ASCILITE 2026

The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Revisiting educational foundations for learning in the age of Generative AI

Michelle Avila Vanderburg, Robert Vanderburg, Meena Jha
Central Queensland University

The emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has intensified discussions about assessment assurance, academic integrity, and graduate capability in higher education and vocational education and training (VET). Institutional responses have often prioritised assessment security, while a growing body of scholarship has sought to define the competencies required for AI literacy. This position paper argues that these developments, while important, risk overlooking longstanding educational traditions that remain highly relevant in AI-enabled learning environments. Drawing on critical literacy and Students-as-Partners scholarship, we contend that many capabilities now associated with AI literacy reflect enduring concerns regarding critical evaluation, ethical participation, and learner agency. Rather than proposing another AI-specific framework, we argue that established educational traditions provide a robust foundation for helping students engage with AI critically, ethically, and thoughtfully. We conclude by suggesting that educational responses to AI should prioritise critical dialogue and shared responsibility as students prepare for increasingly AI-enabled professional and social contexts.

Keywords: Generative artificial intelligence, assessment assurance, critical literacy, students as partners, higher education

Introduction

In our leadership roles across higher education and vocational education and training (VET), we have spent the past two years supporting academics and educators as they navigate the rapidly evolving landscape of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Consistent with broader discussions across the sector (Selwyn, 2022; Yuce et al., 2026), these conversations have been energising, creative, and, at times, deeply uncomfortable, reflecting ongoing tensions between innovation, academic integrity, and uncertainty about future practice. Alongside genuine curiosity about how AI might enhance learning, colleagues have raised understandable concerns about assessment assurance, professional standards, and how to prepare graduates for increasingly AI-integrated futures. Yet, amid these discussions, we found ourselves returning to a more fundamental question: do these challenges require entirely new educational frameworks, or might established traditions already provide the foundations we need?

AI literacy has become a crowded field: researchers and institutions have produced a rapid expansion of frameworks, competency models, and policy guidance to help educators and students respond to technological change (e.g. Digital Education Council, 2025; Hillman et al., 2025; Laupichler et al., 2022; Long & Magerko, 2020; Perkins et al., 2024). Hillman et al. (2025) warn that this proliferation makes it harder, not easier, to work out which capabilities actually matter, and for whom. When we look closely at what these frameworks are asking for, such as critical evaluation, ethical participation, informed judgement, and learner agency, we recognise them: the long-standing concerns of critical literacy (Freire, 1970; Janks, 2010) and Students-as-Partners scholarship (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014). The technologies are new; the questions are not.

This position paper argues that, rather than continuing to build AI-specific responses to familiar educational concerns, educators might revisit established traditions that have long informed teaching and learning. We focus specifically on critical literacy and Students-as-Partners scholarship as complementary perspectives to support students in engaging with AI critically, ethically, and collaboratively. Together, these traditions encourage learners not only to question the knowledge produced through AI systems, but also to participate

in shaping the expectations, responsibilities, and practices that govern AI use within their learning communities and future professions.

Reclaiming educational foundations for AI-enabled learning

Critical literacy in AI-enabled learning environments

Critical literacy provides a strong theoretical foundation for engaging with GenAI by shifting attention from simply consuming information to questioning how knowledge is produced, represented, legitimised, and used (Freire, 1970; Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012). Rather than treating texts as neutral or authoritative, critical literacy encourages learners to interrogate whose voices are represented, whose perspectives are absent, and whose interests are served. Critical literacy has never depended upon identifying an individual author. Rather, it examines how texts construct knowledge, privilege particular perspectives, and reproduce social assumptions. Whether a text is produced by a single author, an institution, or a large language model, the critical questions remain the same. What changes is the nature of the systems producing the text, not the critical practices required to interrogate it. From this perspective, AI-generated outputs are not fundamentally different from other texts encountered in higher education and VET; they are contemporary artefacts requiring critical interpretation. Concerns such as hallucination, bias, and misinformation are therefore not uniquely AI problems but longstanding questions of knowledge and power that critical literacy has long addressed. This aligns with Freire's (1970) critique of the banking model, which cautions against passively accepting knowledge from an apparent authority, a risk heightened by GenAI's fluent, authoritative tone. Critical literacy instead positions AI outputs as starting points for inquiry, prompting learners to examine how responses were constructed, what assumptions they reflect, and whose perspectives are privileged or excluded. As Hinrichsen and Coombs (2013) argue, technological change requires extending established critical practices into digital contexts, not entirely new foundations. Critical literacy remains essential for navigating AI-generated texts and automated authorship (Mills, 2025), positioning students as reflective participants rather than passive consumers.

Translating critical literacy principles into classroom practice, Luke and Freebody's (1999) Four Resources Model shows that literacy extends beyond comprehension to analysing how texts construct meaning and position readers. Within this framework, AI-generated responses can be interpreted and evaluated alongside conventional academic sources rather than accepted as authoritative answers. Classroom activities that ask students to compare AI outputs, evaluate supporting evidence, and justify the credibility of different responses encourage learners to engage critically with machine-generated information while recognising that prompting and revision shape the knowledge ultimately produced. This pedagogical emphasis is supported by emerging evidence: students who uncritically accept AI-generated responses demonstrate measurable declines in critical thinking, decision-making, and analytical reasoning (Zhai et al., 2024). Such practices also reflect Janks' (2010) view that literacy education must engage with the interconnected dimensions of power, access, diversity, and design. Although GenAI can broaden access to information and reduce barriers to learning (Lodge et al., 2026), students must also recognise how AI systems may reproduce dominant perspectives and privilege particular cultural, linguistic, or professional norms (Mills, 2025), patterns evident in documented cases of biased search results and facial recognition failures (Warr & Heath, 2025). By integrating evaluation, reflection, and design into AI-supported learning, students move beyond being consumers of AI-generated content to becoming informed participants who critically shape and justify the knowledge they construct.

These principles can be operationalised through structured learning activities that require students to interrogate rather than simply use AI. Schapiro et al. (2026) demonstrate how scaffolded AI-supported writing tasks preserve critical thinking by requiring students to justify prompt choices, interrogate AI-generated outputs, and reflect on their decision-making throughout the writing process. Arseven and Bal's (2025) systematic review found that students frequently used AI to support metacognition, ethical reasoning, and reflective judgement when learning activities deliberately encouraged these forms of engagement. Initial teacher education students might evaluate AI-generated lesson plans to determine whose knowledge, cultures, or pedagogical assumptions are represented and whose are absent, while VET students might examine how AI-generated workplace advice reflects particular professional norms or industry expectations. Warr and Heath's (2025) reflective technology audit offers a practical approach to making these often-invisible

assumptions explicit. In each case, the educator's role extends beyond regulating AI use to facilitating critical conversation.

The central challenge presented by GenAI is not fundamentally technological. It is educational. The question is not whether students can use AI, but whether they have developed the critical habits needed to evaluate, challenge, and responsibly act on what AI produces.

Why critical literacy provides a stronger foundation

GenAI has prompted a rapid emergence of AI literacy frameworks defining the knowledge and skills learners need to interact with AI systems. These frameworks make valuable contributions by identifying competencies such as prompt design, ethical awareness, transparency and responsible use (e.g. Digital Education Council, 2025; Long & Magerko, 2020). However, many remain tied to current AI capabilities, and as systems evolve, the competencies required today may change rapidly.

Critical literacy offers a more enduring educational foundation because its primary concern is not the technology itself but the learner's relationship with knowledge (Freire, 1970; Janks, 2010). Rather than teaching students how to operate a particular system, it develops intellectual dispositions that remain relevant regardless of technological change. Learners are taught to question evidence, examine assumptions, recognise bias, consider alternative perspectives, and reflect on how their own thinking shapes interpretation. These are precisely the capabilities required when interacting with AI-generated information (Lodge et al., 2026). This is consistent with treating AI-generated outputs as texts to interrogate rather than as a wholly new pedagogical category. The practical payoff is durability: because these dispositions do not depend on how any particular system works, they transfer directly to whatever GenAI capability comes next, and the pace of technological change strengthens rather than diminishes critical literacy's relevance.

While critical literacy equips students to critically evaluate AI-generated knowledge, it says less about how educational decisions regarding AI should be made. Critical evaluation alone is insufficient if students remain passive recipients of institutional policies or classroom practices (Healey et al., 2014). Students also require meaningful opportunities to influence how AI is introduced, discussed, and used within their learning environments (Jha & Atif, 2025). This is where Students-as-Partners complements critical literacy, moving beyond evaluating AI outputs to creating environments where learners shape responsible AI practices.

Students as partners in negotiating AI use

Students-as-Partners scholarship provides a complementary perspective by repositioning students as active contributors to educational change rather than as subjects of institutional decisions made without them. Cook-Sather et al. (2014) describe partnership as a process of shared responsibility, reciprocity, and respect in which students and educators work together to shape learning experiences, while Healey et al. (2014) emphasise the value of students' unique expertise as learners. Such approaches challenge deficit views of students as problems to be managed, recognising them instead as knowledgeable participants. These ideas are particularly relevant in the context of GenAI. Students are already engaging with AI in ways institutions are only beginning to understand, gaining insights into its opportunities, challenges, and ethical tensions. Yuce et al.'s (2026) analysis suggests students' lived experiences with AI represent an important form of expertise that should inform institutional responses. Framing educational responses solely through regulation or compliance risks excluding these perspectives and reinforcing narratives of surveillance and control. Partnership approaches instead invite students into conversations about what AI use aligned with disciplinary values and workplace expectations might look like. Partnership means more than asking students for feedback. It means recognising students as contributors to educational change, not recipients of institutional decisions. Students-as-Partners rests on shared responsibility, reciprocity, and mutual respect, positioning students as legitimate contributors to curriculum, assessment, and educational decision-making (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014). Building on these principles, prior work showed how students can move beyond consultation to become active partners in institutional responses to emerging educational challenges. Through a Students-as-Partners approach, students co-designed learning resources, developed peer-facing communication strategies, and helped shape educational responses to academic integrity and GenAI. Rather than treating students as misconduct risks, they became active contributors to the design of learning experiences and institutional

practice. This strengthened student ownership, increased the relevance of educational resources, and produced more authentic and responsive institutional approaches to rapidly evolving digital environments (Weber et al., 2025).

In higher education and VET settings, such partnerships might involve students and educators co-developing expectations for AI use in assessment, disclosure practices, or workplace implications. Initial teacher education students, for example, might explore how AI could support planning and feedback while also considering issues of bias, inclusion, and professional judgement. This negotiation of norms and values strengthens learner agency and mirrors the collaborative ethical decision-making graduates will encounter professionally. Partnership does not imply the absence of standards or educator responsibility. Rather, it recognises that students possess lived expertise in how emerging technologies are actually being used, while educators contribute disciplinary, pedagogical, and professional expertise. Educational responses are strongest when these forms of expertise are brought together through genuine partnership (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Weber et al., 2025). Involving students in conversations about AI simply acknowledges that educational responses are more meaningful and sustainable when developed with students rather than for them. Students-as-Partners scholarship thus makes critical engagement with AI a shared endeavour grounded in dialogue, transparency, and mutual responsibility.

Supporting critical conversations about AI

On their own, neither tradition fully addresses the challenges GenAI poses for education. Critical literacy supplies the habits of mind for questioning AI-generated information, while Students-as-Partners supplies the process for developing, negotiating, and enacting shared decisions about its use. Combined, the two traditions cover each other's gaps, pushing the conversation past technological competence and toward educational participation.

This combination does more than link two established perspectives. It changes what the AI conversation is about. Much of the current discourse on AI literacy centres on helping students use AI effectively and responsibly, which risks making AI the focus of educational change (Selwyn, 2022). We want to put learning back at the centre instead, with AI treated as one more source of information for students to critically evaluate within collaborative learning communities. That shift matters in practice: it lets educators respond to whatever comes after GenAI without reinventing a literacy framework every time a new tool appears.

These traditions also change who holds responsibility. Educators are not gatekeepers policing AI use, and students are not risks to be managed; both share responsibility for navigating its opportunities, limits, and ethical implications (Jha & Atif, 2025). For teaching and assessment, this has a concrete implication, already emerging in guidance from universities internationally: conversations can move past whether students used AI, and focus instead on how and why, and what they learned (Dawson et al., 2024). Students might discuss the prompts they used, why they accepted or rejected AI-generated suggestions, and how AI shaped their thinking. Prompted reflection like this has been shown to strengthen the link between theory and practice and deepen learning outcomes (Radović et al., 2021), which means these conversations are not just about accountability; they are a form of learning in their own right.

These conversations do not stop at the classroom door. Graduates entering contemporary workplaces will need to judge when, how, and whether to use AI in professional practice, and that judgement may matter as much as technical proficiency (Lodge et al., 2026). Critical literacy and partnership approaches are well placed to build it, foregrounding questioning, dialogue, and informed judgement. None of this diminishes assessment assurance; it reframes it as part of a broader commitment to developing capable, reflective graduates who use AI to support judgement rather than substitute for it (Mills, 2025). Fawns et al. (2026) make a related point: trustworthy judgements depend on multiple forms of evidence, not a single artefact. The same logic holds here. Involving students in critical conversations about AI, and helping them interrogate the knowledge it produces, supports learning and accountability together while preparing them for the professional worlds they are about to enter.

Conclusion

GenAI has prompted higher education institutions and VET providers to reconsider long-held assumptions about assessment, academic integrity, and graduate capability. While concerns regarding assessment assurance are legitimate, educational responses risk becoming dominated by surveillance, restriction, and the continual development of AI-specific frameworks. We have argued that many capabilities now associated with AI literacy, including critical evaluation, learner agency, and ethical participation, build on longstanding educational traditions rather than requiring wholly new foundations. AI is unlikely to disappear from the workplaces our graduates will enter. The challenge for educators is therefore not whether students should encounter AI, but how institutions can support them to engage with it with discernment and professional judgement. Critical literacy encourages students to question the knowledge AI systems produce, while Students-as-Partners approaches invite them to help shape the norms and expectations that govern its use. Together, these traditions move educational responses beyond compliance and towards shared responsibility and informed participation. This position also opens opportunities for further research into how these established educational foundations operate in AI-enabled learning environments. Future studies could examine students' use of critical literacy when engaging with AI-generated texts and explore how genuine student partnership can inform decisions about AI use, assessment, and learning. Such research could provide an empirical basis for understanding how these enduring educational traditions can support practice as GenAI continues to evolve.

References

Arseven, Z., & Bal, M. (2025). Critical literacy in artificial intelligence assisted writing instruction: A systematic review. *Thinking Skills and Creativity, 57*, 101850. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2025.101850

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: A guide for faculty*. Jossey-Bass. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2025.101850

Dawson, P., Bearman, M., Dollinger, M., & Boud, D. (2024). Validity matters more than cheating. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 49*(7), 1005–1016. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2024.2386662

Digital Education Council. (2025). *AI literacy framework*. https://www.digitaleducationcouncil.com/post/digital-education-council-ai-literacy-framework

Fawns, T., Boud, D., & Dawson, P. (2026). Identifying what our students have learned: A framework for practical assessment validation. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2026.2620053

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). *Engagement through partnership: Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*. Higher Education Academy.

Hillman, V., Holmes, W., & Duarte, T. (2025). *A rapid review of AI literacy frameworks, with policy recommendations*. The Royal Society.

Hinrichsen, J., & Coombs, A. (2013). The five resources of critical digital literacy: A framework for curriculum integration. *Research in Learning Technology, 21*. https://doi.org/10.3402/rlt.v21.21334

Janks, H. (2010). *Literacy and power*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203869956

Jha, M., & Atif, A. (2025). Reimagining pedagogy for the GenAI era: Frameworks, challenges and institutional strategies. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 41*(5), 18. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.10645

Laupichler, M. C., Aster, A., Schirch, J., & Raupach, T. (2022). Artificial intelligence literacy in higher and adult education: A scoping literature review. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence, 3*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2022.100101

Lodge, J. M., De Barba, P. Ainscough, L., Brazil, J. R., Broadbent, J., Ebbert, D., Frankland, S., Hennicke, T., Lim, L. A., Male, S. A., Nirriahi, N., Oliveira, E. A., Pacitti, H., Rakovic, M., Russell, J., Taylor-Griffiths, D., &. Yang, S. (2026). *Assuring quality learning in a gen AI-integrated future: The role of adaptive capabilities*. https://www.teqsa.gov.au/guides-resources/resources/corporate-publications/assuring-quality-learning-gen-ai-integrated-future-role-adaptive-capabilities

Long, D., & Magerko, B. (2020). What is AI literacy? Competencies and design considerations. In *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI conference on human factors in computing systems* (pp. 1–16). Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/3313831.3376727

Luke, A. (2012). Critical literacy: foundational notes. *Theory into Practice*, *51*(1), 4–11. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2012.636324

Luke, A., & Freebody, P. (1999). Further notes on the four resources model. *Reading Online, 3*(4), 1–4.

Mills, K. A. (2025). *Critical literacy in an AI world.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003539193

Perkins, M., Furze, L., Roe, J., & MacVaugh, J. (2024). The artificial intelligence assessment scale (AIAS): A framework for ethical integration of generative artificial intelligence in educational assessment. J*ournal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, 21*(6). https://doi.org/10.53761/q3azde36

Radović, S., Firssova, O., Hummel, H. G. K., & Vermeulen, M. (2021). Improving academic performance: Strengthening the relation between theory and practice through prompted reflection. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 24*(2), 139-154. https://doi.org/10.1177/14697874211014411

Schapiro, H. M., Tripepi, M., & Blackley, J. (2026). Reclaiming the writing process using AI: A scaffolded writing assignment that promotes critical thinking, reflection, and accountability. *Journal of Microbiology & Biology Education, 27*(1). https://doi.org/10.1128/jmbe.00337-25

Selwyn, N. (2022). The future of AI and education: Some cautionary notes. *European Journal of Education, 57*, 620–631. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12532

Warr, M., & Heath, M. K. (2025). Uncovering the hidden curriculum in generative AI: A reflective technology audit for teacher educators. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *76*(3), 245–261. https://doi.org/10.1177/00224871251325073

Weber, A., Vanderburg, R., Cowling, M., Vanderburg, M., & Trotter, P. (2026). How a responsive digital pedagogy using the students against academic misconduct framework decreased academic integrity breaches. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *45*(4), 1149–1164. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2025.2586662

Yuce, E., Dai, X., Owens, R., & Elmas, T. (2026). *ChatGPT vs teachers vs students: Large-scale analysis of generative AI discourse in education communities on Reddit* [preprint]. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2605.17712

Zhai, C., Wibowo, S. & Li, L. D. (2024). The effects of over-reliance on AI dialogue systems on students' cognitive abilities: A systematic review. *Smart Learning Environments, 11*(28). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-024-00316-7

Vanderburg, M. A., Vanderburg, R., & Jha, M. (2026). Revisiting educational foundations for learning in the age of Generative AI. In Cochrane, T., Narayan, V., Poole, T., Lai, P., Lake, P., Moore, O., & Li, L. (Eds.), *The Future is Connection: Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society*. Proceedings ASCILITE 2026. Brisbane (pp. 871–876). https://doi.org/10.65106/apubs.2026.3325

Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.
The author(s) assign a Creative Commons by attribution license enabling others to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon their work, even commercially, as long as credit is given to the author(s) for the original creation.

© Vanderburg, M. A., Vanderburg, R., & Jha, M. 2026