

As AI replaces thinking, learning is eroding

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Chat GPT and Google Gemini are rapidly becoming the go-to places for students. That by itself is not surprising-after all generations of students have found ways to avoid rigor and skirt around academic engagement. Champion Guides (which condensed the whole course into a pocket-sized paperback) were followed by short YouTube videos.

Champion Guides at least had to be read and crammed and this took time. That changed with YouTube videos. Reading required some modicum of engagement and attention. The attention span of students, used to, as they are, to 20 second Instagram reels, was simply not adequate to read even a page of text. A 10 minute video was all that they could possibly tolerate. And that too at 1.5 times the speed! Books were simply out. In fact, an author of a popular undergraduate textbook told me that his royalties, which previously used to run into tens of thousands annually, were now down to a few hundred. And this includes e-book sales.

Chat GPT and other LLM based AI tools are of course a quantum leap in this evolution. Even the limited engagement of a YouTube video is not required anymore. What is worse, one doesn't even need to formulate a proper query- a few keywords would solve the problem almost instantaneously. The issue runs much deeper than just cheating on homework assignments or presentations. It is to do with the whole process of knowledge acquisition.

The first step in learning is to be able to formulate your thoughts in a language cogently. After all, as philosophers like Wittgenstein tell us, knowledge is about representing facts which of course need a language. This is increasingly challenging for students in English and what is surprising, even in their mother tongues. While earlier they would write and then correct it using dictionaries and thus learn incrementally, they are not attempting to do this anymore.

Last month, almost all the mails from my students requesting me to write recommendations were identical. And what is more, they were professionally drafted

and in perfect English. I was intrigued but then I noticed that the mails addressed me as Dear Professor. This was highly unusual for my students since we, as Macaulay's children, would never think of addressing our teachers as anything other than Dear or Respected Sir. It was clear that the mails were generated by AI. The same is true for writing computer code in the class on Computer programming. The students are not even attempting to do this anymore.

Proponents of AI tools in education could argue that writing code as well as good prose is best outsourced to machines leaving the student with more time to think creatively. That might be the case if the student had already developed some basic skills in language and mathematical and analytic reasoning. These skills are underdeveloped for most of our students and will become more so as these tools are used in the earlier stages of one's education. Developing these skills requires sustained engagement and effort on part of the learner as well as the teacher. With the widespread use of these tools, this is bound to become harder.

Educationists are struggling to deal with the detrimental effects of AI tools in education. Oral presentations instead of Power Point, in-class handwritten essays and computer code are some of the ways being used since research shows that writing by hand improves cognitive ability.

We need to urgently ask how use of these tools, whose capabilities would only increase in the future, can be harnessed for making education more meaningful and aiding in the development of the student's creative and cognitive abilities. Else we might have a generation of passive consumers and not creators. This is of course an uphill task in the face of relentless technological innovation but it is something we have to attempt. We owe it to the next generation.

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