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Artificial intelligence, human togetherness, and the courage to reimagine education

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Τεχνητή νοημοσύνη, ανθρώπινη συνύπαρξη και το θάρρος να επαναπροσδιορίσουμε την εκπαίδευση

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Abstract

This article, draws on my keynote (Nerantzi, 2025a) at the International Conference in Open and Distance Learning, organised by the Hellenic Open University and the Greek Network of Open and Distance Education, 5-7 December 2025, in Patra and explores how generative artificial Intelligence (AI from now on) is reshaping the landscape of higher education, not as a substitute for human presence but as a revealing lens into what learners most need from us: equity, creativity, care, and connection. By examining the uncomfort zone as a space of possibility, the article invites educators to approach AI not with fear or blind enthusiasm but with the courage to experiment, to question established habits, and to design learning that foregrounds humane relationships. It proposes that the real work ahead is to cultivate educational environments where technology supports the weaving of meaningful connections, allowing students to imagine and create futures in which they feel seen, supported, and able to learn together.

Περίληψη

Το παρόν άρθρο βασίζεται στην κεντρική ομιλία μου (Nerantzi, 2025a) στο Διεθνές Συνέδριο Ανοικτής και Εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευσης, που διοργανώθηκε από το Ελληνικό Ανοικτό Πανεπιστήμιο και το Ελληνικό Δίκτυο Ανοικτής και Εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευσης στις 5–7 Δεκεμβρίου 2025, στην Πάτρα, και εξερευνά πώς η γενετική τεχνητή νοημοσύνη (από εδώ και στο εξής ΤΝ) αναδιαμορφώνει το τοπίο της ανώτατης εκπαίδευσης, όχι ως υποκατάστατο της ανθρώπινης παρουσίας αλλά ως έναν αποκαλυπτικό φακό που φωτίζει όσα οι εκπαιδευόμενοι χρειάζονται περισσότερο από εμάς: δικαιοσύνη, δημιουργικότητα, φροντίδα και σύνδεση. Εξετάζοντας τη ζώνη της μη-άνεσης ως χώρο δυνατοτήτων, το άρθρο

προσκαλεί τους εκπαιδευτικούς να προσεγγίσουν την ΤΝ όχι με φόβο ή άκριτο ενθουσιασμό, αλλά με το θάρρος να πειραματιστούν, να αμφισβητήσουν παγιωμένες πρακτικές και να σχεδιάσουν μαθησιακές εμπειρίες που δίνουν προτεραιότητα στις ανθρώπινες σχέσεις. Το ουσιαστικό έργο που έχουμε μπροστά μας είναι η καλλιέργεια εκπαιδευτικών περιβαλλόντων όπου η τεχνολογία στηρίζει ουσιαστικές συνδέσεις, επιτρέποντας στους φοιτητές να φαντάζονται και να δημιουργούν μέλλοντα στα οποία αισθάνονται ότι τους βλέπουν, τους στηρίζουν και μπορούν να μάθουν συνεργασιακά.

Keywords

GenAI, creativity, trust, experimentation, connections, possibilities

In the uncomfort zone: begin with questions

When I ask, “What if students are genuinely using AI to learn?”, I am inviting us into the uncomfort zone, a space of curiosity, responsibility and care. Bell Hooks (1994, p. 207) reminds us that higher education, despite its constraints, remains a “location of possibility” where we can enjoy freedom through openness of mind and heart. Paulo Freire adds a simple but radical provocation: “only an education of questions can sustain curiosity” (Freire, 2007, p. 31). In these words I can hear Socrates whispering. It is that curiosity, that generates questions. Questions that open-up new paths for inquiry, exploration and discovery.

Orientation matters. Start from fear, and we design for prohibition, policing and punishment. Start from possibility thinking, and we ask “What if?”, then design for agency, dialogue and ethics (Craft, 2008; Craft, Chappell and Twining, 2008), also in the era of AI. This “what if” question did drive early Creativity for Learning in Higher Education (#creativeHE) community work in 2023 and 2024, when the AI avalanche enveloped higher education. It was in these first months after November 2022 and the release of ChatGPT to us all, when this open community of scholars from over 20 countries came together and created the crowdsourced creative and critical ways of engaging AI as educators, researchers and some students primarily students on education programmes at the time. The two open book outputs from this project have captured the first two years of experimentations with AI and have been used widely for inspiration and further explorations (Nerantzi et al., 2023; Abegglen et al., 2024). And while some questioned what was creative about the ideas shared, we need to acknowledge that AI was new to us all, so by default we could claim that every idea and every

experiment added something new and of value to everyday educational practice that had not been done before. These open books also provided inspiration for the Learning with AI project (University of Leeds, 2025) which followed to surface especially authentic accounts of how university students use AI to learn during their university studies.

Daring: Explore capabilities, limits and values

Daring is the courage to experiment, narrate uncertainty and make process and possibilities visible. Therefor also to make mistakes. It is the willingness to fail and pick oneself up again. To imagine, experiment and play with ideas to explore the unexplored, even the naturally unconnectable. It is being in a space where such exploration is not only possible, but desirable and nurtured. Far too often we focus on polished outputs and look for perfection in these ignoring the messy process of learning. The deep thinking. The paths we follow, abandon and create. We also seem to be looking for perfection in our tools. We seem to wish and expect perhaps that we will iron out our own human imperfections and limitations in the tools we are we are creating. Even the ancient Greek Gods had their human imperfections. What can we learn from this?

The OECD (2025) AI Capability Indicators compare current AI systems with human capabilities across domains such as language, social interaction, creativity and metacognition. According to the OECD (2025), present-day systems appear comparatively stronger in language and creativity. This reminds us that judgement, critique and ethical responsibility remain human work. Yet it also raises a deeper question about creativity itself. While the OECD (2025) attempts to *measure* creativity and compare AI to humans – we seem to like doing this! - for me the more generative perspective lies in the *symbiosis* between human and machine, and in what becomes possible together.

Thinking about measuring intelligence or comparing it with artificial intelligence takes me back to earlier attempts to measure creativity. Torrance (1966) and Guilford (1967) come to mind. Tests like these always make me wonder whether, in education, the goal should be to *measure* creativity or rather to create environments that nurture curiosity, imagination and creativity in all learners and in the everyday.

Kaufman and Beghetto's (2009) 4C model of creativity (mini-c as personal creativity; little-c as everyday creativity; pro-c as professional creativity; big-C as novel and rare creativity) seeks to distinguish types of creativity and perhaps, inevitably, to categorise it. But how valuable is

this categorisation in education? I see parallels to the debate around what has been recognised as the myth of learning styles. Related inquiries into the 4C model by Jackson and Lassig (2020) highlight the edu-c dimension – education as a source of creativity – which is particularly relevant in the context of this inquiry. Nerantzi and Winder (2023) discuss the capacity we all have to experience eureka moments that lead to smaller or larger creative breakthroughs, perhaps contesting the notion of big-C creativity.

For educators, it is essential to recognise the creative capacity in *all* learners, inclusively, and to seek ways to awaken curiosity, imagination and creativity through diverse means. This awakening is triggered by being open to otherness and experiences, inquiries, interactions and collaborations through which we can challenge and are challenged by others, and now with AI. Will the novelty of our ideas be extinguished because of AI as we seem to hear, or does AI amplify opportunities for remix and repurposing? I am excited about the opportunities it brings and have been experimenting, also with my students from early on.

There are of course ethical implications already regarding intellectual property, authorship and originality. But perhaps where we are now, is a critical moment to redefine these concepts? Most ideas are remixed ideas, even when we do not recognise them as such. What could this mean for originality and authorship? Other scholars have started asking these questions (Tlili et al., 2026) and especially open educators who have been committed to not just (co-)creating but sharing their creations generously with the wider world and engaging in boundary-crossing collaborative practices to increase opportunities, engagement and impact in learning. Is it more about novelty in the remixing itself? Connecting what we would *normally* not connect? I am wondering.

Breakthroughs don't come from *normal* connections.

I don't think it will be AI that is or will stifle innovation. We humans are the ones who reinvent our world. We are the thinkers, un-thinkers, re-thinkers. We test, cross-pollinate and combine ideas in new and surprising ways, applying them to new contexts. We connect ideas that seem unconnectable. Exploring possibilities within impossibilities has always driven humanity and enabled us to evolve and transform. This capacity – to imagine otherwise – is the true magic of humans.

Trusting: From rules to principles and relationships

Policy frameworks can help, but they cannot replace relationships. Several institutions in the United Kingdom have adopted *Red, Amber, Green traffic light systems* to indicate whether AI use is prohibited, permitted or integral to assessment. The focus remains on assessment. However, it is not as simple and clean as it sounds. While it is clear that Red means that students are not allowed to use it, there are grey areas around what Amber really means and how it is applied from module to module. Even Green is not a straightforward "go for it!" and nobody would advocate that it means "copy and paste" what you get from AI directly into your assignment and you are done.

The AI traffic lights, as an emergency measure, may have been helpful when higher education suddenly had to act when ChatGPT was released in November 2022 and assessment as we knew it was no longer fit for purpose, at least not all of it. Especially when AI could complete an assessment in seconds or minutes with limited input from students and bypass thinking and learning altogether. It really stretched what we understand by *strategic learning* and reminded me of the shadow writers industry too. Is what we experience now outsourcing learning at scale? It is not really learning, more passing an assessment and getting potentially a degree that says very little about graduates' capacities beyond perhaps the ability to use AI to respond to assessment briefs effectively. I don't want to generalise. I don't want to accuse any student. But it is something that can happen and may be happening already for some time potentially. It all goes back to what our motivations are when we embark on an educational journey. What are our expectations? And what do we want to get out of it for ourselves and others? We know that young people want to contribute positively to our world (British Science Association, 2022), which is hopeful for the future!

Learning is relational, but if we are on the constant hunt to police our students, to check if they have been cheating, what damage do we really cause? Is blaming the students a useful way forward? Luo (2024) describes learners' fear of admitting AI use, anxiety about unclear rules, and the need for teachers to model transparent, responsible engagement. We say this also in the *Learning with AI* project (University of Leeds, 2025). We had anecdotal evidence that some students were reluctant to share their use of AI as they felt that this was about catching students using it! What does this say about where we currently are as a wider academic community and what and how we communicate about AI use across institutions and borders?

And then there are the AI detectors. Do these really help? Their accuracy has been questioned and there have even been court cases. Students wrongly accused. We are all becoming suspicious it seems. Gorichanaz (2023) shows how misplaced reliance on AI detectors can erode trust and compel students to defensively document their process. Students ask for clarity, modelling and relational trust, not more surveillance.

So what should we as educators do instead of policing our students? Redesigning assessment practices? Yes, we should. We are of course all new to AI, well at least all educators who have not been researching AI for years. And this will mean that educators also need support to better understand how to use it effectively in their teaching and how to design using AI in their curriculum and assessment.

A narrow, assessment-only framing risks signalling that students cannot be trusted to use AI responsibly in their learning. A traffic light system with hard rules also seems to focus narrowly on assessment. Learning, teaching and curriculum design, for example, and related guiding principles based on trust instead of hard rules seem to be missing still (Nerantzi and Palfreyman, 2025).

Let's focus on reimagining not only assessment, but also learning, teaching and how we design our curricula. And let's remember that learning relationships matter. Building trust with our students is fundamental.

Experimenting: What students say they actually do with AI

The *Learning with AI* collection for 2024/25 (University of Leeds) includes 28 contributions from students across levels, disciplines and countries, offering a vivid picture of how students are engaging with AI. The contributors include undergraduates (21 percent, 5/28), taught postgraduates (53 percent, 16/28) and doctoral students (21 percent, 6/28), representing 21 academic disciplines and study experiences in Greece, Mauritius, the United Kingdom and the United States. Across these contributions, students describe using AI to clarify complex ideas through alternative explanations, to create low-stakes dialogic spaces for testing framings and strengthening arguments, and to reduce isolation by offering a form of conversational companionship that helps them build confidence. They also highlight ways in which AI can spark creativity, supporting idea generation, alternative openings and structural mapping and enhance accessibility and inclusion, for example through listening to readings on the move or receiving language support. At the same time, students are deeply aware of the limitations

and risks: they express concerns about inequitable access to paid tools, misinformation and fabricated citations, privacy, over-reliance, and the implications of AI for employability in increasingly AI-intensive futures. Several contributions also describe the emotional labour involved in navigating inconsistent expectations, the pressure to "use AI well," and the desire for clearer guidance from educators. What stands out across this diverse set of voices is a consistent thread of agency, curiosity and criticality: students verify, cross-check, annotate, justify and sometimes intentionally reject AI outputs. Their reflections demonstrate that, when trusted and supported, students do not use AI to bypass learning, they use it to deepen it, expanding their confidence, creativity and ethical awareness while navigating its boundaries with care.

Jisc's (2025) *Student Perceptions of AI 2025* study provides a UK-wide, sector-level backdrop that closely mirrors and strengthens what the *Learning with AI* (University of Leeds, 2025) contributions show at a more granular, student-authored level.

Taken together, the 28 *Learning with AI* contributions and the Jisc (2025) findings paint a coherent picture of how students across higher education are navigating AI. Jisc (2025) illuminated concerns around the need for guidance, questions around career readiness, equity and ethics, also potential skills loss. Students also recognise the value of human connections and express the desire to work with educators as partners.

Together, the national picture in the United Kingdom from Jisc (2025) and the reflective student accounts from *Learning with AI* (University of Leeds) indicate that students are already engaging critically and creatively with AI, and are asking institutions to meet them with trust, clarity, and opportunities for co-creation.

Students using AI and having the curiosity to explore how they can use it in their learning, for learning and critical engagement, is a good thing. As mentioned earlier, we as educators want to awaken our students' minds to open up to impossibilities, to use their imagination and explore, inquire into themselves and the world around them. Only through using AI can we experience first-hand what works, what doesn't, what the limitations and the possibilities are. This also applies to educators. Experimentation is valuable for students and educators. We all need not just time but also support. Coming together, educators and students, as partners to learn how AI can be valuable for learning, teaching and assessment is something that could happen more. The work I did with my very own students in this area to reimagine the postgraduate module "Education in a Digital Society" is such an example (Nerantzi, 2025b). It

has been an enlightening experience for students and myself in developing a curriculum that is AI-enabled and invites students to use AI throughout the module in a social and collaborative way, also through the use of Problem-Based Learning and scenarios that have been developed based on real challenges but then further shaped using AI, encouraging students on the module to further tailor them manually or with AI so that they are more closely aligned to their context and the area they wish to inquire into.

Connections: Human togetherness

Human connections matter in education. Yet recent evidence suggests that, even in an age of constant digital communication, many and particularly students and young people, are experiencing deep and persistent loneliness. At the same time, patterns of AI use reveal something unsettling. According to Harvard Business Review's (2025) the most common use of AI is not productivity, writing support, or anything to do with generating ideas, but therapy and companionship. It seems that we humans increasingly turn to AI because we experience it as a space free from judgment. We seem to appreciate having a psychologically safe environment in which we can express ourselves openly, something we may not feel able to do with other humans. How sad is this? The prominence of AI companionship does not seem to be about preferring machines to people, but about a sense of emotional fragmentation and social vulnerability in contemporary life.

Students appear to feel this especially acutely at least in the UK. Emerging UK higher education narratives (Neves and Brown, 2022; Zahedi et al., 2022) describe students as one of the groups most at risk of loneliness, and this aligns with the global pattern reflected in the HBR (2025) findings, where emotional support emerges as a dominant reason for AI use. When students say that AI makes independent study "less isolating," they are signalling a lack of meaningful human connection in their learning environments, something we can not ignore.

Care should never be outsourced to algorithms. The rise of AI companionship should not be interpreted as a model to emulate in our pedagogies, but rather as evidence pointing to where our attention is urgently needed. If students are seeking non-judgmental companionship from machines, this reveals something about their experiences of higher education, about the pressures they and all of us navigate, and about the ways in which trust, belonging, and connection may have eroded.

Our responsibility, then as educators, is to design learning in ways that put human togetherness at the centre. When fear of judgment inhibits participation, we need learning structures that help students build trust. When isolation is a risk, we must create opportunities for authentic dialogue, for active participation. When relationships are fractured or fragile, we need pedagogies that bring students into connection with one another through shared inquiry rather than individualised performance. It is that social and connected dimension of learning that makes a real difference to individuals and the collective.

Across the sector, "re-imagining" the university experience increasingly involves treating social connection as a core priority. This is challenging at a time of constrained resources. Yet open and connected learning approaches offer a sustainable path forward. These approaches invite students into wider networks of belonging, helping them to develop a sense of shared purpose and community that no AI system could replicate.

There is a clear pattern of persistent loneliness and fragmented connection in higher education. Recognising this reality is the first step. The next is to respond by designing for human connection with intention and care, ensuring that students find community not in algorithms but in one another.

Final thoughts: Possibilities

In the end, exploring the possibilities of AI in higher education is not about choosing between humans and machines, nor about surrendering complexity to automated systems. It is about noticing what these technologies reveal about us: our hopes for more equitable learning, our desire for creativity and agency, our longing for care that feels genuine, and our need for connection at a time when isolation is quietly spreading.

The patterns emerging from recent studies, including the unexpected dominance of AI companionship, point to something far deeper than technological novelty. They illuminate the unfinished work of nurturing trust, belonging, and humane spaces for learning. It is not the outsourcing of dangerous, mundane, boring work to AI including looking after the elderly that will make us humans wanting suddenly to engage more with creative endeavours as it seems to be suggested by Zafiropoulos (2026) in a recent article. First of all, human socialisation and values such as caring for each other are fundamental to our existence. Also, creativity is something that grows and evolves when there is struggle, friction, challenge, a need and vision for something better. It happens in an ecosystem and not in isolation. The value of creativity

has a ripple effect and grows and evolves when it is shared. The picture book *Pandora* by Turnbull (2017) provides valuable insights into humans' creativity, our desire to love and be loved by other humans and sharing our experiences and creations with others. Even if the Pandora in the story is a little fox. Therefore, real opportunity lies in bringing insights together and imagining educational futures in which technology including AI, supports and diversifies learning, rather than replaces, the relationships that make learning possible and nurture human flourishing.

Stepping into this future asks us to dwell, at least for a while, in the uncomfort zone, the place where daring becomes possible, where we trust ourselves and one another enough to experiment, to question habits, practices and traditions, to imagine alternatives and play and active role in shaping these. If we can hold on to our human responsibilities, to design with care, to nurture connectedness, and to invite everyone into the creative act of meaning making, then AI becomes not a threat but a companion to a more compassionate, imaginative, and just higher education.

As Parker Palmer reminds us, "Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves." (Palmer, 2007, 11)

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