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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

From connection to co-creation: Human relationships as the foundation for technology-enhanced learning

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This paper explores how sustained collaboration between an academic and an educational technologist can inform human-centred approaches to educational technology and AI integration. Drawing on a seven-year partnership, the authors use retrospective co-generative dialogue to identify relational conditions that supported innovation, including psychological safety, mutual respect, and shared pedagogical purpose. Two key themes emerged: human connection fosters creativity and preserves pedagogical voice, while explicit expectation-setting ensures technology remains subordinate to learning goals. These themes are translated into design principles guiding the development of an AI-powered course agent. The paper argues that the relational infrastructure built through co-generative dialogue is not incidental to innovation, it is the condition that makes responsible, student-centred technology integration possible and that responsible AI integration depends on investing in human relationships as much as technological capability.

Keywords: co-generative dialogue, human connection, digital efficacy, AI course agent, pedagogical design, psychological safety

Introduction

The expansion of AI and digital learning environments has re-emphasised the question of how technology can be integrated in ways that remain genuinely human centred, both at the point of use and the relational conditions by which technology use and design is shaped. We analyse a seven-year collaboration between academic and technologist to identify ways of working that enable practical, human centred learning design.

Through retrospective narrative we demonstrate how something more demanding emerged: extracting from our shared experience the thematic principles that explain why our collaboration worked and translating these into design principles to guide our initiative for an AI powered course agent. The value of this translation lies not in the technology itself but in the quality of thinking that precedes it. We argue that without the relational groundwork, the trust, the shared vocabulary, the willingness to fail together even the most sophisticated technology tool risks becoming another layer of unreflective deployment.

The story of how educational technology and academic practice can genuinely merge is rarely told from the inside. Our work documents an unlikely partnership between an educational technologist and an academic – how a chance introduction became a sustained collaboration grounded in psychological safety, shared goals, and shows how being “best friends at work” (after Bilginoğlu & Yozgat, 2023; Durrah, 2023;) creates new ways of working. The emergence of co-generative dialogue is both a method and ethic showing a way of working together that replaced transactional support with co-created educational delivery.

We write as a duo in which mentoring has been a living, reciprocal process rather than a formal structure. The educational technologist brought deep operational knowledge, technical fluency, and an emerging capacity for strategic leadership. The academic brought experience, networks, and a habit of asking “why” before “how.” Each needed what the other had; neither could have produced this work alone. Over seven years, that asymmetry has become a productive generative tension: not erased by familiarity but held productively within co-generative dialogue. What began as mentoring has evolved into mutual learning. That shift itself models the kind of relationship we now seek to build between academics, technologists, and every deployment of technology.

The dynamic between us is generational, disciplinary, and positional. These differences could have produced silos or deference. Instead, held within a framework of psychological safety (Clark, 2020) and co-generative

dialogue (Gribble & Campbell, in press), they produced a richer set of questions than either of us would have asked alone. That asymmetry is part of what we seek to theorise, not as a feature of this particular partnership but as a transferable condition for innovation.

Methodology: Retrospective co-generative dialogue as a lens forward

Co-generative dialogue is characterised by mutual respect, shared authority, and a solution-oriented orientation toward future practice (Martin, 2006). Unlike ethnographic accounts that describe what happened, co-generative dialogue asks what can be learned and applied. In our work this method is implicit as it is emergent from practice. Here, we deploy it explicitly: a structured retrospective dialogue reviewing our collaboration across seven years as a site for inquiry into human centred learning design, allowing themes to surface organically through conversation rather than imposing an a priori coding framework.

This retrospective builds on Senge's (2006) notion of the learning organisation, where reflection enables generalisation and contextualisation of experience, and on Langellier's (1989) framing of personal narrative as a form of professional development. Analysis was conducted through iteratively revisiting our dialogue and collaboration, identifying recurring patterns and distilling them into themes. What distinguishes our approach is that we move deliberately from retrospection to projection: the themes we identify are not ends in themselves but are expressed as transferable principles, with relevance for designing our forthcoming AI course agent. In this sense, our method enacts its own argument as the dialogue that produced the paper is the same kind of dialogue we are proposing as a design practice.

Human connection in technology design cultivates creativity and preserves voice

One of the most consistent observations from our retrospective was that the moments of greatest innovation were not moments of technical discovery but moments of relational openness. When we sat together, sometimes literally, sometimes virtually, we always shared not just our problems but stories, curiosity, and even failure. Then the technology we subsequently deployed bore the marks of that conversation. It felt, to both of us and to the students, human.

This is not coincidental. Research in organisational learning suggests that psychological safety, i.e. the shared belief that the environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Wanless, 2016), is the precondition for the kind of exploratory thinking that produces genuinely novel solutions. In our collaboration, this safety was built incrementally: through small disclosures, through laughter, through the experience of having an idea taken seriously even when it failed. Over time, that safety became the foundation from which creative risk could be taken at scale.

Early in our collaboration, we trialled personalised feedback with a cohort of over 1,000 students, a technical risk neither of us had taken before and felt less risky together. While the educational technologist had the tool knowledge, the academic had the pedagogical intent and the classroom relationship. The activity succeeded not because we had rehearsed every contingency, but because we had rehearsed trust. When the platform briefly stalled, we were able to implement a fix together, enabling resolution of the issue in real time. Students were unaware of any problems in the deployment. What they noticed and what evaluation feedback confirmed, was an interaction that felt purposeful and designed for them. The relational collaboration protects the human voice and pedagogical intent.

What strikes us, in retrospect, is how directly this relational quality transmitted into the student experience. When we co-designed a technology-enhanced activity, we were not asking "what can this tool do"? We were asking "what do we want students to think, feel, and be capable of as a result"? The technology was chosen in service of the human questions. As a result, students encountered activities with discernible pedagogical intention and a clear human voice from the educator who had both taught them and thought carefully about their experience.

A surprising consequence of this is that it moved our relationship with technology from one of technical limitation and workarounds, into human flexibility and creativity. Technical limitations were not design limitations but became aspects that informed the design. Conversely, we found when co-designing interactive content, that while the full extent of a technology can give us ideas, there was always flexibility to adjust to a manageable level of technical skill and workload within the design.

The implications for AI integration are significant. When AI tools are adopted reactively such as in response to institutional pressure, student demand, or technology that is simply available, the human voice is easily displaced. The tool becomes the curriculum. By contrast, when human connection precedes and guides technology design, the tool remains subordinate to pedagogical intent. The educator's voice remains audible. This is the difference between AI as replacement and AI as instrument.

This resonates with Sankey's (2020) argument for putting the "pedagogic horse in front of the technology cart," a principle we have now lived, not merely cited. It also aligns with what Gladwell (2001) would identify as the connective function of the maven as someone whose enthusiasm for ideas draws others into generative exchange. In our collaboration, both of us have at different moments played this role, and the reciprocity of that exchange is what Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) call the norm of reciprocity, and it has been the engine of sustained innovation.

Setting expectations about technology keeps engagement with activity, not tool

A recurring challenge in technology-enhanced learning is what we have come to call tool-capture as the phenomenon where students (and sometimes educators) become so focused on operating the technology that the intended learning activity recedes. Discussions about Turnitin become discussions about plagiarism and numbers. Lecture capture becomes a substitute for attendance. AI-assisted writing becomes a conversation with a chatbot rather than a development of one's own thinking. In contrast, our retrospective revealed that one of the most consequential things we did, often without naming it as such, was implementing a strategy of setting expectations about technology explicitly and early. Not technical instructions, but relational and pedagogical framing. Telling students that "this tool is here to help you do X; your thinking is what matters; the technology is a scaffold, not a destination" meant technology was an assistant not a substitute. This practice of expectation-setting draws on the concept of digital efficacy (Ulfert-Blank & Schmidt, 2022): the belief that one can use technology purposefully and effectively to achieve one's goals. Building digital efficacy is not primarily a technical task; it is a relational and communicative one. When an educator or an educational technologist communicates clearly about what a tool is for, and why it has been chosen, they are not just giving instructions; they are modelling a relationship with technology that is curious, purposeful, and critical.

This matters especially in the context of AI, where the emotional landscape of technology adoption is unusually charged. Students and academics alike arrive with a range of feelings about AI tools. From enthusiasm, anxiety, scepticism, and sometimes a sense of threat to their own identity as thinkers and writers; AI even has conscious objectors. Therefore, expectation-setting is not only a cognitive act of telling people what a tool does, it is an affective one: creating a container in which uncertainty is acknowledged, questions are welcomed, and the educator's own relationship with the technology is made visible. When we have done this well, we have seen it reduce the defensive adoption of AI as a shortcut and increase to what could be called purposeful experimentation such as students using AI tools as thinking partners rather than answer machines.

The inverse is also true. When technology is introduced without pedagogical framing and students encounter AI tools without discussion of their purpose, limitations, or the thinking still required of them, the result is often either uncritical adoption or anxious avoidance. Neither is the condition for learning.

In our own practice, expectation-setting happened at multiple levels and is seen in the design of the activity itself, in the language used to introduce it, and in the ongoing co-generative dialogue between the two of us that ensures we remain aligned about intent. This results in a consistent voice being present from the

introduction into the in-practice technology and design of the activity. Areas of tension between technology and students are considered beforehand, or discussed afterwards, always framed pedagogically and incorporated into the design where needed. This alignment is, itself, a form of modelling, noting that both students and colleagues can sense that we had thought about the technology, not just deployment of it.

Translating into practice

Upon reflection we see building the relationship as critical to the trust that formed. This requires investment of time and self. As a result, that trust meant we were focused on making solutions work together and never leaving one person with all the responsibility. Together we learned, failed, laughed and experimented, trusting each other's expertise and care for students and the process.

In sharing goals we shared our expertise, carefully listening to what each person wanted and knew, and how together this could be achieved. There was never any "talking across each other" but was more adding to what each other said and wanted, leading to a symbiotic outcome. Creating these conditions takes time and means approaching collaboration with consideration beyond a transactional nature to one of a sustained partnership of change.

Our next steps

We are currently developing an AI course agent as a conversational AI tool embedded in a course to support student learning, answer procedural questions, and prompt deeper engagement with course material. The retrospective themes discussed above translate directly into design principles for this agent. Our focus is on human connection to precede and frame the design; the agent will not be built by technologists or academics alone but rather together as an iterative consideration of what is needed and what can be done. Its development is through a co-generative process: iterative, relational, and grounded in the question of what the academic needs for the students and how we want the students to think and feel, not only what the technology can do. The design conversations will be documented as reflective practice, continuing the methodology that has characterised our collaboration.

The agent will be designed to direct students toward activity. Its responses will scaffold thinking rather than replace it, thus prompting reflection, pointing toward course materials, and explicitly naming the limits of AI so that students understand what the agent cannot do and why their own processes remain necessary. Where appropriate, the agent's tone and language will carry the human voice of the course team as an academic 2.0; not a generic AI persona but a recognisable extension of the pedagogical relationship already established.

Importantly, expectation-setting will be embedded in the agent's first interactions with students. Before a student asks a question, they will encounter a brief, accessible explanation of what the agent is, what it is for, and how to use it well. This framing is not designed as a legal disclaimer but a pedagogical invitation and as an expression of the relational approach that has defined our collaboration.

Of note, the agent will be subject to ongoing co-generative review through a structured dialogue between the team (the educational technologist and the academic) that evaluates not just whether the agent is functioning but whether it is serving the intended pedagogical purpose. This recursive reflection and subsequent revision is the institutional expression of the personal practice that began our collaboration years ago.

Discussion and conclusion

The argument of this paper may appear simple, but it is consequential as the quality of human relationships in educational technology design is not a soft precondition but a hard determinant of whether technology serves learning. Co-generative dialogues built on psychological safety, mutual respect, and friendship at work is the methodology that makes this possible.

Our retrospective has surfaced two patterns that are neither novel in isolation nor surprising in the abstract i.e. that human connection enables creativity, and that clear expectations preserve learning focus. What is

notable is how consistently and concretely these patterns have manifested in our collaboration, and how directly they translate into design decisions for an AI tool. The personal becomes the pedagogical. The relational becomes the institutional.

As higher education confronts the rapid proliferation of AI tools, the temptation is to focus on the technology: its capabilities, its risks, its governance. This paper argues for a different emphasis. The most important question is not what technology, or AI can do, but what kind of human collaboration do we want. That includes considering the quality of relationship and depth of reflective practice as part of the process of deciding how AI is used. In our experience, that collaboration, when it is genuinely co-generative, produces not just better technology integration but better educators, better technologists, and better learning.

There is also an institutional dimension to this argument that we wish to name directly. The EdTech Hub design we helped develop, the course designs we have co-created, and the AI agent we are now building are outcomes of relational investment sustained over years. They could not have been mandated, procured, or project-managed into existence. They required time, trust, and the particular conditions that co-generative dialogues create. This suggests that institutions serious about responsible AI integration need to invest not only in tools and policies but in the human infrastructure that makes thoughtful tool use possible: time for educators and technologists to think together, structures that reward collaboration rather than pure output, and cultures in which uncertainty about technology is a legitimate professional position rather than a gap to be urgently filled. When people trust each other enough to think together, surprising and joyous things become possible. That conviction is our model, and our invitation.

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