

JOHAN STEYN: How could AI help us reimagine children's education?

In an era of rapid technological advances and a global shift towards creativity and innovation, our educational system remains stubbornly rooted in the Industrial Age. Originally designed to produce obedient industrial workers, today's schools continue to prioritise mass output and control, often at the expense of individuality and originality.

The historical model, organising students into cohorts, rings bells to signal transitions and prioritises conformity over creativity, stifles the independent thought and innovation that modern society demands.

Characterised by rigid schedules, standardised testing, and a one-size-fits-all curriculum, our educational system fails to meet the needs of modern learners. As society evolves, demanding more critical thinking, creativity and adaptability, all levels of education must undergo a fundamental transformation.

We must move away from antiquated practices of the past and embrace new approaches that foster independent thought, creativity, and the ability to innovate — skills essential for success in the contemporary world.

The integration of artificial intelligence in education offers unprecedented opportunities to personalise learning experiences, cater to diverse learning styles, and equip students with the skills necessary to thrive in a digital world. AI can revolutionise education by providing real-time feedback, automating administrative tasks, and offering adaptive learning platforms that adjust to individual student needs, ensuring a more engaging and effective educational experience.

Recently, I was helping my 10-year-old son prepare for his exams. The day before his history exam, we went through the course content together. The main topics focused on the significant contributions of historical figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela and their effect on addressing SA's historical inequalities.

It saddened me to see that the main objective was to memorise their birth dates, birthplaces, and a few other historical events. There was almost no emphasis on their impact on society, the significance of their lives for the future of our country, or the valuable lessons and inspiration they offer for future decision-making.

It reminded me of my own school experience, where the focus was on memorising information and taking tests to prove that I had learnt the facts. There was virtually no emphasis on understanding the significance of history. History is about meaning; it is a story, not just a list of facts to be memorised and then forgotten the day after the exam.

It was time to employ the latest AI tool. My son joined me as I used OpenAI's newest platform, GPT-4o, to explain the significance of these two monumental figures in our history. The voice from my smartphone provided a beautiful explanation, detailing the importance of these leaders and offering context appropriate for my son's age. "Oh Daddy, I get it now! It makes sense!" my son exclaimed.

He was not just memorising facts; he was learning to appreciate history and developing a genuine understanding. The AI had given him a skill, a desire to learn, and an insight that his teacher had not been able to provide. He moved beyond the curriculum to a real moment of understanding.

As we embrace the future, it is crucial to transform our educational system to nurture creativity, individuality, and critical thinking. By integrating AI and other modern

technologies, we can create a more engaging and personalised learning experience, equipping students with the skills and understanding necessary to thrive in an ever-evolving world.

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