

Many Voices - One Call

Season 3/Episode 7: Artificial Intelligence: The Student Perspective

Guest Commentary by Kirk Winans

Kirk Winans is an Advising Specialist and Adjunct Instructor for Computer Science and Mathematics at Hudson Valley Community College.

This episode of “Many Voices, One Call” highlights the mixture of dread and hope regarding Artificial Intelligence that seems to be pervasive today, if not a little more the dread side. This mixture of feelings relates to the concept of the technological sublime, the experience of both awe and terror at some new technology that is so grand yet also dangerous. When a new technology evokes the sublime, it often become the subject of hyperbolic claims of revolutionary potential, leading to projections of a doomsday or an over-enthusiasm. Such claims about a new technology drastically changing everything are not new, and were once made regarding radio, television, and cable television. Yet, things did not drastically change and these technologies eventually became mundane. However, I do think AI could be something different.

What potentially makes AI different is that the goal here is to develop a being that is more intelligent and capable than humans. It is true that AI has been developed over decades and is not really “new.” However, what is new, and what has sparked this most recent popularity of AI, is Generative AI models that seemingly create new works. Such AI tools have already been disruptive, especially in the context of education.

The hosts and guests talk extensively about the concerns surrounding student use of AI and potential replacement of faculty. When it comes to student use of AI, I agree with the host that “trust is an essential component of education.” Learning cannot happen in an environment of mistrust. I also agree that there needs to be assignments that use AI to prepare students for the world. Coming up with such assignments can be tough, but I think one aspect is an expectation of transparency. Having students point out what is from an AI and then explain what they think about it is one way to do so. Another thing that educators should always strive to do more effectively (whether they allow or ban the use of AI) is to help their students understand why they are having them complete an assignment.

One beneficial way that I think Generative AI can be put to use by any student is to use it as an organizational tool. Several students struggle with planning how to complete larger projects such as a research paper. Here, Generative AI can help by creating a timeline including researching the topic, drafting, and editing. Generative AI can also be helpful in the process of writing by helping writers find alternative words, figure out transitions,

summarizing works, and generating ideas. Of course, I think any AI should be treated as at most a semi-reliable source.

On the other end of the educational spectrum, AI has enormous potential to be helpful or harmful. It could be helpful in terms of responding to routine inquiries and being an organizational tool for teachers. I doubt AI will ever be an adequate substitute for having a human teach since another important aspect of education is that human, emotional connection. Also, studies have shown that even in free online courses, it is helpful to have a human teacher in order to motivate students and make material more relatable. Of course, within higher education specifically, I think there still remains a justifiable concern of some replacement, especially in the climate of adjunctification, which is harmful to students in terms of focus, yet is a way for institutions to save money. I can see institutions hiring people to develop courses and primarily have AI interact with students and perhaps have some adjuncts that show up once a week. However, I do not think that is beyond the control of faculty and students, especially if students reject being taught by AI Professors.

The over-enthusiasm mentioned above is typically deployed by the advocates of permissionless innovation, who seek an environment of unregulated innovation and believe that will provide the best benefit to humanity. However, often those benefits are limited to a select few. Such advocates, have until this point, been mostly successful in at least making us feel powerless to control the development of new technologies and in the context of the development of AI, it is easy to feel powerless since Generative AI was just recently foisted upon us. While we are relatively powerless on our own, collectively we are not. We do not have to hand over the keys to society to the likes of Sam Altman and Elon Musk.