-025-00526-0>.

Youth Talks on AI (2024). Switzerland: Higher Education for Good. Available at: <https://youth-talks.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Youth-Talks-on-AI-Final-report-03062024.pdf>.

Yusuf, A., Pervin, N. and Román-González, M. (2024) 'Generative AI and the future of higher education: a threat to academic integrity or reformation? Evidence from multicultural perspectives.', *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 21(1), pp. 1–29. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-024-00453-6>.