

The nail in the coffin: How AI could be the impetus to reimagine education

By Cynthia Alby, Co-Author of [Learning that matters: A field-guide to course design for transformative education](#)

December 23, 2022



Inexplicably, the first thing I asked [ChatGPT](#) to do for me was to write a grant for innovative classroom furniture. As I watched it crank out a serviceable first draft in seconds (easily improved further by what I'll call "tweaking prompts"), I thought to myself, "We are so screwed. And I couldn't be more excited." I wondered, if this is what AI can do right now, what will it be capable of in a month or a year? And when someone made a ChatGPT joke on the national news last night, I recognized that educators aren't the only ones reeling.

As I was reading up on ChatGPT's capabilities and the implications for higher education, I ran across [an article by Karen Costa](#), who quoted one of my favorite authors, adrienne maree brown (whose [Emergent strategy](#) is the ideal antidote to AI panic):

"Change is constant. You can't stop change, control change, or perfectly plan change."

BUT

"You can ride the waves of change, partner with change, and shape change."

These words quivered with new meaning for me, and my imagination caught fire. Frankly, the more I read, the less worried I became. Why? Because those first articles, which I compiled in my initial piece [ChatGPT: Understanding the new landscape and short-term solutions](#), were glorious – fascinating and heartfelt, clever and insightful. They were magnificent responses from specific human hearts written with humor and perception honed by years of human living. That’s what I want to read now and forever. I want to know what Daniel thinks and Dara and Jacob. Karen Costa’s article made me feel like I had met a kindred spirit. I will always gravitate toward pieces that engage me in a conversation with specific others, and that is something AI will never be able to replicate. When my students write, I want them to use AI ethically and productively to engage me, their peers, and others far beyond our classroom with unique ideas in ways they couldn’t without the assistance of AI but still human to human.

Through decades of facilitating educator development, I have struggled to push secondary and higher education toward a vision that limits rote learning and uninspiring assignments and emphasizes the more authentic and meaningful. I know it’s hyperbole, but now I have the sensation that ChatGPT and other AI are funneling us toward two possible worlds: increased punishment, control, and surveillance or spectacular freedom. I’ve been around long enough to know we are likely to opt for the former, humans loving the status quo as they do. But what if we didn’t? **What if we didn’t?** So today my goal is to offer up some questions to you to see if you perhaps agree and want to help bend the arc toward spectacular freedom.

Let’s start with questions that help us consider the larger problem. Why are *you* seemingly so much more enchanted by learning than your students? Why do so many middle and high school students flock to camps and programs on every subject under the sun: science, math, writing, coding? How much human learning takes place outside of schools? Why do so many people go further than they need to in their work and play to improve themselves, their products and processes? Why did so many turn to learning during the pandemic: bread making, new languages, physics? Why did so few turn to higher ed? In short, how do we enchant learning in higher ed in such a way that people flock to it when they need to be energized, when they need a balm, when they are trying to figure out their why, when they have burning questions they want support in pursuing?

How do we design education that beckons?

We can design education that is AI-proof, but we will have to do it by designing learning experiences that are so meaningful and beguiling that students wouldn't want to turn to AI any more than they would want to have AI play a video game for them or eat a delicious meal for them. Over the past week of my holiday break, I've spent probably 40 hours studying AI and writing about it. Why? Because I *wanted to*. I got sucked into this marvelous challenge, and sometimes it was hard to stop to go to bed. I had no desire to allow AI to steal this fascinating mission from me. Everything about this errand was filled with intrinsic motivation. I chose to do this (autonomy). I could see my understanding growing steadily (mastery). And I understood that this was a way I could use my talents to support others (purpose).

Parts of what I had to do were technically a bit dull. Not every resource I examined was interesting and some were over my head. But I wasn't the least deterred because I have learned to love learning and to recognize how even the more tedious aspects of learning are important when you are working toward a goal. Just as someone striving to improve at basketball is willing to spend countless hours practicing free throws, I am willing to do what is needed to learn about things that matter to me. This trait is something anyone can learn, something we can and will teach because now the entire educational endeavor may depend on it. And how much more delightful would it be to focus on ushering students into an interest in our subject rather than finding ways to force them to study it whether they want to or not?

[Middle schools](#), [high schools](#), and [colleges](#) already exist where students are guided in pursuing questions that matter to them rather than marched through a pre-set curriculum. Vague interests and narrow starting points blossom into broad, interdisciplinary studies as students discover reasons to dive into subjects they never thought they would care about.

My key point is this: humans tend to enjoy and be nourished by out-of-school learning but somewhat (or even extremely) repelled by in-school learning, and it doesn't need to be that way. (Susan Blum's [I love learning; I hate school: An anthropology of college](#) springs to mind.)

Why might this be?

The in-school environment is an “us vs. them” system, a power dynamic that results in an adversarial relationship. We try to soften the edges to appear supportive, but any student will tell you that school (unlike many other avenues of learning) is a game where the goal is to please those who have authority. I would be interested in asking students what percentage of their education felt like “hoop jumping” to them. The sensation of hoop jumping was [amplified considerably](#) when courses moved online during the pandemic. We have focused on controlling students who we view as not capable of controlling themselves or directing their own learning.

- Why do we assume that we are capable of controlling and directing our own learning but our students are not?
- Did you go into teaching to police students, to be judge and jury? What would it feel like to support and learn alongside instead? What would it feel like to primarily direct, inspire, and give feedback?
- If so much quality human learning takes place outside of schools where there is little or no “us vs. them” dynamic, why couldn’t that be true inside of schools as well? Are we really so different from Scandinavian countries who have drastically reduced the power dynamic?
- If organizations can benefit from flatter hierarchies, why can’t schools?
(Francesca Gino, [Rebel Talent](#), Ch. 8)

We have tended to focus on shortcomings, on the negative, on what students *can’t* do. We perpetuated this during the phases where building on strengths would have been far more productive in supporting students as they developed an interest in our subject and began to buy in. While we tend to believe that focusing on the negative is better, research suggests this isn’t necessarily so (Francesca Gino, [Rebel Talent](#), Ch. 7), and [it is definitely problematic when learners are more novice](#).

- How do you feel when those who conduct your annual reviews focus on your shortcomings rather than helping you build on your strengths?
- What percentage of the feedback you provide tends to be focused primarily on fixing? What would it look like if we were more strengths-focused in the novice phases, and how might quality AI make that far more possible now?

We have stripped the joy from learning through methods that focus on teaching as telling, where we ask students to witness and record *our* learning rather than guiding them in the joy of discovering for themselves ([Zehnder et al, p. 141](#)). We haven't provided enough autonomy, made the purposes of the learning clear and meaningful, or truly helped students enjoy watching their mastery grow. We created a system that was highly efficient, a means of mass-producing vast quantities of relatively well-educated individuals, and over time we've developed standards to standardize those graduates. We haven't kept pace with the changes in the world around us (such as advances in AI and significantly more online learning). Now the status quo is truly crumbling, and only a small percentage of faculty and institutions are prepared.

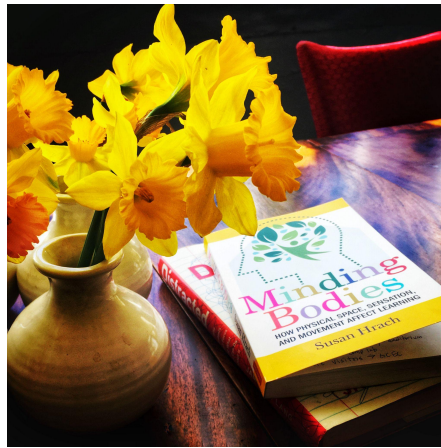
- What if we focused on designing significant *learning experiences* rather than asking students to witness and record *our* learning?
- What would it look like to incorporate far more autonomy, mastery, and purpose into learning?
- Are efficiency and standardization what are most needed now in a world where AI can do so much?
- Did you know research suggests that non-experts (such as our students) may be [more likely to stumble upon solutions](#) to gnarly problems in our fields than experts (us), especially if we prepare them to be creative problem solvers?

And finally, we have too long approached students as if they were brains on sticks rather than complex beings who may need support for their more foundational needs before they can learn optimally (I'm thinking Maslow here).

- When have you most effectively incorporated "[physical space, sensation, and movement](#)" into students' learning? What would it look like to do that consistently?
- How great is the need on your campus to address increased anxiety and depression? To what extent does our current vision of education support *your* well-being?
- Do all your students have their needs for food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and technology met?

What would education focused on the above look like? How might it be a more delightful experience not just for your students but for *you*? What would have to happen for you to implement some or all of the above into your own courses?

Given the world we were preparing students for in decades past, perhaps our previous vision wasn't the worst. But what could education for a new millennium look like? Below you will find my own personal vision. I am looking forward to modifying my ideas through working with teams of faculty and students on my campus and beyond this spring. What would your vision look like?



One Possible Vision

Minimize power dynamics that result in adversarial relationships

- ❖ [Restorative](#) and invitational practices (scroll to [Ch. 4](#))
- ❖ [Co-construction of knowledge](#), discovery-focused rather than teaching as telling
- ❖ Minimizing grades, students move on when ready (scroll to [Ch. 6](#))
- ❖ Engaging students in decision-making at all levels including course design (scroll to [Ch. 3](#))

Maximizing interest and engagement

- ❖ Highly relevant content
- ❖ Student-directed, tailored to the individual
- ❖ [DEI-focused content and strategies](#)
- ❖ [Embodied practices, emotion-rich learning](#)

- ❖ Intrinsically motivating practices: [Autonomy, mastery, purpose](#)
- ❖ [Authentic assessment](#)

Preparing students for wicked problems and an uncertain future

- ❖ Reducing memorization to only that which is required for agile thinking, while increasing focus on [portable essential skills](#)
- ❖ Moving away from rote work that AI can do just as well or better while preparing students to work alongside AI to extend their capabilities while being realistic about [how AI will change](#) or [eliminate](#) various professions
- ❖ Experiential and field-based learning, original research, novel wicked problems, inquiry/project/problem-based learning,

A focus on well-being

- ❖ Whole student learning
- ❖ Community building, [depolarization](#), [complexity thinking](#)

Improved access and supports (not my area of expertise but crucial)

- ❖ Reasonable cost
- ❖ Entrance requirements that reflect our values
- ❖ DEI practices and student input threaded through decision-making at every level

Unless, like me, it is part of your job to keep up with advancements in teaching and learning, you probably aren't familiar with every idea listed above (that's why we created [this website](#)). What in this list are you particularly curious about? What on this list would have the most significant impact if implemented in your own classroom or institution? How did looking at my vision impact your vision? More importantly, what can our students envision? What if we worked alongside them?

Based on my own experiences attempting to move my courses toward my values, I can unequivocally state that even after decades of [focusing on best practices and improving my teaching](#), addressing the power dynamic is what changed everything. Wonderful authors such as Susan Blum made [unimpeachable arguments](#) for "ungrading." What they didn't tell me was that minimizing grades would radically alter my relationship with my students and saturate me with joy and relief. They didn't warn me that having made that change would drive me to do everything I could to move toward co-construction of

knowledge and a focus on student-driven learning, removing every last vestige of the power dynamic I could.

I recognize that some may not feel like they have the energy for this right now. If you are in a place where all you can do is cheer from the sidelines, please do that. We need that. But I suspect most of us have already tried stepping back, tried resting, and didn't feel significantly better. As Laurie Santos of [The happiness lab](#) would say, "What if our brains are lying to us?" [One episode of her podcast](#) notes that we are likely to feel *more* energized by getting involved and working together towards common goals, not less. [As Francesca Gino notes](#), "Comfort is overrated. It doesn't make us as happy as we think it will" (p. 42), and working on projects that matter can lead to substantial boosts in well-being (pp. 218-219).

What if this is exactly what you needed? How can you be more yourself here and in your classroom? How can you bring more of your most authentic self to your colleagues and to your students? How could you bring your culture, identity, values, and interests to the table for us? How might you, yes you, use this game-changing situation to give yourself and others permission to reimagine education?

Are you interested in designing courses around values such as those I have described here? My co-authors and I would love to have you join us, as we work to build communities around reimagining education.

Artificial intelligence isn't the end of the world. Join Cynthia and her co-authors in redesigning your courses around our shared humanity.



Set on the lush, forested campus of The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, [Learning that Matters: the Course Design Institute](#) offers faculty an opportunity to pause from normal routines to focus deeply on meaningful course design. During this four-day, resource-rich institute, faculty will find themselves supported and inspired as they develop and design courses that address the needs of diverse students within the contexts of their unique teaching environments.

Cynthia Alby has spent most of her career immersed in “avid cross-disciplinary idea synthesizing.” Her primary research question is, “How might we re-enchant learning in order to help faculty and students flourish?” She joined Georgia College in 2001, where she is a Professor of Teacher Education, and in 2020 she earned a certification in applied positive psychology. She recently co-authored a practical book on course design for changing times: [Learning that matters: A field guide to course design for transformative education](#). In addition, for nearly 20 years she has helped to develop faculty from across Georgia through the “[Governor’s Teaching Fellows Program](#)” at the Louise McBee Institute for Higher Education at UGA. She can be reached at cynthia.alby@gcsu.edu.