

Tech, teaching AND TRUST



Teachers aren't going to be replaced by artificial intelligence any time soon, says **Colin Foster** – and here's why...

Why do we need teachers any more? After all, for many years now we've been able to look up information on Google or Wikipedia and get instant, factual answers.

When I was a child, I had to visit the local library and crawl around on the floor leafing through heavy, outdated copies of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to find the equivalent information. In so many ways, the internet has been a massive step forward in terms of discovering information.

But if we want to ask more complex questions, then what we often really need is someone to interact with – which is where human beings have tended to come in very handy! More recently, however, even that seems to have changed with the rapid growth and adoption of large language models...

Competing with the machine

If our artificial intelligence prompts are sufficiently well-engineered, then AI can often respond in highly sophisticated ways, rather like a knowledgeable human might. I sometimes like to run my draft articles through an AI and ask it to give me five objections to my argument. One or two of them might be a bit flimsy, but I'll often find that

“AI has no shame, and doesn't feel guilty for having led you astray”

there's some idea I hadn't considered, and that the process helps me to improve what I've written.

Of course, AI isn't perfect, and the errors, hallucinations and outright bluffing to which it's prone can often be hilarious. But whatever AI's limitations might be today, by the time you're done reading this article, they will surely be less pronounced than before.

Improvements are coming much faster than most of us would have predicted a few years ago, and the change is going in only one direction – that of progress.

So, amidst all this, what duties are left for the role of the human teacher? If the

students of the future can learn by conversing with an intelligent AI that has access to the best of all that has ever been written or said, then how can a mere human teacher possibly compete with that?

Big betrayals, big consequences

One answer to why we'll still need teachers is *trust*. We build relationships with human beings, and we learn

just as confident when it's wrong. When it misleads, it will generally admit it – but AI has no shame, and doesn't feel guilty for having led you astray and wasted your time. You might find AI useful, but you can't trust it in the way that you might trust a human teacher.

An honest lack of expertise

What about expertise? I was reflecting on this recently, thinking about some of my experiences as a teacher when I stepped outside of my expertise.

to trust them and rely on them. If people let us down, or disappoint us, that will affect things going forward in the relationships we have. And big betrayals can have big consequences – even professional ones, for someone with the responsibilities of a teacher.

AI has none of this. It lives in the moment, bluffs when it's trained and rewarded for doing so, and has no investment in the person it's communicating with. It will give out incorrect – possibly even dangerous – information without a care. If you point out that it's wrong, it won't argue; it will just shift ground and try telling you something different in order to see whether you might like that response instead.

It's true that AI is often right about its facts, but it's

I remember once covering a geography lesson, which is certainly not an area of speciality for me. The lesson had something to do with Colombia, and a student said, “*They have lots of drugs in Colombia, don't they?*”

I wasn't sure how to respond. It sounded like it could be a dangerous stereotype – offensive, even – to make such a sweeping statement about an entire country. But I could imagine where this comment might be coming from. I think most of

my knowledge about Colombia is based on my extensive familiarity with *James Bond* films, and so I think I also had this sense about Colombia. From my position of geographical ignorance, I thought, “*That's either true, or it's a very common misconception – and I don't know which.*”

An actual geography teacher, with actual expertise, would have been able to respond properly to this comment. They would know that the illegal drug trade in Colombia is definitely ‘a thing’. But they would have been able to talk about this in the context not only of drug trafficking cartels, but also of government efforts to address

drug-related crime. They would have been able to give a balanced response that didn't leave the student with a misleading impression of an entire country. I was way out of my depth, and had to advise the students to talk with their geography teacher about it when she was back.

Note, it wasn't the case that *I couldn't think of anything to say* in response to the student's comment. I could have easily said all sorts of things, but they might have been completely wrong, or at the very least, unhelpful, and could have inadvertently created and reinforced prejudices. Sometimes, it's just better to say less than to blunder into an area you aren't well prepared for.

We tend to trust people more if they sometimes hold back and say, ‘*Actually, I'm not sure – let me help you find someone else who actually knows about this.*’

Modelling humility

Another way in which teachers can help students in the context of AI is to model *intellectual humility*, which students won't see, or be able to learn from in their interactions with large language models.

As teachers, we don't simply grab hold of the first view or answer that comes to mind, just so that we have something to say. We want to first check that we aren't misunderstanding or misrepresenting what we've been asked. AI, at least in its current form, seems to lack this sense of caution. It doesn't hesitate. It plunges in straight away with an immediate answer, and if it's wrong, it's wrong.

It behaves a little like the worst kind of politician – one who always has a simple, instant view on anything you care to bring up, but not necessarily any positions or perspectives that are well thought through.

As teachers, we can model a slower approach than AI; one where we take time to sift and weigh up facts. Yes, we can look up information when we need to, but we don't ‘look up our views’. We form those ourselves, by critically assessing the facts and learning from other people's perspectives. We accept that we might be wrong, and try not to be.

If we're unsure, then we'll say so. Because there's still lots that students can only learn from their all-too-human teachers.



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