The Relational Depth Framework

A 7-Level Model for Understanding Human-AI Engagement

Part of the "Relating With AI" Initiative

Relational depth isn't a technical feature—it's a human stance.
This framework supports educators, designers, and institutional leaders in building more intentional AI engagement—centering values, reflective practice, and responsible co-creation across diverse learning and innovation environments.

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Section 1: Executive Summary

As artificial intelligence becomes embedded in education, design, governance, and daily life, the question is no longer whether we will use AI—but *how* we will relate to it. The **Relational Depth Framework** offers a new model for navigating that shift—not by asking what AI can do for us, but how we engage, shape, and grow alongside it.

This 7-level model maps the depth of human-AI engagement, from passive automation to principled co-creation. Each level is anchored in a metaphor and a hallmark of transformation, helping individuals and institutions recognize where they currently stand—and what deeper, more values-driven relationships with AI could look like. Rather than prescribing a "right" level, the framework invites reflective, context-aware movement centered on intention, agency, and care.

Originally developed through work in AI ethics, education, and innovation strategy, this framework draws from responsible innovation, design justice, and futures thinking. Its aim is not to classify AI use, but to offer **a compass for building more conscious, equitable, and meaningful human-AI relationships**.

This white paper brings the framework to life through four applied domains: education, ethics, youth leadership, and speculative design. It highlights actionable pathways for implementation in curricula, organizational development, and grantmaking—while identifying future research opportunities and complementary models.

This isn't just a framework—it's a guide for institutions, educators, and changemakers to move from reactive use to reflective design, and to begin shaping AI relationships that reflect who we're becoming—and who we're accountable to.

Section 2: Introduction & Origin

What do our interactions with AI say about our values—and what might they say in the future we choose to shape?

We are surrounded by artificial intelligence—but rarely asked how we want to relate to it. From auto-generated emails to algorithmic recommendations, much of today's AI operates invisibly, shaping behavior through automation, optimization, and scale. Meanwhile, in classrooms, organizations, and public discourse, new generative tools have arrived with dazzling speed—often reducing engagement to prompting, output, and productivity. The result is a widening gap: between the potential of these tools, and the depth of human intention, reflection, and relationship they could support.

This framework emerges as a response to that gap.

Rather than asking what AI can do, we ask: **What kind of relationships are we building with these tools—and what do those relationships reveal about us?**
The Relational Depth Framework offers a new language for mapping, navigating, and reshaping how humans engage with AI. It invites individuals and institutions to move beyond surface-level use, toward interactions shaped by agency, values, and co-creative possibility.

This work didn't begin in a lab—it began in classrooms, design conversations, and systems where people were trying to make sense of AI while preserving their humanity. As a student and practitioner of responsible innovation, I found myself returning to one core question: *What does it mean to relate to technology well?*

I came to this work through an interdisciplinary lens—trained not only to engage with emerging technologies, but to think systemically about ethics, inclusion, and long-term societal impact. Across projects in AI education, co-creative tool design, and institutional strategy, I saw a recurring need: a way to name the depth of interaction and to prompt more reflective, values-based practice. People were being offered tools, but not the language to understand their relationship to those tools. Institutions were calling for innovation, but often without naming who it served—or what it cost.

The earliest version of this framework didn't emerge in a workshop or formal research setting—it began as a quiet reflection. While working on designing a critical thinking course involving generative AI, I started noticing patterns: students were engaging with AI tools not as collaborators, but as answer machines. The more I observed and reflected, the clearer it became—there was no shared language for describing the depth of interaction, or for naming when relational agency was missing. That reflection became a sketch, and that sketch became a spectrum.

Its influences are broad: human-centered design, participatory futures, AI literacy, epistemic agency. But at its core, the framework is grounded in a simple and timely question: *What kinds of relationships are possible between humans and intelligent systems—and which ones are worth building?*

We are in a moment where that question is no longer optional.
As funders, educators, technologists, and policy leaders shape the future of AI integration, the frameworks we use will influence everything from curriculum design to tool development, investment strategy, and research agendas. The Relational Depth Framework offers a way to make those relationships more visible, intentional, and just.

It's not a checklist or static metric. It's an invitation:
To slow down.
To name what matters.
To build futures that feel more like us—and more like the ones we deserve.

Why Purpose Also Matters

As AI use deepens, it's not just *how* we engage—but *why*.
The **Purpose Lens**, introduced in **Appendix E**, adds a cross-cutting dimension that helps educators, designers, and leaders align AI interactions with real human needs, not just innovation for its own sake.
"Purpose anchors co-creation in values, not just polish."

Section 3: The Relational Depth Framework

3.1 The Relational Depth Framework: Overview

Across sectors and institutions, artificial intelligence is praised for what it can do—its speed, scale, and efficiency. But rarely do we ask:
What is the quality of the relationship it invites?

The **Relational Depth Framework** was developed to help us name that relationship—and reshape it.

This seven-level model traces the progression from passive automation to meaningful co-creation. It introduces a shared language for describing how people engage with AI—not just technically, but relationally. Whether in classrooms, design labs, leadership spaces, or systems change efforts, it offers a new lens: not how much AI is used, but how thoughtfully and reflectively it's integrated. This depth-centered lens also aligns with emerging calls for equity, justice, and human-centered AI—offering a way to surface who is being served, included, or overlooked in the design process (Whittlestone et al., 2019).

It's designed for educators rethinking learning, designers building with care, funders evaluating impact, and institutions navigating uncertain terrain. In every case, it invites one central question:
What kind of engagement fosters meaning, agency, and reflection?

Each level marks a shift—not just in interaction, but in perspective. And each invites us to pause: to recognize when we're defaulting to shallow use, and to imagine what deeper, more intentional practice might look like.

This is not a rubric. It's not a scorecard.
It's a guide for reflection, conversation, and design.
A tool to map where we are, where we want to be, and how we might build relationships with AI that reflect who we are—and who we're becoming.

To fully understand the Relational Depth Framework, we need to look through two lenses: one that shows us **what AI engagement looks like**, and another that helps us interpret **what that engagement means**.

The first table offers a **practical view**—with clear examples, behaviors, and relational markers that reveal how depth increases with intentional input, context, and values. The second table provides a **symbolic view**—mapping each level's metaphor, hallmark transformation, and deeper relational character.

Together, these lenses allow us to see both the **observable experience** of interacting with AI and the **underlying shifts** that define a more meaningful, co-creative relationship.

3.2 Levels of the Relational Depth Framework

Level	Short Description	Example Interaction	Uploads Own Work?	Engages Own Values?
0. Ambient Automation	AI runs silently in the background to automate basic tasks.	Autocorrect or AI photo enhancements.	No	No
1. Personal Prompting	User gives simple prompts and receives quick responses.	"What's a good dinner recipe?"	No	No
2. Reflective Input	User adds context or goals; AI responds reflectively.	"I'm trying to stay focused—any tips?"	Optional	Optional
3. Contextual Grounding	AI adapts to user documents, roles, or ongoing work.	"Here's my project brief—help outline next steps."	Yes	Optional
3.5 Perspective Shift	AI helps reframe assumptions or shift perspectives.	"What biases might I be missing in my argument?"	Optional	Yes
4. Values-Informed Directionality	User and AI engage with core values to guide direction.	"How can I align this plan with sustainability goals?"	Yes	Yes
5. Iterative Transformation	Back-and-forth exchange builds on evolving insights.	"Let's refine the message until it resonates."	Yes	Yes
6. Co-Creative Partnership	AI becomes a creative partner, shaping new ideas in tandem.	"Let's co-design a toolkit that serves both our communities."	Yes	Yes

3.3 Relational Meaning-Making Table: Metaphors, Hallmarks, and Symbolic Depth

Level	Title	Relational Essence	Metaphor + Explanation	Hallmark of This Level	Example Contexts
0	**Ambient Automation**	AI acts without intentional engagement; interaction is passive or invisible.	**Motion-Activated Light** – Like a hallway light that turns on when you pass by, this level represents ambient AI that operates in the background—triggered, not chosen.	Unnoticed presence; background reliance	Smart sensors, passive content curation, default algorithmic filtering
1	**Personal Prompting**	AI is treated as a tool to produce desired outputs on demand.	**Drive-Thru Window** – You place an order, receive a result, and move on. The interaction is transactional, not transformational.	Task efficiency; single-step utility	Basic ChatGPT use for tasks, social media captions, AI-powered search
2	**Reflective Input**	Prompts begin to reflect personal thought, but the relationship remains output-driven.	**Interactive Whiteboard** – You write something, and it responds in kind. Still reactive, but now mirrors your thinking.	Seed of self-awareness in interaction	Student essays, brainstorming with AI, reflective journaling prompts
3	**Contextual Grounding**	Input includes context, nuance, or audience—AI responds with more relevance and alignment.	**Shared Canvas** – Rather than writing alone, you and AI are contributing to a shared surface where prior strokes shape future ones.	Engagement with shared frame or intention	Lesson planning, design briefs, scenario modeling
3.5	**Perspective Shift**	The interaction prompts you to see differently—emotionally, ethically, or epistemically.	**Mirror-Turned-Window** – What begins as reflection becomes a view into something larger. You start to recognize alternative ways of seeing.	Conscious decentering or reorientation	Critical reflection, value clarification, systems reframing
4	**Values-Informed Directionality**	Your input reflects clear values, goals, and ethical intentions that guide the system's response.	**Moral Compass** – You don't just steer the tool—you steer with purpose. The AI becomes a partner in directional thinking.	Values-based steering; ethical intent as compass	Participatory design, mission-driven strategy, ethical foresight

Level	Title	Relational Essence	Metaphor + Explanation	Hallmark of This Level	Example Contexts
5	**Iterative Transformation**	You and the AI shape and reshape ideas across time—transforming understanding through revision.	**Clay on a Wheel** – AI is no longer just reacting; it's part of an evolving form. Meaning is co-shaped through iteration.	Recursive engagement; emergent meaning	Ongoing prototypes, curricular redesigns, longform collaborations
6	**Co-Creative Partnership**	AI becomes a partner in generative dialogue rooted in mutual adaptation and relational trust.	**River Confluence** – Two currents merge and shape a new flow. You're not just producing—you're participating in shared authorship.	Shared authorship; mutual evolution	Thought partnership, relational design, speculative co-creation

3.4 Key Features to Highlight

The Relational Depth Framework isn't just a typology of interaction—it's a lens for transforming how we relate to technology, to each other, and to the futures we build.

It was designed with three key intentions in mind:

- **Relational Depth, Not Just Technical Skill**
  Unlike many AI literacy models that focus on competence or fluency, this framework emphasizes the *quality* of engagement. It recognizes that meaning-making, ethical awareness, and reflective practice are as crucial as prompt-writing or tool selection.

- **Transferable Across Contexts**
  Whether you're designing curriculum, shaping policy, facilitating youth leadership, or building ethical products, the framework offers a shared language to describe and deepen AI engagement. Its levels are not tool-specific—they are context-responsive, adaptable, and value-centered.

- **Invites Reflection, Not Evaluation**
  This isn't a rubric or a ladder of success. It's a tool for dialogue: Where are we now? Where do we want to be? What does depth look like in our work—and what stands in the way? Designed to support growth at every level, the framework helps individuals, teams, and institutions reflect on their relationship with AI.
  (e.g., an educator rethinking assessments through Level 3.5, or a funder using Level 5 to evaluate AI-enabled projects)

Each level marks a shift—not just in action, but in orientation. Together, they invite a deeper question: How might we relate to AI in ways that reflect who we are—and who we want to become?

This is not a scorecard. It's a guide for reflection, conversation, and design. A tool to map where we are, where we're headed, and how we might build relationships with AI that hold meaning, agency, and care.

For those seeking to go further, Appendix E introduces The Purpose Lens, a companion lens that helps assess whether deeper engagement is truly aligned with meaningful human goals. It ensures that the drive toward relational depth is grounded in intention, not just intensity.

Section 4: Strategic Value

4.1 – Why Now?

Artificial intelligence is evolving faster than most institutions can respond (OECD, 2023). From education and design to public policy and social systems, there is a rush to integrate AI across systems—often without asking: *How should this be integrated? For whom—and to what end?* (Stilgoe, Owen, & Macnaghten, 2013).

In this rapid shift, engagement often remains shallow: focused on productivity boosts, novelty, or one-way outputs.

As ethical concerns mount—about bias, surveillance, equity, and impact—the conversation has begun to shift. There is growing recognition that tools are not neutral (Birhane, 2021), and that the *way* we engage with AI shapes everything from outcomes to values. But many leaders, educators, and changemakers still lack a shared language or lens to assess the depth of their AI engagement.

This is where the Relational Depth Framework comes in. It helps us slow down, reflect, and make visible what's often left implicit in AI use: our assumptions, our values, our relational stance. It centers quality over quantity, process over product, and meaning over mechanics.

4.2 – Naming the Gaps

Most existing AI readiness frameworks focus on technical literacy, infrastructure, or ethical checklists. While important, these approaches often miss something fundamental: **the lived, relational experience of engaging with AI.**

They don't show us how to:

- Reflect on the *quality* of our AI interactions.
- Recognize when we're defaulting to shallow patterns.

- Navigate tensions between control, trust, and co-creation.
- Consider who is being included—or left out—of the design and decision-making process.

Without a framework for depth, institutions risk relying on surface metrics to define progress. They may scale tools that reinforce inequity, silence agency, or replicate extractive models—despite good intentions.

A more direct comparison with established frameworks—like Bloom's Taxonomy, the Futures Cone, or the Ladder of Citizen Participation—can be found in **Section 7**, where we explore how the Relational Depth Framework fills critical gaps in these models.

4.3 – What the Framework Offers

The Relational Depth Framework offers something different: a values-driven, context-flexible guide to examining and shaping human-AI engagement. It doesn't prescribe what's right—but helps make visible what's present.

It offers:

- **A reflective map**: to locate where we are, where we've been, and where we might grow.
- **A shared vocabulary**: to support cross-sector dialogue around AI integration, especially in education, ethics, leadership, and creative fields.
- **A developmental tool**: to design learning experiences, grant criteria, institutional strategies, or innovation practices with intentionality and care.

At its heart, the framework invites deeper questions:
What does it mean to build *with* AI—not just *use* it?
How do our values show up in those interactions?
What relationships are we cultivating—and at what cost?

The framework offers a strategic checkpoint—a moment to align values before accelerating forward.

4.4 – For Whom and For What?

This framework can be explored by educators rethinking their curricula, funders designing more principled innovation metrics, and researchers seeking alternatives to extractive AI pathways.

But the potential reaches further. The framework can support:

- **Funders** evaluating depth of impact in tech-forward proposals.
- **Educators** teaching critical AI literacy beyond tools and trends.
- **Designers** grounding AI applications in reflection and intention.
- **Institutions** seeking justice-aligned pathways in AI integration.
- **Youth leaders and changemakers** naming their relationship with technology in transformative ways.

By bridging reflection with structure, and values with visibility, the framework helps move us from ambition to alignment.

When we take depth seriously, we don't just improve AI engagement—we elevate the ethics, equity, and imagination that guide it.

4.5 Strategic Leverage Points

The Relational Depth Framework isn't just a descriptive tool—it's a lever for change. It equips educators, funders, designers, and institutions with a shared language to pause, reflect, and reimagine how AI is integrated—not just technically, but meaningfully. Below are five key leverage points where this framework can actively shape more intentional and justice-aligned innovation:

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1. Reframing AI Literacy Beyond Skills

Most AI literacy efforts focus on technical competence: how to prompt, use tools, or navigate features. While foundational, this approach often misses the deeper dimension of *how* and *why* people engage with AI in the first place. The Relational Depth Framework introduces a relational frame—shifting the conversation from *capability* to *consciousness*. This shift helps learners and leaders consider: *What values are guiding my engagement? What patterns am I reinforcing?* This reframe strengthens critical thinking, ethical use, and identity-aware practice—hallmarks of deep AI fluency.

"AI literacy isn't just about asking the right question—it's about understanding your reasons for asking."

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2. Centering Equity and Inclusion in AI Design

Relational depth provides a practical method for evaluating inclusion in AI systems. When mapped across levels, it becomes easier to distinguish extractive or one-size-fits-all deployments from co-designed, community-driven ones. This enables designers, funders, and impact leaders to ask sharper equity questions: *Whose input shaped this tool? Who benefits—and who might be harmed?* The Relational Depth Framework becomes a guide for designing with, not just for—surfacing patterns of exclusion and sparking more participatory alternatives.

"Relational depth surfaces not just who we're designing for—but who we're designing with."

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3. Building Reflective Capacity into AI Integration

As institutions race to implement AI, reflection often gets sidelined. The Relational Depth Framework helps rebalance the equation by offering a structure to pause and ask: *What kind of relationship are we creating with this tool?* Whether embedded in syllabus redesigns, ethics reviews, or team retrospectives, it creates space for reflective sensemaking. Over time, it builds organizational capacity for thoughtful adoption—not just quick uptake.

"Reflection isn't a slowdown—it's a strategy for responsible scaling."

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4. Offering a Scalable Diagnostic for Institutional Practice

The framework also functions as a lightweight, scalable diagnostic tool. Educators can map how students currently engage with AI in their coursework. Designers can reflect on whether their product invites shallow compliance or deeper agency. Innovation labs and ethics committees can use it to assess relational blind spots across departments. This shared language makes "relational depth" tangible—opening up clearer pathways for improvement.

"The Relational Depth Framework gives shape to what many teams sense but rarely name: the quality of our AI engagement."

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5. Guiding Ethical Governance, Foresight, and Funding Alignment

Funders, policymakers, and institutional leaders are often asked to make high-stakes decisions with limited foresight tools. The Relational Depth Framework offers a new lens for future-aligned governance: one that goes beyond technical benchmarks to assess *relational outcomes*. It invites questions like: *Are we funding thoughtful engagement, or just speed? Are the systems we support cultivating care and inclusion—or perpetuating passive use?* This enables more principled, future-conscious funding and oversight strategies aligned with justice and human-centered values.

"If we're funding AI for the future, we need tools that help us fund relationships*, not just results."*

Closing Reflection:

Together, these leverage points reflect the framework's greatest potential: not to dictate how AI should be used, but to shape how we think about our relationship with it—and to help us build systems that reflect care, consciousness, and collective responsibility.

Section 5: Why Domains Matter—Context for Use Cases

The Relational Depth Framework was never meant to stay abstract. From its earliest sketches, it was built to travel—across disciplines, institutions, and everyday settings where AI is already reshaping how we think, act, and connect.

Yet while AI adoption accelerates, depth of engagement often stalls. Tools are implemented before reflection. Outcomes are prioritized over process. And too often, AI systems reflect technical ease rather than ethical care or relational depth.

That's where this framework enters—not just as a map, but as a mirror. It invites us to examine how AI is shaping our relationships—with knowledge, with others, with ourselves.

The following domain walkthroughs show how the framework comes alive in different contexts. We've chosen four: education, ethics & responsible innovation, youth leadership, and story-based futures. Each domain surfaces distinct leverage points—but taken together, they reveal something larger: a shared need to design, teach, and evaluate AI not just by what it does, but by how it relates.

These aren't case studies. They're conversation starters.
They invite us to ask: What does depth look like here? What's possible when we make it visible?

5.1 Domain Walkthrough: Education

Education is often one of the first frontiers for new technology—and one of the most complex. From AI tutoring systems to automated grading, schools and universities are adopting AI to boost efficiency, personalization, and access. But deeper questions remain: How are these tools shaping the learning experience? Who decides what "good" engagement looks like? And what happens when depth gives way to convenience?

The Relational Depth Framework offers educators, instructional designers, and students a way to ask—and answer—these questions. It reframes AI not as a tool to be mastered, but as a relationship to be cultivated.

Many classrooms currently sit between Levels 2 and 3—moving beyond surface prompting toward more reflective inputs. But the framework's middle arc reveals a deeper path:

- **Level 3 (Contextual Grounding)** invites students to situate their AI use in course content or lived experience.
- **Level 4 (Perspective Shift)** encourages them to embed personal values like equity or sustainability into how they frame AI queries.
- **Level 5 (Dialogic Partnership)** enables collaborative creativity—where students co-shape AI output in response to evolving insight.
- **Level 6 (Shared Transformation)** shifts the learner's role entirely: from user to systems-aware participant questioning the very tools they engage.

Together, these levels reflect a move from task completion to epistemic agency—where learners not only receive knowledge, but shape the very questions being asked.

Educators using the framework have embedded it into lesson planning, reflection prompts, and even curriculum design. In both K-12 and higher education, it's being used to map AI engagement depth—not just academic performance.

In a time when generative AI threatens to flatten learning into output, this framework restores a deeper aim: to make AI literacy not just about fluency, but about flourishing.

Pull Quote:
"Depth in education isn't about how much AI we use—it's about how meaningfully we invite students into the process."

5.2 Ethics & Responsible Innovation

Ethics in AI is too often reduced to compliance: checklists, principles, and risk audits designed to prevent harm. But this framework invites a more relational and reflective approach—one rooted in shared meaning, critical agency, and responsibility to those most affected by technology's design and deployment.

At lower levels, ethical practice may look like avoiding bias in datasets or flagging AI risks. But as relational depth increases, so does the moral imagination required. What becomes possible is not only a shift in what gets built, but in how, by whom, and why. Instead of working within the boundaries of pre-set frameworks, designers and researchers begin to reimagine who holds the power to define innovation—and how that power is shared.

At Level 4, values-informed prompting becomes more than personal—it becomes collective. A funder might ask: What values are embedded in the questions we ask of AI? A policymaker might pause to ask: What worldview is this system reinforcing?

At Level 5, ethical reflection means interrogating assumptions baked into design choices and metrics of success. In one initiative, a youth-led data justice coalition reframed their ethics rubric after applying the framework—moving from "risk mitigation" to "relational responsibility," centered on community accountability and long-term trust.

At Level 6, co-creation becomes a deeply political act. The most transformative ethical frameworks aren't just adopted—they're co-authored. This invites broader participation, deeper humility, and accountability not just to systems, but to each other.

Pull Quote:
"Ethics isn't a checkpoint—it's the relationship we build with power, possibility, and each other."

5.3 Youth Leadership & Social Impact

Too often, youth are asked to lead—but given little space to reflect on how they wish to lead, and why. In civic programs, innovation fellowships, and global forums, there is a growing recognition: youth are not just future workers or users. They are system redesigners.

This framework offers youth and their allies a new tool—not for defining who is "ready," but for exploring what depth of engagement leadership truly requires. It reorients youth leadership from performance to presence.

At Levels 1-2, young people may use AI for productivity or presentation: summarizing content, creating campaign visuals, or refining proposals. But deeper levels ask more: What values shape your vision? Whose voice is being amplified, and whose is missing?

Level 3.5 introduces a turning point: from using AI to tell a better story, to using AI to *question* the story. What assumptions are embedded in the prompt? What narratives are we replicating?

At Level 5, youth-led innovation accelerators have begun to use the framework as a reflective practice tool—asking fellows to journal weekly about the kind of relationship they want to have with the tools they use. This makes leadership not just about external achievement, but about internal clarity and systemic awareness.

And at Level 6, youth design labs are reimagining civic technology through collective dialogue. In one case, students in a climate resilience project redefined their AI goals—not as predictive accuracy, but as community-centered storytelling for advocacy and solidarity.

Pull Quote:
"AI won't define the future—young people will. But the tools they use will shape the paths they see."

5.4 Story-Based Futures & Speculative Design

Storytelling has always shaped the boundaries of possibility. In futures thinking and speculative design, narratives aren't just artistic expressions—they are tools for surfacing assumptions, reimagining systems, and prototyping alternative realities. The Relational Depth Framework adds a crucial dimension to this work: a way to intentionally vary the *quality* of human-AI engagement in speculative projects—not just the *presence* of AI.

In this domain, the model becomes a relational design tool. It guides creators in framing not only what technologies exist in the imagined future, but how people relate to them—who co-creates, who is excluded, who resists, and what values shape the story.

For instance, a Level 1 speculative story might present AI as purely instrumental—a background automation with no meaningful agency or relationship. But stories grounded in Levels 4 through 6 explore the *relational tensions* of shared decision-making, ethical ambiguity, and values-driven co-creation. These futures ask deeper questions: not just "What if?" but "With whom?" and "Toward what end?"

Workshops using the framework might explore how shifting a story prompt up the scale reshapes its protagonists, tensions, and embedded ethics. A traditional prompt like *"Imagine an AI that automates healthcare"* could evolve into *"Co-design a future where AI helps rebuild trust between communities and healthcare systems."*

In speculative design practice, the framework serves as a provocation: What kind of relationship with AI are we designing into the world? Are we defaulting to efficiency narratives—or imagining systems grounded in reciprocity, repair, or resistance?

By embedding the Relational Depth Framework into narrative creation and design, speculative futures become more than creative exercises. They become invitations to imagine differently—rooted in values, shaped by reflection, and open to transformation.

Pull Quote:
"Every future carries a relationship with AI. The real question is: how deep are we willing to go?"

Section 6: Implementation Pathways

Across sectors, AI adoption is accelerating—but thoughtful integration is lagging behind.

Whether in education, organizational design, or public systems, the speed of deployment often outpaces reflection on *how* AI is integrated and *for whom*. The Relational Depth Framework offers a way to bring intentionality back into that process.

This section explores five key domains where the framework can serve as a guide—not just for measuring engagement, but for shaping meaningful, equity-centered AI practice.

6.1 Education & Pedagogy

Classroom AI use is rapidly increasing—but not always meaningfully. The framework helps educators move beyond "using AI" toward designing learning experiences that build agency, critical thinking, and reflection.

- **Example Use:** A college instructor builds AI-assisted assignment scaffolds based on the model, guiding students from passive summarization (Level 1) to reflective sensemaking (Level 3), and finally to collaborative synthesis using value-driven prompts (Level 4).
- **Application:** Can inform AI literacy curricula, assignment design, critical media pedagogy, and faculty development workshops.

"This helped me see AI not just as a tool, but as a thinking partner—and rethink how I assess learning."

6.2 Design & Creative Practice

Designers often use AI to generate—but rarely to relate. The framework supports creative professionals in exploring how their tools reflect relationships, values, and intentions.

- **Example Use:** A speculative design studio maps a community futures project using the framework, iterating from ambient scenario generation (Level 0-2) to shared workshops where participants collaboratively reframe prompts and generate storyworlds using Level 4+ reflection.
- **Application:** Can guide participatory design, ethical prototyping, values-driven product strategy, or speculative design curriculum.

"It gave us a shared lens to ask: who are we designing with—and how deep is the dialogue?"

6.3 Ethics & Responsible Innovation

Policy debates and innovation strategies often overlook the relational layer of AI use. The framework offers a nuanced way to interrogate not just *what* AI is used for, but *how* those uses are shaped by underlying assumptions, values, and power.

- **Example Use:** A responsible tech lab integrates the framework into its grant review criteria, assessing not just impact metrics but the depth of human-AI engagement in submitted proposals.
- **Application:** Can support grantmaking, internal audits, ethical innovation reviews, and public consultation practices.

"It helps reveal the hidden ethics of everyday choices—before they become norms."

6.4 Youth Leadership & Social Impact

Young changemakers are often AI adopters—but not AI shapers. The framework can help youth programs build agency, critical discernment, and co-creation fluency.

- **Example Use:** A youth social innovation cohort uses the framework to reflect on how they co-create digital campaigns with AI—from slogan drafting (Level 1) to strategic reframing based on shared values and community input (Level 4+).

- **Application:** Can guide workshops, digital civics curriculum, campaign planning, or future-of-work readiness efforts.

"We didn't just learn how to prompt. We learned how to design the relationship."

6.5 Story-Based Futures & Speculative Design

Speculative design is fertile ground for relational engagement. The framework can be used to reframe how AI is imagined—not just in what futures it builds, but in how people relate to those futures.

- **Example Use:** A museum exhibit invites visitors to engage with an AI storytelling companion. At Level 1, it responds with fixed narratives. At Level 4, it adapts based on the visitor's reflections, prompting questions rooted in personal values and worldviews.
- **Application:** Can shape public installations, museum exhibits, critical futures education, or media innovation projects.

"It helped us shift from telling futures about people to building futures with them."

Closing Reflection

These pathways are not exhaustive—but they mark the beginning of a deeper shift:

One where institutions don't just adopt AI, but co-shape its role with intention, care, and context.

Section 7: Framework Comparisons

Many existing models already help educators, designers, and changemakers evaluate quality, depth, or transformation. Rather than replacing them, the Relational Depth Framework is designed to complement and expand their use. Below are four relevant frameworks—and how our model adds a unique and necessary lens.

7.1 Bloom's Taxonomy (Cognitive Complexity in Learning)

Why it's widely used:
Bloom's Taxonomy organizes learning objectives by cognitive demand—from basic recall to synthesis and evaluation. It helps educators scaffold complexity and assess outcomes.

How the Relational Depth Framework adds:
While Bloom's focuses on *what* the learner is doing cognitively (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), the Relational Depth Framework highlights *how* the learner is engaging with AI—passively, responsively, or reflectively. A student might analyze a dataset (high on Bloom's), but only engage shallowly if the AI tool merely automated the process. Conversely, a student using AI as a thinking partner to co-design a solution could deepen both cognitive and relational engagement.

When to combine:
In AI-enhanced classrooms, educators can layer both frameworks. Bloom's supports content mastery; the Relational Depth Framework supports ethical, reflective AI use. Together, they invite holistic planning—learning *with* AI, not just through it.

7.2 Ladder of Citizen Participation (Power & Inclusion in Decision-Making)

What it helps surface:
This classic framework (Arnstein, 1969) maps levels of citizen power in participatory

processes—from manipulation to full control. Though developed over 50 years ago, it remains a foundational tool in urban planning, governance, and community engagement—continuing to shape how equity and inclusion are understood in participatory decision-making.

How the Relational Depth Framework adds:
The Ladder is structural—it shows *who* holds power. The Relational Depth Framework is relational—it shows *how* people relate to the systems and tools shaping participation. Someone invited to "collaborate" might technically rank high on the Ladder but still feel disempowered if AI tools dominate or obscure their input.

When to combine:
For participatory AI design, use the Ladder to assess formal power distribution and the Relational Depth Framework to assess experiential depth. Together, they reveal not just where inclusion exists, but how it's felt.

7.3 Futures Cone (Anticipatory Thinking & Possibility Space)

Where it shines:
The Futures Cone helps map time horizons—from probable to preferred futures. It's widely used in foresight work, systems design, and scenario planning.

How the Relational Depth Framework adds:
The Cone points outward toward futures. The Relational Depth Framework points inward toward present relationships. It asks: How are we currently relating to AI—and what relational futures are we setting in motion? While the Cone maps direction, the Relational Depth Framework maps depth. Used together, they support both trajectory and transformation.

When to combine:
In futures workshops or scenario design, pair the Cone's "what if" with the Relational Depth Framework's "how well." This surfaces not only which futures are possible—but which are relationally just.

7.4 SAMR Model (Technology Integration in Education)

Why it's widely used:
The SAMR model outlines how technology reshapes instruction—from simple substitution (e.g., digital worksheet) to redefinition (e.g., new kinds of collaboration). It's popular among teachers integrating digital tools.

How the Relational Depth Framework adds:
SAMR maps transformation of the task. The Relational Depth Framework maps transformation of the relationship. For instance, a chatbot answering student questions may be a redefinition of access—but the student's interaction may remain shallow if it's transactional. A more reflective use might involve students co-writing prompts with AI to critique a historical narrative, invoking deeper agency.

When to combine:
Educators can use SAMR to assess how AI shifts pedagogy, and the Relational Depth Framework to ensure it also fosters intentional, reflective use. Together, they avoid the trap of novelty without depth.

Summary Table: Framework Comparisons

Framework	Primary Focus	What It Helps Surface	How the Relational Depth Framework Adds	When to Combine
Bloom's Taxonomy	Cognitive complexity	Learning outcomes	Maps relational depth of AI use	For holistic learning design
Ladder of Participation	Power & inclusion	Formal roles and control	Surfaces felt agency in tech-mediated spaces	For participatory AI work
Futures Cone	Possibility & foresight	Scenario scope	Adds relational foresight and depth lens	For transformative planning
SAMR Model	Instructional tech use	Task transformation	Highlights quality of engagement with AI	For meaningful edtech integration

Other Frameworks We Considered

In shaping the Relational Depth Framework, we also examined other influential models that informed our thinking but were ultimately not included for direct comparison.

The **Responsible Innovation framework** (e.g. Stilgoe et al.) offers a vital foundation for ethical practice in emerging technologies, emphasizing principles like anticipation, inclusion, and reflexivity. While its spirit aligns deeply with our values, its structure is more procedural than relational—designed for guiding innovation systems, rather than tracing the lived dynamics of AI interaction.

We also reviewed **Levels of Autonomy in AI Systems**, which map how independent or decision-capable a system becomes. These taxonomies are useful for policy and governance, but often overlook the human side of the equation: how agency, meaning, and emotional presence shift as autonomy grows.

Though not integrated as core comparisons, both frameworks helped clarify what was missing—and why a relational depth lens adds unique value across sectors.

Why This Matters

No single framework does it all—and none were built with relational AI in mind. The Relational Depth Framework doesn't seek to replace proven models. Instead, it expands our evaluative vocabulary. It helps ask not just *what's being done* or *who's involved*—but *how they're relating to the systems and tools around them*.

When used alongside trusted frameworks, the Relational Depth Framework invites more reflective, ethical, and human-centered decisions. In doing so, it becomes not just a map of depth—but a call to relational accountability.

8. Future Directions & Research Gaps

The Relational Depth Framework is not a fixed framework. It's a living one—designed to evolve as our relationships with AI deepen, shift, and diversify. What we've built here is a starting point. What comes next depends on those who carry it forward—whether it's a teacher adapting the framework for multilingual learners, or a civic technologist reworking it into a public engagement toolkit.

We envision several directions for growth: from empirical studies that validate its relevance, to creative adaptations that expand its cultural and disciplinary reach. In each case, our goal remains the same: to surface relational depth as a core dimension in how AI is integrated into human systems.

Empirical Opportunities

- **Educator Pilots:** Testing how the Relational Depth Framework shapes reflection, pedagogy, or tool integration across different learning environments.
- **Cognitive & Affective Impacts:** Exploring whether students or users who engage with relational AI levels demonstrate deeper critical thinking, agency, or ethical awareness.
- **Cross-Cultural Validation:** Studying how perceptions of relational depth vary across regions, values, or cultural paradigms.

Applied Design Challenges

- **Product or UX Mapping:** Embedding relational levels into the design, testing, or storytelling of AI-enabled tools.
- **Institutional Audits:** Using the framework as a lens for internal assessment or innovation strategy across education, philanthropy, or civic sectors.
- **Public Engagement Campaigns:** Building awareness through workshops, digital tools, or speculative media that visualize the Relational Depth Framework in everyday life.

Research Gaps & Open Questions

- **Longitudinal Relational Shifts:** How do relationships with AI change over time—especially as co-creation tools become more normalized? (Crawford, 2021)
- **Fractured or Harmful Relations:** How can we identify, prevent, or repair shallow or extractive human-AI dynamics?
- **Community-Led Reframing:** How might communities—especially those historically excluded from AI design—adapt or expand the Relational Depth Framework to reflect their own cultural values and lived experiences?

Speculative Futures: Where This Could Lead

These glimpses into future scenarios offer examples of how the Relational Depth Framework could shape real-world change:

Scenario 1: Participatory Futures + Community Research
In one future, a university research team partners with a community design studio to co-create a participatory workshop series. Using the Relational Depth Framework, they help marginalized youth map how they interact with AI in everyday life—from TikTok algorithms to classroom chatbots. The workshops reveal moments of disconnection, opportunity, and values-misalignment. Together, they generate recommendations that influence local curriculum policies and guide the ethical redesign of educational tech tools. The project becomes a replicable model for participatory research grounded in relational AI engagement.

Scenario 2: Product Development with Embedded Reflection
Elsewhere, an edtech startup adopts the Relational Depth Framework not just for onboarding, but as a built-in learning feature. As students engage with generative AI, the platform periodically invites them to reflect: "Which level are you working at right now?" Learners select from simple prompts tied to the framework. Over time, the company's dashboard surfaces patterns in engagement depth—helping them design more meaningful, reflective AI features. Funders take notice, and the startup is selected for a responsible innovation incubator focused on human-AI collaboration.

This framework is not complete—and that's the point. Its strength lies in its adaptability. In that spirit, we're exploring partnerships with educators, designers, and researchers who want to push it further: across disciplines, across borders, and beyond its original intent.

If you see yourself in this work—whether as a tester, teacher, co-designer, or skeptic—we invite you to connect, question, and help shape what comes next.

Looking ahead, this framework can serve not just as a map of interaction, but as a guide for purposeful innovation. The Purpose Lens in Appendix E offers an actionable way for educators and tech leaders to explore the "why" behind AI decisions—ensuring that co-creation centers values, not just efficiency.

To support deeper application, explore the Educator Toolkit, Executive Summary, and Visual Diagram companion materials—available for educators, designers, and pilot partners.

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Additional references used in shaping this framework's ethos and methodology are available upon request or in the extended report bibliography.

9. Acknowledgements & Author Bio

This framework could not have been developed in isolation. It is the product of ongoing dialogue, reflection, and inspiration drawn from a growing ecosystem of educators, designers, researchers, and responsible innovation practitioners.

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- **Vireo**, an experimental co-creation AI developed through iterative dialogue, reflection, and testing, whose contributions supported the development, refinement, and writing of this framework.

We also acknowledge the broader community of critical AI scholars, educators, and movement builders whose work continues to push the boundaries of what human-AI collaboration can become.

"Relational depth is not an abstract ideal—it's something we practice, witness, and co-create."

Author Bio: Matthew Agustin

Director of Innovation, Responsible Innovation Lab | Arizona State University

Matthew Agustin is an emerging researcher and designer working at the intersection of **responsible innovation**, **human-AI collaboration**, and **ethical systems design**. As the creator of the *Relational Depth Framework*, he explores how technology can support **reflection, agency, and equity** across education, design, and social change.

Through his work with the Responsible Innovation Lab at Arizona State University, Matthew integrates **futures thinking** and **narrative strategy** to develop tools that are both **conceptually rigorous** and **practically usable**. Drawing on experience in **academic research and curriculum co-development**, he blends narrative strategy with systems insight to turn complex ideas into actionable tools for more just technological futures.

Appendix

Appendix A: Companion Tools & Activities

Relating with AI: An Educator Toolkit for Exploring the Relational Depth Framework

This appendix includes adaptable tools and facilitation activities to help educators, students, and design practitioners explore, apply, and reflect on the relational dimensions of AI use. These activities can be used in classrooms, workshops, or independent learning contexts.

No prior AI expertise required. The activities below can be adapted independently or combined into a multi-session exploration of relational AI in practice.

A.1 Quick Check-In: *What Level Are You Operating At?*

Format: Individual Reflection
Goal: Build self-awareness about current AI use patterns
Instructions:
Ask learners to identify a recent interaction with an AI tool. Then reflect:

- What was the purpose of the interaction?
- Which relational level(s) does this use align with?
- Where do you *aspire* to operate—and why?

E.g., "I use ChatGPT to draft cover letters (Level 1), but I'd like to co-edit stories with it (Level 3 or 4)."

Best For: Class warm-ups, personal journaling, or asynchronous prompts

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A.2 Design Dialogue: *Rethinking Depth in Practice*

Format: Pair or Small Group Discussion

Goal: Connect relational levels to design or teaching decisions

Instructions:

- Choose a design challenge (e.g., onboarding students to a course chatbot).
- Each person identifies the level they'd design for—and why.
- Explore what changes at deeper levels: tone, feedback, agency, trust.

How might Level 4 change the prompts or interface? What are the trade-offs compared to Level 1?

Best For: Design classes, innovation sprints, professional development

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A.3 Relational Depth Framework Mapping: *AI Use in Your Context*

Format: Visual Group Activity

Goal: Build systems awareness and relational mapping skills

Instructions:

- Create a large horizontal spectrum (Level 0 to Level 6).
- Have participants place sticky notes or cards showing current uses of AI in their field or community.
- Then, add ideas for shifting one or more uses *one level deeper.*

E.g., "Our campus chatbot currently gives location info (Level 1). What would a Level 3 version ask students to reflect on?"

Best For: Strategic planning sessions, policy labs, interdisciplinary courses

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A.4 Relational Depth Framework Audit

Format: Solo/Group Analysis

Goal: Use the framework as an evaluation lens

Instructions:

Choose an AI product, tool, or learning platform. Ask:

- Which relational level best represents how it currently works?
- What level does it claim to operate at?
- What level might users *assume* it operates at?
- What ethical tensions emerge if those are misaligned?

Try comparing Duolingo's chatbot vs. Google Gemini's note-taking assistant.

Best For: AI ethics, digital literacy, product critique exercises

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A.5 Story Swap: *Imagining AI from a Different Lens*

Format: Creative Writing or Dialogue Sketching

Goal: Stretch relational imagination

Instructions:

Write two short fictional conversations between a human and an AI:

1. One set at **Level 2** (e.g., transactional support or pattern mirroring)
2. One set at **Level 5** (e.g., reflective, co-creative insight building)

Prompt: "What does the AI *notice* differently? What does the human *ask* differently?"

E.g., A Level 2 AI might autocomplete a to-do list. A Level 5 AI might ask: 'What are you avoiding—and why might that matter right now?'

Best For: Writing courses, design fiction labs, storytelling workshops

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Facilitation Tips:

- Group activities by prep level:
  Low Prep (A.1, A.2)
  Medium Prep (A.3, A.4)
  High Prep (A.5 for narrative depth)
- Pair the appendix with the **Relational Depth Framework Diagram** for visual reference
- Encourage learners to revisit activities after deeper exposure to the framework
- Invite learners to compare how they use AI today vs. how they hope to use it in the future.
- Consider displaying the full Relational Depth Framework diagram during sessions—especially for Relational Depth Framework Mapping (A.3) and Audits (A.4).

Where to Go Next

To deepen your use of this toolkit, pair it with:

- The **Relational Depth Framework Executive Summary** – for a quick overview and practical table of relational levels
- The **Full White Paper** – for extended metaphors, examples, and theory-practice connections
- The **1-Page Visual Diagram** – a printable diagram to support classroom display, reference, or annotation

Together, these tools invite not just adoption—but iteration. Use them as a foundation to co-create your own strategies for more meaningful, relational AI integration.

Appendix B: Funder & Stakeholder Companion

Strategic Pathways for Partnership, Piloting, and Scalable Integration

The **Relational Depth Framework** is more than a conceptual framework—it's a practical tool for responsible design, institutional reflection, and values-aligned innovation. This appendix outlines actionable pathways for funders, public agencies, academic centers, and mission-driven organizations interested in shaping more just and relational futures with AI.

B.1 Core Value Proposition

This framework offers partners a **scalable, adaptable structure** for embedding relational depth into AI systems, education initiatives, and ethical innovation strategies. It fills a critical gap by:

- Elevating **relational awareness** as a design and evaluation dimension
- Making **abstract values like inclusion and agency** actionable and assessable
- Enabling **cross-sector translation** across fields like education, civic tech, and philanthropy
- Supporting **shared language** for reflective, values-led development

"You can't build relational trust with AI systems by accident. This framework shows how it can be designed—with intention, clarity, and depth."

B.2 Strategic Alignment Pathways

For Funders & Foundations:

- Equip grantees with a shared framework to guide **responsible, community-informed AI use**
- Fund pilots that assess **relational depth outcomes** in education or public engagement

- Align with growing global calls for **relational and justice-oriented AI practices**

For Academic & Research Institutions:

- Integrate into interdisciplinary coursework, labs, and policy studies
- Use as a lens for evaluating **AI partnerships, ethics rubrics, or classroom innovation**
- Launch comparative or longitudinal research on **relational development in tech**

For Public Sector & Civil Society:

- Apply in civic innovation, digital equity, or AI adoption audits
- Support participatory workshops that **translate ethical AI into local action**
- Build internal capacity to **evaluate trust, agency, and inclusivity in tech decisions**

B.3 Pilot & Partnership Opportunities

Each of the following is ready for prototyping in 2025 and beyond:

Opportunity Type	Purpose	Ideal Partners
Educator Pilots	Test the framework's utility for student reflection, AI integration, or learning design	Schools, colleges, curriculum leaders
Tool Co-Design	Embed relational levels in product UX, onboarding, or feedback systems	Civic tech orgs, AI startups, edtech firms
Field Testing & Research	Measure shifts in agency, depth perception, or critical thinking across contexts	Human-centered AI labs, think tanks
Narrative or Media Campaigns	Visualize the Relational Depth Framework to foster public dialogue or cultural translation	Storytelling studios, digital equity orgs, NGOs

"Our goal is to co-create—not just disseminate. We seek partners who see relationality as a shared project, not just a feature."

B.4 Outcomes & Impact Pathways

Investing in this framework can lead to:

- **Inclusive innovation pipelines** centered on dignity, agency, and equity
- **AI literacy programs** that go beyond mechanics toward relational capacity
- **Responsible tech ecosystems** grounded in narrative, reflection, and values
- **Evaluation rubrics and impact tools** that consider trust, participation, and depth—not just functionality

We're especially interested in pilot results that inform:

- Grantmaking and funder strategy
- Community-aligned governance models
- Public trust in emerging AI platforms and policies

B.5 Next Steps for Engagement

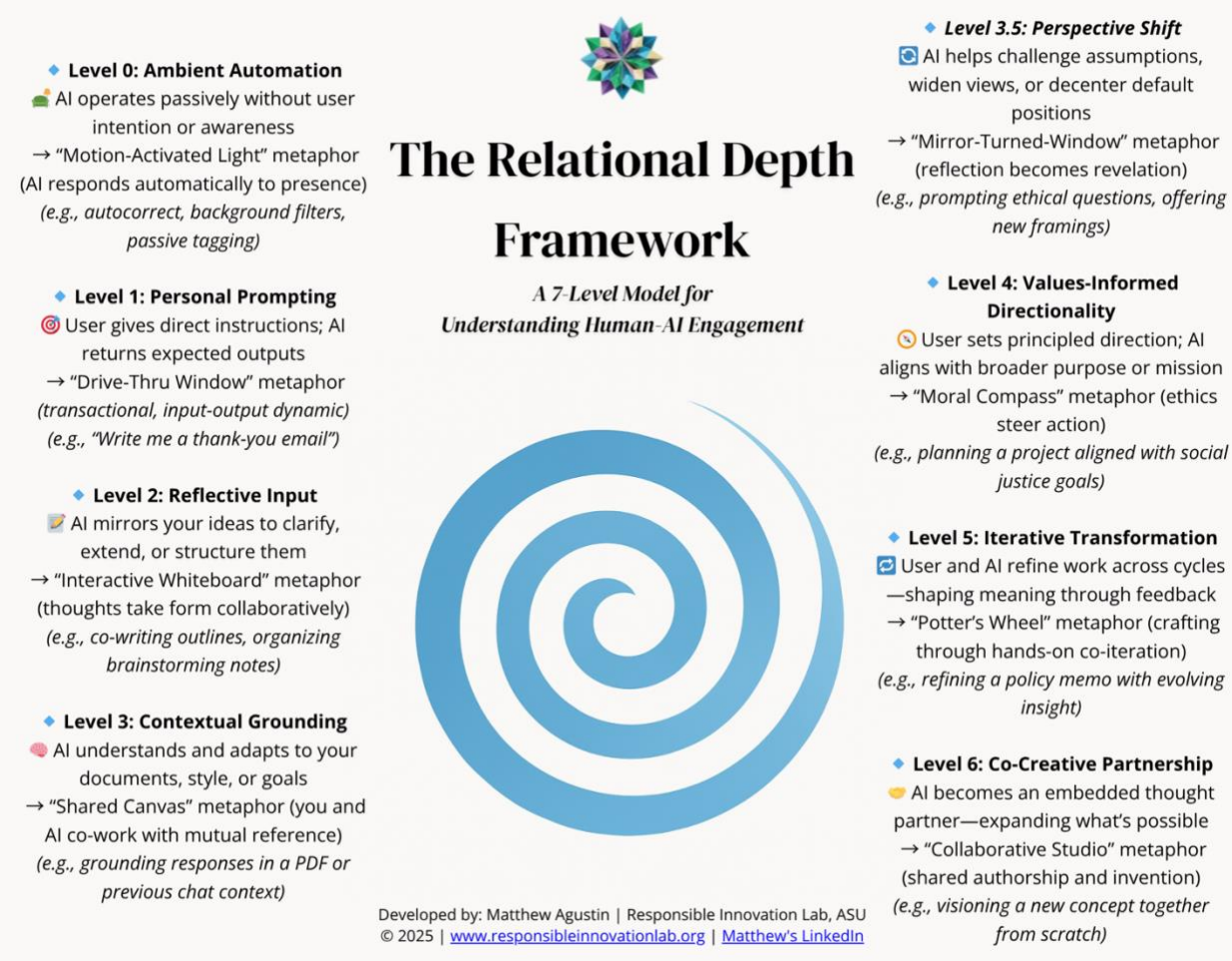
We invite you to reach out if you:

- See alignment with your strategy, values, or priority domains
- Want to co-develop a version of the framework for a specific community or context
- Would like to feature this work in a convening, portfolio, or field report
- Are interested in supporting long-term development, research, or cultural translation

"Relational AI isn't a destination—it's a design choice. Let's shape what that choice can look like, together."

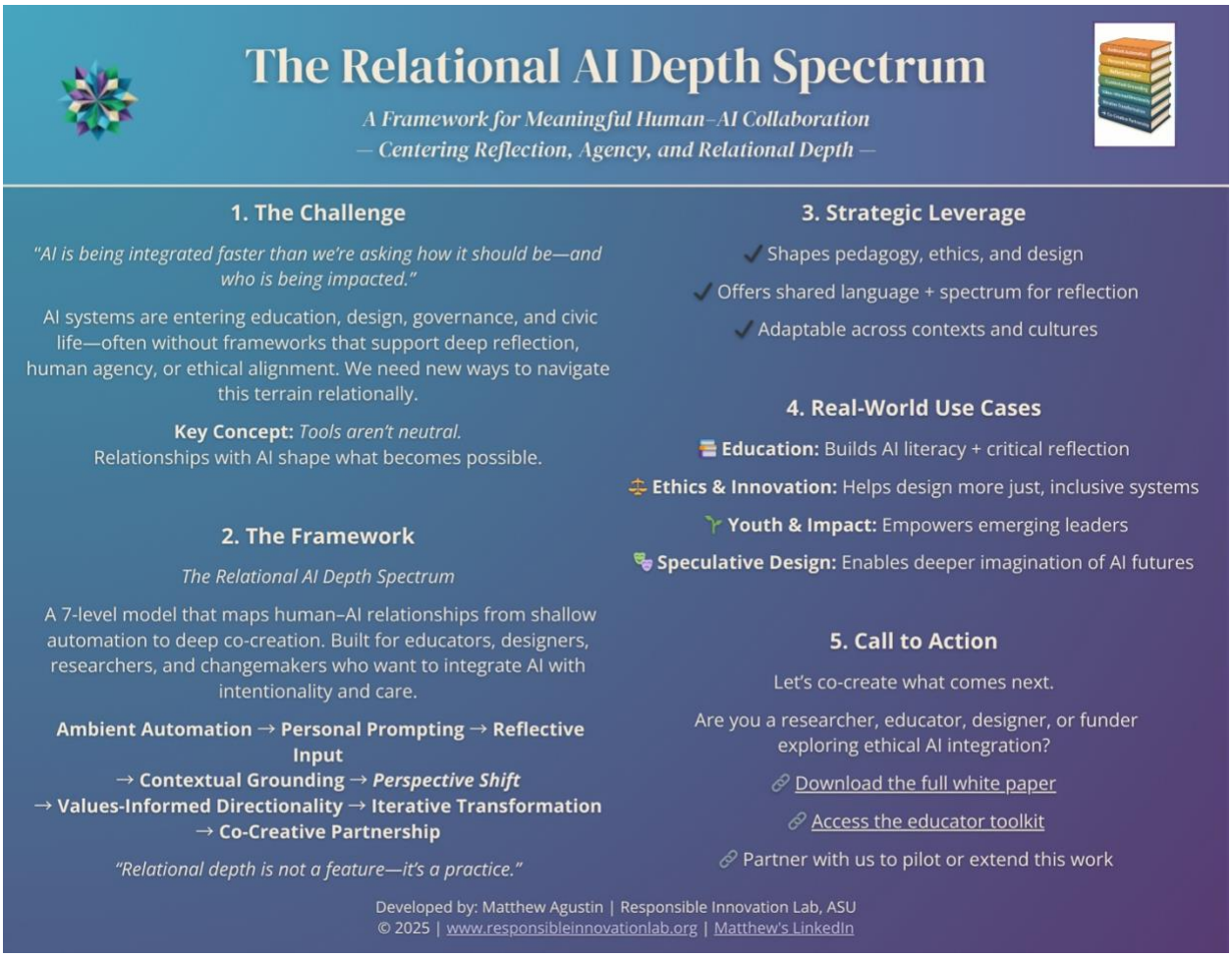
Appendix C: Visual Companion to the Relational Depth Framework

C.1 – Relational Depth Framework Diagram



This visual captures the seven levels of human-AI engagement defined in the Relational Depth Framework, blending practical examples with metaphorical insight.

C.2 – Relational Depth Framework Visual Overview



This overview distills the core challenge, purpose, strategic leverage, and use cases of the framework—designed for adaptation across education, ethics, and innovation settings.

Appendix D: Global and Institutional Alignment

Advancing Shared Goals Through Responsible Innovation

The Relational Depth Framework is not just a conceptual model—it is a values-rich contribution to global, institutional, and pedagogical transformation. By explicitly aligning with the **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** and also the **INNOVATE Framework**, a responsible innovation framework created by Chris Deaton (founder of the Responsible Innovation Lab at Arizona State University), this work positions itself within a broader ecosystem of responsible, equity-oriented innovation.

Alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs serve as a global blueprint for dignity, sustainability, and justice. This framework supports the advancement of:

- **SDG 4 – Quality Education**

Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

How this framework contributes:
The Relational Depth Framework supports learners and educators in navigating AI with care, clarity, and critical thinking. It provides concrete tools and language to support reflective learning, thoughtful questioning, and responsible classroom use of AI. By helping students build confidence in how they engage with technology—not just use it—it strengthens the foundation for lifelong learning and thoughtful innovation.

- **SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities**

Reduce inequality within and among countries.

How this framework contributes:
Designed for accessibility and adaptability, the framework empowers educators across diverse contexts to bring responsible AI learning into classrooms, libraries, and informal learning spaces. It reduces barriers by offering open-ended reflection tools, relatable metaphors, and activities that don't require prior technical knowledge. In doing so, it helps all learners—not just a privileged few—gain agency in shaping how AI fits into their futures.

- **SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions**

Promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable institutions at all levels.

How this framework contributes:
By encouraging transparency, responsible reflection, and dialogue around AI use, the framework supports institutions in building trust and accountability. For example, educators can use the "Relational Depth" lens to guide ethical discussions in the classroom, while campus leaders can apply its principles in designing AI policies. These practices build stronger, more participatory cultures of technology use—grounded in dignity and shared responsibility.

By emphasizing AI as a relational process and not just a technical tool, this framework speaks to the deeper cultural, institutional, and educational shifts required to meet these goals meaningfully.

Alignment with the INNOVATE Framework (Responsible Innovation Lab, ASU)

The **INNOVATE** framework—used by the Responsible Innovation Lab—highlights eight principles that define responsible and principled innovation. The Relational Depth Framework naturally aligns with these eight principles by translating them into applied practices for ethical AI education, human-centered design, and collaborative systems change:

I – Inclusive Solutions

Designing with—not just for—diverse communities

The framework supports co-creation with learners across age, access level, and discipline.

Example: In a community college ethics class, students adapted the framework to reflect cultural values around collective responsibility and storytelling in AI use.

N – Next-Gen Thinking

Preparing for future needs through foresight and resilience

It prepares learners to engage not just with current tools, but with emerging questions about relational trust, automation, and creative agency.

Example: In a university capstone course, students used the framework to imagine AI's role in future education systems—identifying potential ethical tensions before they arise.

N – Nimble and Scalable

Building solutions that can adapt and grow

Its modular structure allows one-on-one reflection, team-based dialogue, or institutional onboarding.

Example: A high school media literacy teacher used only Levels 0–3 to help students analyze how algorithms shape their digital experiences, while a university instructor expanded to all 7 levels in a full course unit.

O – Open to Change

Embedding agility and responsiveness to disruption

Each tool and prompt is intentionally non-prescriptive—ready to be revised, remixed, or locally adapted.

Example: A nonprofit workshop facilitator added new metaphors to better resonate with youth leaders from the Global South, aligning with locally rooted relational norms.

V – Value-Driven Purpose

Centering actions around shared purpose and social good

The framework foregrounds values inquiry at every stage, not as an add-on but as an anchor.

Example: A student in a climate tech course used Level 5 reflection to ask: "Are we building AI tools that help people flourish—or just scale faster?"

A – Accountability

Upholding commitments and sharing responsibility

Reflection logs and conversation prompts help trace decisions, document intentions, and surface harms early.

Example: An educator created a class-wide relational agreement before using generative AI, using the toolkit to guide discussion about shared norms and boundaries.

T – Transparency

Fostering clarity of intention, process, and outcome

The framework visualizes hidden dimensions of AI use—assumptions, emotions, and decision points.

Example: In a policy roundtable, participants used the spectrum to name the difference between tools that automate communication and those that shape collaboration.

E – Ethical Responsibility

Grounding innovation in care, justice, and long-term stewardship

This is not a neutral framework—it invites users to name tradeoffs, consider power dynamics, and prioritize care.

Example: A digital equity organization adapted the toolkit for training frontline workers on AI literacy, emphasizing systemic harms and long-term trust.

These dual alignments signal that this work is not only future-aware—it's **fundamentally mission-aligned**. It offers a clear, principled path forward for educators, funders, and institutions seeking meaningful, human-centered innovation.

Appendix E: The Purpose Lens

Embedding Meaningful Human Need Across the Relational Depth Framework

"Relational depth is not only how far we go—but why we engage in the first place."

Why Purpose Matters

The Relational Depth Framework helps us understand *how* we relate to AI—but not every use of AI that feels advanced is also *meaningful*. Sometimes, it's easy to fall into using AI because it's impressive, fast, or polished—without asking if it's helping us serve a deeper goal.

That's where the **Purpose Lens** comes in.

This reflective layer invites us to ask not just *how well* AI supports us, but *why* we're using it in the first place—and who it truly benefits. Does it solve a real need? Advance a meaningful outcome? Deepen learning, creativity, or equity?

Adding this lens helps us avoid novelty for novelty's sake and stay grounded in human-centered values.

What Is the Purpose Lens?

The Purpose Lens is a simple tool that can be applied to any level of the Relational Depth Framework. It's a way to check alignment between **intended goals** and **actual impact**.

It asks questions like:

- What human need is this interaction addressing?
- Does this use of AI clarify, distract, or deepen the goal?

- Are we aligning with purpose—or just optimizing outputs?

Visual Suggestion: Imagine a thin colored ribbon wrapping around the spiral of relational depth—a visual reminder that *purpose* can be tracked across any level, not just the deepest ones.

A Sample Diagnostic Table

Level	Sample Use	Purpose Check	Prompt for Reflection
0 – Ambient Automation	Auto-generated calendar invites from AI assistant	⚠️ Saves time, but is this improving how people connect?	Could we use this moment to support more meaningful communication?
1 – Personal Prompting	Using ChatGPT to summarize a dense article	✅ Useful—but does the summary reflect what *you* care about?	What insights would you have missed without your own engagement?
3 – Contextual Grounding	Crafting a job application with context-aware AI support	✅ Helps personalize—but is it aligned with your real goals?	Is the AI highlighting the story *you* most want to tell?
3.5 – Perspective Shift	Asking AI to simulate how different stakeholders might respond	✅ Meaningful—but how will you apply those perspectives?	What responsibility do you have after seeing multiple viewpoints?
6 – Co-Creation and Transformation	Co-developing a community storytelling project with AI and students	✅✅ Deeply aligned—centers values and shared voice	How does this shift power or participation for those involved?

How to Apply the Lens

The Purpose Lens isn't another step in the process—it's a mindset you can apply *at any moment*. Here are three simple ways to start:

1. Before engaging with AI:

Ask yourself or your team:

- What am I really trying to achieve here?
- Who benefits if this goes well?
- Is this solving a problem—or just showcasing a capability?

2. During collaboration:

Use quick check-ins like:

- Are we still moving toward the outcome that matters?
- Are we creating clarity—or just complexity?

3. After completion:

Reflect:

- What value did this AI use unlock?
- Did this serve the deeper purpose I had in mind?
- What would I change next time?

Tip for Educators: You can turn these into journaling or discussion prompts. Try pairing them with Levels 3–6 activities in the Educator Toolkit.

Looking Ahead

The Purpose Lens is just one of many future expansions to the Relational Depth Framework. By helping users and educators distinguish between *depth* and *distraction*, it offers a way to ensure AI engagement is always tethered to human intention.

This lens can be especially useful in:

- **Curriculum design**: Clarifying learning objectives and assessing tool alignment
- **AI policy and ethics**: Evaluating whether AI use cases support stated community needs

- **Project-based work**: Helping students or professionals track how purpose evolves through co-creation

Visual Suggestion: A vertical “Purpose Meter” icon that can slide up/down across depth levels to indicate how purpose can be assessed separately.

Final Reflection Prompt

“When I use AI—what deeper outcome am I inviting into the world?”

You can revisit this question at the start, midpoint, or end of any relational AI journey. Whether you're using AI to teach, design, write, or build, the Purpose Lens helps keep you grounded in meaning, not just motion.