

# AI can complement education, not replace it

In an age of disruption, educators must re-emerge as facilitators of critical thinking and meaningful learning

MUKTA KULKARNI AND  
RISHIKESHA T KRISHNAN

A few months ago, two different groups of MBA students came to one of us with the same curiosity. They wanted to study how AI is changing higher education. Big question. Bigger assumptions. In one of the very first conversations, one group said something that seemed unsettling. Degrees may not matter anymore, they said. Professors may become irrelevant.

By the end of the term, after much back-and-forth, a few arguments, surveys, interviews, and readings, they concluded that degrees are not disappearing anytime soon. And professors? Not irrelevant. But their role must change.

Around the same time, the other one among us got invited to podcasts and public forums. And the questions were always some version of the same thing. Are degrees losing value? Is AI replacing professors? Over time, these conversations made us pause and ask: What is a higher education degree really supposed to do for the student? And what, then, is the role of a professor?

When people say degrees are becoming less useful, they are usually working with a very specific idea of education. In their minds, education is about knowledge and skills. What you know. What you can do. Fair enough. But that is also incomplete. Because education has never been and never will be just that. It is also about character. Values. Civic awareness. Responsibility. Empathy. Self-discipline. In a world increasingly mediated by technology, these things don't become less important. They become more important.

Education is also about learning how to live with other people. Not just next to them, but with them. Working together. Disagreeing without breaking things. Respecting differences. Holding a group together even when it would be easier to walk away. This is social integration. And it matters. For jobs, yes. But also for life.

A degree alone does not make some-

one ready. Not for work. Not for life. It is the ecosystem around it that does the heavy lifting. Student clubs. Competitions. Festivals. Group projects. The late-night arguments. The wins. The disappointments. This is where skills are tested, formed, and reshaped. This is where people learn how to deal with other people – through collaboration, through conflict, through camaraderie. Because at the end of the day, we're wired to be social, and education strengthens that.

And somewhere in the middle of all this stands the professor. A good professor is not just someone who walks into a room, runs through slides, and leaves. That version is already obsolete,



AI or not. A good professor is closer to a catalyst. They make things happen without being the centre of anything. They connect ideas to real life. They ask questions that are slightly uncomfortable – the kind that stay with you longer than the answers. They don't hand out neat conclusions; they leave you with better questions, and the ability to keep asking them. And in an age of AI, their role matters even more: not to outsource thinking, but to keep that muscle in use, to make sure students don't lose the habit of thinking for themselves.

They also shape the room in ways hard to replace – whether it feels safe to speak up, to disagree, to be wrong, and to try again. They influence whether one voice dominates or many voices find space. These things don't show up on a syllabus, but they define learning. And at its core, learning isn't just about absorbing information – it's about curiosity, about sparking creativity and ingenuity.

Often, their impact spills outside the classroom. A nudge towards a competition. A recommendation letter that opens a door. A conversation that changes how a student sees herself. So what do we do now, as professors, in a world where AI can explain concepts faster and sometimes more clearly than we can? We can design the room so that thinking actually happens.

## Thinking, clear and visible

AI can deliver content. Good. Let it. Use it. Our role shifts to creating experiences. Asking harder questions instead of giving cleaner answers. Bringing in messy, real-world problems that don't have obvious solutions. Creating moments where students have to take a stand, not just submit something on time. Making space for disagreement. For collaboration. For failure that teaches something.

It also means paying attention to the human side of learning. Who is speaking? Who is silent? Who is trying? Who is coasting? And why. These are things AI cannot see. Not yet.

The problem in classrooms is no longer a lack of information. It is sameness. When many students can produce similar, polished answers using AI, the task itself must change. We need more open-ended questions. Assignments tied to local realities. Personal interpretations. The goal is not to avoid AI. It is to push students beyond what AI can generate.

We also need to teach students how to use AI well. Ask them to compare AI-generated responses. To question them. To find inconsistencies. To decide what to trust and why. Because a skill now is not finding answers. It is judging them. And perhaps most importantly, we need to rethink what we evaluate. If the final output can be generated or heavily assisted by AI, the output alone is not enough. We need to look at the process. How did you get here? What did you reject? What did you miss? What would you do differently? Make thinking visible again.

But then, wasn't that always the point? To make students think. So AI is not a disruption of our purpose. It is a reminder of our purpose as educators. A powerful tool. It is changing our classrooms. But it will not erase them.

*(Mukta is Dean – Programmes, IIM Bangalore; Rishiksha is former director, IIM Bangalore, and Professor of Strategy)*