

AI can teach facts, but not critical thinking

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The classroom after artificial intelligence will matter because it can teach what machines cannot: analysis, doubt, responsibility and judgement – the same skills that firms will prioritise while hiring consultants



In the quiet glow of screens and the rhythm of meetings begun and ended, we forget the human cadence of thought: the gentle, questioning touch that makes learning, law and even a passing conversation truly alive. (AI image)

A few weeks ago, a management consultant asked me a question many professionals are now being forced to answer: “If artificial intelligence becomes good enough, what happens to our jobs?” It is an understandable question. For a legal academic, it is also the wrong one. The real question is not whether artificial intelligence will replace teachers. It is whether universities will remember what teaching was meant to do.

Every generation remembers one teacher who made an impossible subject feel possible. Very few remember the textbook. That is because education, at its best, has never been only about the transfer of information. It has been about the formation of judgement, confidence and discipline. A good teacher does not merely explain a subject; she lends the student courage to enter it. The best teaching does not give answers; it gives permission to think.

Artificial intelligence has arrived at a moment when higher education was already uneasy about itself. It is tempting to ask whether such a machine diminishes the teacher. In truth, it exposes what was always inadequate about a narrow view of teaching. For centuries, universities were organised around scarcity. Books were scarce. Libraries were scarce. Expert instruction was scarce. The professor stood at the front of the classroom because knowledge must travel from one mind to another. That world has not disappeared entirely, but its foundations have shifted. Information is no longer scarce; reliable interpretation is. In an age of infinite answers, the rarest skill is knowing which ones to trust.

This is the fundamental change. The printing press multiplied access to books. Search engines multiplied access to information. Digital databases transformed legal research. Artificial intelligence does something more unsettling. It does not simply retrieve knowledge; it performs some of the intellectual labour once required to acquire it by summarising, synthesising and organising. This distinction matters. Education has always relied on the belief that the labour of thinking itself is formative. A student learns not only by reaching an answer but also by grappling towards it. The slow act of reading, misunderstanding, returning, comparing and grasping a difficult idea develops a kind of inner discipline. Artificial intelligence shortens this journey. Sometimes that is useful. Sometimes it is dangerous. Ease is not always progress; sometimes it is the quiet erosion of effort.

Technology has shortened the distance between a question and an answer. Education must preserve the distance between an answer and understanding. Speed delivers answers; slowness builds minds. Nowhere is this more visible than in legal education. Law is often mistaken for a discipline of rules. It is not. Law is a discipline of interpretation. A lawyer is trained not merely to know what a provision says but to understand why it says, how courts have read it, where its limits lie and what consequences follow from choosing one interpretation over another. Law does not reward the person who answers first. It rewards the person who reasons best. In law, certainty is less valuable than clarity of reasoning.

In my own classroom, artificial intelligence has become an invisible participant. Students often arrive having already asked AI to explain a judgement, distinguish two concepts or reduce a long statutory provision into simpler language. There is something deeply democratic about this. For generations, legal education rewarded

those who arrived already fluent in its language. Students from families of lawyers, elite schools or privileged educational backgrounds often possessed an invisible head start. Others spent months merely learning how to read what their peers already

AI has begun dismantling part of that privilege. The student who might once have closed a Bare Act in quiet defeat can now ask twenty questions without embarrassment. The student intimidated by a 300-page judgement can first understand its broad structure before confronting its finer reasoning. The first barrier, the fear of not understanding, has started to weaken. Access has expanded; understanding still demands effort. This should be welcomed. But it should not be mistaken for education.

Understanding a summary is not the same as understanding the law. A summary tells you what a court held; it rarely tells you why it mattered. It cannot show you why a judge chose one principle over another or how a single word in a statute can reshape institutions. The danger of AI is not that it writes better than students. It is that students may stop writing well enough to disagree with it. The real loss is not skill but the habit of questioning. This is why law schools must teach students not merely to use AI, but to interrogate it. In my classroom, I describe AI as a junior in chambers: quick, tireless, useful for groundwork, but never beyond supervision. It can prepare a note; it cannot carry responsibility. It can suggest a path; it cannot exercise judgement. It often sounds certain even when it is wrong. Confidence is not competence, especially when it is generated. Used well, AI is not a shortcut but a sparring partner. The machine is most useful when it forces us to think harder, not less. Outsource thinking long enough, and you outsource ownership of thought itself.

My meeting with the consultant dissolved like mist between us. He chased the clean lines of efficiency; I lingered in the shadows of doubt. We parted politely. But it left behind a question that now confronts every classroom: What is the role of the professor and of the professional when answers become instant? The professor's role is not to compete with the speed of the machine but to insist that answers be tested, questioned and earned. The real risk is not that AI replaces teachers or lawyers; it is that students may grow fluent in answers without developing ownership of thought. The classroom after AI will matter because it can teach what machines cannot: analysis, doubt, responsibility and judgement – the same skills that firms will prioritise while hiring consultants. In the quiet glow of screens and the rhythm of

meetings begun and ended, we forget the human cadence of thought: the gentle, questioning touch that makes learning, law and even a passing conversation truly alive.

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