

Critical Thinking About AI: Questions for Students and Educators

Artificial Intelligence is taking American society and education by storm. As the editors of *Rethinking Schools* [recently noted](#):

In the next 10 years the AI education market is projected to reach between \$112 billion and \$127 billion — more than double the federal government’s entire K–12 education budget. Tech executives, administrators, and even some teacher union leaders are urging educators to utilize AI for everything from lesson planning to giving feedback, and to teach students how to use AI “ethically.”

Unfortunately, those cheerleading the blitzkrieg of AI technology on all fronts have failed to account for the fundamental truth that any technology is simply a tool that is used by particular people in particular societies subject to the social relations and existing power dynamics of said societies.

Presently, the AI push is driving us toward what many critics see as a vastly more unequal, ecologically unsustainable, and culturally impoverished destiny. And yet, even after any number of cautionary tales we have seen with the smartphone, internet technology, social media, and more, we just can’t seem to wait to get to the AI boosters rosy sci-fi future with not just the tech elite but leaders in education, medicine, industry, and finance all waving the flag.

Theoretically, it is conceivable that artificial intelligence could end up resulting in groundbreaking advances in medicine, a reduction in the hours people must work at unsatisfying tasks, and a whole brave new world of humans using robots and other technologies to transform the world for the good. At least that’s the story we keep hearing from AI’s promoters.

But before we jump on the AI bandwagon, there are some key questions that we as educators and unionists need to ask ourselves and share with our students, whether we plan to use, negotiate with, or reject AI in our classrooms and workplaces:

- 1). Can and/or should we ignore the reality that AI is situated in a network of social, economic, and political power? What interests do the corporate entities behind AI have and how do they coincide and/or conflict with labor, climate justice, and education?
- 2). What impact will AI have on the economy? Jobs? Organized labor? What jobs are the most vulnerable? What kinds of work will be created? What will the net impact be for the average American worker? With deskilling and Taylorism at its core, how can we expect AI to be put in the service of the broader interests of working people? In an era of historic economic inequality, is it wise to follow the lead of an industry that threatens to serve as a driving engine of future inequity and economic displacement and the creation of a new underclass—a “technofeudalism”—of unskilled workers?
- 3). What are the environmental and climate costs of AI and the data centers that it necessitates? How are these costs distributed across socio-economic classes and ethnic groups? How will the incorporation of AI into the heart of the American economy and society in an era of catastrophic climate change drive both resource consumption and further exacerbate climate change? How much energy will it use? How much water will be needed? Who should pay for the costs of those impacts? Are they worth it?
- 4). Not being neutral, all technologies come with an ideological bias that justifies their social necessity. AI is a tool that promises maximum efficiency, endless technical “innovation,” immediate access to a vast amount of information, and profitability. Are the values of efficiency, innovation, speed, convenience, and endless commodification superior to those of human judgement, frequently inefficient social interaction,

careful inquiry, creativity, curiosity, imagination, and love for learning and each other? Is information extraction the same as knowledge? Is the maximally efficient institution better than a beloved, human-centered community?

5). What impact will AI have on our brains, our social life, and learning beyond the easy availability of information? Will our students be surveilled and mined for data by interested parties posing as educational innovators? How do we as educators and workers use AI in our own areas? What impact is it having on us—on our ability to think, to socialize, to do research, to learn, to collaborate? Has our use of AI opened us up to having more tasks added to our jobs?

6). How will reading and writing, art, music, politics, philosophy, medicine, law, and much more be impacted? As it privileges information processing over human judgement and confuses the ability to efficiently deliver information with intelligence and creativity, will AI replace lived human culture with an imitation? What is the future of the humanities, social sciences, and other less instrumental disciplines in the age of AI?

7). What will unregulated AI do to our children and their ability to learn, think, remember, and develop their full humanity? Can we learn from the cautionary tales brought to us by smartphones, social media, and other technologies when it comes to performing a widescale social experiment on our nation's young people in the service of capital? What do we make of recent studies linking young peoples' uses of AI tools with learning delays, the inability to focus and complete tasks, and the lack of development of essential skills that lead to academic and career success as they move through their lives?

8) Will AI be used to prepare students for the workplace by giving them new skills or will it be a force that eliminates entry level jobs, outsources previously human-centered work to bots, two-tiers our education system into one where the children of the elite are taught how to read and think critically, while the rest of the population is given the equivalent of job training for disposable workers? Are we being sold pauperization under the guise of "equity"?

9) As we enter an age where reading becomes less and less valued and what is essentially plagiarism stands in for an accepted academic tool, what will be the consequences of a far less literate and deeply educated society? How might this impact democracy?

10) Is the only choice that students, educators, workers, and citizens have is how to use AI or is there still room for the question of whether we should use it at all in many cases? Is this simply a practical question or is it a moral and existential one? In short, can AI ever be taught or used "ethically"?

As Jesse Hagopian notes in [his article](#) in *Rethinking Schools*:

Dismantling the logic behind AI in schools means rejecting the entire framework that treats education as a commodity instead of a common good. It means funding smaller class sizes, not software. Valuing joy, creativity, and critical thinking--not compliance and metrics. Investing in human relationships instead of automation. Teaching students to ask questions, not just answer them.

In a society with a clear historic bias towards unquestioning technophilia, it should be our obligation as educators bent on creating critically thinking citizens in a democracy to err on the side of informed skepticism rather than cheerleading for an industry and technology with the potential to do grave harm. Like the Luddites on the verge of a technological revolution which would eventually eliminate their profession and social status as craftspeople, perhaps it might be wise to think before becoming the rope makers for our own professional hanging and the sacrifice of our students to corporate interests.