

From Wonder to Responsibility: What AI Has Taught Me

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Abstract

This reflective essay draws on the author's three years of experience using AI tools in academic and educational practice to explore what artificial intelligence reveals about learning itself. Rather than offering a technical account of AI, the essay uses concrete moments, an overlooked suggestion about font accessibility, the creation of pedagogical characters for a teacher training book, to examine three questions: what learners actually want to know, what remains invisible from within one's own frameworks, and who is doing the intellectual work when AI is involved. Written for university students, the essay argues that AI does not change what learning requires; it simply makes the difference between understanding and its appearance more consequential than ever.

Keywords: learning, agency, curiosity, artificial intelligence, higher education, intellectual responsibility

Del asombro a la responsabilidad: enseñanzas de la inteligencia artificial

Resumen

Este ensayo reflexivo parte de tres años de experiencia de la autora utilizando herramientas de inteligencia artificial en su práctica académica y educativa para explorar lo que la inteligencia artificial revela sobre el aprendizaje mismo. En lugar

de ofrecer un análisis técnico sobre la IA, el ensayo recurre a momentos concretos, una sugerencia no contemplada sobre accesibilidad tipográfica, la creación de personajes pedagógicos para un libro de formación docente, para examinar tres preguntas: qué quieren saber realmente quienes aprenden, qué permanece invisible desde los propios marcos de referencia, y quién realiza el trabajo intelectual cuando interviene la IA. Dirigido a estudiantes universitarios, el ensayo sostiene que la IA no modifica lo que el aprendizaje requiere; simplemente vuelve más relevante que nunca la diferencia entre comprender algo y aparentar haberlo comprendido.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje, agencia, curiosidad, inteligencia artificial, educación superior, responsabilidad intelectual

The beginning of it all.

It was not a dramatic moment. I was sitting at my desk, working through a course I had been awarded a scholarship to take, Successful Classrooms for English Learners with Special Needs, and I had asked an AI model to evaluate a lesson plan I had designed. By that point in my career, I had been teaching for nearly three decades. The lesson plan already included Universal Design for Learning principles, flipped learning sequences, metacognitive prompts, and activities mapped to different levels of Bloom's taxonomy. I was not asking for a rescue. I was asking for a second opinion.

The model worked through the plan systematically and then offered a suggestion I had not considered: using dyslexia-friendly fonts in the written materials I gave students.

I sat with that for a moment.

It was such a small thing. A font. And yet I had not thought of it, not because I did not care about my students, and not because I lacked knowledge about inclusive education. I had not thought of it because it existed just outside the boundary of what my existing knowledge made visible. My framework was solid. My blind spot was real.

I made the change. And then I did something that turned out to matter more than the font: I added a question to every prompt I gave the model from that point forward. Is there anything else you need to know to complete this task? Not because I expected the model to know more than me. But because I had learned something about the shape of what I did not know, and I wanted a way of reaching toward it.

That small shift, from give me an answer to what am I not seeing?, is what this essay is about. Not artificial intelligence. Not technology. Learning. Specifically, your learning: what it is, what it requires, and what quietly disappears when you let something else do it for you.

You are studying during a remarkable and genuinely strange moment. The tools available to you can summarise a novel, draft an argument, translate a text, and explain a concept in seconds. They are useful. I use them myself, every day, across thirty years of accumulated questions that I am still working through. But useful is not the same as sufficient, and fast is not the same as deep, and an answer that arrives before you have finished forming the question has a way of leaving you exactly where you started, only with less patience for the discomfort of not knowing.

Here is what three decades of teaching, researching, and learning alongside these tools has shown me: the students who develop most are not the ones who find the best answers. They are the ones who learn to ask better questions. And that skill, irreplaceable, transferable, entirely yours, is precisely what disappears when you outsource the thinking.

What do you actually want to know?

There is a difference between wanting an answer and wanting to understand something. It sounds obvious when stated directly. In practice, it is one of the most difficult distinctions to maintain, particularly when answers are available instantly and understanding takes considerably longer.

I noticed this in my own work long before AI made it urgent. When I began using these tools in my research and teaching, my first instinct was transactional. I needed

a text revised, a document summarised, a set of materials organised. The model was efficient. I was satisfied. And for a while, that felt like enough.

What changed was not the technology. What changed was the quality of my dissatisfaction.

At some point I began noticing that the most useful exchanges were not the ones where I received a clean, complete response. They were the ones where the response made me stop, reconsider what I had asked, and realise that my original question had been the wrong one. Not wrong in the sense of mistaken, but wrong in the sense of shallow. I had been asking for the surface when the interesting question was underneath.

I started asking differently. Instead of write me a summary of this, I began asking what assumptions does this argument rest on, and which of them are contestable? Instead of give me feedback on this lesson plan, I began asking what does this plan make possible for learners, and what does it foreclose? The responses changed, but more importantly, my thinking changed. The model was the same. I was not.

This matters for you because the temptation you face is not laziness, exactly. It is something more subtle: the temptation to accept the first available answer as a substitute for the question you have not yet learned to ask. And that question, the one still forming, the one that does not yet have words, is usually the one worth pursuing.

Think about the last time you were genuinely curious about something. Not curious because it appeared on a syllabus, but curious in the way that makes you forget what time it is. That feeling is not incidental to learning. It is learning, in its earliest and most honest form. What you do with it, whether you follow it or resolve it quickly and move on, determines a great deal about the kind of thinker you are becoming.

“How does your language say this? That comparison is the lesson.”

Suly is one of the characters that appear in the margins of my teaching book whenever an activity asks learners to reach into their own linguistic experience rather than toward a single correct form. She is there because one of the things thirty years

in classrooms has taught me is that the students who bring their full selves into a learning task, their languages, their doubts, their half-formed ideas, learn more than the students who wait to be told what to think. *Sus preguntas son distintas. Sus respuestas también.* And that difference is not a problem to be corrected. It is the lesson.

The question what do you actually want to know? is harder than it sounds, because answering it honestly requires you to acknowledge what you do not yet understand. That is uncomfortable. It is also the only honest starting point for any learning worth the name.

What can you not see from where you are standing?

I want to return to the dyslexia-friendly font, because there is more in that moment than I drew out earlier.

When the model made that suggestion, my first reaction was not resistance. It was something quieter and more uncomfortable: recognition. I had spent years studying inclusive education. I had read the research on Universal Design for Learning, worked through frameworks for neurodiversity, designed activities with accessibility in mind. And still, the font had not occurred to me. Not because the knowledge was absent from my field, but because it was absent from my attention at that particular moment, in that particular task.

That is how blind spots work. They are not gaps in intelligence or commitment. They are the natural consequence of having a framework. Every framework organises what you see, and in doing so, it also organises what you do not see. The more coherent your knowledge becomes, the more invisible its edges.

I have been thinking about this in relation to Suly ever since she appeared in my teaching book.

Suly is the character who turns up when an activity invites learners to bring their own linguistic experience into the room. She asks: how does your language say this? She assumes, as a starting point, that learners arrive with languages rather than without them. But when I created her, I realised something that stopped me mid-thought:

despite having read, discussed, and taught about multilingualism for years, I had been thinking about it in a particular way without noticing I was doing so.

In a foreign language classroom in Mexico, multilingualism tends to be understood as the relationship between Spanish and the target language, most often English. That framing is not wrong, but it is incomplete. Mexico is a country of extraordinary linguistic richness, and many learners carry languages and linguistic histories that a foreign language curriculum rarely finds space for. Those learners, and the knowledge they bring with them, can become invisible not because anyone intends it, but because the framework does not have a place for them. Suly reminded me of that. Or rather, Suly made me see that I had not been seeing it, despite everything I thought I knew.

This is the more demanding version of the blind spot problem: it is not only that we miss details, like a font. It is that the categories we use to understand the world determine what we are capable of noticing in the first place. And those categories can be so familiar, so thoroughly internalised, that questioning them does not feel like an act of intellectual courage. It feels like questioning reality itself.

I am telling you this because the categories we use to understand learning are rarely neutral, and they are rarely designed with every learner in mind. Some will fit your experience closely. Others may describe someone quite different from you, a learner with a different history, a different language at home, a different relationship to the classroom. When a category does not quite fit, it is worth asking whether the problem belongs to the category rather than to you. That is not a comfortable question. It is, however, a useful one.

This is where AI becomes something more than a convenience or a shortcut. If the tools being built to support your education are trained on narrow descriptions of who learners are, they will reproduce those descriptions with greater speed and wider reach than any individual teacher could manage. The categories get harder. The invisible students stay invisible. The font still does not change.

But here is what I have also learned: the first move toward seeing your own blind spots is not to study harder within the framework you already have. It is to ask, genuinely and without already knowing the answer, what am I not seeing from where I am standing? That question is uncomfortable because it does not have a tidy answer. It is also the question that, in my experience, produces the most consequential learning.

Lexy another of my newly created characters for the book I describe ahead, would ask it without hesitation. She would look at this paragraph, at any argument presented with apparent confidence, and ask why that word, why that structure, why that assumption and not another one. She is occasionally exhausting. The students who learn to think like her rarely find it easy to stop.

Who is doing the thinking?

Recently, I made a decision that felt modest at the time and turned out to be one of the more significant things I have done professionally. I had accumulated thirty years of teaching materials, lesson designs, activity templates, recorded reflections, and pedagogical experiments. Most of it lived in folders that no one else could see, in a form that no one else could easily use. I decided to write a book, not an academic monograph, but something a novice teacher could open and find immediately useful, something that might spare them the decades of trial and error that had been, for me, the actual curriculum.

I asked AI to help me gather, organise, and structure that accumulated knowledge. It did so efficiently and well. But at a certain point in the process, I made a choice that had nothing to do with efficiency. I decided to add characters.

The statistics textbook that had accompanied me through my doctoral research had done something I had never forgotten: it had made me want to read about statistics. Not because the content was simplified, but because the book had a personality, and that personality had made the difficulty feel companionable rather than hostile. I wanted to give novice teachers something similar. Not a manual, but a conversation.

What I got back from the model, when I described what I was looking for, surprised me. The characters that emerged were not illustrations or mascots. Each one carried a pedagogical position, a distinct way of being in a classroom, and a message to the teacher reading the page. Flo, who believes that a sentence spoken imperfectly is worth ten sentences never said, and who has very little patience with silence. Lexy, who is never quite satisfied, who will always ask one more question about why the writer chose that word, why the essay structure works, why the poem uses that image. Patrick, who has never met a template he did not eventually want to throw out of the window, but who will admit, usually, that constraints sometimes produce the best creative work.

Each character named something I had learned across three decades but had never quite articulated in this form. The model helped me find the shape of knowledge I already had. That is a precise description of what AI does well, and it is worth holding onto: it can help you find the shape of what you already know. What it cannot do is know it for you, or care about it, or decide that it matters.

This brings me to the question I find most important, and most difficult to answer honestly: who is doing the thinking?

When you submit a prompt and receive a response, something has happened. But what exactly? If you read the response carefully, question it, compare it with what you already know, push back against the parts that do not seem right, and use it as a starting point for your own reasoning, then you have been thinking. The model was a tool in that process, the way a library is a tool, or a conversation with a knowledgeable friend. But if you read the response, accept it, and move on, then the thinking was done elsewhere, and what you have is not understanding. It resembles understanding closely enough to be mistaken for it, at least until the moment you are asked to do something with it that the model cannot do for you.

Flo knows this better than anyone. She does not care whether the sentence is correct. She cares whether you said it, whether you committed to the attempt, whether you moved through the discomfort of not quite knowing how to express something and came out the other side having expressed it anyway. The correction

can come later. The experience of having made something, however imperfectly, is what internalises the learning. It is what makes it yours.

You are studying at a moment when polished, ready-made answers are very easy to obtain. A well-formed paragraph, a coherent argument, a plausible response, all of it available in seconds, all of it looking exactly like the product of sustained thought. The question worth asking is not whether you can obtain it. The question is what you are left with once you have.

Patrick would say: learn the rules first. Understand why the structure exists, what it makes possible, what it costs. Then, when you know it thoroughly enough to feel its edges, break it beautifully. That sequence matters. The beauty is not in the breaking. It is in the knowing.

“Rules first. Then break them beautifully.”

There is no shortcut to that kind of knowledge. There is no prompt that produces it. It accumulates slowly, through reading and attempting and failing and revising and trying again, and one day you look back and realise you understand something in a way that is genuinely yours, in a way that no one can take from you, in a way that will still be there when the tool is unavailable, or the answer is wrong, or the moment requires something that cannot be generated on request.

That is what learning is. That is what is worth protecting.

Conclusion

I began with a font.

It was such a small thing. A suggestion I had not thought of, offered by a tool I had asked a simple question. I have spent this essay trying to explain why that moment mattered, and I want to end by telling you what I think it was actually about.

It was about the gap between what I knew and what I could see. Thirty years of teaching had given me a great deal of knowledge, and that knowledge had a shape,

and the shape had edges, and the edges were invisible to me precisely because they were edges. The model did not know more than I did. It simply stood somewhere I did not, and from there, the font was visible.

You are going to spend the next years of your life accumulating knowledge of your own. Some of it will come from classrooms, some from books, increasingly some from conversations with tools that did not exist when I started teaching and that will likely be unrecognisable by the time you finish university. All of that knowledge will have a shape. All of it will have edges. And you will not be able to see those edges from where you stand, because that is not how edges work.

What you can do is ask. Not once, but as a habit. Is there something I am not seeing? What would someone with a different history, a different language, a different set of questions notice here that I have missed? That question will not always have a comfortable answer. It rarely points somewhere convenient. But it is the question that keeps a framework from closing in on itself, and it is the question that, in my experience, opens the door to almost everything worth learning.

I think of Suly when I think about what gets left out of a lesson before anyone notices it is missing. I think of Lexy when I notice I have stopped asking why. I think of Flo when I catch myself waiting for a sentence to be perfect before I am willing to say it. And I think of Patrick when I remember that the rules I have spent so long learning are not the destination. They are what makes it possible to go somewhere new without losing the thread.

None of these characters came from outside my experience. They came from thirty years of watching students, including the parts of myself that were also, in some sense, still a student. AI helped me find the words for them. It did not create them, and it could not have.

You will use these tools. You should. They are capable in ways that would have seemed implausible when I began teaching, and pretending otherwise would not serve you. But capability is not the same as judgement, and speed is not the same as understanding, and an answer that arrives before you have finished forming the

question leaves you, in the end, exactly where you started, except with one fewer question you might have asked.

So here is what I would ask of you, if I could ask just one thing.

The next time you reach for an answer while “talking” to the AI, pause for a moment before you take it. Ask yourself what you were actually curious about. Ask what you might not be seeing from where you stand. Ask who, in the end, is doing the thinking.

The question is not whether to use AI.

The question is who you are becoming while you do.