

TEACH.LEARN.SHARE

Teaching in the era of gen AI

Episode 7: Leading through change: (Pt. 3) Preparing students for an AI-shaped future

Episode description

In the finale of this three-part episode, the conversation steps back to ask a fundamental question: what is a university degree for in an AI-shaped world? The framework of “stuff, skills, and soul” is introduced to help answer this question and explore how universities can prepare students for an uncertain future of work. While content and technical skills remain essential, the discussion emphasizes the growing importance of human capacities such as judgment, resilience, adaptability, and working with ambiguity. Drawing on research and historical examples, the guests argue that AI is more likely to raise expectations around critical thinking than eliminate work outright, while complicating entry-level pathways and transitions from education to employment. The episode concludes with a call for universities to remain nimble, diverse, and committed to cultivating human purpose in an AI-mediated world.

Did you miss the previous episodes? Listen to [part 1](#) and [part 2](#)

Transcript

Jasmine Parent: Welcome to Teach.Learn.Share, a podcast that thoughtfully explores teaching and learning practices in higher ed. I'm Jasmine Parent, an Educational Development and Digital Learning Designer. This podcast is brought to you by Teaching and Academic Programs at McGill University, also known as TAP. We're recording today from Montreal, Quebec, on unceded land which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange among Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and the Anishinaabeg nations. We honour their stewardship as we live and work on these lands.

So, welcome back to another episode of our fifth series: *Teaching in the era of gen AI*. I'm here with the co-host of this series, Adam Finkelstein, the Associate Director of Learning Environments. Hi, Adam.

Adam Finkelstein: Hi, Jasmine. Thanks ... thanks again for a great intro. I mean, what a season it's been. We've been going all over the place from, you know, talking with faculty about what they're doing and how they're integrating AI into their teaching and learning and ... and have just been in the middle of a great conversation with some Associate Provosts.

Jasmine Parent: So, we're about to dive into part three of this three-part episode, where we interviewed Associate and Vice Provosts of teaching and learning from three of Canada's leading universities—Professor Chris Buddle from McGill University, Dr. Simon Bates from the University of British Columbia, and Professor Susan McCahan from the University of Toronto.

So, I think this third episode is probably one of my favorite ones we've done so far. In this final part of our three-part episode, we're really zooming out beyond courses and beyond institutions. Up to this point, we talked about opportunity, as you said, Adam, about challenges—challenges with

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assessments, with instructor support. But all of that kind of shapes something much bigger—how students imagine their futures beyond attending university. Students are paying very close attention to how quickly AI is changing the ... the ... their fields of work, and many are understandably anxious about what this means for their future careers.

Adam Finkelstein: Absolutely. And, you know, one of the things about the future is that's where we're going to spend the rest of our lives. So, I think that it's really appropriate to think about it in terms of, you know, how is AI going to impact that future? And not only just impact, but what can we do to help guide it into the direction that we really want it to go? So, in this episode, we're really going to ask that big question, you know, is a university degree in a world where AI can generate, summarize, and evaluate knowledge, you know, what is a university degree in that kind of world and ... and what does it mean?

Jasmine Parent: Let's jump back into the conversation.

So, I do have one last question. And for this one, I kind of want to zoom out beyond the university itself and more how it fits into our reality. Much of what we're discussing ultimately shapes how students imagine their futures, and students have reported concerns around the future of their work. AI can now generate, summarize, and even evaluate knowledge, and it's moving so quickly, while universities, as we know, move quite slow.

So, how should universities address student concerns and prepare students for a job market where AI will reshape or in some cases even eliminate many of the traditional jobs that we were once trying to prepare them for when they graduate?

Prof. Simon Bates: Yeah, I can ... I can have a stab at this one. This really is zooming out. We're basically asking: What's a university for? What's a university degree?

A couple of years ago, I had the real privilege of working with [Danny Liu](#) from the University of Sydney, a educational technology professor. We worked together on a ... on [a project](#). And ... and he had this wonderful way of describing what students need from a degree. And it's really, really simple, which is why it stuck with me. It's stuff, skills, and soul.

And just to unpack those, stuff is easy—that's content. We've been doing that forever, right? Content in the advanced stages of a discipline, in many cases at the frontiers of a discipline, universities have been doing that forever.

Skills, I think over my career and time in higher education, there has been much more of an explicit focus on the skills that students develop during their degrees, making them visible, not having them as part of an implicit curriculum, but actually foregrounding it. You will see this in course learning outcomes, in program learning outcomes.

But I think soul is about ways of being or ways of becoming. These are the sort of affective components—resilience, working with ambiguity, working with others, working with different perspectives, intercultural competencies.

The irony of it is in an era of AI, we're talking about the importance of distinctly human skills. And I think that's really important because that's not something that can currently be replaced by machines. And I hope it never is because learning is a human and social process at its heart.

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So, I think that's what we need to do for our students. We need to help them become. We need to foreground some of those ways of being in courses and in the outcomes of courses. And in doing that, I think that has huge implications for faculty development, as well, because I think faculty are very comfortable as subject matter experts. They may be well aware of broader, or you know what ... what sometimes erroneously gets called soft skills, because they're actually kind of important and not soft at all. But thinking about helping students who explicitly build resilience within your course design. How do you model and demonstrate empathy and compassion? How do you be a reflective educator?

I think foregrounding some of those will help assuage some of the concerns that students have that "what is all of this for" given that the world is going to look very different in four or five years when I graduate.

Prof. Susan McCahan: Yeah, it's so interesting. This is part of the research that I do is actually looking at the intersection between AI capabilities and engineering competencies to identify how we will want to adjust our curriculum to maintain relevancy for our graduates.

You know, I ... I think one of the things that gets pointed out in that literature on AI job disruption quite a bit is that previous technology revolutions have not eliminated necessarily jobs or there are very few types of jobs really that get completely eliminated. But what happens is the expectation of skills and quality of jobs goes up tremendously.

So, you know, the one...and so from one of my colleagues in sociology that I love is when people introduced dishwashers and washing machines to save women time, it didn't. What it did was increased the expectations about how clean things were around your house, right? It didn't actually reduce the work of women at all.

And as ATM machines came in, it ... it hasn't eliminated, you know, there are fewer, perhaps, bank tellers, but the bank tellers that we have are now expected to be able to do many more different things than just hand out cash. So, it adds to the complexity.

I'm really concerned about entry-level positions. I'm really concerned about the impact on that bridging between universities and jobs. Interestingly, past technology revolutions have not decreased the time in education. They've increased it. You know, it went from you could get a decent job out of high school to you had to have an undergraduate degree to you have to have a graduate. Like, we are increasing the actual prep time necessary to take what will be an entry-level job because technology tends to sort of mechanize away some of the things like bank teller positions that kids would have gotten us a summer job in high school back in the day.

So, that's one of the things I'm thinking about a lot is I think we need those skills, like, ever more. We used to use shortcuts. When I got a ... a set of drawings, right, I'm old enough that when I was in engineering, you took your sketches down to a draftsman, the draftsman drafted them for you, and then you had to check the drawings, right? And then there was the era of CAD where I did the drawings myself, and so I could rely on them because I did the drawings. And I can rely on my draftsmen because I got to know which were the good draftsmen, which were the ones that I needed to check a little bit more carefully, etcetera.

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You hand something to AI to do, and the level of checking that you're going to need to do goes up tremendously. We're losing a lot of the, sort of, proxies we have for, as ... as Simon put it, interpretability or trustworthiness, in some of this technology by handing these things off.

And so, as that trustworthiness, whether it's photos and videos and misinformation or whether that's work that the AI is doing to do data interpretation or make decisions about mortgages and health coverage or whatever else, the skills of our students need in order to be really critical consumers and managers of these technologies goes up, as well.

And so, I ... I think it's actually going to amp up the kind of critical thinking and judgment skills that our students need. Because so many of the proxies we have for reliability, you know, whether that's in cover letters and letters of recommendation or, you know, what we see on the news or what we read in papers and research papers, I can't just look at the author anymore and say, that came from so-and-so, therefore, it is a good piece of research work, right?

Many of these, sort of, shortcuts we have for credibility are getting undermined. And that's going to change the expectations of what students need going into jobs.

Prof. Chris Buddle: One of the things I've been thinking about is the importance of universities continuing to offer diverse kinds of educational opportunities and programs and areas of study and ... because we're not going to be in a position to predict what is going to be important in five years relative to what is important today and, you know, a philosopher today versus a philosopher 200 years ago is very different ... important in different ways. Same with engineering. So, you pick your discipline.

So, I think having a recognition of the importance of the diversity of approaches, pedagogical competencies, deep learning skills ... it's ... it's going to be so important as we go forward.

And I ... and I think ... I ... I, too, worry about the entry-level position, Susan, that you mentioned. And I also worry about the older workforce who ... who have questions about retraining and are losing jobs and what is the role of ... of universities in supporting a ... across a ... a real range of career stages is a really interesting question that we'll also be able to reflect on.

So, it is exciting. It's ... it's scary, but I also think we've talked so much today about the ... I think the opportunities are more than the negatives if I'm to be honest. When I think about how we can position ourselves to really answer society's call at large, I think we can. We need to be maybe a little more nimble than we sometimes are, but also remain diverse in our approaches is going to be really important.

Jasmine Parent: So, this brings the conversation with our guests to a close. I feel like this has been an insightful and well-articulated conversation that is probably relevant to anybody and everybody in the higher ed sphere.

As we wrap up the final episode, we can see here over the last three parts of this episode is that there is a lot of concern around jobs, a lot of concern about the transitions around workload and change ... maybe even trust ... but also a very strong sense that the role of universities may actually become more important and not less important in the future.

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And across the progression of the three episodes, you know, we moved from discussing opportunities, to tensions, to purpose. And the message that carries through that is that in an AI-mediated world, human judgment, our ability to adapt, the ethical considerations, and the relationships that we have with each other are now more important than ever.

Adam, what were your thoughts?

Adam Finkelstein: Yeah, I ... I think that's a very poignant, Jasmine, thinking about the opportunity, tension, and purpose. And I ... I think it goes back to this ... the ... the whole idea is, you know, it's ... we ... we're past the concept of thinking about if we're going to have to deal with AI. It's really now we're really talking about like, well, how are we going to deal with it? How are we going to, sort of, create and ... and navigate this really complex relationship with a technology that we're still struggling to understand?

I come back to, you know, [Tim Creasey from ProSci](#) has a really interesting framework to think that through. And he talks about, you know, three different, kind of, buckets that we have to think about with our, you know, relationship with AI and in ... in a way to integrate it into ... into ... into our lives and he thinks about it in ... in three different ways.

The first being, you know, what's ... what's ... what's going to be my work? What is the work that ... that I need to do by myself? Like, the human exclusive kind of work. That's a really important thought and something we've really heard a lot about in this ... in this episode.

But the other two buckets we also have to really think about, which is, you know, what are ... am I going to automate with AI? You know, what do I want AI to do for me? And how can I get, you know, a way to get out of it and get AI to do that kind of task?

And ... and then, of course, the biggest issue, which is, you know, how am I going to, you know, think through the ... the AI collaboration opportunities? You know, what ... what ... what am I going to do to ... to help think through, you know, what is AI going to do with me?

And ...and I think that's going to be the real challenge that we're all going to be faced with in ... in redefining our professions and redefining our disciplines. You know, what is the work I need to do? What is the work that I'm going to outsource to AI? And then what am I going to do with AI? And that's a struggle.

I ... I think that, you know, there's a further element of this that makes it really, really difficult. And that, you know, when we're thinking about this in ... in terms of our own profession, you know, we're experts. And I ... and I think that's one of the things that we often forget, especially as people working at universities and ... and faculty members that we're experts in our domain. So, we've gone through all of the cognitive struggle and the ... the learning process to get to that level of expertise where now we can, sort of, decide, oh, great, we have this thing called AI and it can outsource a whole bunch of work that we don't have to do anymore, which we are grateful for. It's fantastic for us.

One of the real big questions is, well, what ... what about our students and what about our children? You know, how do we figure out what they need to struggle with and what they don't? And, you know, it really gets back to the core question, which is, you know, what is ... what do we want

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students to know? What are ... what are the learning outcomes that we have and what are the different ways we can get there? And now AI is providing even more opportunities and more different ways to get to our learning outcomes that we've really never even begin to think about. And I think that's going to be one of those key struggles that we're going to have to be wrestling with in education when it comes to what is our university all about.

Jasmine Parent: Yeah, I hear you. This is an important aspect to consider in this part of this transition, you know, you've been ... as faculty member or even as support, we are in a place of using these tools to help us professionally, but we've gone through the hardships of learning and the cognitive struggle, so we, kind of, have to keep that at the forefront when reflecting on how to guide students through this massive change in higher ed.

And in part three of this episode, the thing that struck me the most was Simon's framework, so: stuff, skills, and soul. I think I really loved this part of the conversation because we addressed purpose, which is something I think about a lot. And I think I participate in a lot of metacognitive reflections in my own life in general. I think it's important to remember what's at the heart of what we are doing. So, the framework was, kind of, like, a "ding" moment in my mind. Like, yes, of course this is it. And there's something so interesting in that framework with how it relates to the future of higher ed in a world where AI is so pervasive. The stuff is, you know, what we often focus on because it's more straightforward, it's more tangible to assess, like, what ... what do my students know? But the skills and even more the soul are outcomes that are more affective and more difficult to capture in a way. And for anybody who has ever tried to come up with affective learning outcomes knows that it's a challenge. But knowing this, I am happy to hear the perspectives that these outcomes remain a little more untouchable by AI and will perhaps become even more important in the future. So, this, kind of, gives me a more realistic vision of what the future holds for higher ed.

And it can be scary to ...to think about, what the future is going to look like, because it's very, very different from anything that we have ever experienced before. And so, you know, Adam knows this this story and often brings it up to me ... we were at a conference last spring and we went to this keynote that was discussing the future of AI. It wasn't necessarily education related but more generally talking about the mere speed that things are moving at and what the near future holds. And it was, safe to say, quite alarming for me. I felt extremely destabilized and so after that session, I made a comment to my team, like, I need to go outside and lay in a field and touch some grass right now because I feel very ungrounded and am currently holding this very dystopian view of what the future may look like. And I think that it was just me getting caught up in that [hype cycle](#) of what we talked about earlier. It can be very scary when you can't really fathom what reality or that day-to-day will be in our personal lives or in our professional lives and so on.

But this conversation we had to produce over these last three episodes really made me feel grounded in a way that I can, sort of, maybe ... maybe picture what the future is going to look like. And it's not going to be so bad if we progress with intent and with thoughtfulness and transparency and so on. So, I like to believe that higher ed is quite good at doing that. So, I think and I hope that we're in good hands.

Adam Finkelstein: It's funny how, you know, people who study history are considered historians and extremely revered and authoritative. People who study the future are generally considered a

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little bit out there in science fiction, and ... and it's things that are made-up and not real. But there really is a study of the future that ... that's important.

And ... and, you know, like, I said earlier, it's, like, future is where we're going to spend the rest of our lives. So, we really have a ... better have a really good idea of what it's going to look like. It doesn't mean we can predict it, but we ... we definitely can study it, and we can think about what are the possible futures that ... that lead us towards a positive direction.

And I ... I think that's what you're talking about, this idea of, you know, not falling into the dystopian spiral because, you know, we fall into a dystopian spiral because we can't see the positive future possibilities. And that often happens when we see new technologies that are frightening or do things that we've never seen before and it's, sort of, like, "Oh, my God, I ... I can't believe that I can do this."

And, you know, I sat down the other day with AI and ... and was using some of the deep research tools. And it's, you know, I just had to step back for a minute and go, I ... I cannot believe that we can do this. It's incredible that we can sit down and ... and have a conversation with a technology and be able to produce stuff that is ... is of such high quality. You never would have thought that.

And it's incredible to ... to ... to think that we can do these kind of things. And I ... and I think that's really the challenge is taking that ... that incredible, sort of, like, oh, my goodness, what ... what have we got here? And ... and using that sense of wonder in a positive way to think about, like, what can we do with this in ... in education? Like, how can this change not just, like, the way we do business day-to-day, but how can we fundamentally shift around our university structures, our education structures, and think about a better way of doing business in that helping students become masters within the disciplines that we're ... we're trying to teach them.

And ... and I ... I think that that's really the challenge is ... is we at universities have to start really being creative about how can we use these technologies in those ways? What can we do differently with this? And, you know, not just, like, let's make a better test. It's, like, how can we rethink assessment from the ground up? How can we think about content in a different way? What can we think about courses differently? You know, can courses be created on the fly? You know, can we use AI to build them?

All these sort of ideas, I think, are what's bouncing around in my head and ... and a number of others on our teams thinking about, you know, this is super exciting. And ... and I, for one, am very excited because I think, you know, this is ... this is where we're going to spend the rest of our careers. And boy, is it going to be interesting.

Jasmine Parent: Yeah, it's already very interesting and it will continue to be interesting, I'm sure. On that note, I think we'll wrap up. I will say, you know, I'm very grateful to have been a part of this conversation. It's been fascinating watching our leaders lead and being able to, you know, be in the room and hear ... hear their thoughts of pushing forward and how they're guiding us. So, I really appreciate this a lot.

And I want to thank Chris, Susan, and Simon for giving us their time, for letting us record them and be a part of this podcast. So, thank you to you three, and thanks Adam for being a part of the conversation, as well.

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And I hope that over all these conversations, the last three episodes and even, you know, the ones before in this series, we hope that it's sparked reflection and conversations within your own networks, within your own teaching and learning contexts.

So, thank you so much to our listeners for tuning in. Please subscribe to Teach.Learn.Share and let others know about it. Until next time.
