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NEWSLETTER





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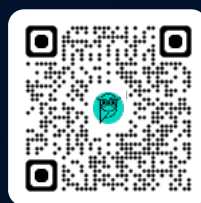
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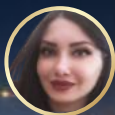
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ARE WE SO BUSY IMPROVING TEACHING THAT WE FORGET ABOUT **LEARNING**?

Dr. Le Dinh Bao Quoc 

? WHAT PISA 2025 INVITES US TO RECONSIDER ABOUT EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT

For decades, education systems have invested enormous effort in improving teaching. Teachers have been introduced to new methodologies, new curriculum models, new coursebooks, new approaches to assessment, and an expanding range of digital technologies. Classrooms have become more interactive, collaborative, and technologically equipped. More recently, generative AI has opened another wave of possibilities for lesson planning, personalization, feedback, content creation, and student support.

There are good reasons for these developments. Better teaching can create better conditions for learning, and teachers deserve access to approaches and resources that strengthen their practice. Yet there is a question we do not always ask with the same intensity: **Have our efforts to improve teaching always resulted in stronger learning?**

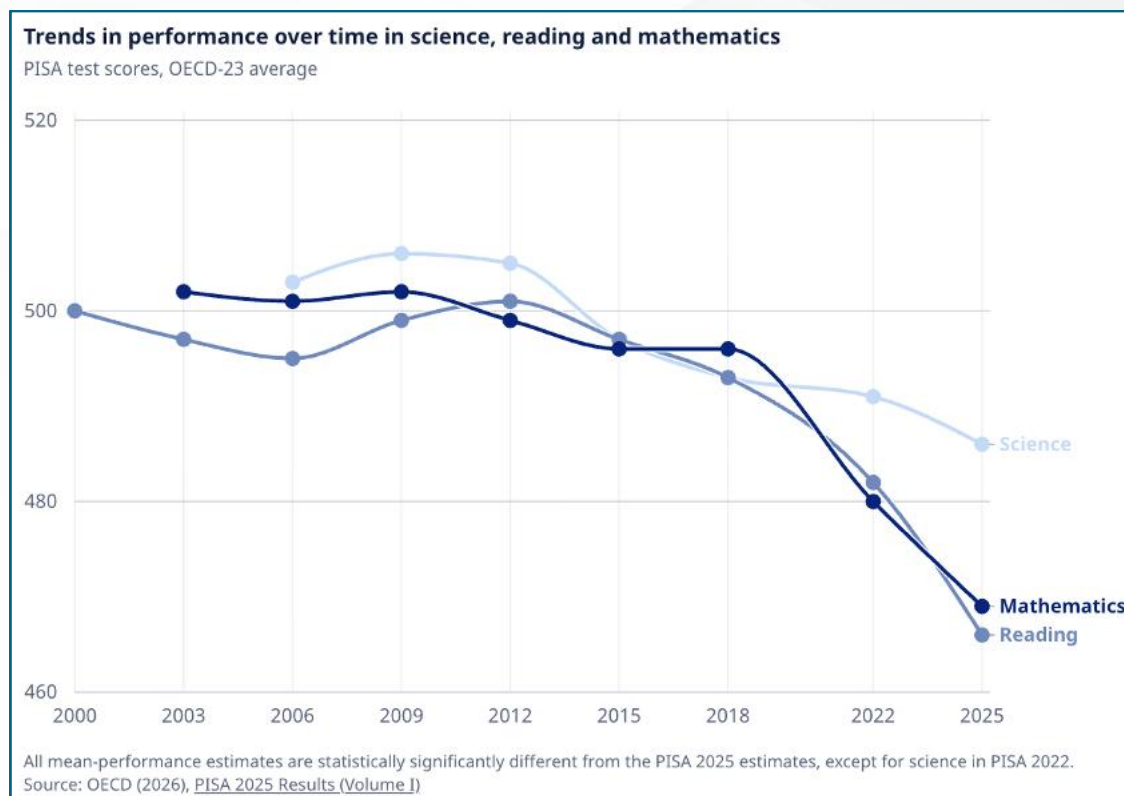
WHAT PISA 2025 IS TELLING US

The latest PISA results give this question some urgency. PISA 2025 involved more than 760,000 15-year-olds across 91 countries and economies, making it the largest PISA assessment to date. Across OECD countries, the overall picture is concerning. PISA 2025 recorded the lowest OECD-average performance observed so far in science, reading, and mathematics. Reading performance has declined over the past decade, while mathematics fell particularly sharply after 2018 (OECD, 2026).

Looking at the past decade, average reading performance across OECD countries fell by 28 points between 2015 and 2025, while mathematics fell by 22 points. Perhaps more concerning than the averages is the proportion of students struggling across subjects. In the report's preface, OECD estimates that 20% of 15-year-old students are low performers in all three subjects, compared with 16% in 2022 (OECD, 2026).

It is tempting to search for one explanation, but PISA does not give us one. Changes in reading habits, digitalization, attendance, family support, socioeconomic circumstances, and the effects of the pandemic form parts of a much more complicated picture. Importantly, the decline also predates COVID-19 in many education systems, while some countries have bucked the trend, demonstrating that declining performance is not inevitable.

PISA therefore does not tell us that student-centered learning, technology, gamification, teacher development, or any particular methodology has failed. Nor can we use the data to claim that these developments caused the decline. But the results give us a good reason to ask a more fundamental question: When we improve something about teaching, how do we know that we have improved something about learning?



When we improve something about teaching, how do we know that we have improved something about learning?

TEACHING IMPROVEMENT IS NOT YET LEARNING IMPROVEMENT

Much of professional development naturally begins with teacher practice. Teachers learn how to implement a methodology, teach a new curriculum, use a coursebook, manage collaborative learning, integrate technology, or design engaging activities. Success is then often described through implementation: teachers are using the methodology, classrooms have become more interactive, students are participating, or technology has been successfully integrated.

These can all be positive developments. The difficulty begins when implementation itself becomes evidence that learning has improved.

I remember observing a classroom in which almost everything looked right. Students were working in groups, moving between activities, discussing ideas, using technology, and preparing something to present. The teacher was energetic and supportive, and students appeared highly engaged. If I had been observing mainly for classroom activity and teaching techniques, there would have been plenty to praise.

But sitting at the back of the room, I found myself asking a different question: **What did these students actually have to think about?**

That question changed what I noticed. Students were certainly busy, but how many meaningful decisions were they making? What did they need to understand in order to complete the activity? Did they have to explain their reasoning? Was there anything they needed to reconsider, revise, or improve? Could they complete the activity successfully without really understanding the intended learning?

Experiences like this have made me increasingly cautious about treating visible activity as evidence of learning. The students' engagement gave me something useful to observe, but it did not provide enough evidence to judge what they understood. A classroom can be lively without demanding much thinking. A project can look impressive without revealing how students reached the final product. Students can participate enthusiastically in a game without demonstrating the intended understanding.

Student activity and student learning are related, but they are not the same thing. An activity tells us what students are doing. To understand learning, we need to look at what may be changing in their understanding, thinking, judgment, capability, or ability to use what they know.



LOOKING AT THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CLASSROOM

Classroom observation provides a useful example of how the educational lens can shift. Many observation systems understandably devote considerable attention to teacher behaviors: explanation, questioning, classroom management, differentiation, lesson structure, resources, and instructional strategies. I spent years observing classrooms in much the same way, and those dimensions remain useful.

Over time, however, I became increasingly interested in the other side of the classroom. Instead of recording only what the teacher was doing, I began asking what evidence I could actually find from students. What were they understanding and applying? What were they explaining? What decisions were they making? How did they respond when something became difficult? Did feedback change what they did next?

That shift eventually informed my development of the Student-Centered Observation Scheme (SCOS). Its purpose is not to make teachers less important or to suggest that observers should stop examining teaching. It is to connect teacher practice more directly with evidence from learners. If a teacher uses an excellent questioning strategy, for example, the next question becomes what that questioning enables students to think about, explain, or reconsider.

This perspective also complicates some familiar assumptions about student-centeredness. A quiet classroom may contain substantial individual reasoning, while a highly active collaborative classroom may contain surprisingly little. Direct teacher explanation may sometimes provide exactly the support students need, while an elaborate project may sometimes ask students to produce more than it asks them to learn. The useful question is therefore not simply whether a lesson looks innovative or student-centered, but what is happening to learning because of the teaching taking place.



The useful question is therefore not simply whether a lesson looks innovative or student-centered, but what is happening to learning because of the teaching taking place.

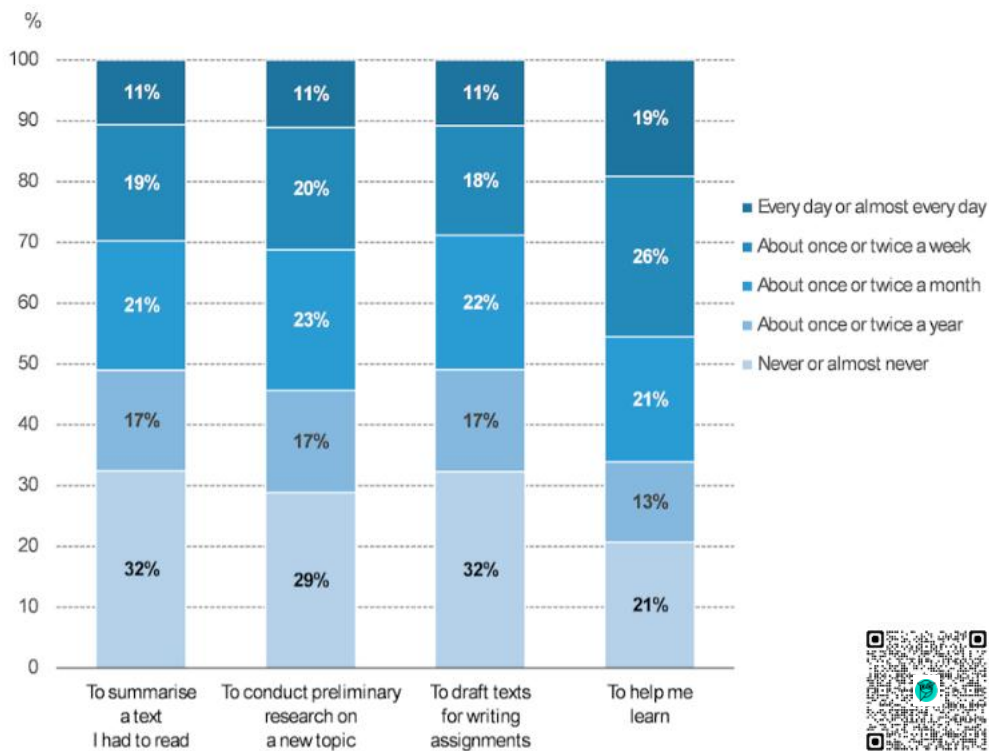
THEN AI ENTERS THE PROCESS

PISA 2025 makes the teaching-learning distinction even more interesting because, for the first time at this scale, we can also see how extensively students are using generative AI for schoolwork.

Across OECD countries, 46% of students reported using AI chatbots at least weekly to help them learn. Figure I.4.11 in the OECD report also shows how frequently students use AI for particular tasks: around 30% use it at least weekly to summarize texts they are supposed to read, 31% for preliminary research, and 29% to draft text for writing assignments (OECD, 2026).

Figure I.4.11. Students' use of artificial intelligence chatbots for schoolwork

Percentage of students who reported using AI chatbots (e.g. ChatGPT) for their schoolwork to carry out the following activities; OECD average



Source: OECD, PISA 2025 Database, Table I.B1.4.53. See <https://stat.link/o1j4k0> for the underlying data.

These are not small numbers. They also represent activities that have traditionally contained important parts of the learning process. Summarizing requires identifying important information and distinguishing central ideas from details. Preliminary research requires searching, selecting, comparing, and evaluating information. Drafting requires organizing ideas, making choices, expressing meaning, and revising language.

AI can support all of these processes. But it can also perform much of them for the learner.

That distinction becomes especially interesting beside the PISA reading findings. The report identifies particular declines between 2018 and 2022 in tasks involving evaluation, reflection, and the integration of information across sources. Across the longer period from 2018 to 2025, declines were more uniform across task types, although difficulties with longer texts remained a strong contributor (OECD, 2026). These findings should not be turned into a causal claim about AI. PISA does not show that AI use caused declining reading performance, and much of the decline began before generative AI became widely available.

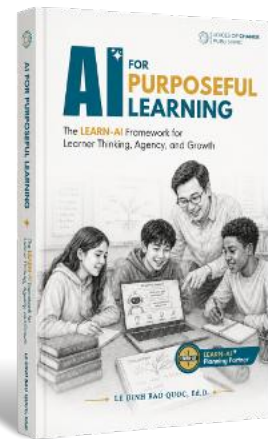
When AI can produce the work, what part of the learning should still remain with the learner?

This question becomes more difficult as AI becomes more capable. If the purpose of a task is to help students organize ideas, for example, asking AI to organize everything for them may improve the final product while removing an important part of the learning. If students are learning to evaluate information, AI can help them locate and summarize sources, but the judgment about which sources to trust and how to use them should remain theirs.

The answer will not be the same for every lesson. Sometimes AI should do more. Sometimes it should deliberately do less. Teachers need to identify the learning they want to protect before deciding what to hand over to AI. This shifts the conversation from how much AI students are allowed to use to what kind of thinking, decision-making, and improvement students still need to experience themselves.

This question is central to the LEARN-AI framework introduced in *AI for Purposeful Learning* (Le, 2026). The framework considers learning through five connected elements: Learning Purpose, Evidence of Thinking, Agency, Reflection, and Next-Step Improvement. Together, they raise questions that can easily disappear when attention is focused mainly on the tool: What are students supposed to learn? What evidence shows that they are thinking? Which meaningful decisions still belong to them? How do they make sense of their own learning? And after receiving support from a teacher, peer, or AI, what do they do next?

LEARN-AI functions as a flexible compass rather than a rule for using AI in class. It helps teachers identify the intended learning and decide what intellectual work needs to remain with students.



MOVING THE LENS BACK TO LEARNING

Moving the lens toward learning does not require schools to abandon teacher development, engaging methodologies, projects, technology, or AI. It requires us to connect these investments more deliberately with what happens to learners. Several practical shifts can help.

1 Start lesson planning with learning, not only activity.

A statement such as “Students will work in groups to create a presentation” describes an activity and product. Teachers can add another question: What will students need to understand, compare, decide, explain, or apply while creating it? For example, requiring students to compare three possible solutions, choose one, and justify that choice with evidence makes the intellectual work much clearer.

2 Look underneath engagement.

Instead of asking only whether students are engaged, examine what they are engaging with. Could students win the game without understanding the concept? Could they complete the project by dividing tasks among group members without everyone engaging with the central problem? Could they produce the answer simply by following steps? Engagement remains valuable, but teachers need to see the learning demand underneath it.

3 Collect evidence while learning is happening.

Final products tell only part of the story, especially when AI is involved. Explanations, drafts, annotations, questions, comparisons, decisions, revisions, and responses to feedback can reveal students’ thinking and current understanding. To identify progress, teachers also need to look for change. Does a later explanation correct an earlier misconception? Does a revised draft show that feedback was understood and used? Can students apply what they learned to a new example without the same support? Students can demonstrate this through spoken, written, visual, or practical responses, depending on the learning purpose and their needs. Such evidence helps teachers judge progress and decide what support students need next.

4 Give technology and AI a learning job.

Instead of beginning with “How can I use AI in this lesson?”, identify the learning need first. AI might provide contrasting examples for students to evaluate, feedback on an early attempt, another perspective to challenge, or additional practice. Once AI has a defined role, identify what students should still do themselves. If the intended learning involves evaluating evidence, for example, AI can suggest sources for students to locate and verify, but students may still need to judge their credibility and defend their final selection.

5 Follow teacher development into student learning.

A professional development session should not be considered successful only because teachers enjoyed it, learned a new methodology, or can now use five new AI tools. Schools can follow the change into classrooms. Did the new questioning strategy help students correct misconceptions or explain a concept more accurately? Did collaborative learning help more students understand and apply the intended content? Did the AI workshop lead to feedback that students used to improve their work? Comparing students' responses before and after a change, and checking whether they can use their learning independently, can help schools judge its contribution. These checks need to be interpreted in context, since student progress is influenced by more than one change in teaching.

FROM BETTER TEACHING TO BETTER LEARNING

PISA 2025 should not send education systems searching for another quick solution. The findings are too complex for that, and the experiences of countries that have improved remind us that educational trajectories are not fixed. Better methodologies, stronger teacher development, purposeful technology, student engagement, and AI can all contribute to better education.

The challenge is to examine the evidence that an innovation is improving learning. Implementation, engagement, technology adoption, and polished products each tell us something useful. To judge educational improvement, we also need to understand what students can now explain, apply, or do that they could not do before.

For teachers, school leaders, teacher educators, curriculum designers, and EdTech providers, one question can therefore accompany almost every educational decision:

What will change in the way students learn?

Following that question into classrooms gives teacher development a clearer destination. It encourages us to examine students' progress, adjust support, and decide what AI should help with while learners continue to think through, decide, explain, and improve their own work.

We should continue improving teaching. But perhaps educational improvement now requires us to become equally ambitious about understanding, designing for, observing, and evaluating learning.

Better teaching is not the destination. It is one of the most important ways we help learners get there.

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- OECD. (2026). *PISA 2025 results (Volume I): Future-ready students*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/73451bc5-en>



Le Dinh Bao Quoc (EdD) is an author and educator with over 20 years of experience in English language teaching and educational leadership across Vietnam and the region. He is the Founder & CEO of Pro.Ed Education Solutions, Academic Director at VIA English Academy, and Head of EduVerse, a global professional development network. He also created EDU361 Expo, the world's first 48-hour non-stop 3D virtual education conference with 120+ global speakers. His book *The Art and Science of ChatGPT in Education* explores AI's impact on learning, and in 2024 he was recognized by LinkedIn as a Top Voice in Educational Leadership.

HOW THINKING *evolves* WHEN WORKING WITH AI

Sondes Gharbi 



During recent conversations with people working across government entities, universities, companies, language schools and NGOs, we discussed the kinds of capabilities people increasingly need when working alongside artificial intelligence. Although our conversations focused on the workplace and education, they led me to reflect on a broader question for education: how should thinking evolve when AI becomes part of learning?

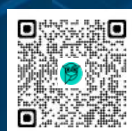
In this article, I use the term “thinking evolves” to describe the way AI shifts where and when learners engage in critical thinking. Here, AI changes the cognitive processes involved in framing problems, evaluating responses, refining ideas and making informed decisions. In practical terms, this means that some of the cognitive effort moves from producing an answer towards defining the problem or situation, deciding what information AI needs, directing the inquiry, evaluating the output, exercising judgement and deciding what to do with it. The emphasis and location of thinking within the learning process have changed, not disappeared.

For the past few years, discussions about AI in education have largely centred on whether students should use AI. However, it is already becoming part of many learners’ everyday lives. The more important question is how learners think while using it, not simply whether they use AI.

AI changes where and when critical thinking occurs.

When I refer to thinking evolving, I do not mean that critical thinking becomes less important. Quite the opposite. AI changes where and when critical thinking occurs. In many learning activities, the production of an answer has traditionally provided visible evidence of the learner’s work. Today, AI can often generate a competent first draft within seconds. As a result, learners are increasingly required to invest their thinking before, during and after interacting with AI. The educational challenge therefore shifts from producing information to framing problems, evaluating responses, refining ideas and making informed decisions.

This shift has implications far beyond education. The World Economic Forum (2025) has identified analytical thinking, creative thinking, curiosity and lifelong learning among capabilities expected to remain or become increasingly important in the workplace. These should not be viewed only as employability skills. They are equally valuable as life skills that enable individuals to navigate uncertainty, solve problems, evaluate information and continue learning throughout their lives.



THINKING BEGINS

BEFORE AI RESPONDS

One consequence of this change is that learners must become more intentional when communicating with AI. This is often described as effective prompting, but it begins with clarifying one's own thinking, since learning clever techniques alone is not enough.

Before learners can explain what they need from AI, they first need to understand what they are trying to achieve. This includes identifying the problem, the information that is relevant, the limits that matter, what has already been tried and what kind of response would actually be useful. Sometimes an unhelpful AI response exposes a weakness in the prompt. At other times, it exposes a limitation in the AI response itself. Learning to distinguish between the two is itself part of the thinking process.

In addition, AI does not automatically know the learner's context: their classroom, organisation, previous experiences, objectives or circumstances, unless these are communicated. Yet identifying relevant context is not as straightforward as adding more information to a prompt. Learners first have to decide which information matters.

Take a university student who realises that poor time management is affecting their studies. They might begin by asking AI to generate five ways they can manage their time better. AI can easily give five plausible suggestions, but those suggestions are likely to be general because the question itself contains little context. The student could stop there and choose one, or they could think further. Perhaps they study full-time and work several evenings each week. Perhaps they concentrate better in the morning. Perhaps they already use a calendar but still underestimate how long assignments take. Perhaps their problem is not scheduling at all, but deciding which tasks deserve priority.

They have to decide which details to communicate, which are irrelevant and what AI needs to know before its suggestions become useful. The learner is already making decisions before receiving the next response. Identifying relevant context requires them to examine their own situation, determine what influences the problem and communicate it clearly. For language learners in particular, this also creates a meaningful reason to organise ideas and express them precisely.

THE DECISION POINTS BEGIN

AFTER THE RESPONSE

Once AI responds, thinking does not stop. In many ways, this is where another form of thinking begins. The student may now receive five recommendations that are better suited to their circumstances, but they still need to decide which suggestions deserve further attention.

One recommendation might immediately seem unrealistic. Another might be interesting but unclear. A third might appear promising enough to investigate further. The learner might ask AI to explain two options in more detail, compare them, suggest how one could work around their work schedule, or identify possible disadvantages. They might challenge a suggestion: "That would work during a normal week, but what happens when I have several deadlines at the same time?" As you can see, each interaction creates another decision point.

The student has to decide what information to provide, what to omit, what to question, what to investigate, what to fact-check, what to disregard and eventually what to act on. These micro-decisions are a significant part of the thinking taking place.

AI may be producing most of the visible text,
but the learner is directing the inquiry.

This is why effective use of AI is highly iterative. The first response does not need to be treated as the final one. Learners can question initial responses, request alternative perspectives, ask for greater depth, challenge assumptions and refine ideas over multiple interactions. The quality of the final outcome may therefore depend not only on the initial prompt, but on the learner's willingness and ability to continue thinking throughout the interaction. In the time-management example, AI may be producing most of the visible text, but the learner is directing the inquiry. They are deciding where the conversation goes next and what deserves attention.

From an educational perspective, the process matters. Learners can be given opportunities to practise making such decisions and, importantly, to reflect on why they made them. The objective is to make decision-making, questioning and justification part of the learning process.

WHAT IF AI GIVES A GOOD ANSWER?

Suppose the recommendations given to our university student are sensible, relevant and supported by reliable information. There may be no obvious factual error to identify. The student still needs to decide whether the advice is appropriate for their specific situation. A recommendation can be accurate without being useful. It can work well for many people while being unrealistic for this particular student, or it can solve one problem while creating another.

Verification asks whether information is accurate and supported. Judgement asks whether that information is relevant, appropriate, feasible or useful in a particular context.

Here, the student needs to distinguish between verification and judgement. Verification asks whether information is accurate and supported. Judgement asks whether that information is relevant, appropriate, feasible or useful in a particular context. In most cases, both matter. A learner therefore needs to move beyond asking whether the information is correct. They may also need to ask why an idea might work, under what circumstances it might fail, what assumptions the recommendation makes and whether it fits their situation.

This becomes important because AI can produce responses that are coherent and convincing. A polished response can feel complete even when important contextual information, perspectives or evidence are missing. The ability to recognise those gaps is part of working critically with AI.



FROM INFORMATION TO JUDGEMENT

The same distinction becomes important in academic and professional contexts. AI may suggest directions for further reading or identify possible authors and concepts, but meaningful academic work still requires learners to engage with original sources, evaluate evidence, compare perspectives and construct supported arguments. An AI-generated reference or claim should not become evidence simply because it appears plausible.

Similarly, when developing proposals, educational programmes or business ideas, AI can generate possibilities very quickly. What it cannot automatically provide is a complete understanding of the practical realities surrounding a particular situation. An educational proposal, for example, may sound excellent on paper while ignoring timetable restrictions, staff capacity, learner needs, institutional culture, available resources or local priorities. Someone familiar with that context may immediately recognise a problem that is invisible in the generated response. The human contribution therefore lies in bringing context, experience, evidence and judgement to that information.

This is a good reason why this is why thinking with AI should not be reduced to learning how to prompt. Learners need to know what they are trying to achieve, recognise what information matters, evaluate what they receive, identify what is missing and decide what to do next.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT?

Consider a programme in which students investigate a real problem and develop a proposal to address it. Traditionally, assessment might focus heavily on the final product, especially the quality of the written proposal, presentation or solution.

When AI becomes part of the process, a polished final product tells us less on its own about how the learner arrived there. An AI-mediated learning programme can therefore make more of the process visible. Making thinking visible here is not only about assessment. When learners articulate why they rejected an option, what information changed their position or where they remain uncertain, they can reflect on their own reasoning. Their thinking also becomes available for discussion with teachers and peers.

A practical learning process might ask students to:

- 1 Define the problem:** Identify the problem, the people affected by it and the context in which it occurs.
- 2 Identify what they need to know:** Explain what information they need before exploring possible solutions.
- 3 Investigate through different sources:** Gather information from stakeholders, published sources, real-world observations and AI, where appropriate.
- 4 Compare possible responses:** Consider different ideas rather than moving immediately towards the first plausible solution.
- 5 Record decision points and changes in understanding:** Explain which idea they rejected and why, what assumption they challenged, what additional evidence they needed, and whether information from a stakeholder, source or observation changed their initial understanding.
- 6 Test possible solutions:** Consider how each option might work in the context in which it would actually be implemented.
- 7 Justify the final decision:** Explain why they selected one solution and how their thinking changed from their initial understanding of the problem.

In this kind of learning, evidence is distributed across the process. The final product still matters, but so do the questions learners ask, the information they seek, the alternatives they consider, the assumptions they challenge and the decisions they justify. Assessment therefore begins to look different as well.

Here, educators look not only at how good the final answer is, but also at how learners arrived at it: whether they can explain why they selected one source rather than another, justify rejecting an AI suggestion, recognise when they need more information, or explain why their thinking changed. This does not mean that every AI interaction needs to be recorded or assessed, as it could quickly become impractical and turn learning into an exercise in documenting every click. The more useful focus is which decisions provide meaningful evidence of the learning we actually want to see.

This is where learning design becomes important. If communication, problem-solving, judgement, reflection and decision-making are intended learning outcomes, activities need to give learners opportunities to practise them, and assessment needs to make at least some of them visible.

The final product still matters, but so do the questions learners ask, the information they seek, the alternatives they consider, the assumptions they challenge and the decisions they justify.



EDreframe explores how learning design can help learners work with AI while continuing to organise, question and develop their own thinking. In English-language education, AI can offer a low-stakes space for learners to clarify context, structure ideas, evaluate responses and explain decisions in English. Unless linguistic accuracy is the learning focus, attention can remain on the quality of their ideas before they bring them into discussion with teachers, peers or other audiences. Technical safeguards for AI use remain an institutional responsibility.

Find more about EDreframe in our partner section at the end of this newsletter.

AI can generate suggestions, explanations and possibilities, but learners remain responsible for verifying information, evaluating evidence, exercising judgement and making decisions. Critical thinking therefore becomes more visible throughout the learning process.

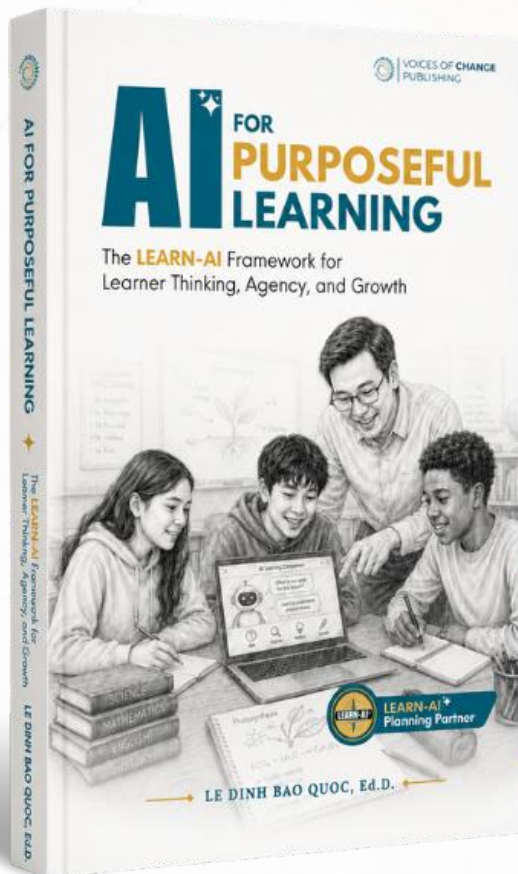
If education focuses primarily on teaching students how to use particular AI tools, we risk preparing them for technologies that will inevitably change. If we help learners understand how thinking itself evolves when working with AI, we prepare them to approach changing technologies with greater intentionality and judgement.

While the tools change, the need to frame problems, question information, consider context, make decisions and justify those decisions remains. For education, the challenge is to design learning in ways that make this thinking visible and give learners opportunities to develop it. When learners reflect on their reasoning, discuss it with others, question it and apply it across different situations, the purpose extends beyond completing a learning activity or demonstrating achievement for assessment. The wider aim is to prepare learners to approach problems, information and decisions with greater independence and judgement, with or without AI, beyond the classroom.



Sondes Gharbi is the founder of EDreframe, an educational consultancy focused on human-centred learning in an AI-enabled world. Her work explores how learning and assessment can evolve when AI becomes part of education, while strengthening human judgement, communication and decision-making and connecting education with tangible social and economic impact beyond the classroom.





“Pedagogy **before** technology.
A transformative read.”

PROF. MARINA FALASCA
STAR Scholars Network
Argentina

AI FOR PURPOSEFUL LEARNING

AI CAN PRODUCE THE WORK.
**BUT WHO IS DOING
THE LEARNING?**

AI for Purposeful Learning helps educators move beyond a tool-first approach and make thoughtful decisions about when, why, and how AI should support learning. At its center is **LEARN-AI**, a flexible compass built around Learning Purpose, Evidence of Thinking, Agency, Reflection, and Next-Step Improvement.

The book also includes access to the **LEARN-AI Planning Partner**, a specially trained chatbot designed to help educators think through purposeful classroom use of AI. It is not a lesson-plan generator. It serves as a planning companion, asking focused questions while keeping educational decisions and professional judgment with the teacher.

Through educational stories, classroom applications, practical tools, and digital resources, Dr. Le Dinh Bao Quoc shows how teachers can benefit from AI while keeping learners actively involved in thinking, deciding, explaining, and improving.

Real stories from real education: Classrooms • teacher training • conferences • professional observations

4 parts • 21 chapters • 437 pages: A complete journey from AI use to purposeful learning

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TECH OR NO TECH

BUT WAS THAT EVER THE RIGHT QUESTION?

Dr. Genevieve Bosma Martínez 

Last week, I found myself repeating the same thing, reaching for the paperback on my nightstand rather than my tablet, even though the tablet would have let me enlarge the text and thus gotten rid of my reading glasses altogether. I don't mind the convenience at all; I still prefer the book.

It's just a personal habit, not a firm position; I'm typically as supportive of progress as anyone else. I believe that technology should make us more efficient and more effective, and I don't see nostalgia as a viable strategy. However, the ideas of being more efficient and more effective only become useful when you know exactly what you're aiming to achieve, and that's where things become complicated.

Growing up in the 1990s, I didn't have computers in the classroom. Neither were email, learning management systems, quick information searches, or YouTube-based learning. We lugged heavy textbooks, used our own pens and pencils, and filled notebooks by hand.

Then COVID hit, and a shift that had been giving us time to adjust, and often felt wanting, for me, suddenly became an overnight one. Devices, learning platforms, and video calls went from occasional supplements to the only way school could happen at all. That's the context in which this current debate is unfolding, which is part of why it feels so urgent and why technology's role in the classroom can't be settled with a simple yes or no.

In the previous spring, the same kind of tension reappeared in two quite different forms. The state's new online standardized testing system, partly designed to improve efficiency, failed on the day of the exams, leaving students facing blank, unresponsive screens while the timers on their tests continued to run. At about the same time, not far from my school, families were engaged in a vigorous dispute with the school board over whether students should be allowed to opt out entirely of using school-issued devices. Although the two situations were very different, both reflected the same underlying tension between access and dependence.

One conversation was about technology failing, while the other was about whether we had too much of it in the first place.

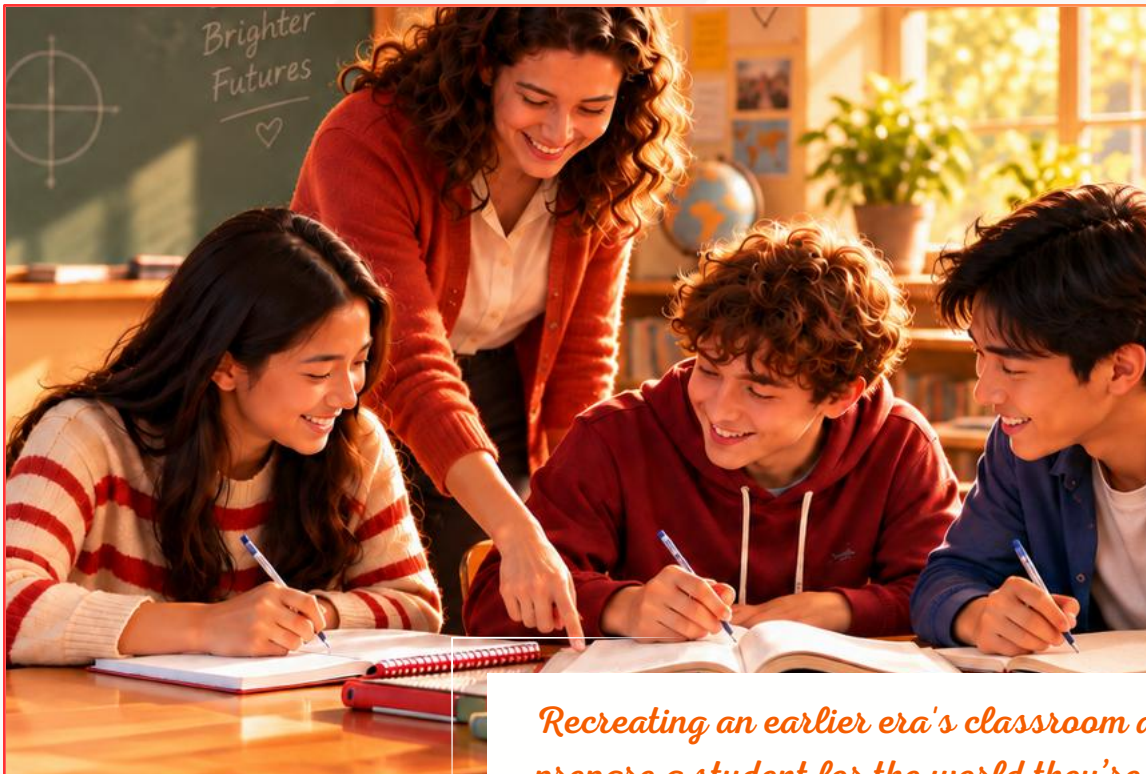
But something in this simplified debate never really sat right with me. Was tech actually the problem, or was it just a scapegoat for a complex problem? Underneath it is a harder question about what school is supposed to do in the first place: *what is education actually for?*

AN ATTEMPT AT COURSE CORRECTION BUT WHERE ARE WE GOING?

The conversations and corrections in this space are not limited to my part of the world. By March 2026, over half the world's education systems had adopted some form of national restriction on mobile phones in schools, up from under a quarter just three years earlier (UNESCO, 2026). Schools that spent years expanding digital access are now, in many places, reconsidering where those devices belong.

Removing pixels on its own doesn't resolve much, however. A pencil, by default, isn't pedagogically superior to a laptop. A printed worksheet can require as little of a student as a digital one. Closing a laptop can remove the distraction, but it doesn't necessarily redirect attention to the teacher. It also doesn't automatically produce curiosity, persistence, or individual thought. Research in this area tends to support an uneven rather than a clear verdict. OECD analysis of PISA data has found real digital distraction in classrooms, with students pulled off tasks by their own devices and their classmates', but the same data found moderate, purposeful device use associated with better outcomes than no use at all. The variable wasn't the device; it was whether anyone had decided what the device, or its absence, was supposed to accomplish.

Nostalgia falls short here, as the instinct behind much of this correction is to return to what worked before: more paper, more handwriting, fewer screens, and the classrooms that many adults remember from childhood. The problem is that those classrooms did not prepare us for the environment we are currently inhabiting. Nor will they prepare our students for the future. This environment includes algorithmic feeds engineered for engagement, AI tools that can produce finished work in seconds, and a level of connectivity that didn't exist when a pencil-and-paper classroom was the unquestioned default. Recreating an earlier era's classroom doesn't prepare a student for the world they're actually going to navigate.



Recreating an earlier era's classroom doesn't prepare a student for the world they're actually going to navigate.

Dr. Genevieve Bosma Martínez

A SYSTEM PROBLEM, NOT A SINGLE CULPRIT

Each time we look to assign blame to a single culprit, this complex systems problem gets flattened. Codependent home habits, a school's daily design, a platform's product choices, and a policymaker's options all shape the same outcome. Many digital platforms have figured out how to capture attention, which changes what a teacher competes with in the classroom. A school can restrict phones during the day, but it can't control what happens at night. A platform can optimize its features, but it can't ensure its programs are used ethically by educators or what policymakers choose to fund. A well-intentioned device ban can solve one issue while overlooking others.

Undeniably, these are complex issues, and schools are consistently tasked with solving their disproportionate share without anyone asking which parts are actually theirs to solve. Alongside managing academic instruction, schools are expected to manage attention, mental health, digital literacy, data privacy, and workforce readiness. Some of this actually belongs to schools. However, much of it belongs to families, technology companies, and public policy outside the walls of schools. Before adding another rule to schools, it's important to determine where ownership lies.

THE QUESTION

UNDERNEATH THE QUESTION

Years ago, well before generative AI intensified this debate, I was asking a version of it in my own doctoral research. I studied how educators understood what young people would need to learn, experience, and become capable of doing in a world already defined by rapid change and emerging technology in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the years since, the debate has only intensified. The underlying question remains unanswered:

What is education is for?

With technology now able to produce correct answers and polished output, can schools' goal of developing students who can do the same really be the answer? Do standardized tests measure a student's learning? Or are we now being forced to identify whether schools are set up to develop in learners the ability to reason through difficult problems, recognize what they do or do not know, communicate effectively, and persist even when the answer isn't obvious?

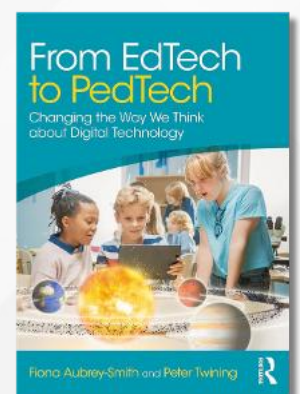
As educators, we cannot continue down the road of attempting to produce students who can compete with machines. Instead, we need to invest in those capacities that are uniquely human as the work available to our students continues to change shape. The World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs Report 2025* asserts that a substantial number of workers' current skills will shift by 2030, as employers increasingly need analytical and creative thinking, resilience, and collaboration at least as much as technical fluency. Job titles for the types of work our students will have in the future, and some of the skilled work they are currently being trained to do, will likely be partially automated. While we can't control what kind of job a student will exactly be asked to do, we can focus on building their capacity to keep learning once they get there, a different, harder, more durable goal than deciding how many devices belong in their classroom.

FROM EDTECH TO PEDTECH

Dr. Fiona Aubrey-Smith and Professor Peter Twining have developed and advanced a useful name for this shift in starting point: PedTech. In *From EdTech to PedTech: Changing the Way We Think about Digital Technology*, they argue for approaching technology through a pedagogical lens first, rather than letting technology dictate practice. Instead of starting with a platform or a newly released tool and asking how to use it, you start with what you believe about how students learn and what you're trying to build in them, and only then ask what role, if any, the tool should play.

This reordering changes the conversation more than it may appear at first glance because it means that a translation tool, a calculator, an AI system, and a pencil are all the same question: not whether the tool is good or bad, but what it does to this learner's development of this capability, right now. A translation tool can prevent one student from practicing the language she still needs to build, while giving another student access to ideas she couldn't otherwise reach. The purpose, rather than the tool, is the determinant.

This plays out every day in my classrooms. Technology is given an intentional purpose. When students first encounter a novel concept, the learning process is often messy. They might draw or write on paper, or, if typing helps them capture their thoughts more quickly, perform a brain dump in a Word document. The goal is to let them struggle while the stakes are low. Once they have wrestled with the idea on their own, they can turn to other tools, whether a classmate, a teacher, or AI, to clarify or extend their thinking. The technology did not change between those two moments. Its purpose did. In each moment, what the student needed guided how and when the tool was used.



WHAT STILL HAS TO HAPPEN IN THE LEARNER

The central question of what a tool does to a learner's development, rather than what the tool actually is, shapes how I, as an educator, evaluate any learning experience. I use a framework I developed called **THINK**, which stands for Tension, Human Judgment, Intellectual Visibility, Novel Transfer, and Knowledge Construction, to determine if an experience asks something meaningful of the learner. Tension is worth wrestling with rather than simply retrieving; human judgment she has to exercise herself; intellectual visibility so we can see her thinking rather than only her finished product; the chance to transfer what she understands to an unfamiliar place; and something genuinely constructed in her that wasn't there before.

I don't use THINK to reduce technologies into the categories of "good" and "bad". A worksheet can fail at all five of those things, and a well-designed AI interaction can meet them if it pushes a student to test an idea rather than produce the idea for her. The difference isn't the technology. It's whether the thinking happened somewhere in the process.

The same caution runs in both directions, as productive difficulty and unnecessary barriers can be confused at a real cost to students. A multilingual learner, for example, may need translation support to assess ideas while still building the language to express them independently. A student with a disability may benefit from text-to-speech or a communication device, not to make a task easier, but to make it possible at all. In these cases, removing that kind of support in the name of rigor doesn't build ability; it removes access.

The difference isn't the technology. It's whether the thinking happened somewhere in the process.

Dr. Genevieve Bosma Martínez



TECH OR NO TECH?

BUT WAS THAT EVER THE RIGHT QUESTION?

The work of schools to reconsider technology in the classroom is pressing and necessary, but counting devices in a room or treating a phone ban as proof that something better is now happening diminishes the magnitude of the challenge before us. The arrival of AI has exacerbated the uncomfortable position schools find themselves in before they have even adapted to the last technological shift. Still, it has also provided a genuine opportunity to refocus on the real question at hand rather than allowing a device policy to stand in for it.

We are sending the students in classrooms right now into a world where technology will continue to become more capable, doing work that looks little like the work we recognize, and what they need are schools that are clear about what is being developed in them (if it is at all): curiosity, judgment, and the ability to continue learning amid real complexity. It is that clarity which will allow us to determine the difference between a technology decision that serves that purpose and one that stands in the way.

So, tech or no tech? We're better than such a simple question. The right and better one we need to answer has always been what education is for, and whether we're willing to let that answer guide everything else.

So, tech or no tech? We're better than such a simple question. The right and better one we need to answer has always been what education is for, and whether we're willing to let that answer guide everything else.

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Dr. Genevieve Bosma Martínez is an educator, researcher, and founder of GBMnexus whose work explores learning, technology, and human capability. Her research focuses on 21st-century learning priorities, while her current work examines PedTech, AI, and how schools can design learning that prepares students to think, adapt, and thrive.



RETHINKING HOW WE GRADE RISK

THE 13-YEAR-OLD WHO WOULDN'T TAKE NO

Rosvinder Kaur 

A national programme built failure into its definition of success.

He was the youngest one there. Thirteen, selling 3D-printed fidget spinners, and almost turned away before he had even started.

Blake^(*) applied to East Ventures' "My First S\$1,000" programme in 2026, alongside well over a hundred other teams of secondary, junior college, polytechnic and ITE (Institute of Technical Education) students. He was below the programme's usual age range. It almost said no.

He did not take no for an answer. He got in, alongside teammates a year or two older than him, and spent eight weeks doing exactly what the other teams were doing: turning S\$250 in seed capital into a sellable product, building toward Showcase Day, and carrying a real obligation to repay that capital, costs included, regardless of whether he sold a single item.

That last detail is the one worth sitting with. The programme's founder, Willson Cuaca of East Ventures, has said plainly that the objective was never about revenue. It was a formative-age encounter with a real problem statement, a real sales attempt, a real failure, and a real recovery from it. A meaningful share of teams ended the eight weeks with little to no revenue (Hong, 2026). The programme treats that outcome as a success, not a shortfall, because the character-building happened either way.

A national-level programme, developed through Singapore's own Economic Strategy Review process and backed by senior government sponsors, built failure into its definition of success. Most classrooms have not.

THE PATTERN BEHIND BLAKE'S STORY IS NOT NEW

This is not a new observation dressed up in a new story. In 2011, Chung Wai Keung, then an assistant professor at Singapore Management University, wrote in *The Straits Times* (Chung, 2011) that Singapore's risk-averse culture was quietly capping social mobility, because it discouraged exactly the kind of entrepreneurship that lets people climb. He put it bluntly: the system makes it more rational for students to find a job than to build something of their own.

Fifteen years on, we still tell students to be entrepreneurial and then grade them for compliance. The research on why young people hesitate to start something of their own points the same way: fear of failure and risk aversion tend to outrank lack of capital, lack of knowledge and lack of a network among the barriers students themselves name. Whatever practical obstacles a school removes, that underlying fear tends to remain the largest one left standing.

Even Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's founding Prime Minister, flagged this decades ago in a lecture on building an entrepreneurial culture. He argued that the country's entrepreneurial instinct was not extinct, only latent, and that unlocking it was fundamentally a job for education, not economics. This framing matters, because it means the lever has never belonged to policy alone. It sits with what happens inside a classroom on an ordinary Tuesday.

What makes Blake's story land differently from the usual entrepreneurship-in-schools narrative is one detail East Ventures built in on purpose: the repayment obligation. Most school-based enterprise projects quietly protect students from real consequences, which is sensible for safety reasons but also means the risk being taken is never quite real. My First S\$1,000 kept the obligation real (capital had to be returned regardless of outcome) while still treating a poor commercial result as a legitimate, celebrated form of learning. This combination, real stakes paired with genuine tolerance for a bad outcome, is the one a graded classroom assignment almost never holds at the same time. A classroom project either removes the stakes entirely, which drains the exercise of its lesson, or keeps the stakes and then punishes the failure anyway, which teaches the opposite lesson to the one intended.

^(*)The name used in this article is a pseudonym to protect the participant's identity.

WHY GRADING IS THE QUIET CULPRIT

It is tempting to treat all of this as a culture problem too large for any one school to touch. It is not. Alfie Kohn, drawing on decades of research on grading, describes three reliable effects wherever students are graded this way: they think less deeply, avoid taking risks, and lose interest in the learning itself (Kohn, 2006). That is not a Singapore-specific finding. It is a classroom finding, present anywhere a rubric exists, because a rubric quietly teaches a student to optimise for the visible criteria in front of them rather than to explore. Exploration is exactly what an untried idea requires.

Meanwhile, the market these same students are graduating into is asking for close to the opposite of what the rubric rewards. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 lists creative thinking, resilience, curiosity, and initiative among the fastest-rising skills employers want by 2030, sitting alongside AI literacy (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Put the two findings side by side and the gap is stark: the traits the job market rewards fastest are close to the traits the grading system quietly trains out of students. A student can spend thirteen years being taught assignment by assignment that the safest path to a good grade is the path with the least risk attached to it, and then be asked, the moment they graduate, to reverse that entire habit of mind on demand.

THE BRAVE AUDIT

FIVE QUESTIONS TO RUN THIS TERM

None of this requires an overhaul of the whole curriculum before a school can act. Five honest questions, run against your own school this term, will tell you more than any policy discussion in the abstract. Together they spell BRAVE, which is deliberate: the entire argument above is that schools currently reward the opposite of it.

B

BROWSE YOUR RUBRICS

Pull three graded rubrics currently in use across different subjects. How many marks on each are available for a well-reasoned attempt that did not work, and how many reward getting closer to a single expected answer?

A

ASSIGN ONE FAILURE-SAFE TASK

Put one assignment on the calendar this term that is explicitly allowed to fail without academic penalty, provided the attempt itself is genuine and well-reasoned. If nothing like it exists on your timetable already, that is the gap East Ventures' programme is filling and yours is not.

R

REQUEST HONEST ANSWERS FROM STUDENTS

Ask a handful of students, informally, what happens to their grade if their idea for a project does not work. If the honest answer is "it gets worse, the same as if I had just played it safe," the incentive structure is currently working against the exact skill your school says it wants to build.



V VERIFY HOW FAILURE IS TALKED ABOUT

Check how failure is discussed publicly in your school: in assemblies, in newsletters, in the stories a school chooses to celebrate. A school that only publicly celebrates finished, polished success is quietly teaching the same lesson as a rubric that only rewards the correct answer.

E ESCALATE THE QUESTION TO LEADERSHIP

Ask your leadership team, directly, whether a student who tried something ambitious and produced nothing sellable would be treated, in your school's own language, the way East Ventures treats Blake and his cohort: as a success story, not a shortfall.

None of these five steps requires new funding or a new subject on the timetable. They require an honest look at incentives your school has probably never audited on purpose, because grading tends to be treated as a settled, background feature of school life rather than a live policy choice with consequences for exactly the skills this generation is being asked to build.

WHAT A TEACHER OR SCHOOL LEADER ACTUALLY DOES WITH THIS

The temptation, faced with a gap this large, is to wait for a system-wide answer: a new national curriculum strand, a ministry directive, a wholesale rethink of assessment. That wait could be a long one, and in the meantime, a single department, or even a single teacher, does not need permission to run one assignment differently this term. A single project where the mark rewards the quality of the attempt and the thinking behind a genuine risk, rather than only the polish of the final outcome, is enough to start teaching students that the two are not the same thing, and that a good school can tell the difference between them.

This does not mean abandoning rigour, and it does not mean grading effort in place of quality. Kohn's critique of rubrics was never a case for lowering standards. It was a case that the mechanism itself, built to reward proximity to a predetermined answer, quietly punishes the exploratory thinking a ambitious task requires (Kohn, 2006).

The fix is not a softer rubric. It is a rubric, or a project brief, that explicitly separates two different things it is currently measuring as one: the quality of a student's reasoning and risk-taking during the attempt, and the quality of the final polished outcome. A student can score well on the first even when the second falls short, in the same way Blake's team could walk away from Showcase Day with close to no revenue and still be described by the programme's own leadership as a genuine success.

If a national programme backed by serious government sponsors can look at a thirteen-year-old with zero revenue and call that outcome a success worth cherishing, the question worth putting to your own leadership team is not whether your school agrees with that philosophy in principle. Most schools would say they do.

The real question is narrower and harder to avoid: if a national programme can treat zero revenue as a success, what would it actually take for your gradebook to do the same?

Run the BRAVE audit this term, leave that question with your leadership team, and see what they bring back.

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Rosvinder Kaur is a curriculum strategist based in Singapore with 20 years' experience across national education systems and private education. She works at the intersection of curriculum design, instructional leadership, and assessment, and is the creator of the LEARNERS AI Framework and founder of Education Intelligence.

Key Features

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LEADERSHIP PRESENCE

WITHOUT MICROMANAGEMENT

Felix F Erasmus 





Many of the challenges facing schools are not new. An old Chinese saying has stayed with me: 天高皇帝远, often translated as “Heaven is high, and the emperor is far away.” Put simply, when leadership feels distant, local interpretation becomes powerful. In schools, policy does not travel cleanly from senior leadership to classrooms. It passes through people, relationships, middle leaders, habits, and daily pressures.

But there is another side to the problem. Leaders sometimes respond to this distance by becoming too closely involved in minor operational details.

Schools need leadership presence, but they also need space for teachers and middle leaders to exercise judgement. The challenge is not choosing between control and freedom. It is building enough connection for people to understand the direction while preserving enough autonomy for them to do their work well.

The opposite of micromanagement is not absence. It is connected autonomy: clear shared direction combined with enough trust, authority, and support for people to exercise professional judgement.

DISTANCE CREATES DRIFTS

When senior leaders are distant from daily practice, their policies may still be announced, documented, and repeated in meetings. But that does not mean they are shaping behaviour.

Teachers are surrounded by immediate pressures: classes to teach, students to support, parents to communicate with, assessments to mark, conflicts to manage, and lessons to prepare. In that environment, a policy only becomes real when it is translated into practical meaning.

What does this change in my classroom? What does my department head expect? Is this a genuine priority, or another announcement that will fade away? Will anyone follow up? Does this make the work clearer, or does it add another layer?

If those questions are not answered close to the classroom, policy becomes background noise. People may not openly resist it. They may simply continue with the work that feels most urgent.

Leadership presence matters because direction must remain visible enough to reach practice, not because senior leaders need to control every detail.

PRESENCE IS NOT CONTROL

Leadership presence is often misunderstood. It does not mean constantly checking on teachers, entering every decision, or turning professional work into surveillance. In fact, too much control can weaken the very professionalism schools depend on.

Teachers need room to make decisions. They need to adapt lessons to their students, adjust timing, respond to classroom dynamics, and use their professional knowledge. Middle leaders also need space to lead. They cannot simply function as message carriers from senior management. They need enough trust to interpret, adapt, and support implementation in ways that make sense for their teams.

The question is not whether leaders should be present or whether teachers should have autonomy. Schools need both.

The more useful question is: where does leadership presence create clarity, and where does it become interference?

AUTONOMY NEEDS ALIGNMENT

Teacher autonomy is sometimes discussed as though it simply means being left alone. But autonomy without alignment can easily become fragmentation. One department moves in one direction, another interprets expectations differently, and teachers receive mixed signals about what matters.

At the same time, alignment without autonomy becomes compliance. Teachers may follow instructions, but they stop thinking deeply about the work. They wait to be told what to do. They become implementers rather than professionals.

THE ROLE OF MIDDLE LEADERS

Middle leadership becomes essential here. Department heads, year heads, coordinators, and programme leaders often sit closest to the point where senior direction becomes daily practice. They understand the official priorities, but they also understand teacher workload, team culture, student needs, and the practical limits of implementation.

If senior leaders do not maintain regular contact with middle leaders, this layer weakens. Middle leaders may hear announcements at the same time as everyone else, without understanding the reasoning behind them. They may not know which priorities are urgent, which are flexible, and which are part of a longer strategic direction.

When that happens, even capable middle leaders can become hesitant. They may soften or delay an initiative, not because they are undermining leadership, but because they do not fully understand its intent or are trying to protect their teams from another unclear demand.

Senior leaders may not always have time to speak directly with every teacher, but they do need to strengthen the middle layer. Regular meetings with middle leaders should not only be administrative updates. They should be spaces for shared interpretation: Why are we doing this? What problem are we trying to solve? What trade-offs are involved? How should this be explained to teachers? Where is the pressure likely to appear?

Middle leaders also carry information in the other direction. They are often the first people to see where a policy that looks straightforward on paper becomes difficult in practice. They can see when two priorities compete for the same limited time, when a new process duplicates an existing one, or when what appears to be resistance is really confusion or workload pressure. That makes them more than a communication channel. They are part of the school's feedback system. If leaders only use them to pass messages downward, they lose much of the value of having people positioned between strategy and day-to-day practice.

CONNECTED AUTONOMY IN PRACTICE

Connected autonomy requires deliberate habits.

It means senior leaders are visible enough to understand how policies are landing, but restrained enough not to override every local decision. It means middle leaders are close enough to senior thinking to explain direction clearly, but trusted enough to adapt implementation responsibly. It means teachers are given agency over instructional decisions, but within a shared understanding of the school's goals.

This is not easy. It requires communication that goes beyond announcements. It requires leaders to listen before assuming resistance. It requires middle leaders to translate both upward and downward. It requires teachers to be treated as professionals whose judgement is part of the system, not an obstacle to it.

In practical terms, this might mean fewer whole-school announcements and more structured conversations with the people who will actually carry the work. It might mean checking not only whether a policy was communicated, but how it was interpreted. It might mean asking department heads where the message is unclear before asking why implementation is inconsistent.

The aim is not to involve senior leaders in more decisions, but to clarify which decisions actually need their involvement. If expectations, boundaries, and priorities are understood, routine decisions can stay closer to the people doing the work. This reduces unnecessary escalation while keeping the organisation aligned. Connected autonomy is therefore not simply a leadership style. It also prevents leadership itself from becoming a bottleneck.

Leadership presence should reduce confusion, not increase pressure.

THE DANGER OF FALSE AUTONOMY

There is also a kind of false autonomy that schools need to avoid. This happens when teachers are told they are free to make decisions, but the conditions around them make that freedom almost meaningless.

They may have autonomy over lesson design, but no time to plan properly. They may have freedom to innovate, but no support when something goes wrong. They may be invited to contribute ideas, but only if they also carry the extra workload. They may be trusted in theory, but second-guessed in practice.

That kind of autonomy does not feel empowering. It feels like responsibility without support.

There is an important difference between delegating ownership and simply transferring a problem. Giving a middle leader responsibility can be empowering when it comes with enough authority, information, and support to act. The same responsibility becomes frustrating when every meaningful decision still needs approval from above. Schools can appear decentralised on paper while remaining highly centralised in practice, leaving middle leaders accountable for outcomes they have limited power to influence.

Real autonomy requires conditions. Teachers need clarity, time, resources, trust, and leadership support. Middle leaders need the same. Without those conditions, autonomy becomes another word for being left alone to solve problems the system has not addressed.

LEADERSHIP AS CONNECTION

Leadership presence without micromanagement depends on connection: between senior vision and classroom practice, middle leaders and senior decision-making, teacher autonomy and shared purpose, and policy and lived experience.

Schools are too complex to run through control alone. They are also too complex to run through distance. The work depends on people making hundreds of small professional decisions every day, often in situations no policy can fully predict.

The goal of leadership is not to remove that judgement. It is to create the conditions where judgement is informed, aligned, and supported.

When leadership is too far away, direction dissolves. When leadership is too controlling, professionalism shrinks.

The schools that manage this balance well understand that presence and autonomy are not opposites. Good leaders stay close enough to create clarity, but not so close that they take ownership away from the people doing the work.

In education, leadership involves setting direction and staying connected enough for that direction to make sense, while trusting teachers and middle leaders to turn it into practice.



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ASK

Welcome to **Ask the Experts**, the ultimate column dedicated to professional development in the field of education. In this dynamic and ever-evolving field, continuous growth and learning are paramount. In each issue, we explore the most commonly asked topic by interviewing invited experts for their insights, experiences, and strategies.



SCHOOLS AS CULTURAL SYSTEMS

WHO BELONGS DECIDES SHAPES THE FUTURE



Exclusively with DR. DONNA M. VELLIARIS 

EduVerse: Every school has a culture. Some parts of it are visible in its values, traditions, and routines. Others are quieter, carried through everyday expectations, relationships, language, and ideas about who belongs. But what happens when we begin to see the school itself as a cultural system?

In this edition of **Ask the Experts**, we explore that question with **Dr. Donna M. Velliaris**, internationally recognized educator, author, and researcher whose work spans school culture, inclusion, identity, and belonging. Ranked among the Top 30 Global Gurus in Education for four consecutive years, reaching No. 6 in 2026, Dr. Velliaris brings both scholarly insight and an international perspective to how culture shapes educational experience.

Our conversation moves from the culture schools intend to create to the culture students actually experience: the unwritten rules they learn, the identities they bring, the sense of belonging they develop, and the voices that help shape the community around them. Ultimately, it asks us to look at a familiar place – **the school** – with a different set of eyes.

SEEING SCHOOLS AS CULTURE SYSTEMS

PART 1



1 ✨ **Welcome Dr. Donna M. Velliaris. Much of your work invites us to see schools not simply as places where education happens, but as cultural systems. I'd love to start there. What led you to begin thinking about schools in this way?**

Thank you for having me. In fact, the idea of 'Schools as Cultural Systems' began to crystallise for me during my PhD, when I was researching transnational students in Tokyo. What interested me was that students were not simply moving between curricula or campuses. They were moving between expectations about language, authority, achievement, family involvement, and belonging. The same student could be understood very differently from one setting to another.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) *Human Ecology* framework helped me see that a learner develops within interconnected environments rather than inside the school alone. Epstein's (2001) *Overlapping Spheres of Influence* drew my attention to the relationships among school, family, and community.

Together, these perspectives challenged the idea of a school as a neutral container in which education happens. Instead, the school emerged as a living cultural system. Its policies, routines, symbols, relationships, and unwritten rules communicate what is valued, how people are expected to participate, and who is seen as belonging. Once that lens is applied, familiar school practices begin to look different.



2 ✦

I really like that idea of the school not being a “neutral container.” It also makes me think about the difference between the culture a school intends to create and the culture people actually experience. Schools often have carefully written mission statements and values on their walls, but how can we tell what a school’s actual culture is?

I would look less at the words on the wall and more at the patterns that repeat.

Who is welcomed, heard, or interrupted? Which achievements are celebrated? What happens when a student questions a rule, makes a mistake, needs an adjustment, or brings a different perspective?

I would also examine how time, attention, opportunities, discipline, and resources are distributed. Those everyday choices reveal a school’s working values.

Mission statements still matter because they give a community something against which to hold itself accountable. The real test is whether students, families, teachers, and support staff describe a broadly consistent experience. When the stated values and those accounts do not match, that gap provides useful evidence of the culture actually operating.

So perhaps the real culture is revealed less by what a school says and more by what repeatedly happens. And I suppose some of those messages can be almost invisible. Students quickly learn the unwritten rules of school: how to behave, what counts as success, whose voice carries authority, even what a “good student” looks like. How powerful are these less visible cultural messages in shaping students’ experiences?

✦ 3

They are very powerful because students encounter them continually, often without explanation. The hidden curriculum tells students what is rewarded, overlooked, corrected, or treated as normal. When those messages align with a student’s prior experience, school can feel relatively easy to read. When they do not, the student may spend considerable cognitive and emotional energy decoding expectations that others seem to understand without effort.

These messages can shape participation, confidence, relationships, subject choices, and a student’s sense of possible futures. They do not determine every outcome, and students are not passive recipients of culture, but their cumulative effect is difficult to dismiss. A minor interaction can become significant when it confirms a wider pattern about whose language, knowledge, behaviour, or identity carries greater legitimacy.

DR. DONNA M. VELLIARIS

Dr Donna M. Velliaris is an educator, researcher, author, and editor with around 30 years of experience across school and higher education settings. She has taught and worked in Australia, Japan, Singapore, and Thailand, with roles spanning classroom teaching, teacher education, academic development, student support, and educational leadership.

Her PhD in Education examined the experiences of transnational students in Tokyo and deepened her interest in culture, identity, inclusion, and belonging. She has authored or edited multiple books and contributed extensively to international publications on education, academic integrity, learning support, and teacher development.

Her work is grounded in the view that schools are cultural systems shaped by interactions among students, educators, families, communities, policies, and wider social conditions. She is especially interested in how everyday school practices communicate who is valued, whose knowledge counts, and whether learners feel able to participate as themselves.



CULTURE, IDENTITY INCLUSION, & BELONGING



4 ✦ That idea of having to “decode” a school culture is powerful, because some learners may have to do far more of that work than others. You have researched and worked with learners across different cultural contexts. What have those experiences taught you about what happens when a learner’s identity does not easily fit the culture of the school?

My research and teaching across Australia, Japan, Singapore, and Thailand have shown me that identity can become something a learner feels required to manage. Some students become quiet and watchful; others overperform to prove that they belong; some code-switch constantly; and others resist expectations that seem to erase an important part of who they are. These responses can be misread as low motivation or poor behaviour.

Sometimes the issue lies in how narrowly a school has defined the “acceptable learner.” The most constructive response is to ask what the environment is requiring, whose norms those demands reflect, and what can be adjusted without lowering educational expectations. A learner should be challenged to grow, but growth should not require cultural disappearance.

5 ✦ That last point is especially striking: learners should be able to grow without having to leave parts of themselves at the school gate. It brings us directly to the idea of belonging. We often use the words diversity, inclusion, and belonging together, almost as if they mean the same thing. From a student’s perspective, what distinguishes being represented, being included, and genuinely feeling that “this school is also a place for me”?

Representation, inclusion, and belonging are connected, but they are not interchangeable.

- Representation asks: “Can I see people like me here?”
- Inclusion asks: “Can I enter, participate, and access what others can access?”
- Belonging asks: “Can I participate as myself and still be recognized as a legitimate member of this community?”

A school can display diverse faces, texts, or celebrations without redistributing voice or influence. It can also provide formal access while expecting students to suppress language, identity, disability, faith, or family knowledge in order to be accepted.

Belonging is present when students are not accommodated only at the edges. They are known, taken seriously, able to contribute, and missed when they are absent. Thus, belonging is relational and cannot be established by representation alone or declared by policy.

6 ✨

That distinction helps explain why having diversity represented in a school does not automatically mean every learner experiences belonging. Most schools today would probably describe themselves as inclusive, yet students within the same school can experience its culture very differently. Why does that gap between intention and student experience occur?

That is a great question. The gap arises because inclusion is often treated as an intention, a programme, or a policy, while students experience it through daily interactions. A whole-school statement may be inclusive, but its meaning can change across classrooms, peer groups, subject areas, and points of contact with families.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective is useful here because it shows how development is shaped through relationships within and between settings, not through policy language alone.

Staff may share a commitment to inclusion while holding different assumptions about behaviour, ability, language, or parental involvement. Broad survey results may hide patterns affecting smaller groups. I would, therefore, compare institutional claims with disaggregated evidence and with the accounts of students and families, especially those whose experiences are least visible.

Good intentions are a starting point, but consistency, responsiveness, and accountability determine whether those intentions are felt.

Teachers can stop treating silence as disengagement, difference as deficiency, and equal treatment as inherently equitable.

- Dr. Donna M. Velliaris -

7 ✨

So inclusion ultimately has to become something learners experience in ordinary moments, not only something institutions declare. Teachers clearly have an important role in making that happen. What are some of the things teachers can do, or perhaps stop doing, that can significantly change how students experience inclusion and belonging in the classroom?

Certainly! Teachers can begin with practices that sound small but carry considerable weight: pronounce names correctly, learn about students beyond a file or label, explain expectations rather than assume they are obvious, distribute attention equitably, offer more than one way to participate, and maintain high expectations while scaffolding access. Curriculum examples should widen whose knowledge is treated as credible, while feedback should protect dignity as well as promote improvement.

Epstein's (2001) Overlapping Spheres of Influence reminds us that families are partners with knowledge, not simply audiences for school instructions. Teachers can stop treating silence as disengagement, difference as deficiency, and equal treatment as inherently equitable. They can also avoid public comparisons, casual stereotypes, and humour that places a student or group on the outside.

No single gesture creates belonging, but repeated interactions create a pattern, and students are attuned to that pattern.



8 ✦

Those everyday interactions show how much culture is built from the ground up. But individual teachers are also working within a larger system. So let's zoom back out to the school as a whole. School culture develops whether we design it intentionally or not. What changes when leaders begin treating culture as something they are actively responsible for shaping?

Culture becomes part of core leadership work rather than something left to atmosphere or tradition. Leaders can ask whether recruitment, induction, timetabling, curriculum, discipline, professional learning, resource allocation, family communication, and the use of space reinforce the values the school claims to hold. Leaders should also look for evidence in student and staff accounts, participation patterns, disciplinary decisions, and who gains access to leadership opportunities.

Treating culture with purpose does not mean scripting a single identity or controlling every interaction. Leaders cannot manufacture belonging by announcement. They can, however, create conditions in which it is more likely, identify contradictions, and respond when routines produce unequal effects.

The shift is from hoping for a positive culture to taking responsibility for how institutional choices shape daily experience.

9 ✦

I like that distinction between trying to “manufacture” belonging and creating the conditions in which it can develop. But if culture is being intentionally shaped, we also need to ask who gets to participate in shaping it. If we want students to feel that a school belongs to them too, should they have a voice in its culture? What might genuine student participation look like?

Yes, provided that student voice includes genuine influence. Participation is not a survey conducted after the important decisions have already been made, or a student council used mainly for ceremonies.

Students can help examine school norms, co-design learning spaces and wellbeing initiatives, review communication and disciplinary processes, shape curriculum themes, and identify barriers that adults may no longer notice.

Genuine participation requires access to relevant information, representation beyond the most confident students, clear boundaries, and a visible feedback loop showing what changed, what did not, and why. Adults still retain legal, ethical, and professional responsibility. Shared authorship does not mean transferring every decision to students. It means recognising that students possess essential knowledge about how the school is experienced and giving that knowledge a meaningful place in decision-making.

10 ✦

That balance between shared authorship and adult responsibility is important. And it becomes even more interesting when a school community includes increasingly diverse identities and experiences. As schools become more multicultural and globally connected, how can they maintain a strong shared identity without expecting everyone to fit a single cultural mould?

A strong shared identity should be built around common purpose and ethical commitments, not cultural sameness. Schools can be explicit about non-negotiable principles such as dignity, safety, intellectual honesty, high expectations, mutual responsibility, and respect for difference. Around that core, there should be room for multiple languages, traditions, histories, family structures, ways of participating, and ways of demonstrating learning.

Shared rituals and stories can still matter, but they should invite contribution and reinterpretation rather than present a finished culture for newcomers to adopt. In practice, this means asking which elements express the school's educational purpose and which merely reflect the dominant group's preferences.

A coherent school culture does not require everyone to look, speak, or think alike. Its strength can come from learning to live and work well across difference.

A coherent school culture does not require everyone to look, speak, or think alike. Its strength can come from learning to live and work well across difference.

– Dr. Donna M. Velliaris –

CLOSING THOUGHTS

That feels like an important place to bring our conversation back to practice. We've looked at culture from the learner, teacher, and leadership perspectives, but changing what we notice may be the first step. Before we close, if you could ask every school leader and teacher to walk into their school tomorrow and look at it through one new lens, what would you want them to notice?

I would ask them to notice who has to do the most adapting. Who can move through the school without having to explain themselves, and who is constantly translating language, behaviour, identity, or family expectations? Whose mistakes are treated as part of learning, and whose are interpreted as evidence of character or ability?

I would also ask them to notice who speaks, who is heard, who is corrected, who is supported, and which families are contacted mainly when something goes wrong rather than invited to contribute knowledge. I would then compare those observations with the school's stated values.

One useful question is: If this practice feels completely normal to us, whom does that normality serve? A cultural-systems lens shifts attention from trying to fix an individual learner towards examining the conditions in which that learner is being asked to learn and belong.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Schools operate within a human ecology.** Students develop through interconnected relationships among school, family, community, and wider social conditions.
- **Culture is lived before it is stated.** Repeated interactions and decisions reveal a school's working values more clearly than slogans alone.
- **Unwritten rules carry real consequences.** The hidden curriculum shapes who feels confident, understood, and entitled to participate.
- **Representation, inclusion, and belonging are different.** Seeing oneself, gaining access, and being accepted as oneself are related but distinct experiences.
- **Equity requires more than sameness.** Students may need different forms of access and support while being held to meaningful expectations.
- **Teachers create culture interaction by interaction.** Small, repeated choices about language, attention, feedback, and family relationships accumulate.
- **Student voice should include influence.** Participation becomes genuine when students help shape decisions and can see how their input was used.
- **Shared identity does not require uniformity.** A school can unite around a common purpose and ethical commitments while making room for cultural difference.

A learner should be challenged to grow, but growth should not require cultural disappearance.





WHY CHILDREN FREEZE ON STAGE and How Educators Can Help

Simran Bagwan 

Consider a ten-year-old student – let us call her Ananya – sitting at her classroom group table during a morning science inquiry. She speaks with clarity, poses thoughtful questions to her peers, and explains her group's project with quiet conviction. Yet three weeks later, when she is selected to present her team's findings at the school assembly, a stark transformation occurs. Walking to the podium beneath the glare of auditorium lights and before two hundred silent peers, Ananya stops in her tracks. Her hands grip the microphone stand, her posture stiffens, and the opening sentence she rehearsed multiple times will not come out.

⁽¹⁾The name used in this article is a pseudonym to protect the participant's identity.



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For teachers and school leaders, this scene is deeply familiar. It represents a striking gap between a child's demonstrated ability in a routine setting and their sudden silence in front of an audience. Often, well-meaning adults label this behavior as "stage fright," "shyness," or a simple "lack of confidence." The prescription that follows is often equally simplistic: just practice more, take a deep breath, and stand up straight.

However, viewing speaking performance through the lens of child development and educational psychology reveals a more nuanced reality. A child who freezes during a presentation should not automatically be seen as lacking ability, preparation, or self-assurance. Rather, it is often a response to a sudden shift in social and environmental context.

The essential educational question is not simply, "How do we make the child stop being nervous?" Instead, educators must ask: "How can we design speaking experiences that gradually help students manage the social and cognitive demands of being observed, evaluated, and heard?"

Understanding the Stage Shift: Social Evaluation, Cognitive Demand, and Environment

Why does a child who expresses ideas easily in a small group freeze when placed before a crowd? The answer lies in the intersection of environmental context, cognitive processing, and social perception.

When a student steps onto a stage, the environment changes dramatically. Research on acute stress suggests that situations involving social evaluation can be potent stressors, particularly when people feel that their performance is being judged by others (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004). On a stage, the natural, reciprocal feedback of casual conversation disappears. Instead of the supportive head nods of a four-person group table, the speaker faces a large, expectant audience.

For some students, increased performance pressure may be accompanied by noticeable physical sensations such as tension, faster breathing, or a racing heartbeat. These sensations can make it harder to concentrate on the task at hand, particularly for young learners whose self-regulatory strategies are still developing.

At the same time, cognitive processing can come under strain. Research on performance under pressure, including studies of working memory during demanding academic tasks, suggests that pressure can consume some of the cognitive resources people rely on to carry out a task (Beilock & Carr, 2005). In a speaking situation, this offers one possible explanation for why a student who knows what to say may temporarily struggle to retrieve or organize it under pressure.

Educators should also avoid assuming that every instance of stage freezing represents a broader communication difficulty. Communication apprehension is an established concept in communication research for understanding anxiety associated with oral communication (McCroskey, 1977). Yet one difficult presentation at the podium may be a situational response rather than evidence of a broader pattern, and it can often be supported through intentional instructional design.

What Educators Often Misunderstand About Stage Readiness

In many schools, public speaking is treated as an occasional event rather than a skill cultivated through daily scaffolding. When teachers attempt to help students prepare for public presentations, three common instructional misconceptions emerge.

1 Repeating high-stakes exposure automatically builds resilience

Simply repeating a high-pressure performance is not necessarily the same as providing a carefully supported learning progression. For some students, repeating an overwhelming experience without adjusting the level of support may make future participation feel more difficult. A more supportive approach is to pair preparation with gradually increasing familiarity with the setting.

2 Confidence must precede performance

Simply repeating a high-pressure performance is not necessarily the same as providing a carefully supported learning progression. For some students, repeating an overwhelming experience without adjusting the level of support may make future participation feel more difficult. A more supportive approach is to pair preparation with gradually increasing familiarity with the setting.

3 Public correction during rehearsal sharpens execution

During auditorium rehearsals, it is common for directors or teachers to call out corrections across the seats: "Speak louder," "Stop looking at your cards," or "Stand still." While intended to polish delivery, public correction during high-stress moments increases the feeling of scrutiny. The student may begin to experience even the preparation space as another setting for immediate evaluation, increasing tension long before the final presentation.



The S-C-A-L-E Framework

Scaffolding Speaking Efficacy in Schools

Drawing on the educational principle commonly associated with scaffolding, particularly the work of Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), the S-C-A-L-E Framework proposed here structures speaking experiences so that social exposure and cognitive complexity are introduced gradually.

This five-tier progression provides a practical roadmap that educators can integrate across subject areas:

Safe Proximity (Physical Grounding)

Before expecting a student to stand at the front of a room, speaking opportunities should occur within familiar physical boundaries. Students speak from their seated positions, working in pairs or small triads. The focus at this tier is on idea generation without the added cognitive load of formal posture, standing in an exposed position, or projecting across a large room.

Controlled Audience (Incremental Group Expansion)

Once comfortable in paired dialogue, the speaker presents to small, supportive groups. A student shares a brief summary with four or five peers rather than the whole class. This controlled setting allows the speaker to experience being listened to while keeping social evaluation pressure manageable.

Anchored Support (Cognitive Offloading)

When transitioning to standing before the full classroom, teachers should provide physical or visual supports. Allowing a student to hold a simple cue card, stand behind a small lectern, or present alongside a co-speaker can reduce the feeling of being exposed in front of the room. These supports can reduce working-memory demands, allowing the student to concentrate on articulation and structure.

Low-Stakes Exposure (Micro-Presentations)

When speaking opportunities are reserved exclusively for end-of-term speeches or annual school assemblies, students have fewer chances to practice these skills in everyday settings. Micro-presentations—thirty-second updates, daily reflection sharing, or explaining a problem-solving step to classmates—normalize standing and speaking as routine classroom activities. When public speaking becomes a frequent, ungraded routine, the novelty associated with the front of the room gradually wears off.

Extended Stage (Environmental Familiarization)

Transitioning to the school auditorium or gymnasium stage should be the final step of a deliberate sequence, not the starting point. Students benefit from exploring the stage space when it is completely empty. Walking around the space, holding the microphone, and hearing how their voice carries in an empty hall can make the stage feel less unfamiliar before a live event.

What to Do When a Student Freezes on Stage

Despite thoughtful preparation, there will be moments when a student freezes during a live presentation. How an educator responds in that critical minute can influence whether the situation becomes an embarrassing hurdle or a more manageable learning experience.

When a student goes silent on stage, educators can use a calm, three-step response protocol below.

STEP 1 Reduce Public Scrutiny Immediately

A prolonged period of silence while an audience is watching may increase the student's sense of pressure. A teacher or moderator should calmly step toward the stage area, positioning themselves alongside rather than directly in front of the student. This quiet movement naturally redistributes audience attention and signals immediate adult support.

STEP 2 Offer a Low-Cognitive-Load Prompt

Avoid telling the student to "remember the speech," because this adds another memory demand at a moment when retrieval may already be difficult. Instead, offer a simple prompt that requires minimal cognitive processing. For instance: "Ananya, what is the title of your project?" or "Shall we read the first sentence together?" Alternatively, transition smoothly into a co-presentation format where the teacher reads the opening phrase, allowing the student to rejoin as they regain their composure.

STEP 3 Provide a Dignified Choice

If the student remains unable to continue independently, offer a quiet, dignified alternative that preserves their self-esteem. A simple phrase to the audience - "We are going to let Ananya's group share their main points together today" - reframes the moment from individual failure to collaborative teamwork.

After the Presentation Dignity-Preserving Debriefs and Process Feedback

What happens after the presentation is just as important as the in-the-moment response. In a private follow-up conversation, educators should avoid both dramatic sympathy ("That was so terrible for you") and dismissive reassurance ("It was nothing, don't worry about it").

Instead, provide grounded, objective validation: "You felt very nervous up there today, which can happen when the lights are bright and the hall is full. You stepped up to the microphone, and now we know which small step to practice next."

Post-event feedback should focus on actionable strategies rather than general praise. Instead of broad comments like "You looked so confident!", point out specific choices the student made: "I noticed how you took a deliberate pause when you lost your place. That showed great focus and control."

Building a Progressive School Culture and Aligning with Families

Developing articulate, self-assured young speakers requires consistency across the school environment and alignment with home routines. Schools benefit from embedding oral communication into the weekly curriculum rather than treating it as an annual talent showcase.

Parents also play an essential role. When children express nervousness about a school presentation, parents sometimes inadvertently increase pressure by emphasizing the importance of the event or offering overwhelming advice. Educators can guide families toward low-pressure home habits: encouraging regular conversations around the dinner table, practicing short presentations casually, and treating minor verbal stumbles as normal parts of learning.

Stage readiness develops through frequent, low-stakes speaking opportunities, rehearsals that preserve student dignity, and gradual exposure to larger audiences. A child who freezes has not necessarily lacked courage or potential; the demands of the setting may simply have exceeded the support available at that moment. When schools and families treat public speaking as a capability developed through structured practice, the stage can become a place where students learn that their voices are worth hearing.

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FROM “I CAN'T SPEAK ENGLISH” TO “I CAN DO IT”

Ana Yudha 

"I can't speak English. I'm not confident."

These are the words I hear from my students far too often. Recently, I asked one student to speak in front of the class. Before she started, she looked at me and said, "Look, my hands are trembling." Yet I knew that her English was actually better than that of many of her classmates. At that moment, I realized that the challenge was not simply about speaking English. It was also about having the confidence to speak. Many students have the ability, but fear and self-doubt prevent them from using it.

Year after year, the same pattern appeared in the classroom. It raised an important question: How could students be supported in overcoming their fear of speaking English? This question led to the introduction of public speaking into regular lessons.

The idea grew from my experience as a public speaking trainer for young learners. When the district organized an English speech competition, students with a good foundation in English were selected and trained in pronunciation, body language, facial expressions, hand gestures, and stage presence. After weeks of practice before an audience, clear changes emerged. Their English became more fluent and, more importantly, they grew more confident in expressing themselves.

These experiences suggested that public speaking could benefit all students, not only those selected for competitions. Speaking therefore became more than answering questions or reading dialogues. Students were encouraged to address their classmates as speakers, although on a much smaller scale than in a formal event. Professional performance was never expected at the beginning. The aim was to help learners become comfortable before an audience while strengthening their English proficiency and confidence in using it.

▶ **STARTING WITH SMALL, SAFE STEPS**

The starting point was a series of simple activities: self-introductions, short talks about families and hobbies, and personal stories shared with the class. Even these apparently straightforward tasks were difficult for many learners. Some could hardly say a single word when they stood before their classmates.

The approach therefore shifted to private practice before whole-class speaking. Students rehearsed individually, repeating sentences after a model until they felt more comfortable. This provided a safe space without the immediate pressure of an audience. With time, they became more willing to speak before the class.

This level of individual support was difficult to provide in a class of around 30 students. Large classrooms require far more time and planning than private lessons, and regular class hours did not always allow for personalized guidance. Some additional practice and feedback took place outside lessons. Where this is not sustainable, pair rehearsal, rotating small-group practice, and peer feedback can provide support without depending entirely on individual teacher conferences.

The next step was a short speech of seven to ten sentences on an assigned topic. After their drafts had been revised, students practiced and delivered the speeches before the class. At this early stage, memorizing a short script gave some learners the security they needed. As they became more comfortable, key words or brief notes gradually replaced complete scripts, allowing their speaking to become more natural.

The results were encouraging. Many students who had once been afraid to speak became more willing to stand before their classmates and express their ideas. Some still displayed common beginner habits, such as looking down, avoiding eye contact, or speaking too softly. These were not failures, but part of the learning process.

Helping students become confident speakers requires patience and persistence. As teachers, we cannot expect instant results. Confidence develops through continuous practice, constructive feedback, and a supportive classroom environment where students feel safe to make mistakes and learn from them.

BUILDING TOWARD LONGER SPEAKING

The following stage was to introduce short storytelling activities. The stories were slightly longer than the previous speeches, allowing students to speak for a longer period while organizing their ideas more coherently. This stage required more practice before they were ready to perform. On average, it took two to three class meetings before most students could deliver their stories with reasonable fluency. Although the process was time-consuming, the improvement was visible and became a strong foundation for the next speaking activities.

One activity that proved both effective and enjoyable was Show and Tell. Students brought an object that was meaningful to them and explained it to the class. Creative choices were encouraged, and many were excited to bring their favorite belongings. Because they were discussing something they genuinely cared about, they felt more motivated to speak. Their presentations became more natural, and the classroom atmosphere was more relaxed and interactive.

Another activity is mini presentations. They were introduced in two stages. Students first worked in groups, sharing responsibility with their teammates and reducing the pressure of performing alone. Those who later felt ready could progress to individual presentations, while others continued working in groups. Both formats offered meaningful ways to communicate, and learners did not need to follow the same path at the same pace.

RECORDED GROUP PRESENTATION

A project called the Compiled Oral Presentation proved particularly engaging. In this project, students worked in groups of five to eight members. Each group was given a topic, and every student was responsible for presenting one part. The first student introduced the topic, the following students developed the main points, and the last student delivered the conclusion. In this way, every member had an important role in creating a complete presentation.

Before recording, students practiced their pronunciation and rehearsed their parts several times. Instead of presenting live, each student recorded their section individually. They then collaborated to edit and combine the video clips into one seamless presentation using video-editing applications such as CapCut. The entire production process, from planning and rehearsing to recording and editing, was completed by the students themselves.

One unexpected observation was that some students felt more confident before a camera than a live audience. Recording appeared to reduce their anxiety and gave them the freedom to try more than once until they were satisfied with the result. Even the shyest students could express themselves more comfortably. Recorded speaking was not simply a substitute for live presentation. For some learners, it was the format that enabled fuller participation and allowed them to show what they could do.

This project supported more than English-speaking skills. Students also learned to collaborate, solve problems as a team, and use digital tools to create a meaningful learning product. The final videos became a source of pride, demonstrating their language development, creativity, and digital literacy. When using this activity, teachers should also follow school guidance on recording, permission, privacy, and safe sharing, and provide another option for students who cannot or do not wish to appear on camera.



A LEARNING CYCLE FOR EVERY ACTIVITY

From self-introductions, short speeches, storytelling, and Show and Tell to mini presentations and compiled oral presentations, all the activities follow the same learning cycle.

The process begins with preparation: introducing the topic, providing language support, and modeling the expected performance. Students then move to practice, working individually or collaboratively to prepare and rehearse. Next comes performance, either before the class or through recorded video. Constructive feedback follows, addressing grammar and pronunciation as well as eye contact, voice projection, body language, and overall delivery. Finally, students reflect on what they did well, the challenges they faced, and how they can improve in their next presentation.



Throughout this process, the teacher plays a crucial role. Beyond teaching language, teachers become facilitators and coaches who encourage students, provide supportive and constructive feedback, create a safe learning environment, give clear instructions, and motivate even the shyest learners to keep trying. Building confidence is a gradual journey, and students need to know that making mistakes is a natural part of learning.

WHAT CHANGED IN MY CLASSROOM

After several years of implementing these activities, the clearest improvement has been students' willingness to speak. Learners who were once reluctant to stand before the class became more ready to express their ideas. As they spoke more frequently, many also became more fluent because they learned to communicate continuously rather than rely only on isolated words or memorized sentences. Preparing speeches exposed them to new vocabulary and encouraged them to use it in meaningful contexts. With repeated practice and regular feedback, their pronunciation also became clearer.

Public-speaking activities can also support skills beyond language learning. Students learn to organize their ideas logically, think carefully about what they want to say, collaborate with their peers, and communicate with greater purpose. Classroom participation becomes more active because students are no longer only recipients of information. They become speakers who are willing to share their thoughts. These are valuable life skills for authentic communication beyond the classroom.

HELPING EVERY STUDENT FIND THEIR VOICE

Speaking is an important skill for junior high school students, yet many learners struggle to express themselves in English because of anxiety, limited language, or both. Public speaking can provide an effective bridge between knowing English and using it. Regular opportunities to speak in supportive and meaningful contexts can develop both speaking proficiency and the confidence to use English in real-life situations.

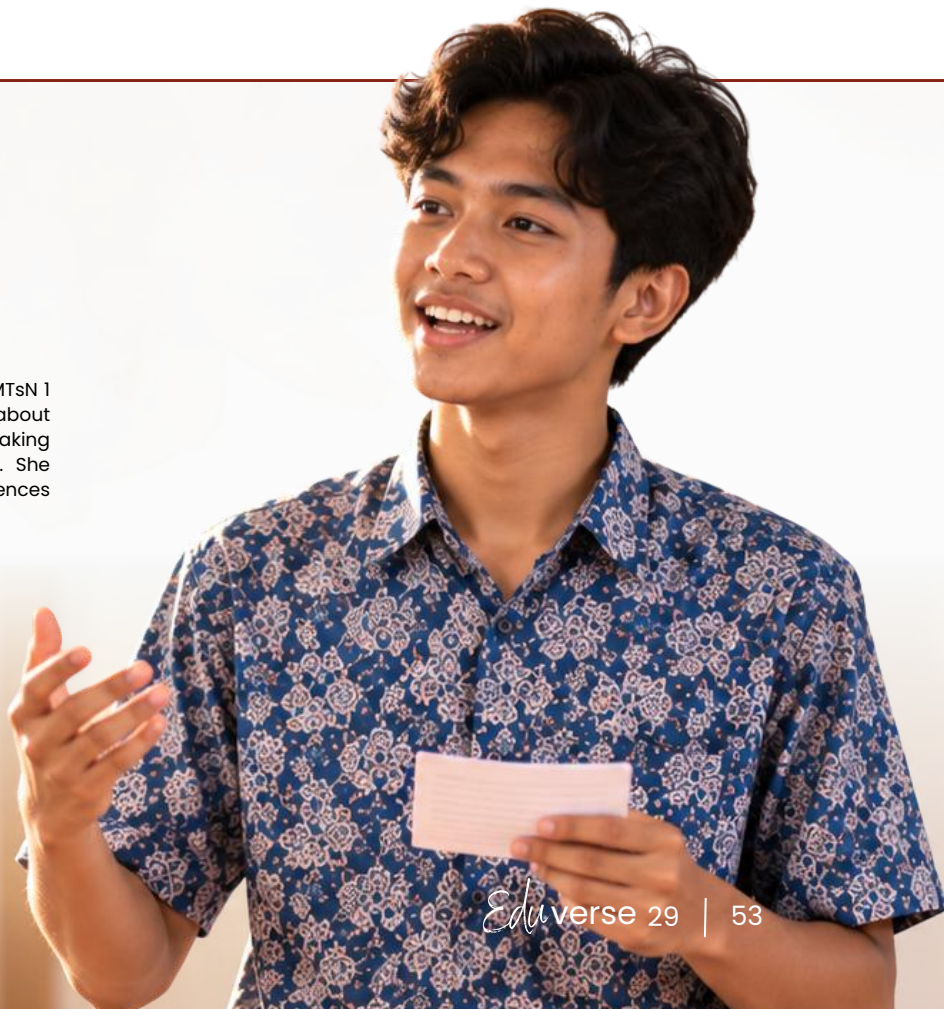
Speaking activities should therefore become a regular part of English learning whenever the context allows. Schools can support this effort through authentic opportunities such as speech contests, storytelling competitions, presentation days, English Week, or activities held during National Language Month. The more opportunities students have to express themselves in meaningful contexts, the more confident and competent they can become.

However, the ultimate goal is not to produce professional public speakers. It is to help every student discover their voice, believe in their abilities, and have the courage to communicate in English.

The greatest achievement is not seeing my students deliver perfect speeches. It is hearing fewer students say, "I can't speak English," and seeing more of them stand up and proudly say, "I can do it." That simple mindset shift is the true success of language learning, and the kind of success every English teacher hopes to inspire.



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MAKING AUTHENTIC ENGLISH COMMUNICATION ACCESSIBLE

VIA VIRTUAL INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGES

Emelle Amel Antit 

Growing up in Tunisia, learning English was very different from the experience available to many learners today. Authentic exposure was rare, limited largely to a one-hour daily broadcast on RTCI radio or attempts to decipher song lyrics for pronunciation clues. English was mostly presented as an academic subject, with an emphasis on grammar rules and vocabulary lists and few opportunities for meaningful interaction.

Today's learners encounter English through streaming platforms, social media, online gaming, and global communities. Yet exposure alone does not guarantee an ability to communicate. Many university students who perform well in grammar exercises and examinations still experience anxiety, hesitation, and fear of making mistakes during real conversations

I have observed this disconnect in English sessions at Tunisian universities. Some students attend because attendance is mandatory but remain disengaged, scrolling through their phones or participating only when required. They recognize that English is important for their future employment, yet their motivation to use it actively remains limited. One student expressed this postponement plainly: "After I get my diploma, I'll learn it." The comment reflects how English may be treated as a credential to earn later rather than a living skill to practice now.

Some educators organize international study trips that provide valuable cultural and linguistic exposure. However, travel costs place such experiences beyond the reach of many students. This raises an important question for educators: How can we create meaningful intercultural communication opportunities for learners who cannot travel abroad?

Structured virtual exchanges offer one possible response. They can help learners move from consuming English passively to using it actively with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

the power and privilege of immersion

My own perspective on authentic communication shifted during a 2001 educational exchange in Derby, UK. In an English-speaking environment, the language came alive beyond textbooks. Daily interactions helped me notice cultural nuances, become more attentive to pronunciation and intonation, and feel increasingly comfortable using English to communicate.

While physical immersion yields dramatic improvements in fluency and confidence, it remains a privilege accessible only to a minority of students due to financial, geographic, and institutional constraints, as mentioned previously. Recreating every aspect of studying abroad may be impossible, but technology, paired with communicative teaching methodologies, can provide more students with opportunities to communicate across cultures.

a brief theoretical lens

Three ideas help explain the value of virtual exchange. Krashen (1982) emphasizes comprehensible input and the influence of anxiety on learners' willingness to engage. Long (1996) highlights negotiation of meaning, which occurs when learners clarify, rephrase, and adjust their language during interaction. Task-Based Language Teaching connects these ideas to practice by giving learners a meaningful purpose for communicating (Nunan, 2004).

Virtual exchange can bring these conditions together: understandable language, a genuine reason to communicate, and opportunities to respond when meaning is unclear.

putting the ideas into practice

I explored these possibilities through Beyond Borders initiative, an international virtual exchange project created and led by Levent Değirmencioğlu from Bursa Technical University in Türkiye. The project brought together educators and students from several countries, including Spain and Bulgaria, to engage in structured cross-cultural dialogue.

Eleven Tunisian university students, aged 22 to 26, joined the exchange. Most were studying Information Technology or Software Engineering, while others specialized in Business Communication. Their professional fields increasingly require communication with internationally distributed teams, participation in virtual meetings, discussion of technical requirements, and collaboration with people from different cultural backgrounds. For these students, English is not merely an elective academic requirement; it is an essential professional survival skill.

During the exchange, discussions extended beyond introductions and small talk. Students explored the UN Sustainable Development Goals, unpacked pressing global issues, and reflected on the resources available to them as future professionals. The exchange framed them not merely as language learners, but "Global Engineers," encouraging them to see English not simply as a university subject but as a means of contributing to international professional conversations.

what participants reported

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

Post-project reflections offered insight into how students perceived the experience. Their reflections offer valuable insight into how students experienced lower affective barriers and adapted their communication during the exchange. However, they should be read as personal accounts rather than measured evidence of language improvement.

FROM ANXIETY TO COMFORT

At the start of the initiative, anxiety was a dominant emotion. R. noted feeling "*curious and slightly anxious... unsure of what to expect.*" However, within the first ten minutes, this feeling began to change as the virtual environment became more familiar.

Students explicitly highlighted that the virtual exchange provided a safer emotional space compared to formal oral presentations in class. R. reflected:

In terms of emotional comfort, this online exchange was more relaxed than a typical speaking activity in class. I felt more comfortable speaking with the exchange partners because the environment was less strict, more open, and there was less pressure to speak perfectly.

Her reflection is consistent with Krashen's view that lower anxiety can create more favorable conditions for language engagement. However, the virtual format did not remove anxiety for everyone. B. felt uncomfortable when instructors entered his breakout room while he was silent, while M. described some initial awkwardness when participants were learning how to take conversational turns.

These reflections remind educators that teacher presence in breakout rooms must be unobtrusive to preserve student autonomy.

● RESPONDING WITHOUT A SCRIPT

When asked which specific English skill benefited most, students consistently identified spontaneous cognitive processing and response speed rather than isolated grammar rules. B. shared a compelling example of spontaneous communication:

"I had to improvise when answering a few questions about traditional holidays and clothes which I didn't prepare for, so my thinking speed benefited the most."

R. similarly reported that her *"ability to think and respond quickly"* saw the greatest improvement, while M. perceived improvement in her pronunciation through authentic practice. When learners negotiate unscripted topics under real-time constraints, they start to transition from passive language knowledge to dynamic cognitive processing.

● INTERCULTURAL EMPATHY AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

Beyond linguistic progress, the exchange produced profound shifts in cultural perception. Initial worries about cultural differences quickly gave way to a sense of shared humanity. R. wrote:

I learned that communication is not just about language but also about listening, understanding, and being open-minded... I learned cultures aren't as different as I thought they were from each other.

M. captured this sentiment concisely: *"We are way more similar than we think."* These reflections illustrate that virtual exchanges serve a dual purpose: building linguistic confidence while simultaneously cultivating intercultural competence essential for global careers.

Other participants described becoming more aware of how cultural perspectives shape communication. T. emphasized adapting to different viewpoints in international environments, while L. valued the opportunity to understand how people from different backgrounds think and interact.

For K., the experience was particularly significant because it helped her become more confident and collaborative. She reflected on how participating in the exchange encouraged her to communicate with others and work together despite the challenges.

R.'s reflection was especially interesting. She explained that the experience challenged her previous perception of cross-cultural communication. Engaging with people from different backgrounds helped her learn to navigate different linguistic and cultural nuances, ask clarifying questions, and respond thoughtfully to misunderstandings.

She also recognized the importance of adaptability, active listening, and intentional communication in multicultural environments.

The experience was not equally successful in every respect. M. appreciated learning about different traditions and customs and said that the experience encouraged her to reflect on her own culture in a more open way, but she felt that some discussions of global issues did not reach the level she had expected. Her feedback is an important reminder that bringing students together internationally is not enough: the quality of the questions, the preparation, the time available, and the structure of the interaction all influence what students ultimately gain from the experience.

These reflections confirmed something I had observed as a teacher. The students were not simply improving their English. They were practising skills they will need far beyond the English classroom.

(*) Initials are used to protect students' identities.



practical implementation challenges

Designing effective virtual exchanges requires addressing realistic operational hurdles.

● TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

While platforms like Microsoft Teams and Zoom facilitated collaboration, technical issues (audio lagging, video freezing) created occasional awkward silences. Students adapted by exercising patience and attempting alternative ways to clarify meaning.

● GROUPING AND CONTINUITY

Students requested longer session durations, interactive games, and greater partner stability. B. noted that *"putting some friends with each other would make it better because when everyone is a stranger, communication has a hard start."* Balancing familiar peers with international partners helps cushion the initial social anxiety.

● MANAGING OUTSIDE LIVE SESSIONS

Maintaining engagement in messaging groups or post-session activities was more difficult. Some students responded consistently, while others participated less frequently. Clear participation expectations and time for feedback during the live session can reduce dependence on asynchronous follow-up.

extending communication beyond the exchange

The challenges outlined above also reinforce an important principle: virtual exchange should not remain an isolated experience. Its value can be sustained when students continue using English after the scheduled sessions have ended. Institutions can support this continuity through Culture Clubs and other co-curricular initiatives that provide ongoing opportunities to explore cultural topics, exchange perspectives, and communicate with international peers or invited guest speakers.

For students who disengage from mandatory English sessions, such spaces can reconnect language learning with their personal interests, professional aspirations, and curiosity about the world. Culture Clubs are not intended to replace formal language instruction. Rather, they extend it by giving students authentic reasons to apply what they are learning while sustaining the confidence and willingness to communicate developed through the virtual exchange.

Recommendations for Educators

Reflecting on the transformation from a language learner in Tunisia to an educator, I see a clear imperative: our responsibility is to construct accessible, interactive pathways that empower students to become active target-language users – especially those for whom the default classroom experience has become something to endure rather than embrace.

While virtual exchanges cannot fully duplicate physical study abroad programs, they provide a more equitable, scalable, and impactful platform for developing communicative competence. The experience of this small group should be understood as a practitioner account supported by students' reflections, not as proof of measurable language improvement. Even so, their comments offer useful guidance for educators considering similar initiatives:

Prioritize psychological safety:

Emphasize successful communication rather than immediate grammatical accuracy, particularly during students' first interactions.

Optimize group dynamics:

Combine familiar peers with international partners and maintain group continuity across sessions to reduce initial awkwardness.

Embed scaffolding and topic preparation:

Provide pre-task materials so students can anticipate vocabulary and improvise comfortably during live discussions.

Build in-session accountability:

Dedicate the final minutes of live meetings for verbal reflection, short response, or quick poll. This supports accountability without relying entirely on participation after the meeting.

Ultimately, the goal of language education extends beyond grammar mastery. It is about fostering agency, confidence, and international perspective – equipping learners to connect, collaborate, and communicate confidently across global boundaries.

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INTERDISCIPLINARY VIRTUAL EXCHANGE DESIGNING BILINGUAL MULTIMEDIA STORIES

Prof. Marina Falasca 

across Argentina
and Costa Rica



Prof. Marina Falasca is an award-winning teacher educator, researcher, and consultant specializing in educational technology, sustainability, teacher development, virtual exchange, and AI in education. She lectures on TEFL Methodology and Educational Technology at INSPT UTN and I.E.S en Lenguas Vivas "J. R. Fernández" in Argentina. As STAR Country Director for Argentina and GlobalEd's VE Program Coordinator, she leads international initiatives that promote inclusive, ethical, and human-centred approaches to education.



Preparing TEACHERS FOR CONNECTED, DIGITAL CLASSROOMS

What happens when future teachers from two countries, different disciplines, and different educational traditions come together to create something for children? The answer can be more than an international online meeting. When the collaboration is carefully designed, Virtual Exchange (VE) can become a space where future educators learn with and from one another while developing practical skills for today's classrooms.

This was the idea behind "Classrooms in Dialogue: Multimedia Stories Across Borders," an interdisciplinary project connecting the *Instituto Nacional Superior del Profesorado Técnico* at *Universidad Tecnológica Nacional* (INSPT UTN) in Argentina and the *Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica*. Over six weeks in April and May 2026, pre-service teachers from early childhood education, foreign languages, children's literature, music education, and educational technology worked in mixed international teams. Their shared task was to create bilingual Spanish-English multimedia stories for early childhood and primary school learners.

The project brought together several dimensions of contemporary teacher education: international collaboration, language learning, digital technologies, storytelling, multimodal communication, and community engagement. Rather than treating technology as an end in itself, the exchange asked participants to make purposeful pedagogical decisions: Who are our learners? What do we want them to learn? How can we represent our cultures respectfully? How can words, images, sounds, and music work together to make a story meaningful?

WHY VIRTUAL EXCHANGE MATTERS

in teacher education

Virtual Exchange offers opportunities for international learning without requiring students to travel. This is particularly important for learners who may face financial, geographical, personal, or other barriers to study abroad. Through structured online collaboration, students can encounter different perspectives and educational practices while remaining in their own institutions (O'Dowd, 2018).

For future teachers, this experience can be especially valuable. Teaching is never simply about applying a set of techniques. Educators constantly make decisions about language, culture, learners, materials, interaction, and context. Working with peers from another country can make some of those decisions visible and open them to discussion.

The project also drew on a multiliteracies perspective, which recognizes that communication today involves much more than printed words. Learners make and interpret meaning through combinations of text, image, sound, movement, and digital interfaces (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kress, 2010). Creating a multimedia story therefore gave participants an opportunity to think beyond "writing a story" and consider how different modes could support young learners' understanding and engagement.

Most importantly, the interdisciplinary structure meant that no single participant or discipline could provide all the answers. Language specialists could contribute to bilingual communication; students with experience in children's literature could support narrative development; music students could consider sound and musical elements; early childhood specialists could keep learners' needs in focus; and educational technology students could help turn ideas into digital products. The result was a collaborative design process in which disciplinary knowledge became a resource for the whole team.

FROM INTRODUCTIONS TO STORYTELLING

a six-week journey

The exchange followed a six-phase sequence. Each phase had a clear purpose and built toward the final product.

Week 1 – Intercultural introductions and team formation

Participants began with icebreaker activities on Padlet and shared information about their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These first exchanges helped establish relationships and gave team members an initial sense of the perspectives they were bringing to the project.

Week 2 – Cultural and narrative exploration

Teams examined traditional folktales and narrative styles from Argentina and Costa Rica. This stage was important because it moved the exchange beyond simply "getting to know another culture." Participants had to look closely at how stories represent places, people, values, and traditions.

Week 3 – Storyboarding and collaborative planning

Teams identified their target audience, developed storyboards, and discussed how their narratives could serve clear educational purposes. This was also the point at which interdisciplinary expertise became particularly visible. Decisions about language, narrative structure, music, images, and technology had to be connected to the needs of young learners.

Week 4 – Digital production

Teams began producing bilingual drafts and integrating visual, audio, and musical elements. They worked synchronously and asynchronously using tools such as Zoom, Padlet, Google Drive, and Genially.

Week 5 – Peer feedback and revision

Rather than treating the first digital draft as the final product, participants reviewed one another's work and refined their stories. They reconsidered language choices, mediation strategies, multimodal balance, and pedagogical alignment.

Week 6 – International showcase and reflection

Teams presented their completed stories internationally and engaged in self-assessment and post-project reflection. The final stage encouraged participants to look back not only at what they had produced but also at how they had collaborated and what they had learned.

This sequence illustrates an important principle for educators: successful virtual collaboration benefits from structure. Simply putting students from different countries into a video call does not automatically create meaningful international learning.

2 3

THREE AREAS OF professional development

The project was designed to support three important areas of professional learning.

1 MULTIMODAL COMPETENCE

The multimedia story task encouraged participants to consider how different semiotic resources could work together to support young learners' comprehension. Text was not the only channel through which meaning could be communicated. Images, narration, music, and interactive elements became part of the pedagogical design.

This matters for teacher education because children increasingly encounter information through multimodal environments. Future teachers need opportunities to ask not only "What should I teach?" but also "How can different modes help my learners access, interpret, and respond to this content?"



2 INTERCULTURAL MEDIATION

Working across Argentina and Costa Rica required participants to negotiate meanings and examine cultural representations. Cultural differences were not treated simply as interesting facts to collect. They became part of the design process.

For example, when teams selected cultural elements for their stories, they had to consider how those elements might be understood by children in another context. This required attention to accessibility, representation, and inclusion. In this sense, intercultural learning became practical: it was embedded in decisions about what to include, how to explain it, and how to present it.



3 INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

The combination of language pedagogy, children's literature, music, early childhood education, and educational technology brought complementary forms of expertise into the design process. The task illustrated how complex educational work can draw on more than one discipline.

This is an important lesson for teacher education. Schools increasingly ask teachers to collaborate, integrate technologies, address diverse learners, and connect different areas of knowledge. Interdisciplinary projects can provide a safe space for future educators to practice these forms of collaboration before entering the profession.



KEEPING LEARNERS AT THE HEART OF DIGITAL DESIGN

One of the central principles of the project was pedagogical coherence. The goal was not to produce the most sophisticated digital story possible. Instead, participants were encouraged to consider whether each technological and multimodal choice served a meaningful educational purpose.

The multimedia stories were assessed through an 18-point holistic rubric covering six dimensions: pedagogical design, multimodal integration, bilingual communication, intercultural collaboration, creativity and impact, and metacognitive reflection. This assessment approach helped keep the focus on the relationship between design choices and learning goals.

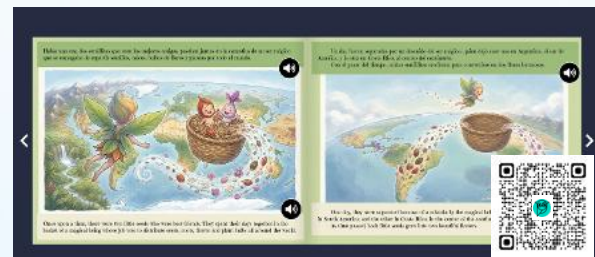
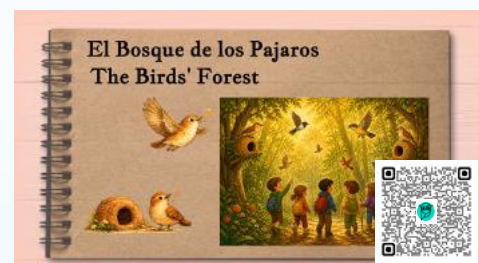
For teachers considering a similar project, this is a useful reminder: technology should follow pedagogy. A visually attractive digital resource is not necessarily an effective learning resource. The most important questions should remain rooted in pedagogy: Is the material appropriate for the learners' age and needs? Is the learning objective clear? Do sound, images, and interactive features genuinely enhance learning? Is the language accessible? And are cultural perspectives represented accurately, respectfully, and inclusively?

Connecting INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL CLASSROOMS

The project also aimed to connect teacher education with local educational communities. The completed digital stories were shared through publicly accessible links and with early childhood and primary classrooms in Argentina.

The stories addressed themes with clear relevance for young learners. *Amigos sin Fronteras / Friends Without Borders* focused on empathy and diversity for children aged 5–6. *Los Guardianes de los Humedales / Guardians of the Wetlands* addressed environmental awareness and the protection of native species for children aged 7. *El Bosque de los Pájaros / The Birds' Forest* explored problem-solving and self-care for children aged 6–7. *Entre el Ceibo y la Guaria Morada / Between the Cockspur Coral Tree and the Purple Orchid* celebrated national symbols, friendship, and cultural heritage for children aged 4–8.

These examples show how international collaboration can remain locally relevant by producing resources designed for children and connected to themes such as diversity, environmental awareness, wellbeing, and cultural heritage.



Practical IDEAS FOR EDUCATORS

A full international project may not be feasible for every teacher or institution, but several principles from this experience can be adapted to smaller collaborations.

- **Start with a meaningful shared product.** A story, podcast, digital exhibition, lesson sequence, or classroom resource gives students a reason to communicate and collaborate.
- **Build intercultural learning into the task.** Ask students to compare perspectives, explain assumptions, and make decisions about cultural representation rather than simply exchange information about their countries.
- **Use disciplinary diversity as an asset.** If students have different areas of expertise, design tasks that make those differences useful.
- **Structure the collaboration.** Break a large project into manageable phases with clear deadlines, roles, and opportunities for feedback.
- **Keep learners at the center.** Technology, international collaboration, and creativity should all serve the needs of the intended learners.
- **Include reflection.** Ask participants what they learned, what challenged their assumptions, and how their decisions changed during the process. Reflection helps transform activity into professional learning.

“Classrooms in Dialogue” illustrates how Virtual Exchange can support teacher learning when international collaboration is connected to a shared product, interdisciplinary teamwork, and reflection.

The most valuable outcome may not be the digital stories themselves, but the professional habits developed while creating them: listening to different perspectives, negotiating meaning, making purposeful design choices, revising ideas, and thinking carefully about the learners at the center of the process.

Virtual Exchange does not replace face-to-face international experiences or local teacher education. It can extend both by creating additional spaces for dialogue and shared professional learning across borders, disciplines, and ways of seeing education.

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THREADS OF IMPACT

REFLECTIONS ON THE EMAS 2026 REGIONAL CONFERENCE

Sezen Savaş Oğuz 

There are some professional experiences that stay with you because of what you learn during them. Others stay with you because they make you reconsider what you already thought you knew. My participation in the 2026 EMAS Regional Conference Week in Malta was both.

In May 2026, as part of The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award program, I participated in NextGen Award Leaders: EMAS 2026 – Threads of Impact. Bringing together Award Leaders and representatives from across the EMAS region, the conference provided a valuable opportunity for professional exchange, collaborative reflection and international learning.

For me, however, the experience had an additional dimension. I have been involved in the Award for several years, working directly with young people and observing their development throughout the process. I did not arrive in Malta simply to learn about the Award. I arrived with my own experiences, observations and questions, and the conference gave me an opportunity to consider them within a much broader international context.

LEARNING

FROM DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

One of the most valuable aspects of the conference was the opportunity to explore how the Award is implemented in different countries and organizations.

Award Leaders from across the region shared practical experiences of program delivery, including the approaches they use, the challenges they face and the support they receive from their National Award Offices. Through workshops, discussions and collaborative activities, we considered questions around the recruitment, retention and recognition of Award Leaders and explored possible ways of strengthening engagement across the region.

What made these discussions particularly meaningful was their openness. We did not focus only on successful practices. We also talked about what had not worked, where difficulties had emerged and which aspects of program delivery still required attention.

This was an important reminder that educational practices cannot be separated from their contexts. A model that works well in one country may need considerable adaptation elsewhere because of differences in educational structures, institutional priorities, available resources and cultural expectations.

Although the contexts differed, the similarities were striking. We were dealing with many of the same fundamental questions: How do we motivate adults to remain involved as Award Leaders? How do we maintain quality and consistency? How do we help Award Leaders feel that their contribution is valued? How do we ensure that young people experience the Award as something they own rather than something they simply complete?

For me, this was one of the strongest outcomes of the international exchange. International collaboration is not necessarily about finding a universal solution. Rather, it allows us to examine our own practices critically, learn from alternative approaches and identify ideas that can be meaningfully adapted to our own contexts.

THE AWARD

THROUGH A TEACHER'S EYES

My understanding of the Award has developed primarily through working with students over the years. One of the most noticeable changes I have observed is the gradual development of self-confidence, self-efficacy and learner autonomy. When young people choose an activity, set their own goals and commit to a challenge, they begin to recognize their own capacity to learn, persist and improve.

The process is not always easy. Students sometimes struggle or lose motivation, but overcoming these moments can be particularly valuable. Seeing them realize that they are capable of doing something they once found difficult is one of the most rewarding aspects of being an Award Leader.

I have also seen how this experience can become part of students' wider personal and academic profiles. Some of my students have included their Award experience in portfolios and university applications abroad, particularly as evidence of sustained commitment and personal development.

Yet for me, its value goes beyond any certificate or application. What matters most is the journey itself: students explore new interests, challenge themselves, discover their strengths and, importantly, enjoy what they are doing. I believe that enjoyment, autonomy and meaningful challenge are powerful conditions for sustained engagement and personal growth.

HUMAN SKILLS

IN AN INCREASINGLY DIGITAL WORLD

This understanding of personal development connected strongly with one of the central themes of the conference: Human Skills.

As an English teacher, I have always considered communication, collaboration and interpersonal competence to be integral to learning. However, the rapid development of artificial intelligence has made the question of what remains distinctly human in education even more significant.

Our students are entering a world in which information is increasingly accessible. AI tools can generate texts, translate languages, provide explanations and assist with complex tasks almost instantaneously.

This does not reduce the importance of education, but it does shift some of its priorities.

Accessing information is no longer enough. Young people also need to evaluate information, communicate effectively, collaborate with others, respond to uncertainty and make responsible

decisions. They need resilience when things do not go according to plan, empathy when encountering perspectives different from their own, and the confidence to act independently.

These competencies develop through experience rather than through receiving information alone.

The Human Skills discussed at the conference connect strongly with what I have observed through the Award. Young people are given opportunities to plan, make decisions, work with others, respond to setbacks and reflect on their own progress.

A student who completes an activity may develop a particular skill alongside perseverance, confidence, self-awareness and the ability to manage their own learning.

These outcomes can be difficult to capture through conventional assessment, yet they are highly relevant to young people's long-term development.



EXPERIENCING

WHAT WE ASK YOUNG PEOPLE TO EXPERIENCE

One of the most memorable parts of the conference was Award in Action, which invited delegates to experience elements of the Award first-hand.

Instead of observing the program as Award Leaders, we temporarily stepped into the role of participants and engaged in practical activities reflecting the four sections of the Award. It was more than an enjoyable afternoon; it allowed us to experience the program from the learner's perspective.

As teachers and Award Leaders, we are accustomed to designing activities, setting expectations and supporting others. Stepping away from that position allowed us to ask a different question: What does an activity actually feel like for the person experiencing it?

The activities in Award in Action were carefully designed and clearly required considerable preparation, but they also had an important quality: they were fun.

People became involved very quickly. We worked together, tried unfamiliar things, made decisions and experienced the activities rather than simply discussing them.

That experience reinforced the educational value of experiential and non-formal learning. When learners are actively involved in an experience, learning can become more personal and memorable. They are not simply receiving information about resilience, collaboration or problem-solving; they are placed in situations where they have opportunities to practice these competencies.

It also reminded me of the value of appropriate challenge. Young people do not always need adults to remove difficulties from their path. They need meaningful challenges, a supportive environment and enough autonomy to discover what they can do. I have repeatedly seen this in students participating in the Award: a journey that initially seems demanding can become a source of genuine satisfaction precisely because it asks them to move beyond what they previously believed possible.

FROM PARTICIPANTS TO FUTURE COLLABORATION

Another aspect of EMAS 2026 that I particularly appreciated was the active role given to participants throughout the program. We were not simply expected to listen to presentations; we were encouraged to contribute ideas, challenge assumptions and share our practical perspectives.

This may seem like a small detail, but it reflected an important idea: contribution does not belong only to people in formal or strategic roles. Everyone can strengthen a shared experience. Ultimately, it represented a shift from learning from others to learning with others, turning an international network into a genuine community of practice.

The international nature of the conference naturally opened doors to future cooperation, particularly through Erasmus+. We explored how these opportunities could support Award Leaders, strengthen institutional partnerships and facilitate the exchange of good practice across borders.

What I found especially valuable was the emphasis on continuity. Conferences can easily become isolated experiences: intense, inspiring and quickly forgotten. The NextGen Award Leaders project offered the possibility of sustained knowledge exchange, reflection and shared work beyond the conference itself.



The author at the conference NextGen Award Leaders: EMAS 2026 – Threads of Impact.

BRINGING THE EXPERIENCE HOME

Perhaps the most important question after any professional development experience is not simply, 'What did I learn?' It is, 'What will I do differently because of what I learned?'

EMAS 2026 did not fundamentally change my understanding of the Award. In many ways, it confirmed what I had already observed through my work with young people. What it changed was the scale at which I saw those observations.

I have seen individual students become more independent, confident and willing to take responsibility. I have seen young people discover abilities they did not know they had, and I have seen how powerful it can be when a young person recognizes their own progress. In Malta, I saw that these experiences are part of a much wider international conversation.

Education is often evaluated through outcomes that are relatively easy to measure, yet some of the most significant forms of development are gradual and personal: a student becoming more willing to take initiative, a young person learning to persevere, or a teenager discovering that their contribution matters. These changes may not always appear in a test result, but they can influence how a young person approaches future challenges.

The conference reminded me that educational practice is strengthened when we remain open to perspectives beyond our own classrooms and borders. Professional growth does not happen only through formal training; it also emerges through dialogue, comparison and the willingness to question our established ways of thinking.

Bringing the experience home therefore means more than sharing conference notes. In practice, it means giving young people meaningful choices, setting challenges that require sustained effort and making time for them to reflect on what they have learned about themselves. It also means choosing at least one idea from professional learning to adapt and test in our own context.



*I brought that thread back from Malta,
and it continues.*

THE THREAD CONTINUES

The title Threads of Impact has stayed with me because it captures something essential about international professional learning: the impact of an experience does not remain where it began.

An idea discussed in Malta can become a practice in a school in Türkiye. A strategy shared by an Award Leader can be adapted in another country. A professional connection can develop into an Erasmus+ partnership. And an experience shared between educators can ultimately influence the opportunities offered to a young person.

I went to Malta as an Award Leader from Türkiye, but I returned not simply with new information. I returned with a broader professional perspective and a renewed appreciation of the educational value of experience, autonomy and human connection.

In an increasingly digital world, our students will undoubtedly need technological competence. They will need to work with AI, evaluate information and adapt to rapid change. They will also need to work with people, deal with uncertainty, recover from setbacks, take responsibility and remain curious. These human skills need meaningful contexts in which they can be practiced.

For me, one of the most valuable lessons I brought back from Malta is that educators must create opportunities for young people to develop the confidence, autonomy, resilience and human skills to participate in and shape the world they will inherit.



Sezen Savaş Oğuz is an English Teacher, Head of Department, and Award Leader in Türkiye with 20 years of experience. Holding an MA in Language Education, she engages in international projects and strives to foster learner autonomy, resilience, and personal growth through experiential learning.



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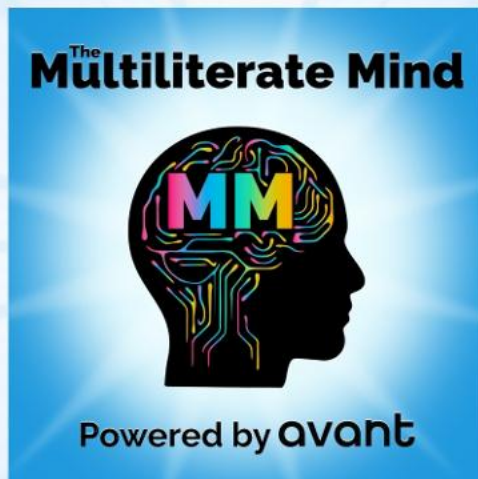
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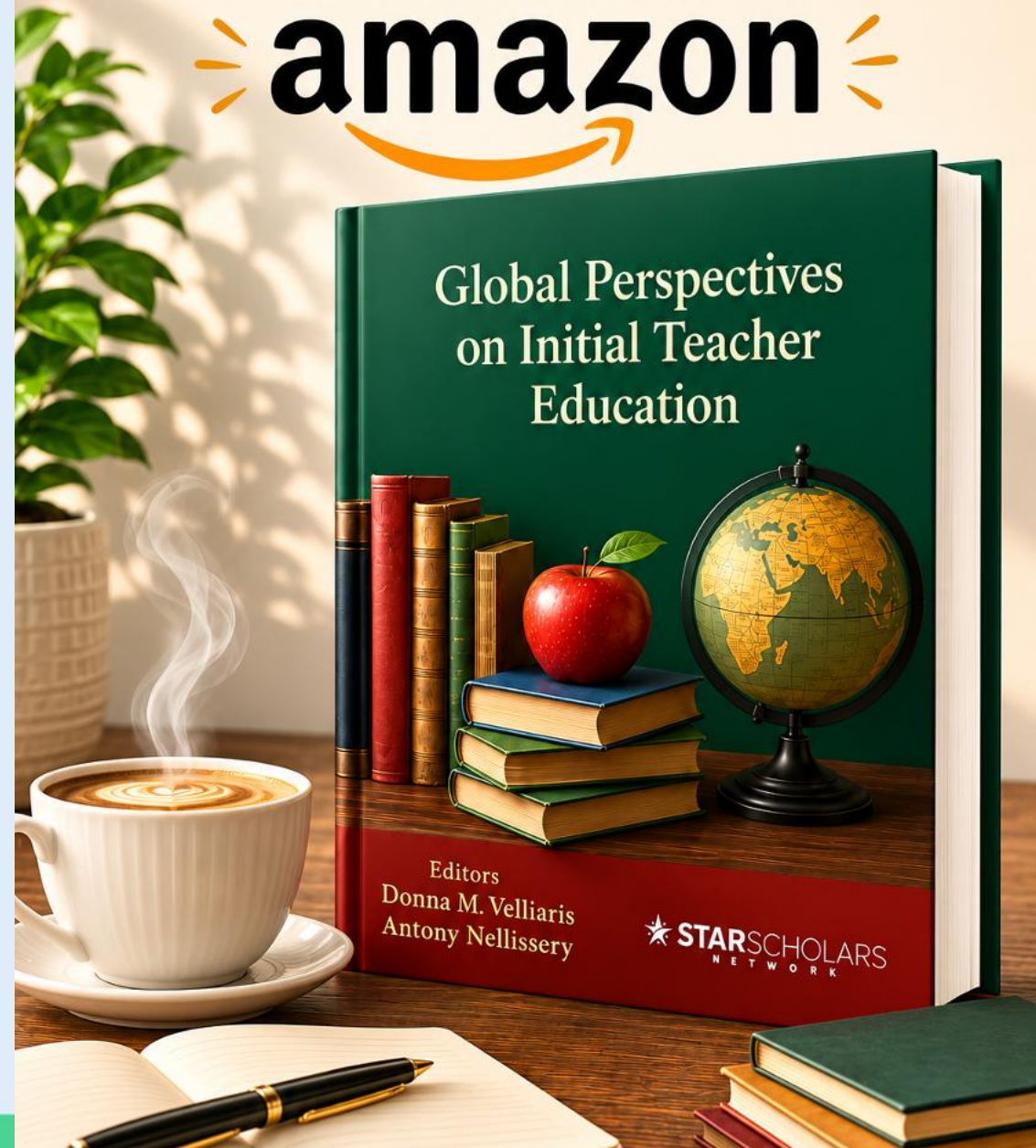
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Editors
Donna M. Velliaris
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EDreframe is a learning-design consultancy for educational institutions.

We turn curriculum goals into practical projects around real social, environmental and economic challenges.

THE APPROACH

CURRICULUM

STUDENTS + REAL CHALLENGES + RELEVANT PEOPLE AND ORGANISATIONS

LEARNING THAT CONTRIBUTES BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Students investigate a real challenge, engage with the people involved and develop, test or present responses as part of their learning.

WHAT THIS GIVES YOUR INSTITUTION

- ✓ More tangible learning.
- ✓ Better evidence of students' thinking and capabilities.
- ✓ Stronger connections between education and the world beyond it.

→ What could an **EDreframe** pilot look like in your institution?



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1

Design
curriculum-
linked
projects



2

Connect
learning with
relevant people
and
organisations



3

Prepare
educators to
facilitate and
assess
learning



4

Evaluate
and refine
the
programme



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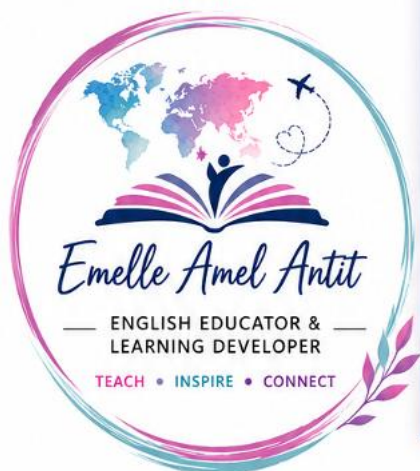
- Task-based learning
- 21st-century skills
- AI Fluency practice
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**AUTHOR'S
PROFILE PHOTO**

**BRAND'S LOGO
(PNG)**



Emelle Amel Antit

**ENGLISH EDUCATOR &
LEARNING DEVELOPER**

TEACH • INSPIRE • CONNECT

I believe in the power of language to open minds, create opportunities, and build bridges between people and cultures. My goal is to help learners become confident, curious and globally ready.



WHAT I DO



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Motivation • Communication



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Lead Intercultural Projects
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Student Motivation & Engagement



AI in Language Education



Intercultural Communication



Fluency & Job Readiness

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📍 Nabeul, Tunisia



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(A5 SIZE PORTRAIT)

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Judy-Ann Green

Judy-Ann Green is an award-winning educator and leader whose impact spans across three continents. Recognized globally for her exceptional contributions to education, she has been honored with prestigious accolades such as Teacher of the Year, Outstanding Educator, and the Race to the Top Award for Outstanding Educator. As a distinguished speaker, writer, literacy coach, school visitor, author, curriculum designer, and professional development expert, Judy-Ann Green has proven herself to be a formidable force in education. Her innovative approach and unwavering dedication makes her a prominent figure and a driving force in shaping the future of learning.

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WHAT IS LCC?

An integrated approach combining:

- Advanced language teaching techniques
- Language acquisition strategies
- Oral communication skills development
- Coaching principles for autonomy and reflection



WHO IS LCC FOR?

- Language teachers and trainers
- Schools and institutions
- Any language learner seeking stronger communicative competence

"LCC helped me see what was missing in my classroom."

– Irina N., LCC Course Participant

Author of
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Big change
over time.



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A HEART-BASED FRAMEWORK
to support student growth,
connection and
meaningful learning.

SIMPLE. HUMAN. POWERFUL.

A DAILY CYCLE FOR AWARENESS, ALIGNMENT, ACTION AND APPRECIATION



1

AWARENESS

SEE WHAT IS HAPPENING



Pause and notice what's happening
inside you.

TRY THIS

- 🔍 How do I feel right now?
- 🧠 What is taking up space
in my mind?
- 💚 What does my body need?

WHY IT MATTERS

Awareness helps students
become calmer, more present
and more ready to learn.



2

ALIGNMENT

RETURN TO YOURSELF



Reconnect with your values, needs,
boundaries and inner direction.

TRY THIS

- 🌿 What helps me feel calm
and focused?
- 💚 What do I need right now?
- 🌟 What feels important
to me today?

WHY IT MATTERS

Alignment supports emotional safety,
confidence and authentic learning.



3

ACTION

TAKE THE NEXT STEP



Take one small honest step forward.
Movement creates growth.

TRY THIS

- 🏔️ What is one small step I can
take today?
- 🚶 What would help me move
forward?
- 👥 Who can support me?

WHY IT MATTERS

Small actions build confidence,
resilience and growth over time.



4

APPRECIATION

INTEGRATE AND SEE GROWTH



Reflect, recognize growth,
and find meaning in the journey.

TRY THIS

- 📖 What did I learn today?
- ⭐ What am I proud of?
- 🌱 What helped me grow?
- 💚 What can I appreciate in myself
or others?

WHY IT MATTERS

Appreciation strengthens motivation,
self-belief and emotional resilience.



HOW TO USE THE 4A METHOD IN YOUR CLASSROOM



Start small.
5-10 minutes
is enough.



Use the 4A order:
Awareness → Alignment
→ Action → Appreciation



Be consistent,
not perfect.



Create a safe,
judgment-free
space.



Let students lead their
own reflections in
their own way.



Celebrate effort,
honesty and
progress.



TEACHER REMINDER

You don't need to have all the answers.
Sometimes, the most powerful thing a student can
experience is feeling seen, heard, safe and understood.
That is where meaningful growth begins.

83 We learn. We connect.
We grow.

LEARN MORE ABOUT MYCORA™

For more information, collaboration,
workshops or resources:

✉ hello@michellehsquick.com



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SparkED Int

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Executive Overview

What We Do

We are a collaborative consultancy supporting IB and inquiry-driven schools in strengthening curriculum coherence, conceptual understanding, and classroom practice.

Who We Serve.

We serve Directors, Education Leaders, Teams, and Teachers who are ready to:

- ✓ Strengthen conceptual clarity across units
- ✓ Ensure greater coherence across written, taught, and assessed curriculum
- ✓ Increase teacher confidence in facilitating inquiry
- ✓ Foster student agency through intentional use of thinking routines

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Our Services



Conceptual Design

Design concept-based curriculum, transdisciplinary coherence, and program alignment.



Inquiry in Practice

Create learning environments that make thinking visible and build inquiry mindsets.



Curriculum Review

Audits and refinement to ensure rigorous, conceptually driven, and aligned written curriculum.



Oracy Development

Embed visible thinking routines and develop oral inquiry routines across all primary levels.



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WITH

AI



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English language teacher, TEFL/TESOL educator, and EdTech practitioner passionate about leveraging technology and Open Educational Resources to create dynamic, student-centered learning experiences for a global audience.



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FOR TEACHERS

- English teachers
- Test-prep instructors (TOEFL, IELTS, PTE)
- Business English trainers
- Educators who want to integrate AI



WHAT YOU WILL DO

- Design materials creatively with AI
- Adapt tasks for real learners
- Create interactive activities



COURSE STRUCTURE

5 PRACTICAL MODULES

- 📅 Each module + live session
- 📋 Hands-on tasks



WHAT YOU WILL GAIN

- More creative lesson design
- More engaging classrooms
- Confident and innovative teaching



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BEYOND THE AUTOMATION ABYSS

LEARNING AGENCY VS. AI AGENTS IN OUR EDUCATIONAL FUTURES



A NEW DIGITAL DIVIDE

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Research-Backed Insights

- Studies and data on student AI dependency
- Expert interviews with technology leaders
- Cognitive science research on learning transformation

Practical Frameworks

- Four futures scenario planning
- Agency preservation strategies
- Assessment validity in AI age

Beyond Theory

- Real classroom case studies
- Decision-making tools for leaders
- Student voice and perspective
- Global education examples

Eric Hawkinson Learning Futurist

Eric is a learning futurist, tinkering with and designing technologies that may better inform the future of teaching and learning. Eric's projects have included augmented tourism rallies, AR community art exhibitions, mixed reality escape rooms, and other experiments in immersive technology.

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- Optional Online Course
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Blanka Pawlak

ESP & BUSINESS ENGLISH TEACHER AND TRAINER
MATERIAL WRITER | COMMUNICATION COACH
FOUNDER OF FOR ENGLISH SAKE

She also works as a public speaking coach and event host, and is passionate about research-based approaches to teaching and learning.

She is a Co-Founder of **Voices of Change** – a global educator community supporting growth, recognition, and quality in education

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Pro.Ed Education Solutions is honored to be awarded the **Excellence in Educational Consultancy** at the the Asian Education Award 2023, held by Asia Education Conclave in Bangkok, Thailand.



Pro.Ed Education Solutions embodies the spirit of an Edupreneur by relentlessly pursuing excellence in education, fostering innovation, and working tirelessly to make high-quality education accessible to all. Their dedication extends beyond their professional services, as they actively promote education equity and a culture of learning in society through their CSR activities, offering frequent free-of-charge opportunities for all individuals to access the latest and most practical educational expertise.



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