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AI for New Teachers: A Cautionary Tale

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AI for New Teachers: A Cautionary Tale

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Meet Mr. Johnson, A New Teacher

Mr. Johnson was a last-minute hire, fresh out of college, and anxious about the work of teaching itself - managing a room, responding in real time, and making learning happen on a clock that doesn't pause. He had student-taught, but this was different: no cooperating teacher, no built-in structure, and no one quietly steering when things went sideways. He was the teacher of record on day one, overwhelmed before he even met his first class.

This was a large high school, and he wasn't alone. The building had hired about 30 new teachers this semester - an entire cohort of newcomers learning the ropes at the same time, all trying to look calm while quietly sprinting.

Because he was hired so late, his "training" was recorded. A digital folder of onboarding videos. A few slide decks. A couple of links. He started the Monday after a long weekend. Which meant his induction was essentially: log in, press play, and then walk into a room full of teenagers who did not care that his orientation was still buffering.

What hit Mr. Johnson first wasn't the students. It was the requirements. He wasn't just learning to plan lessons; he was trying to keep up with format requirements, mandatory components, submission timelines, and template fields - while also navigating accommodation documentation, internal systems, attendance procedures, parent contact logs, and data protocols. It wasn't just "plan a lesson." It was to prove you planned it - in the correct format, with the correct labels, aligned to the correct expectations, uploaded to the correct place. He didn't feel like he was learning to teach; he felt like he was learning to produce paperwork.

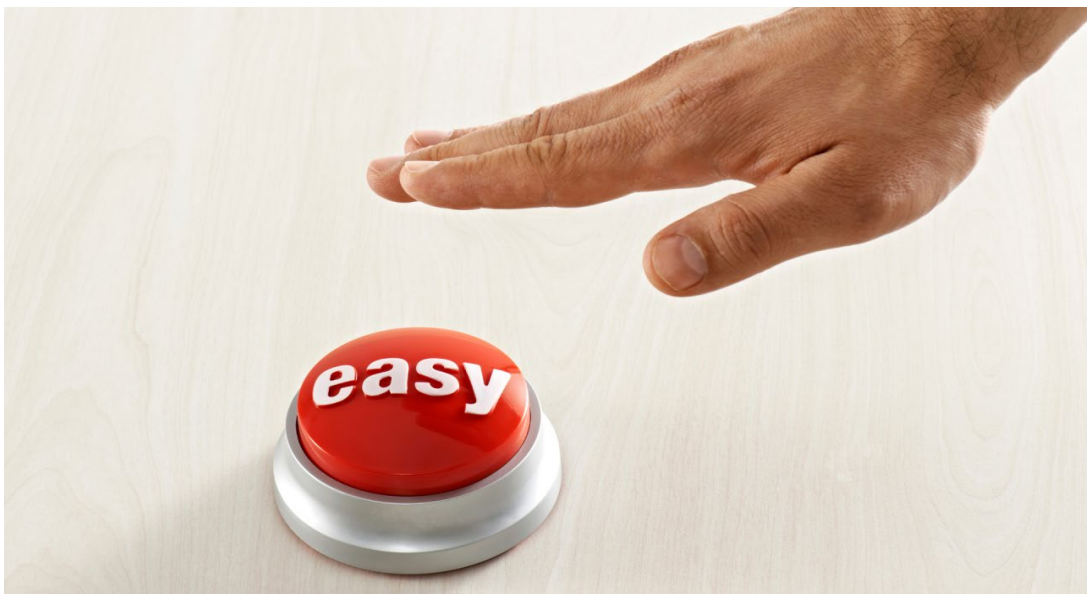
The Magical Shortcut

During his first week, a well-meaning colleague showed him an AI lesson-planning platform.

"Just type the topic, the grade, and the standard," they said. "Pick what type of documents you want. Click generate. This is wonderful."

Wonderful indeed. The screen filled almost instantly: lesson objectives, warm-up activities, mini-lesson, guided practice, independent practice, exit ticket, even a rubric. It looked like magic. It also felt like relief.

With one more click, the platform generated a full slide deck to match - beautifully done slide presentations with clean layouts, polished fonts, neatly organized bullet points, and stock images that looked "educational" at first glance. The slides were the kind that look great projected on a screen and screenshot well for walkthroughs.



Mr. Johnson didn't see a draft. He saw something that looked finished.

Mr. Johnson didn't hear, "This is a drafting tool." He heard, "This is how it's done and done right."

The Eight-Page Lesson Plan

By the end of the first week, Mr. Johnson looked impressively prepared on paper. His slides were clean, his handouts were polished, and his lesson plans were meticulously structured with headers, subheaders, and sub-subheaders. If formatting were instruction, his classroom would have been a district model.

Each prep came with an eight-page lesson plan. That's eight pages, per class.

For social studies, Mr. Johnson's subject, the standards alone took up nearly two full pages - unpacked, restated, cross-referenced, and neatly formatted. The plan included historical thinking skills, Tier 2 vocabulary, and a section titled *Primary Source Opportunities* that sounded impressive even when it was mostly a copied excerpt from a speech no one in the room understood. There were suggested scaffolds, anticipated misconceptions, pacing notes, and differentiation options. The document was immaculate. It looked like something you might screenshot for a professional development session slide deck.

It was also created without the students in front of him in mind.

The plans were written for an imaginary class-one that always read the directions, came in ready, asked the "right" questions, and completed the work at the pace of the lesson plan clock. Mr. Johnson hadn't yet learned what his actual students needed, how they responded, where they got stuck, or what would make them lean in. No one had worked with him on examining student work or analyzing formative and summative assessment data.

And people noticed the document before they noticed the disconnect. A few veteran teachers complimented him in the hallway. An assistant principal skimmed the first page, nodded approvingly, and said, "You're doing great. This is exactly what we want to see." No one had visited the class yet.

The paperwork created confidence before the instruction ever had a chance to earn it. The plans looked like strong teaching. So Mr. Johnson assumed the teaching must be strong, too.

Borrowed Language, Borrowed Confidence

Each unit began with AI unpacking the standards. Mr. Johnson typed prompts like:

"Unpack these standards into learning targets, misconceptions, and pacing for high school students."
The output looked professional. He pasted it directly into his lesson plan template.

But once the standards were "unpacked," Mr. Johnson didn't know how to use them. Which skill should be the focus today? What should mastery look like in student work? How should today's lesson build toward tomorrow?

So the unpacking lived in a folder. The objective went on the board. The lesson drifted. When students struggled, he added another activity.

AI had given him a map, but no one had taught him how to read it.

Planning Becomes Production

Because he wasn't sure what mattered most instructionally, Mr. Johnson leaned into what felt productive: he generated more. Late one night, he typed a prompt into the platform: *Create a full lesson plan with slides, handouts, an exit ticket, and a rubric for a lesson on the causes of the French Revolution.* Minutes later, a complete package appeared. There was a crisp slide deck with bold headings and tidy bullet points, plus an image of a charging crowd that looked like it belonged on a streaming-series poster called *Revolution: Season One.* He clicked through, nodded to himself, and felt the smallest hint of relief. Good enough.

After that, his days developed a rhythm. Every class began with a packet. Not a handout-a packet: stapled pages with a do-now, vocabulary, a short reading, an excerpt, a graphic organizer, a few checks for understanding, and an exit ticket. Some weeks, the packets marched through revolutions and industrialization. Other weeks, they sprinted through reconstruction and immigration, the usual race to get through "just one more unit" before the next benchmark window. Mr. Johnson got faster and faster at producing them. What once took hours took one evening. Then a lunch period. Eventually, he was generating two weeks' worth with a few clicks.

He started talking about planning like meal prep: "*I'm set through next Friday."* And on paper, he was. The packets were coherent, beautifully formatted, and undeniably efficient. Adults who glanced at them saw diligence and organization. But over time, efficiency began to replace intention. He stopped pausing to ask what mattered most: What do I want *these* students to understand? What can they already do? What will trip them up? What will make them care?

A Mountain of Questions, But No Discussion

His first formal observation came in October, and the assistant principal made it clear what they wanted to see: classroom discussion. Mr. Johnson came ready. The lesson plan was eight pages long, aligned to standards, filled with scaffolds, and formatted like a professional document. Afterward, the feedback was both reassuring and unsettling. He was organized. The plan was thorough. The materials were strong. Then came the line that stuck with him: he needed to work on discussion.

Mr. Johnson took that as a solvable problem, like a missing ingredient. That night, he opened his laptop and typed, *Generate 50 higher-order discussion questions for high school students about the causes of World War I.* The list appeared instantly, polished and confident. He copied it, printed it, and walked into class the next day feeling prepared. He started asking the questions one after another. The same two students carried the conversation. Everyone else looked down, suddenly fascinated by their notebooks. When the room went quiet, he filled the silence with another question. The questions sounded rigorous - academic vocabulary, big ideas, plenty of "analyze" and "evaluate." But they didn't move the room. They didn't build momentum. They didn't help students listen to each other or develop a shared line of thinking.

The discussion became a pattern: teacher asks, a couple of students answer, teacher moves on. Over and over. Students weren't building ideas together. They were auditioning for the next question. Mr. Johnson had a mountain of prompts, but he still didn't have the practice of facilitating discussion.

"Differentiation" That Changed the Task

After a few rough days, with some students stuck on the reading and others racing ahead, Mr. Johnson did what he had learned to do when he felt unsure. He went back to the platform. He typed, Create differentiated versions of this reading for three levels and include sentence frames, and watched the options appear as if the problem had been solved.

On paper, it looked thoughtful. There were three versions, neatly labeled. There were sentence starters that sounded academic. There were even supports embedded in the margins. Mr. Johnson printed them, sorted them into stacks, and felt responsible, like he was finally meeting everyone where they were.

But the more he used it, the more something subtle happened. Some students received simplified versions that removed the very complexity they needed to learn how to handle. Others ended up doing tasks that barely resembled what their classmates were doing. A few noticed immediately. "Why is mine different?" one asked, half joking, half alert. Mr. Johnson smiled, said it was to help everyone succeed, and kept moving.

He genuinely wanted to support his students. But without a clear sense of how to preserve rigor while increasing access, differentiation turned into visual variation. Different pages. Different tasks. Different expectations. The work changed. The thinking shrank. The plans looked even better. The gaps grew.

Feedback Without a Teacher's Voice

When grading season arrived, Mr. Johnson faced another familiar wall: time. Stacks of student work, deadlines, and the pressure to return feedback quickly. So he opened AI again and typed, *Generate rubric-based feedback for these student responses*.

The comments were polished, complete sentences with a professional tone, plenty of strengths, and next steps. He pasted them into the document, copied them onto rubrics, and felt relieved that at least students were getting something.

But the feedback landed oddly. Students read it, nodded, and still did not know what to do next. The comments did not point to specific moments in their work. They did not name the misconception he had seen in class. They did not sound like Mr. Johnson's voice or reflect what he had emphasized.

It sounded like someone else had taught the lesson.

The plans were flawless. Student thinking was not improving.

The Part He Never Noticed

By winter, Mr. Johnson felt busy - and, in a quiet way, relieved.

He was ahead on pacing. His plans were done weeks in advance. His slides looked professional. His packets were consistent. His folders were immaculate. He was meeting requirements. He was submitting on time. He was keeping his head above water.

From his vantage point, that felt like success.

In a building this large and with so many new teachers, colleagues circulating past his room saw students working on packets and assumed things were fine. Supervisors were often mesmerized by the documentation: the eight-page plans, the standards alignment, the polished rubrics, the clean formatting. The feedback he received focused on organization and preparation, followed by mild suggestions to "work on discussion" or "push engagement a bit more."
Those polished documents covered up the fact that his teaching was ineffective.

And Mr. Johnson didn't realize it - not because he didn't care, but because no one around him disrupted the illusion. No one named the difference between producing instruction and developing instruction. No one intervened early enough, directly enough, to help him build the actual craft.

AI was working. Mr. Johnson was standing still.

Supporting New Teachers With AI Without Skipping the Basics

The core issue in Mr. Johnson's story is not that he used AI. It is that AI showed up before he had the basics of the craft.

Your job as a leader is to make the sequence clear: formation first, acceleration second. Here is what that looks like in practice.

① **Start With the Standard, Not the Prompt**

Have new teachers practice identifying the core skill in a standard, describing what mastery looks like in student work, and mapping how today's lesson builds toward unit outcomes. Then use AI to refine wording, generate examples, and anticipate misconceptions after the teacher has done the initial thinking.

② Design the Learning Path Before Generating Materials

New teachers should learn how to align objectives, tasks, and evidence of learning. They should learn how to sequence a lesson and plan for misconceptions and pivots. Then AI can assist with slides, handouts, checks for understanding, and exit tickets that match an intentional design.

③ Build Discussion Skill Before Building Question Banks

Before turning to AI for "50 questions," make sure new teachers know what quality questions look like and how discussion techniques work in practice. Coach them to distinguish between questions that simply check recall and questions that prompt thinking, evidence, and reasoning. Teach the facilitation moves that make talk productive, including wait time, strategic follow-ups, pressing for evidence, and getting students to respond to each other, not just to the teacher.

Then, and only then, use AI to generate a smaller set of questions that match the discussion structure the teacher already knows how to run, and coach the teacher to select, revise, and sequence them.

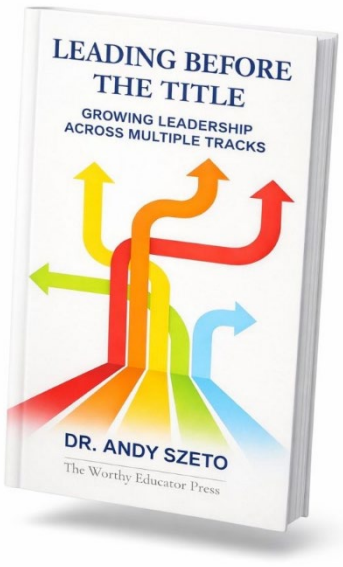
④ Teach Support and Feedback Before Automating Them

Before using AI to differentiate, clarify the difference between scaffolding and lowering the bar, and how to preserve the core thinking task. Before using AI for feedback, coach teachers to reference evidence from student work and name next steps tied to criteria in a voice students recognize. Then allow AI to draft, and require the teacher to revise and personalize.

⑤ Look Past the Artifacts and Coach Early

Polished plans, clean slides, and organized packets can mask weak instruction. Make student thinking the primary evidence of effectiveness. Coach the judgment behind AI use by asking what the teacher decided first, what AI suggested, and what they changed and why. If speed of production is outpacing growth in practice, intervene early with modeling, co-planning, rehearsals, and quick follow-up observations.

> *"AI can make teaching faster. Only leadership can make teaching better. The safeguard is the sequence: craft first, tools second."*



Dr. Andy Szeto is a New York City-based educational leader, writer, and professor whose work focuses on instructional leadership, district systems, multilingual learner advocacy, and responsible, practical uses of AI in education. His writing turns complex leadership challenges into usable tools, decision prompts, and implementation-oriented frameworks for school and district leaders. Andy's work has been published across a range of education outlets, including ASCD, Tech & Learning, eSchoolNews, District Administration, NAESP Communicator, Teaching Social Studies, the Journal for Leadership and Instruction, Faculty Focus, and Getting Smart. He regularly publishes on Lead Forward, his exclusive feature for The Worthy Educator. Andy is the author of Leading Before the Title: Growing Leadership Multiple Tracks (The Worthy Educator Press, 2025), and he has an upcoming chapter focused on college and career guidance for multilingual learners entitled "AI-Powered Postsecondary Guidance for Multilingual Learners." His next book focuses on his journey as an English learner, coming out in late 2026. To subscribe to his newsletter, please visit his LinkedIn page or drandyszeto.com.

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