The AI Dilemma in Classrooms: Ban or Adapt?

(Video Transcript)

According to a recent Pew Research poll, only 6% of American public school teachers believe that AI tools produce more benefit than harm. Essentially, most educators don't trust artificial intelligence and tools like ChatGPT, they think it's a detriment to students. And this is a sentiment that I've seen reflected in schools across the country.

Recently, when I start workshops where I show educators how to use AI to streamline lesson planning or enhance learning units, I always begin with a discussion question about this relatively new tool. In most places, a large portion of the teachers have never even seen what tools like ChatGPT can do. It's always kind of funny because I have the website write an entire original essay right in front of them. And then it gets even funnier because I have ChatGPT rewrite the essay in the voice of Shakespeare. Then I have it do it in the voice of Eminem, which is really fun, because I'll have it write a whole rap song about the causes of the American Revolution or whatever the topic is. But then I have to write it in the voice of an eighth-grade student trying to get out of writing a five-paragraph essay for English class. If you haven't played around with this tool yet, I encourage you to do so. It will blow your mind.

After the demonstration, we have a discussion about the realities of this powerful tool being accessible to students. The discussion often aligns with the Pew Research poll results: teachers are worried, and they're scared about how AI might lead to more

cheating, more laziness, and less critical thinking. And I always empathize with these fears. I mean, they're absolutely valid if we continue schooling as usual and don't adapt to the existence of artificial intelligence.

AI *can* lead to cheating and shortcuts. For example, a teacher might give a writing prompt like this to a seventh-grade class: *What is the primary cause of the American Revolution?* A seventh-grade student could easily put that prompt into ChatGPT, and it would write an entire essay for them. Naturally, a teacher might read that essay and think, "Wait a minute, the word *periphery* was in that opening paragraph. There's no way my student would use the word *periphery.* They must have cheated and used ChatGPT."

But if the seventh-grade student typed into ChatGPT, *Write my essay like a seventh-grade student,* it might start looking a little more like something a seventh grader wrote. They could say something like, "So there's a lot of reasons for war, but the big one is…" They can even intentionally ask the program to include spelling and grammar errors to throw the teacher off even more. The AI can make their essays look almost indiscernible from the real thing, teaching students that they can get away with academic dishonesty and, in the process, not learn a thing about the content you're trying to teach. And so, yeah, there's a reason to be concerned about cheating and shortcuts. But with a caveat, which I want to get here.

AI programs like the one I just described are free and available to everyone. There is probably a ChatGPT app on every one of your students' phones. It's here and it's not going anywhere. So, as teachers, we can ban AI. But really, what we're doing is trying to

ban *kids* from using AI. Kids will find a way. Kids have always found a way. I mean, did you know that in the 1970s calculators were banned in most schools? But then, by 1990, almost 100% of schools allowed calculators.

AI isn't going anywhere. Actually, it's going to continue to proliferate our culture more and more. And so, if we still want students to develop critical thinking, work ethic, integrity, and all of the other traits we're worried AI is robbing from them, we're going to have to change what the *essay* is about. Or, another way of putting it—we have to assign work that *cannot* be fudged with AI. Because here's the thing: banning AI in school is insufficient. Asking students to regurgitate information from a lecture, website, or book is no longer sufficient. Many students will find a way to use AI to write these papers for them. And even if you use strategies to prevent that like in-class writing assignments that are disconnected from the internet someday, when students are no longer in a classroom, they're just going to use AI for that type of writing. Banning it in the classroom is just a temporary fix, which raises the question of whether the learning experience was important enough in the first place.

And also, if we're being honest, why *wouldn't* students use AI in the future when they have to do writing tasks—especially if they find it to be more effective and efficient? Again, it's a conundrum, because the shortcut they take misses out on the critical thinking and work ethic of doing the writing. It misses out on the whole point of assigning the writing in the first place. However, whether you like it or not, people will take the shortcut even if it's not the best thing for them. Are you seeing the conundrum?

Yes, there is cause for concern. But here's the caveat: the concern is *only* valid if school continues business as usual without adaptation. AI will create more cheating, more apathy, and more uncritical thinking if we keep assigning prompts like *What caused the American Revolution?* We're in big trouble.

Therefore, the call to action is this: we must come up with assignments that AI cannot do on its own. Work that is inspired, authentic, and requires the human brain. We need to talk about this: What are some ways that we can incorporate and utilize AI in a responsible way that doesn't rob students of learning? I think that starts with creating assignments that AI cannot do on its own.

The key to this is crafting work that demands creativity work that's deeply personal and maybe includes some reflection or real-world interaction. AI can spit out pre-written summaries or even generate essays on historical events, but it can't replicate the unique experiences of individual students and their personal insights.

For example, instead of asking students to write a summary of a book, you could ask them to connect its theme to their own life or community. This still requires that they understand the text. They have to know what a theme is and the core content of whatever we're trying to teach them. But teachers can still assess for understanding. They can still make sure students grasp the entire unit. Only now, the personal component makes this task require deeper thinking on the student's part, which cannot be completed by AI.

Another example of this is student memoirs, personal narratives, opinion writing, or field research assignments. You could ask students to conduct an interview and write interview questions specifically for the subjects they're interviewing. Doing this requires a personal touch and an understanding of the assignment and the people they're working with. By personalizing the assignment, you're asking students to connect what they're learning to their own context. Again, this is something AI cannot do for them on its own.

Another thing we can do is create more inspired and authentic work. Students are more likely to take the easier and less effective route of using generative AI when the outcome of their work feels less meaningful to them. And this isn't a new concept, but it’s one that's been true for human beings throughout history: we work harder and better when we know the work is worth it.

For example, a chemistry teacher could teach their students about water chemistry, pH levels, and chemical reactions in a traditional unit with the expectation that students will write a report at the end to earn a grade. Those students could very easily input a prompt into ChatGPT and have a report written for them. We already talked about how it can do that. If you don't believe me, go on ChatGPT and try it out—it will blow your mind.

Now, what if the teacher also had students take water samples from a local river, identify a pollution problem, and then tasked them with petitioning their city to clean it up? Maybe they come up with a plan, and part of their petition includes a report on

water quality. That report now has an inspired outcome. Not only is it relevant because it’s about a local river, but it's also tied to a cause that actually matters to the students.

Authenticity is a powerful motivator. When things are authentic, we don’t want to take shortcuts. It’s worth the time and energy we’re putting in. As I think about my house, when I’m doing a project, I don’t want to take shortcuts because that’s going to come back to bite me later. If I’m going to do something, I want to do it right so I can enjoy the fruits of my labor. It’s the same with authentic work for students.

Research shows this – it shows a correlation between purposeful, service-based assignments and academic success. This is why project-based learning needs to become more prominent in every classroom. At its core, PBL is about authentic motivation. If we want students to build resiliency and not take AI shortcuts, we have to give them a good reason not to.

Another thing we need to do is teach students how to use AI effectively and responsibly. We're still at the very beginning of the age of artificial intelligence. The current model of ChatGPT is still in the early stages. It’s like the telegraph to the telephone, or the Wright brothers’ glider that will someday become a rocket. But right now, we're just at the beginning.

We have to recognize that it's here, it's growing, and it's becoming more prominent. We need to make sure students understand how to use AI responsibly. I understand educators’ temptation to mitigate the effects of AI by banning it, trying to prevent it from entering the classroom. But in the end, those efforts will be futile—and

even detrimental. If we ignore the presence of this technology, it will not benefit our students, their communities, or society.

When all the effort is focused on banning and preventing cheating, students are not learning how to use a tool that will be with them for the rest of their lives. Instead, we need to teach students how to harness AI's power in a responsible way, not only to prepare them for the future but also because it can deepen their learning in the present. We need to encourage ethical AI use discussions in our classrooms. Help students understand the issue at hand. Don't assume they know the ethical dilemmas AI presents. Create space in the classroom to discuss these issues. Design scenarios where they explore both the benefits and harms of AI. Create activities where they wrestle with the topic.

Instead of demonizing AI's existence, which I get, because it is a little scary and powerful, we need to acknowledge it. Invite students to brainstorm how to adapt to it in the best way possible. Because one of the realities of AI is that, while it can be intimidating, it also has the potential to truly benefit students. We can do another video or lecture on that subject. I've written about it in an article that's now on my website at trevormuir.com, and you can check out different ways to incorporate AI into the classroom. But for now, let's sum it up: Artificial intelligence is powerful, useful, and it's not going anywhere. In fact, it's only going to grow in prominence and presence in our everyday lives. However, AI – like every other educational technology – is just a tool. It's not a replacement for human creativity, critical thinking, or the connections educators build with their students in the classroom.

Students will always need educators. But they will need ones who are adaptable—ones who know how to incorporate new technologies and societal norms into instruction. Rather than banning AI from schools, we need to discover how to use it appropriately and effectively—and teach students how to do the same. We do this with the same principles of education that have always guided us: to prepare students for a successful future and to deepen their learning in the present.

I believe AI can help us do that—but only if we're willing to shift and adapt to what school looks like.