

School for Humans

Now that we have AI, what are the arts for?

Cultivating minds that can question, interpret and imagine will always matter. That's how students find their voice.

Usha Chandras

It is 9am on a rainy Tuesday on campus and I am trying to buy a coffee. Term has officially ended so I am the only one in line.

After a while, the sole barista on duty notices me, points to the QR code on the wall, and says: "Scan to order."

We could have had a conversation. But no other word passes between us because the hyper-efficient QR code has already done the talking. It almost feels like a small piece of performance art, two people in the same space but interacting on entirely different planes of existence.

The morning with the barista brought to mind what I have been seeing in my own classrooms, where the technology at play is generative artificial intelligence, or Gen AI.

When technology steps in to do uncomfortable or effortful work for us, many of us are only too ready to let it. In the cafe, it replaces simple human exchange. In the classroom, it can serve to replace the far more difficult work of thinking and critical

judgment.

I allow my university-level students to use Gen AI within certain limits, on the basis that these tools will be available to them in the working world.

Responsible educators, in my view, have to teach their students what these technologies mean and how they can be used.

I thought I found a way around Gen AI overuse by introducing debating in class. The rapid-fire exchange and quick repartee would spur the students to think on the spot and speak directly without referring to AI-generated notes or resources, I thought.

This worked well for a few semesters. But in recent classes, students show no qualms about sitting down mid-debate, typing the questions into their Gen AI tools, and reading the answers out directly from the laptops and other devices. What I had assumed would be anti-social behaviour seems well accepted by



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most of the class.

It made me wonder what we can do better to raise a generation confident in their own abilities, and not so over-reliant on Gen AI that they risk rendering themselves irrelevant.

A stronger footing in the arts or some exposure to them could be the answer. It may sound like a trite proposition, but arts education trains the imagination and widens one's sense of what is possible.

LESSONS FROM THE DEBATES

During the debates, I noticed that my foreign students, despite their difficulties with English, were more willing to use their notes and attempt to engage in impromptu speaking. Only a

We can harness these benefits in the age of Gen AI by ensuring that arts education is treated as a core component of holistic education, and that access to such education is both broad-based and egalitarian. In a world where it is simpler than ever to vanish behind screens, and to type never-ending questions into ChatGPT, the arts remind us how to stay present, how to look up and how to meet the person in front of us.

handful of local students were adventurous enough to give it a go. So why the discrepancy? One reason perhaps is the Singaporean obsession with grades and examination results. Despite many tweaks to the education system, stress and panic over grade metrics continue to hang over many students.

When education is seen as

nothing more than a route to a job, it becomes logical to produce the most technically accurate answer with the least amount of fuss. Gen AI uses seem like a no-brainer, especially if there are student loans to service, or anxiety about finding jobs in a turbulent world.

Another reason is possibly discomfort and lack of confidence in using the English language. If the robots can spit out sentences

that seem polished and technically sound, it is easy to wrongly conclude that the content must be accurate.

For students worried about jobs, the world of Gen AI actually looks full of interesting possibilities and new roles that have yet to even be created.

But technical ability on its own is never enough, and the best programmers often think a little like artists. Researchers have found, for example, that when engineers work alongside design students, the work they produce is more inventive.

The irony is, you cannot hope to be a thoughtful developer of code if you lose the very creative instincts and critical thinking that excessive Gen AI can slowly wear down.

The arts, through their various forms, help nurture those instincts, building important human traits in the process.

FINDING ONE'S VOICE THROUGH LITERATURE AND DRAMA

For instance, a better grasp of the English language can be achieved through close reading, practical criticism and the deeper study of literature.

Mr William Phuan, executive director of the Singapore Book Council, advises: "Anyone who wants to use Gen AI in an effective way to stay ahead of the curve will need to know how to process and critically review the data they are examining. An education in literature provides these basic skills to students, which future-proof them for any disruption."

Confidence and teamwork can also be found in the performing arts. Many, including myself, have called for drama to be woven more fully into the primary and secondary school curriculum.

A campaign that advocated

drama education having a greater presence in Singapore's primary school curriculum drew positive responses that were "powerful and remarkably consistent". This was

shared by Ms Aishwaryah Shanmuganathan, president of the Singapore Drama Educators Association, the organisation behind the initiative.

She said: "Many shared that

drama helped them become more confident speakers. Several

described entering drama as shy

or withdrawn children - some

even victims of bullying - but

taking roles, performing in

school musicals, or joining drama clubs gave them a safe space to

step out of their shell."

Ms Kamini Ramachandran, a

teaching artist - a practising artist

who teaches her art form - and

storyteller, shared that a student

once told her how storytelling let

her try to be a braver version of

herself, and that "teachers

regularly report similar shifts

through character analysis,

rehearsal discipline and reflective

storytelling."

Taken together, these accounts

point to something that Gen AI

cannot supply on its own: a sense

of self that is earned through

struggle, practice, rehearsal and

risk-taking.

Literature and drama do not

offer easy shortcuts, and that is

precisely the point. They give

students the language, confidence

and imaginative range to think for

themselves, through the messy

and at-times embarrassing process

of trial and error.

LESSONS FROM DANCE AND MUSIC

Dance reveals the same. To put it simply, there is no discreet way to hide in a dance class: Your body becomes the tool expressing your point of view, and it has to show up, even on days when you feel awkward and unsure.

Learning to move with others,

and accordingly, to misstep, adjust,

and pick up the pieces. In that

respect, today is zero-sum.

As world leaders converge in

Davos, most of the chatter is

about coping with Mr Trump,

who is bringing half his Cabinet.

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