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Equipping our young people to ask the right questions about AI

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From writing to the printing press to radio, television and the internet, new technologies have always triggered anxiety and raised questions. It's no surprise then that the proliferation of AI into many aspects of our lives is raising a lot of questions. As the principal of a secondary school, these questions are something I must grapple with both philosophically and practically — particularly when it comes to the future job market our students will encounter.

On a practical level, AI can help us work smarter. On a philosophical level, it provides ethically complicated issues and problems for us to tackle as we see the world through the lens of what AI can, cannot, should and should not do.

Like any issue, the spectrum of ideas, solutions, perspectives and potential problems is vast, particularly given the void of policy direction.

There is a lot in the media from various perspectives: reports on the impact of AI on young people's brain development, that AI bots are being used to plan holidays and write recipes, right through to complex data analysis that helps identify risks, provide solutions and simplify language so that complex ideas are accessible.

It's reported that AI is being used as a counsellor, and as a friend. That AI will replace many jobs and that the impact of this might be a universal basic income in response to diminishing employment. We hear that AI stocks are seemingly all over the place, and there are significant financial implications, and might have a short shelf life.

It's hard to know what is 'right' in this landscape, and what the unintended benefits and consequences might be, particularly as our young people make decisions about future study and work.

Like many of the 2500 schools across the country, we have developed and implemented our own policy on AI, offering guidance on how and when students should use it, and how assessments are managed to ensure that they are authentically the student's own work.

What we see in the classroom around students wanting to use AI broadly reflects generalised attitudes to school and learning: AI can do the work for me, it can tutor me through problems that I am struggling with so I can get more repeated practice; AI can transform my notes into a podcast so I can listen to the content as well as read it. AI means I don't have to think or it means I can think more about other things, and more complex thinking is accessible to me. The responses are endless.

While we have guidelines on our students' use of AI, what I want for our students is something that's harder to prescribe: the habit of noticing which choice they're making, in the moment, and why. There's a difference between using AI to get *unstuck* on a problem you've already wrestled with, and using it to *avoid* the wrestle altogether. Both can look identical from the outside, but they build very different students.

That distinction matters when we consider what our students are being prepared for—how AI might influence and change jobs. This is very important as our young people leave school and train, work and study in areas that may be impacted by AI. One of the new subjects approved by the Minister of Education for students in Years 12 and 13 is Applied Intelligent Systems. This subject is currently being developed, but may include AI, machine learning, as well as the place of human judgement when working with AI systems.

Like any change, there are lots of unknowns — but also an opportunity to question and reaffirm what matters most for our future selves.

Do we want to be a society where friendships are with an AI? Could this be really important for people who are very isolated? Or, does it detract from the human experience of living in a community? Is it really going to change our jobs, especially those jobs where very little human judgement is needed, or is it going to make the information I need to do my job well much easier to find? Or is it just that AI can help me make dinner with what I have in the fridge?

I don't think it's my job, or our school's job, to resolve these uncertainties for our students. I think it's our job to make sure our students are equipped to keep asking questions — carefully, honestly, and for themselves — long after they've left us.

Ultimately, the choice is ours: how deeply we choose to question AI will shape how we use it, and how we use it will shape what it becomes.