



What Is Worth Learning in the Age of AI?

Cheating, over-reliance, and the question underneath both

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A problem older than AI

Academic dishonesty did not arrive with generative AI. In the early 1960s, William Bowers surveyed college students at universities across the country and found that cheating was common. When Donald McCabe and Linda Treviño repeated the survey at the same nine state universities thirty years later, the share of students who reported copying from another student on a test had grown from 26 percent to 52 percent, and unpermitted collaboration had grown from 11 percent to 49 percent (McCabe & Treviño, 1996).

Is AI making it worse? We do not know yet. Those studies relied on students reporting their own behavior, and students may not count AI use as cheating when they answer. AI detection tools are not reliable measures either. What we do know is that AI arrived inside conditions researchers have described for decades.

This summer, a story about a Brown University economics class made the rounds. According to published reports, Professor Roberto Serrano's students averaged 96 on a take-home midterm and 48 on an in-person final, and 27 students dropped the course or skipped the final, 22 of whom had earned perfect scores on the midterm. Serrano believes AI explains the gap. It is one class, and the evidence is circumstantial, but it raises the question many of us are asking.

What is worth learning, not what is AI-proof

I find a different question more useful than which assignments can survive AI: what is worth learning, what is worth teaching, and what would education look like if we designed from those answers?

Tests are not the problem. Retrieval practice, the effort of recalling what you know, is one of the most reliable ways to make understanding durable. The better question is what sits beyond recall. Employers say they want analytical thinking, yet many of the early-career tasks where people build judgment and experience are increasingly handled by generative

AI. Some people see human thinking as a unit of labor whose value is tied to its output, which makes it easy to swap in AI.

I do not share that view. I hold that people have value beyond what each of us can do or produce, and that conviction shapes how I work with AI. The learning experiences I design focus on growing human wisdom, discernment, critical thinking, and other human capacities, especially in the context of AI use. It also shaped my choice to teach at a liberal arts college and what I teach, including a new integrated humanities course this fall, “Life Worth Living in the Age of AI.”

Identifying the skills each field depends on

The answer to what is worth learning differs by discipline, so the question has to be asked field by field. Business, nursing, accounting, and math or analytics programs each depend on capabilities that graduates must be able to perform on their own judgment, and those capabilities are not the same list. A useful place to start is with the people who practice the field. What do experienced professionals decide that novices cannot? Which early tasks build that judgment? Which of those tasks does AI now do, and what happens to the learner when it does?

Faculty, employers, and recent graduates can each answer part of this. Once a department names the skills its field cannot do without, it can trace where students develop them and where our teaching needs to change so they still do.

Cheating is not over-reliance

Cheating and over-reliance are different problems. Cheating violates trust. Over-reliance interferes with development, and a student can slide into it without breaking a rule or intending to. Over-reliance is related to cognitive offloading, and early research suggests that uncritical AI use can erode critical thinking.

Offloading is not inherently bad. I no longer memorize phone numbers, and I do not miss pulling over after dark to read a paper map by the weak glow of a dome light. The useful questions are what kind of offloading is happening and what is worth preserving rather than handing off.

What the research says works

Because academic dishonesty is a decades-old problem, we have decades of research on what fosters integrity. Honor codes show a consistent relationship with lower cheating. McCabe, Treviño, and Butterfield (2002) found that students at schools with honor codes

reported less dishonest behavior than students at comparable schools without them. The larger question for any campus is how to build a climate where students and employees alike treat dishonesty as unacceptable in every part of their work, studies, and lives.

Structure matters alongside culture. Cheating tends to rise when a course is built around grades and rankings rather than mastery, and when one unsupervised moment decides most of the grade. Cutting take-home exams and homework from the grade is an understandable response, but it trades one high-stakes moment for another instead of building lower-stakes development along the way.

What I do in my own classroom

I build scaffolding into the learning experiences I design. Students get more chances to develop their thinking, and I get more chances to see it forming before the stakes rise. At least one major assignment depends on process, not only the final product, so students show their thinking along the way. I include retrieval practice that cannot be outsourced to AI because it happens in the room, in real time. And I create exercises where students experience the difference between using AI to think and using AI instead of thinking, a distinction most of them have never been asked to make. They need to work out why their own cognitive development matters to them, their goals, and their futures.

What we owe students

A meta-analysis of 565 behavioral experiments found that about four in ten adults lied when they had a chance to gain from it: 42 percent of men and 38 percent of women (Gerlach, Teodorescu, & Hertwig, 2019). When I see dishonesty tolerated, even rewarded, among adults, I wonder why we would expect students to hold themselves to a higher standard. My students learn more from what I do than from what I say or formally teach.

We cannot hand students a set of rules about AI and call it preparation. They need the chance to think critically while working alongside this technology, so that when they are the ones making decisions, they have already done the harder work of developing discernment and forming sound judgment.

To bring this conversation to your campus, visit humanwiselearning.com/contact.

Sources

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