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Reimagining Education in the Age of AI: Digital Literacy, Decolonization, and the Work Ahead

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Abstract

This paper explores how Artificial Intelligence challenges educators to reimagine teaching, learning, and academic integrity through the lens of digital literacy and decolonization. Drawing on frameworks of critical digital pedagogy (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994) and contemporary scholarship on data ethics and algorithmic systems (Selwyn, 2019; Williamson & Piattoeva, 2022; Knox, 2023), it argues that AI integration can empower inclusive, reflective, and equitable learning environments. Through examples from AIEIC Grant and Fulbright Specialist initiatives, the study demonstrates how international collaboration can transform apprehension toward AI into critical curiosity. Ultimately, it positions AI not as a replacement for human imagination but as a catalyst for empathy, creativity, and global collaboration in education.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence in education, Digital Literacy, Decolonizing Pedagogy, Critical Digital Pedagogy, Global Collaboration

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Introduction

When we discuss Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education, the debate often reduces to questions of efficiency or integrity: *Is AI making things faster? Is it cheating?* These are the wrong questions. The word that resonates most deeply with the author is *reimagine*. AI is not simply a shortcut—it is an opportunity to rethink how teaching, learning, and engagement with knowledge itself occur (Casal-Otero et al., 2023).

In the context of digital literacy and decolonizing education, reimagining means asking not what AI can do for us, but what it can do *with* us. It requires expanding our sense of who gets to speak, who gets to be heard, and how students practice the skills that prepare them for a complex, AI-driven world (Tian & Wang, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in the principles of critical digital pedagogy (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Selwyn, 2019; Williamson & Piattoeva, 2022; Knox, 2023), which emphasize agency, reflection, and empowerment in learning environments mediated by technology. Paulo Freire's concept of *critical consciousness* advocates for an education that empowers learners to critically examine systems of power and actively participate in knowledge creation, rather than passively receiving it. Bell hooks' theory of *engaged pedagogy* extends this concept by centering care, vulnerability, and community as essential to transformative education.

In the context of AI integration, these frameworks, supported by contemporary analyses of datafication and digital ethics (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2022; Knox, 2023; Collin et al., 2023), provide a lens for viewing technology not merely as a tool of efficiency but as a medium for equity and inclusion.

My current work—funded by the AIEIC Grant and informed by my Fulbright Specialist experience at Universitas Halu Oleo in Indonesia—aligns with these critical frameworks. Through these initiatives, I collaborate with international faculty to design a curriculum that humanizes AI integration. These dialogues often reveal a shared ambivalence: educators around the world confess, sometimes sheepishly, that they are already using AI in their classrooms but feel uncertain or guilty about it. In these moments, I often feel like a therapist, listening to their anxieties while helping them reframe AI as a pedagogical ally rather than a threat. This relational, empathetic approach is itself a form of digital pedagogy—one that values reflection, ethics, and growth (Selwyn, 2019; Tian & Wang, 2025).

Literature Review

Traditional writing and research instruction often limit students to sources rooted in dominant Western academic traditions. However, AI tools make it possible to surface and compare perspectives from across the globe—including Indigenous, marginalized, and underrepresented voices that rarely appear in traditional syllabi (Casal-Otero et al., 2023; Collins, 2020). This broadens the scope of critical inquiry and supports decolonizing education through access to multiple epistemologies.

Assignments may ask students: *Whose voices are amplified here? Whose are missing?* Students could use AI-powered search or translation tools to access non-English texts and integrate these perspectives into class discussions (Collins, 2020). In doing so, they expand their research base and learn to evaluate credibility, bias, and context in machine-generated outputs. This approach not only strengthens digital literacy but also challenges hierarchies of knowledge (Collins, 2020; Collin et al., 2023).

Teaching the 4Cs with Artificial Intelligence

AI supports the development of the four core competencies of 21st-century learning: collaboration, creativity, communication, and critical thinking (Tian & Wang, 2025; Casal-Otero et al., 2023). Collaborative tools enable global teamwork across languages; generative models stimulate creativity by offering unexpected prompts; multimodal AI enhances communication across various platforms; and critical thinking is strengthened as students evaluate algorithmic bias and consider ethical implications (Selwyn, 2019; Knox, 2023).

When embedded thoughtfully, AI amplifies these competencies, preparing students to navigate futures where human and machine intelligence are intertwined (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2022; Collin et al., 2023).

Discussion

Reimagining education with AI requires dismantling cultural resistance within academia. The prevailing narrative that *"using AI is cheating"* has hindered innovation and fueled anxiety (Casal-Otero et al., 2023). Through my AIEIC Grant and Fulbright collaborations, I have observed how institutional fear of AI often masks deeper insecurities about authority and expertise (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2022). Faculty members express concern that automation may devalue their labor or compromise academic integrity. However, when guided toward critical reflection, these conversations transform fear into curiosity (Knox, 2023).

International collaboration plays a crucial role here, as diverse perspectives challenge Western-centric assumptions about teaching and learning in the era of AI (Tian & Wang, 2025).

As educators, we must also reflect deeply on the values we bring into our classrooms. The four core values that guide my teaching practice—creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication—are essential in this new educational landscape (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Creativity invites students to take risks, explore possibilities, and see AI as a partner in ideation rather than as a replacement for imagination. Collaboration ensures that learning remains a shared, human process, where AI can support connections across disciplines and cultures (Selwyn, 2019).

Critical thinking underpins our use of AI in ethical inquiry, enabling students to analyze bias, context, and credibility (Collin et al., 2023). Communication, meanwhile, allows students to articulate their insights effectively across multiple modalities and audiences (Casal-Otero et al., 2023).

In cultivating these values, I emphasize the importance of valuing process over product. The method of learning—how students explore, revise, and adapt—reveals far more about intellectual growth than the final output alone (Freire, 1970). Rewarding creativity and reflection, rather than perfection, encourages students to engage authentically and embrace uncertainty as a natural part of the learning process.

This approach shifts the educational focus from performance to progress, aligning with a pedagogy of care and inquiry that humanizes technology and honors the creative labor of both teachers and students (hooks, 1994; Williamson & Piattoeva, 2022). Reframing AI as a tool of inclusion rather than exclusion aligns with global efforts to promote digital equity (Casal-Otero et al., 2023). AI, when ethically employed, can democratize knowledge, facilitate multilingual engagement, and foster empathy through cross-cultural collaboration (Tian & Wang, 2025; Collin et al., 2023).

The task ahead is to continue nurturing educators' confidence and compassion—reminding them that responsible AI use begins not with code, but with care (Knox, 2023

Conclusion

To reimagine education in the age of AI means striking a balance between possibility and responsibility. The potential lies in expanding access to diverse forms of knowledge; the responsibility lies in ensuring that these technologies foster equity, sustainability, and human connection. As AI becomes embedded in educational practice, educators must lead with empathy, curiosity, and critical awareness—values that transcend technology itself (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Selwyn, 2019). My work with international faculty continues to affirm that innovation in AI integration is not about machines replacing humans, but about deepening our collective understanding of what it means to teach, learn, and imagine together (Tian & Wang, 2025).

About the Author

Sherri Harvey is a lecturer at San José State University and West Valley College, specializing in sustainability, digital literacy, and decolonizing pedagogy. A Fulbright Specialist and Artificial Intelligence Education Initiative Challenge Grant (AIEIC) recipient, her work focuses on reimagining global education through digital and cultural collaboration. 0009-0005-3777-5445

AI statement

The author declares no use of AI in writing the paper.

Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, findings, or recommendations presented in this paper. All conclusions drawn are independent and unbiased.

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