Helping Students Think for Themselves — Even When AI Does the Thinking

By Matthew Agustin

It started with a sentence that didn't sound like her.

The essay was polished and articulate, but something felt off. "It's not that she cheated," her teacher said. "It's that she didn't feel it mattered whether she wrote it herself."

In another class, a student reading an AI-generated response paused and said, "It's weird. It writes like I already believe something, even when I don't."

These small but striking moments reveal a deeper shift: The tools are doing the work, but what happens when they do the *thinking*?

A teacher might describe the shift this way: *"I'm not worried about students cheating. I'm worried about them not knowing what their own thinking sounds like anymore."*

That kind of comment reframes the issue from a rules-based lens to a developmental one. The challenge isn't just academic integrity, but also helping students find their voice in a world where AI can mimic it instantly.

As generative AI becomes embedded in the daily routines of students, we face an urgent question: What's happening to learning itself?

Students are navigating a landscape where efficiency is rewarded and self-authorship is optional. Many feel caught between ease and integrity, between using a tool and letting it think for them. And many aren't being guided, only warned.

This isn't just a cheating problem, but a reflection problem. If we don't address it with care, we risk leaving students technically proficient, but ethically and intellectually untethered.

From Tools to Thinking

Across the country, districts and governments are moving quickly. In the U.S., a national executive order promises expanded funding for AI education. Some schools have launched AI

literacy courses or installed classroom policies, but much of this momentum focuses on tools, not reflection.

Most efforts teach students *how* to use AI, yet few ask *why*, *when*, or *to what end*. This isn't AI literacy; it's dependence, and students feel the difference. Some describe AI as helpful but disorienting, while others admit they're not sure what counts as learning anymore.

One told me, "I can write faster now, but I don't know if I'm learning anything."

We're not just facing an AI gap, but a **wisdom gap**.

Introducing AI Wisdom Education

During my final semester at Arizona State University, I developed a curriculum framework called **AI Wisdom Education**. It's built around a simple goal: help students not just *use* AI, but *think* with it critically, ethically, and creatively.

The model is grounded in three pillars:

1. **Critical Thinking**

   Students learn to approach AI's outputs with curiosity and skepticism. Instead of asking, *Was this written by AI?*, they're encouraged to ask: *Is this reasoning sound? What's missing here? Who benefits from this framing?*

2. **Ethical Reflection**

   AI isn't neutral. Every tool carries values. Students analyze real-world cases such as biased hiring tools, surveillance systems in schools, and explore who's impacted, who decides, and what responsibility looks like.

3. **Creative Agency**

   Students move beyond passive use. Through projects like AI poetry, civic design, or tool critiques, students begin to shape technology, not just use it."

This isn't about rejecting AI. It's about reclaiming student thinking in a world of frictionless shortcuts.

What This Looks Like in the Classroom

In pilot workshops and curriculum prototypes, we anticipate these pillars coming to life through simple but powerful activities. Students might:

- Compare outputs from different chatbots and assess bias, tone, and voice (i.e. In an English class, annotate an AI-generated story to analyze its emotional tone and character development, then rewrite it from a different perspective)
- Examine a flawed AI decision system and propose redesigns rooted in equity
- Reflect on when to rely on AI, and when it's worth thinking without it

Each activity is less about mastering tools and more about noticing how tools shape them: their voice, confidence, and sense of authorship.

In a scenario we've planned for a future unit, a student might pause after comparing two chatbot responses and say, "They're both right, but one sounds like it assumes I'm already on its side." A moment like that could spark conversations about persuasion, identity, and bias that textbooks alone might not surface.

These reflections matter. They signal that students are still capable of deep inquiry — if we make space for it. It's not just intellectual development at stake; it's emotional as well. When students interact with AI, they're often navigating subtle messages about who they're expected to be. A confident-sounding response can override uncertainty, while a biased output might quietly reinforce stereotypes. Helping students name these feelings, such as confusion, discomfort, overconfidence, can transform AI from a black box into a conversation partner worth questioning.

Why This Matters

For teachers, this shift can feel overwhelming. Many weren't trained to facilitate AI discussions or integrate ethical reflection into their subject, but the good news is: this doesn't require an overhaul. It starts with one question, one pause, one student insight. Teachers don't need to be AI experts to lead these conversations. Many of the most powerful insights arise from student observations, not software mastery. A single reflective writing prompt, a chatbot comparison, or

even an open-ended question like, *"What did you notice about how that tool responded?"* can open the door. When we treat students as co-learners rather than just tech users, we invite them into a shared process of discovery.

We've spent years telling students not to copy. Now we have to help them ask: *Who am I in this writing? What does it mean to think alongside a machine? And what kind of learner — or citizen — do I want to become?*

Higher education may focus on integrity. Policy circles may focus on access. But in K–12 classrooms, what matters most is helping students stay present in their own thinking.

In a world where AI can sound like anyone, students still need to sound like themselves.

Author bio:

Matthew Agustin is a recent graduate in Innovation in Society at Arizona State University. He is the creator of the AI Wisdom Education initiative, which helps students develop critical thinking, ethical reflection, and creative agency as they engage with generative AI in learning spaces.