No Looking Back: Embracing AI as a Co-Teacher and Thought Partner

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When ChatGPT launched in late 2022, my initial reaction as a professor of educational leadership was hesitation mixed with curiosity. Would AI become a shortcut that leads to a loss of critical thinking? Or could it become a catalyst for deeper learning? One year later, I confidently say: AI changed how I teach—radically, and, I believe, for the better. Two years later, AI is one of my greatest passions to design, teach, lead, and learn. Three years into AI, I continue to learn, grow, and develop my capacity to continue iterating my practice alongside innovation.

Recalibrating the Role of the Instructor

Teaching fundamentally changed the moment I stopped trying to anticipate *whether* students would use AI and instead began designing with the assumption that they *would*. This shift reframed my role—not as a gatekeeper of original thought, but as a coach guiding students to use AI with intentionality, integrity, and reflection. I redesigned syllabi, rubrics, and assignments to *account for AI as an influence*, rather than ignore or prohibit it. This included creating explicit policies for how and when AI could be used, embedding structured reflection into assignments, and treating AI as a collaborator rather than a shortcut.

What surprised me was how this approach didn't dilute academic rigor—it deepened it. Students became more metacognitive, more curious about the thinking behind their work, and more confident in distinguishing between what AI can generate and what only *they* can contribute. Of course, not everything worked perfectly. Some students still over-relied on AI early in the process, producing summaries rather than insights. I learned that simply allowing AI isn't enough; scaffolding how and when to use it is essential.

1

Redesigning With AI as a Thought Partner

Using AI as a thought partner and collaborator in teaching has led to a more dynamic and meaningful learning experience, interactive and connected to the real-world challenges today's leaders must navigate. It's no longer a temporary experiment—it's now a regular part of my teaching practice. For example, I began integrating generative AI in my graduate program for aspiring school leaders. I framed it as a "thought partner," asking students to use it not to *replace* their thinking, but to *refine* it. This meant guiding students to engage with AI in iterative, transparent ways: generating drafts, evaluating feedback, checking sources, and improving clarity.

Classroom discussions are more dynamic because students come prepared with AI-assisted insights, having "spoken" to virtual mentors or conducted initial research using tools like Elicit, Research Rabbit, and Julius. Second, I now design assignments to include a metacognitive reflection on the student's use of AI—how it helped or hindered, what surprised them, and what they learned *about themselves* in the process. Third, I model my use of AI, showing them how I use it to draft rubrics, co-create simulation branches, and even summarize field-based data.

Teach, Model, and Apply Simulations

One core strategy I implemented was redesigning assignments to be *AI-friendly but not AI-dependent*. For instance, students now use AI to simulate difficult conversations, such as giving feedback to a struggling teacher or navigating a crisis with a parent. Tools like Character.ai and Co-Pilot helped students rehearse language, build empathy, and analyze the consequences of their responses in real time. They also use custom Chatbots to engage with content or application of knowledge. These simulations became safe, reflective spaces to test their decision-making and leadership voices.

A particularly effective use of AI emerged in our work around continuous improvement. I created a series of interactive simulations grounded in the *teach, model, and apply* framework. Each simulation aligns with phases of the continuous improvement cycle—SCAN, FOCUS (PDSA cycles), SUMMARIZE, and EXECUTE. Students were first taught about using real school data within the AI environment to identify patterns of underperformance (teach). Then, they observed model decision-making through AI-generated scenarios, created in Synthesia (model). Finally, students applied their

learning by selecting an improvement target, planning a change initiative, and simulating a leadership team discussion where they had to defend their rationale, anticipate resistance, and adapt based on stakeholder feedback in their school environments (apply). These branching simulations personalized the experience and moved beyond theory. Students weren't just learning about improvement cycles—they were practicing leadership moves in context. They came away with increased confidence, not just in using data, but in aligning improvement strategies with culture, context, and capacity.

AI and the Practice of Critical Editing

What worked well—and what will stay—is the transparency and trust I've built by *naming the tensions*. We talk openly about ethical use, bias in training data, and how not all AI "answers" are equally useful. These conversations have brought students into a more active, curious relationship with technology and each other. To deepen this trust, I regularly hold one-on-one consults where students bring their work and load it into AI tools using our course rubrics as prompts. This process allows them to receive targeted, formative feedback from AI that they then critically evaluate and revise. We also use iThenticate not as a surveillance tool, but as a *reflective checkpoint*. During our consults, we review the reports together to identify practices that could be perceived as plagiarism or over-reliance on AI without sufficient human interpretation. This reframing shifts the conversation from "gotcha" to *growth*, reinforcing that responsible use of AI requires transparency and judgment.

Student Resistance and the Importance of Choice

Still, not everything clicked perfectly. Some students wanted "right" answers from AI and had to unlearn the assumption that output = truth. Others expressed resistance due to concerns about data privacy or the sensitive nature of their work environments. Hesitation arose based on ethical concerns about relying on a tool trained on massive datasets with unclear implications. We make space for these conversations, and I encourage students to opt out of certain uses if they feel uncomfortable, offering alternatives that still support reflective practice. This flexibility reinforces that AI is a tool, not a requirement, and that thoughtful leadership includes understanding *when not* to use it.

Some students, however, struggled with over-reliance in their drafting process, and I now scaffold those moments more deliberately. One of the most meaningful assignments this year asked students to engage with AI through the lens of adult learning theory, specifically Drago-Severson's (2008) *Ways of Knowing*. Students were tasked with prompting an AI tool to explain the four Ways of Knowing and their implications for adult learning in their school context. Using the *edit* or *regenerate* features, they evaluated the AI's response, noting what it got right, what it oversimplified, and what it completely missed. This wasn't about outsourcing their thinking. It was about developing discernment: Could they identify nuances the AI overlooked? Did the language align with the complexities of developmental theory? Students then annotated the AI-generated text, marking places where they inserted clarification, reframed examples, or corrected inaccuracies. The goal was not to prove the AI wrong, but to highlight where the human element is essential.

Since the rise of dozens of AI tools for educating and increasingly sophisticated generative AI platforms, I've been reminded that teaching is not about certainty but adaptability. AI has challenged me to reimagine the instructor's role: not as the gatekeeper of knowledge, but as the *facilitator of discernment*. I do not try to keep AI out of the classroom. I'm inviting it in—and teaching my students how to lead alongside it. AI has made me rethink the role of the instructor: not as the provider of knowledge, but as the facilitator of the exercise of judgment. I'm embracing AI— and teaching my students to work with it.

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