Should AI be introduced as part of school curricula?

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Recently, the Ministry of Education announced that an Artificial Intelligence (AI) curriculum would be introduced from Class 3 onwards for the next academic year (2026-27). Earlier, in July, the government had launched the 'Skilling for AI Readiness' initiative, under which thousands of CBSE schools will offer AI as a skill subject starting from Class 6. Should AI be introduced as part of school curricula? Aparajita Bharti and Viplav Baxi discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Sruthi Darbhamulla**. Edited excerpts:

What do you think about the proposal to introduce AI as a foundational subject from a young age?

Aparajita Bharti: When we talk about AI education, we have to make a distinction between AI literacy and AI skills. AI literacy is the ability to understand how AI works and to apply critical thinking while evaluating its responses. AI skills refer to developing AI tools, AI products, or being somewhere in the AI value chain. From what we have reviewed (of the curriculum), we see that in Class 6, for example, the focus is on AI literacy. But in Classes 11 and 12, it is on AI skills, such as Python programming and natural language processing. Students can develop these skills and then enter STEM careers. My sense is that if the curriculum is being introduced in Class 3, its focus should be on AI literacy, alongside the emphasis on basic numeracy, literacy, language, and critical thinking skills.

Viplav Baxi: Technology is changing so rapidly that the idea of having a curriculum around it in the traditional sense is difficult to imagine. For example, prompt engineering will probably disappear in a couple of years' time. Another reason why designing a curriculum around it is fraught with problems is that tech can create divides. Imagine millions of children trying to figure out their first AI prompt. Do we have the infrastructure or even the connectivity for that? The models are not available in local languages. Without hands-on training, what is the point of teaching tech? And if the motivation is mitigating job shifts, that itself is a moving target. We can't say that so many millions of jobs will be displaced and therefore you have got to be ready for new jobs. Because by the time they graduate, that picture will have moved.

Students look at their mobile phones. GETTY IMAGES

What impact will this type of curriculum have on work ethic and student learning?

AB: In some studies, students, as soon as they had answered something with AI, were asked to replicate that and explain it in their own language. And they failed to do so. Professor Stuart Russell from the University of Berkeley said how humans deal with AI in education is the litmus test of humanity's ability to be able to regulate and handle AI development for its own good. Education is one of the trickiest use cases, because AI holds a lot of promise for aiding learning. But on the other hand, it is also systematically taking away that incentive to learn. He used the term "dis-education." He is worried that we might lose intergenerational learning. Because until now, whatever AI is doing is actually based on all the learning that humanity has had. But the next generation may not have the right incentives to actually push themselves to keep on learning. What does that mean for humanity?

VB: Historically, whether it was with radio, or TV, or the Internet, we have heard the same concern, which is: are we dumbing down our children? Are we reducing their ability to think creatively or critically? Are we losing agency in front of other tools? Our system should be capable of adapting to every new tech wave. Even our pedagogy has evolved over time; we have moved from behaviourist and cognitivist teaching methods to more constructivist teaching methods. Our systems have to adapt to these new realities. One of the ways we can do that is by treating tech as native to the process of education itself.

Given concerns about the potential psychological impact of AI, what is the right stage to introduce children to AI?

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>
> VIPLAV BAKSHI

AB: Children are not only learning AI at school. They will get exposed to AI, whether schools introduce AI or not. For example, Meta AI is embedded in WhatsApp. What we do need to think about is that as children get exposed to AI, some risks come with it. We did the Youth Pulse Survey with Youth Ki Awaaz, with 500 students who are already using AI. Around 88% of the school students who took that survey are already using AI study companions. But 57% of those students have also started using it to have general conversations. 42% of students also said that some of the things they have been sharing with AI chatbots are things they would have otherwise shared with a person in their life.

We need some guardrails around the design of chatbots when children are interacting with them. AI companies are aware of this risk. There have already been some cases in the U.S. where parents have taken these companies to court. There are already laws placing obligations on platforms and intermediaries. There are restrictions on what you can do with children's data. There is a larger ecosystem beyond education which also has to build safety into this.

VB: Misinformation, malpractice, and crime existed before generative AI and everyone is vulnerable to these. Young students and people with information asymmetries and social and economic disadvantages are more vulnerable than others. Therefore, literacy is important. But it is equally important to understand that we are doing a disservice to students by giving them chatbots when the underlying tech is not proven and when the underlying data is biased and it is not tested. Any number of guardrails can't help you. And here we are allowing even teachers to create bots for students when they themselves are not trained on concepts such as guardrails.

What kind of training do teachers require to implement such a curriculum?

VB: Teachers are not a monolithic entity. We have a smorgasbord of styles and constraints, and one approach will not fit everyone. We need to ensure that there is continuous coaching of teachers. About 9% of schools in India have just one teacher and 35% have less than 50 students and two teachers. Half the teachers don't have proper qualifications. There is a large contingent of para teachers. Many schools don't have electricity. Therefore, how would you design content for somebody who does not have electricity or computers? It will have to be an unplugged curriculum. I am worried about sweeping statements that we will introduce anything at scale within the next few months and assume that it will work.

AB: The digital divide is real. And with AI, it can become even deeper. For example, where teachers themselves do not have critical skills to be able to evaluate something that general purpose AI is producing, how would they teach the students to be able to evaluate critically?

We also have to look at teachers as innovators because they are innovating with tech as they go along. There is a shifting goalpost every 6-8 months. Teaching people the ability to think, to work with other people, to organise different resources and produce value, and to be able to upskill themselves their whole lives is what we need to focus on. The ability to learn and continuously innovate is inherent to humans. That is the skill we need to focus on building in this generation that is in school right now.

As a thought experiment, if you were supposed to introduce a child to AI, how would you go about it?

AB: Till age 12, foundational learning is important. A lot of parental supervision is required till that age. That is a critical period to build critical thinking skills and basic alphanumeric literacy. In middle school, we should think about AI literacy. From Classes 9 to 12, if you want to participate in the AI workforce at some point, maybe those skills can be learned. Of course, this is assuming schools have no limitation of economic resources.

VB: We are battling some pressing challenges in the primary education space. Let us focus on making that space more robust. Whatever needs to be added as part of a subject to help children orient themselves better to AI can be added.

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