SUMMER 2025

LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Reclaiming AI for Learning: Empowering Students

The Worthy Educator

theworthyeducator.com

SUMMER 2025

LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Reclaiming AI for Learning: Empowering Students

John Schembari, Ed.D., School Improvement Expert and Education Management Consultant, New York, New York

When I proclaim in my workshops that AI has the potential to revolutionize teaching and learning in powerful ways, I'm often met with skepticism. The common refrain? *"But AI is cheating."* And yes - some students do use AI to shortcut their assignments. One teacher recently shared her frustration after discovering that a student used AI to complete a task meant to match curated protest songs with social justice issues. Instead of analyzing and making connections on their own, the student submitted an AI-generated response.

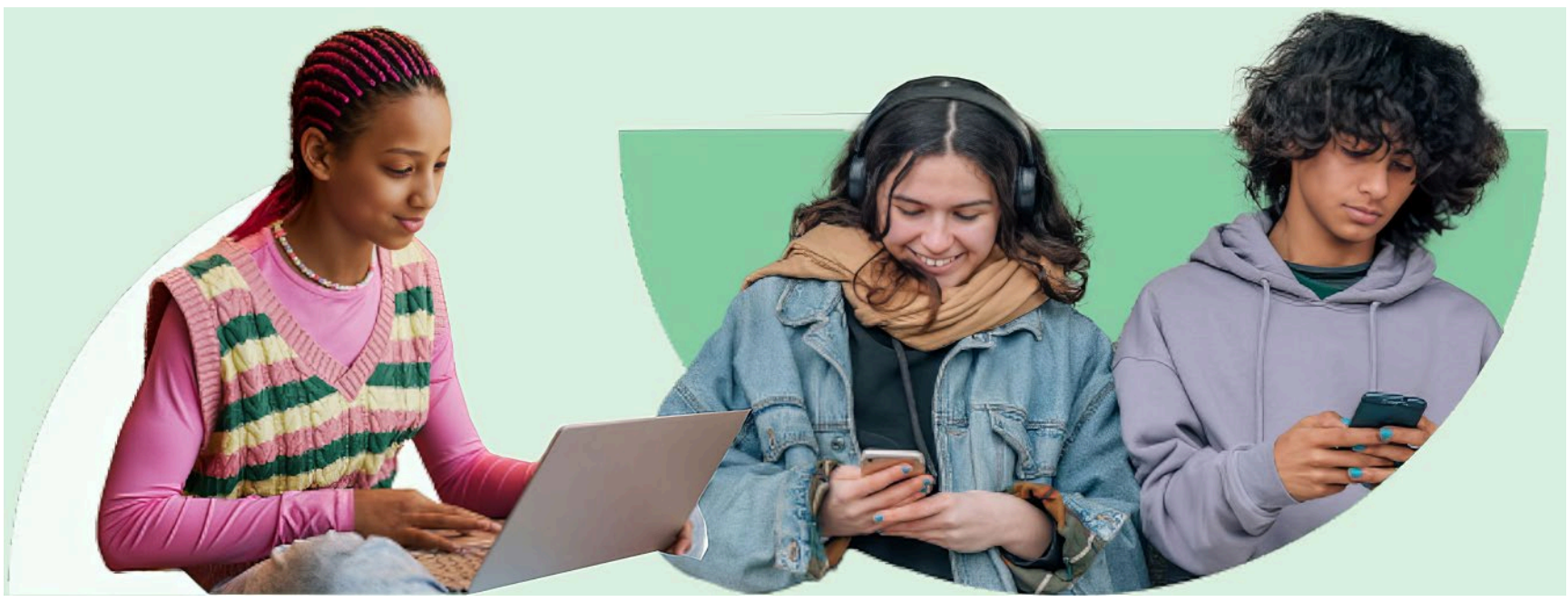
Understandably, the teacher felt discouraged. But this doesn't have to be a story of academic dishonesty - it can be a case of instructional opportunity. With some redesign, this assignment could have invited AI as a tool to extend student thinking, rather than replace it. Let's explore the mindset shift we have to make regarding AI use and identify practical strategies to design cognitively rich, AI-enhanced learning experiences that promote engagement, critical thinking and creativity.

The Dilemma

The high school teacher I mention above is a committed practitioner who is particularly passionate about helping her students to appreciate both the history and literature of social equality movements in her African American literature seminar. To ensure that her students did not get confused or distracted by the thousands of possibilities available to them, she spent hours curating a select list of singers and protest songs related to different social justice issues such as civil rights, war, gender and climate. Her goal was for learners to match songs to issues and explain their thinking in writing. However, one student had AI do this task for him and then submitted the response as his work and the teacher felt cheated. While her feelings about the situation are understandable, what if she looks at it as more than a case of AI misuse? Consider it as a teachable moment.

The common assumption is that AI use equals plagiarism, when a student uses another person's words, ideas, or work without giving them proper credit and presents it as their own. While the use of AI is not inherently plagiarism, it can be if it's not used and cited properly. Much of this depends on whether the user clearly acknowledged that they employed AI as a learning tool, if they added their own thinking beyond what information the AI, like ChatGPT, provided them and if they cited it as a source.

Students use AI for a variety of reasons. Per the report, Teen and Young Adult Perspectives on Generative AI, written by Harvard's Center for Digital Thriving in partnership with Common Sense Media and Hopelab, which relates that, of teens surveyed, many admit to using AI to cheat on assignments, homework or tests. At the same time, they also shared positive academic experiences they've had with generative AI, including finding new information (53%) and brainstorming (51%). In addition, the study noted that Black and Hispanic youth are "significantly more likely" to use AI than other groups and that generative AI helps students them find answers to questions they may be too afraid to ask adults and by offering them guidance on what to say if they do feel anxiety about those kinds of conversations.



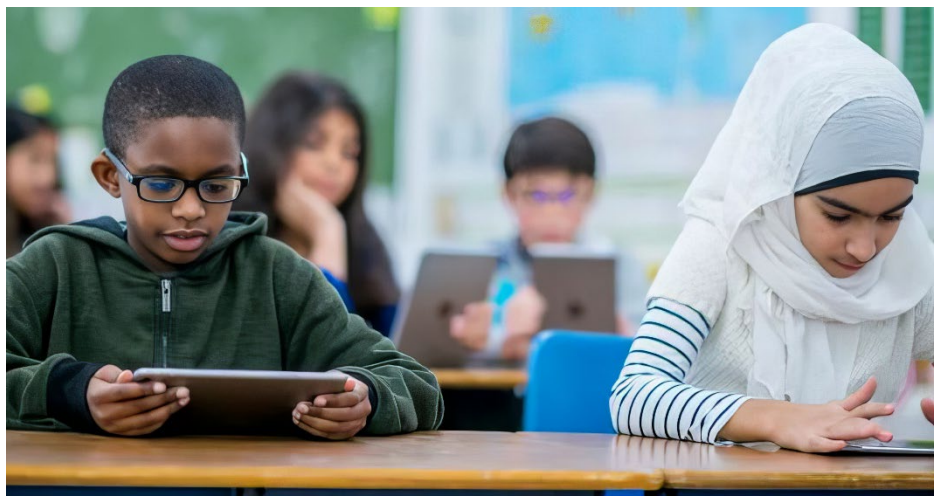
While the fact that many young people do use AI to cheat is alarming, digging deeper we understand that they also use it in constructive ways. For these reasons, we need to reframe how we see AI from something that students use to shirk responsibility and accountability for learning to that of a tool that serves as an impetus for them to learn if we design learning tasks in a more cognitively rich and engaging manner.

As Jose Bowen, former president of Goucher College, recently stated on the Have a Life Teaching podcast, "What we (educators) call cheating, other industries call progress." Indeed, youth today will need to know how to use AI to compete in the 21st Century workplace and if schools continue to ban them from using it, we are teaching them our past rather than their future.

Redesigning Learning Tasks

We often ask our students to summarize text and recall basic information in the form of written reports. While this serves an important purpose - particularly when checking student understanding before moving on - such tasks are easily generated by AI. These assignments follow predictable patterns, require lower-order thinking and align closely with the formats on which AI systems have been trained.

In contrast, stronger learning tasks invite students to engage in deeper thinking: to add their own voice, offer analysis, reflect on meaning and synthesize content across sources, experiences and disciplines. These tasks are far more difficult for AI to replicate because they require personal insight, contextual judgment and authentic engagement.



Consider how you can redesign assignments. Instead of asking "What happened in the text?", we can ask "What does this remind you of?", "Why does this matter now?" and "What's a perspective that's missing from this text?" Incorporating student voice, choice and purpose not only resists AI overuse but fosters more durable, relevant learning.

Additionally, when used intentionally, AI can serve as a springboard for discussion, comparison and critique. For instance, students might review an AI summary and revise it, identifying what it missed or misunderstood. In this way, AI doesn't replace learning - it fuels it.

Designing AI-Enhanced Learning Experiences

First, teach responsible use, instructing children as to what ethical use involves. Ethical AI is accomplished in ways that are honest, responsible and respectful of others' work, privacy and learning goals. It involves being transparent about when and how AI is used and ensuring that it supports - not replaces - original thinking, creativity and critical analysis. One powerful way to promote the ethical use of AI is to require learners to share their AI use reflections. This simple accountability measure can increase transparency around the use of AI, encourages student metacognition and maintains the primacy of original and creative thought.

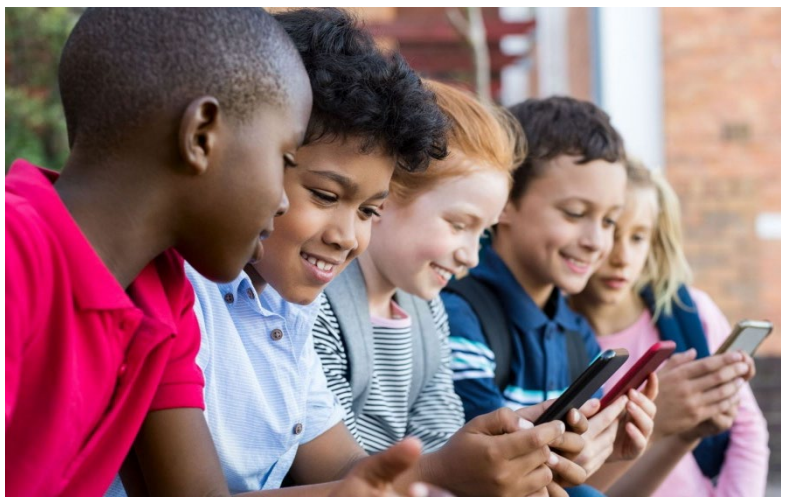
Reflections on AI use should prompt students to consider not only *what* they used AI for, but *why* they chose to do so, *how* it influenced their thinking and *what* limitations or biases they noticed in AI responses. By making space for these considerations, educators can help cultivate a deeper awareness of the implications of AI use - fostering digital citizenship, ethical reasoning and academic integrity. Moreover, embedding discussions about ethical AI use within classroom dialogue helps normalize responsible behavior and equips students with the discernment they will need as these technologies become more embedded in their academic, professional and personal lives. When students understand that ethical use is not just a rule but a reflection of values - honesty, respect, responsibility - they are more likely to integrate those values into all aspects of their learning.

This helps to embed AI in the learning process. It's important that those we teach do not see the primary purpose of AI as being a shortcut in getting things done but, rather, as a partner enhancing their learning journey. We should design AI-infused assignments that help students brainstorm ideas, refine and revise original work and critique AI-produced content. Requiring youth to document AI interactions also assists us in our ability to follow the flow of the generative AI conversation and idea generation.

This metacognitive approach deepens learning by prompting students to assess the strengths and limitations of AI-generated responses, understand the ethical implications of its use and use their own voice in discussing the information they present. Ultimately, the goal is to foster a mindset where AI is not seen as a replacement for human effort, but as a catalyst for deeper inquiry, creativity and thoughtful engagement.

Document AI interactions

How do we design student reflections on AI use so that these assessments of student learning spotlight the use of it as a process rather than a product? First, provide students with key questions they can use to guide and structure their thoughts. These questions can assist in anchoring their thinking:



- ➔ What specific task or challenge did you use AI to help with?
- ➔ How did AI influence your thinking or planning?
- ➔ What ideas did you accept from the AI? What did you change or reject and why?
- ➔ Did using AI clarify or complicate your understanding of the topic?
- ➔ How did your final product differ from the original plan and what role did AI play?

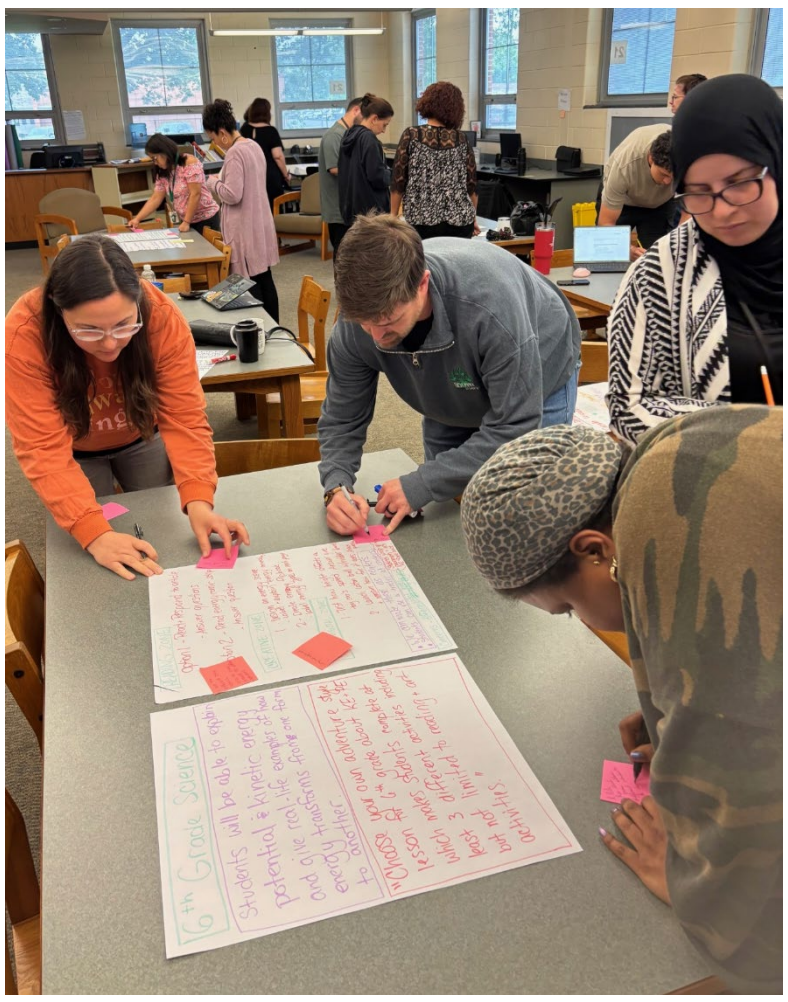
Teachers may also require that learners document where in the timeline of their work that they used AI, such as when brainstorming, drafting, revising and fact-checking. Within reflective journals, learners may also link their AI use back to learning objectives and indicate how its use helped them succeed in meeting academic goals. The key takeaway here for educators is to make AI reflection a regular, low-stakes practice rather than a one-off requirement with 'gotcha" implications. Journals, exit slips and discussion-based debriefs can be used after any assignment where AI played a role, gradually deepening students' self-awareness.

What We Can Do Differently

Returning to our protest song example, there are several ways through which this assignment could be structured so that it is AI-enriched. We can continue to allow students to use AI to match songs with the protest theme; however, it should be framed as a research aid - not a replacement for student thought. If we ask students to analyze lyrical rhetoric in class, short bursts of class-generated reflection journaling or peer-to-peer discussions comparing historical movements and identifying oversimplified interpretations can help frame the work for critical thinking. Learners can also create multimedia reflections such as podcasts, videos, infographics, concept maps and social media posts that share new understandings. In the same way, inviting students to discuss what AI got right and got wrong, comparing their AI outputs and conclusions with classmates. This kind of reframing sets the stage for everyone to provide greater input and benefit from better results in their learning.

We can also use the moment to coach students on the importance of critical thinking - asking them to question: *Whose voices are centered in this song? What historical or cultural narratives are being uplifted or omitted?* and *How is language used to persuade, provoke, or unify?* One powerful strategy is to have students annotate AI-generated descriptions of protest songs, highlighting where the text captures key themes - and where it falls short. For example, what happens when the tools students use to learn about these songs are not built to recognize or respect the full scope of the history and people behind them? Have students identify vague interpretations of lyrics, circle missing context, and add margin notes that contrast AI's summary with their own analysis.

AI tools are trained on dominant cultural narratives which can fail to capture layered and nuanced meanings in texts rooted in Indigenous storytelling. In this way, AI might flatten a protest song's metaphor-rich lyrics into generic language, missing references to historical events, dialect and double meanings central to the song's power. Encouraging the student - who used AI to match protest songs to social justice themes without thought - to critique these gaps to improve their critical thinking and affirm the importance of culturally responsive interpretations that challenge algorithmic biases. These strategies deepen engagement by empowering students to be more ethical as informed consumers of media.



Teachers in South Plainfield, NJ, engage in a gallery walk around their AI generated lessons at a workshop facilitated by the author for NJ Teacher to Teacher.

Supporting Equity and Access

While we must acknowledge the significant role that AI has and will continue to play in the learning process, it is essential not to overlook the potential equity gaps it may create. Requiring the use of AI outside of school hours can inadvertently deepen disparities, as not all students have access to the necessary technology or reliable Internet at home. This digital divide can prevent some students from fully participating in AI-enhanced learning opportunities, so it's crucial to recognize that AI is best utilized in a controlled, equitable environment - primarily within the classroom - where teachers can model its ethical and productive use.

In-class AI use allows educators to provide necessary scaffolding, particularly for students who may struggle with literacy development or critical thinking skills. Teachers can guide students through the process, ensuring they understand both its potential and limitations. At the same time, AI can be a transformative tool for multilingual learners, offering translation and language support that bridges communication gaps. Additionally, it can assist students who face challenges in expressing their thoughts clearly in writing, providing prompts, suggestions and alternative phrasing to help them articulate their ideas more effectively, ensuring that it serves as an inclusive and supportive tool for all students, regardless of their backgrounds and abilities.

In Conclusion: This Matters

AI is not the end of student thinking; poor instructional design is. As a new technology, it demands more of us as educators. When we design strong and well thought-out learning experiences that use AI as our partner to stimulate student creativity and thought, rather than as a shortcut to task completion, we are far more likely to foster classroom environments where students are intrinsically motivated to own their learning, rather than merely comply. Effective integration of AI reinforces both the necessity of media literacy and should encourage exploration, reflection and original expression - qualities that emerge when students are engaged in meaningful, intellectually rich tasks.

The author working with Tajik teachers at the American corner in Dushanbe presenting on AI as a Fulbright Scholar.

Rather than expressing frustration when students use AI inappropriately - such as in the case of the teacher who discovered students relying on AI to match protest songs to social justice themes - educators should treat such moments as clarion calls to reimagine instructional design. These instances highlight a need to move beyond assignments rooted in recall, fact-matching, or surface-level comprehension. Instead, educators should prioritize tasks that validate student identities and also demand synthesis, critical evaluation and creativity - learning goals that are not easily outsourced to AI. When students are asked to create something new, take a stance, defend a perspective, or connect ideas across disciplines, they are far more likely to use AI as a tool *within* the learning process - not as a substitute for it.

In full disclosure, portions of this article were developed with the assistance of generative AI tools, which were used to support idea generation, phrasing and revision. Final content, structure and interpretations are my own.

References

Common Sense Media. (2024). Teen and Young Adult Perspectives on Generative AI. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Graduate School of Education Center for Digital Thriving.

Jose Bowen (2024). How to Teach with AI: Practical Tips. former president of Goucher College, recently stated on the Have a Life Teaching Podcast: accessed June 3, 2025.

Dr. John Schembari is a school improvement expert and former district administrator with a strong background in instruction and technology. He partners with the Center for Educational Innovation, Fordham University, CUNY Brooklyn College, the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, TNTPand the School Culture and Climate Initiative helping to support educators in building the skillsets needed to prepare students for the future AI-based economy they will enter. View his recent Worthy Incubator on AI for students here!