

Artificial Intelligence and educational research: a conversation with Ben Williamson

Inteligência Artificial e pesquisa educacional: uma conversa com Ben Williamson

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Ben's research spans topics at the intersections between education and AI, big data,

¹ See: <https://edwebprofiles.ed.ac.uk/profile/ben-williamson> Accessed: 24 Aug. 2026.

² See: <https://www.de.ed.ac.uk/> Accessed: 24 Aug. 2026.

³ See: <https://efi.ed.ac.uk/> Accessed: 24 Aug. 2026.

⁴ See: <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjem20> Accessed: 24 Aug. 2026.

biology, edtech, infrastructures, and platforms. His book *Big Data in Education: the digital future of learning, policy and practice* (London: Sage, 2017) is also available in Spanish (*Big Data en educación: el futuro digital del aprendizaje, la política y la práctica* (Madrid: Morata, 2018). A full list of Ben's output is available at his institutional profile page⁵. He also maintains a research blog, *Code Acts in Education*⁶.

This conversation took place asynchronously during the months of May and July 2026, initially by e-mail, then on a shared document that was subsequently edited by all three contributors.

GF & MP

Ben, thank you so much for agreeing to talk to us. It's a pleasure and an honour to be able to have this chat with you!

We'd like to start by casting a relatively wide net. For quite a while now, education has been bombarded with claims surrounding the transformational/disruptive potential of digital technology. Now we've got comparable (perhaps more fantastical?) claims regarding Artificial Intelligence (AI). Whilst these claims remain hegemonic, there is a growing demand for evidence of the actual "impact" of AI in the sector, and this is being taken as a justification for research. It seems to us that a lot of noise is being generated around this demand, with responses that range in tone from the usual hype to point-blank refusal to engage with AI in any capacity. In this context, we are witnessing effects not only on the way in which educational systems work, but also on the ways in which educational research is conceived, conducted and legitimised.

Could you start by telling us what is your overall perspective on how AI may be "actually" transforming educational research?

BW

I'm a bit cautious about the idea that "AI is actually transforming educational research" because it's not the technology impacting on research practices and knowledge production by itself, but a range of different actors who are seeking to assess its effects and promote its benefits. We have certainly seen a rush in recent years to produce evidence of AI effects and impacts from researchers, governments and industry alike.

⁵ See: <https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/en/persons/ben-williamson/publications/> Accessed: 24 Aug. 2026.

⁶ See: <https://codeactsineducation.wordpress.com/> Accessed: 24 Aug. 2026.

To give a few examples. Among many researchers, great efforts have been made to find statistical evidence that AI improves learner performance. This has long been the focus of the academic field of AI in education, but such studies have really accelerated post-ChatGPT. The problem with many of these studies is that they have proven to be rushed and to claim conclusions that go beyond the limits of their own data and analyses. A recent analysis of the state of this literature showed that researchers often select only the most positive evidence (Bartoš *et al.*, 2026), while another “forensic audit” found much research on the effects of AI on learning to be severely flawed in terms of methodology and seriously misleading in terms of conclusions (O’Neill, 2026).

This was shown sharply by the recent retraction of a meta-study of the effects of ChatGPT on learning outcomes⁷. It appeared to combine the results from incompatible studies and to aggregate the findings from some very poor-quality research that should have been excluded for quality control reasons (Tuomi, 2025). So, on the basis of these weaknesses, the study was eventually retracted by its publisher, but it had already been out for a year by then, got massive social media attention, and been cited hundreds of times (Hsu, 2026). Its findings have circulated widely despite being nothing more than a meta-review of junk science.

Beyond that single publication, though, I think what such studies show is a kind of academic desperation to prove the effectiveness of AI in education among scientists who have staked their professional reputations on the technology and claims of its promise. These are scientists with distinct interests in centring AI as a uniquely important technology in education and hoping to shape education around the results of their work. Academic work on AI in education has always, at least partly, been oriented towards tech-centred reform of classroom practice, and that work has been turbocharged since generative AI arrived. That’s despite the persistent lack of credible evidence that AI benefits learners and the very questionable quality of much of the research claiming it does (Lawson *et al.*, 2026). Some recent studies even seem to indicate that AI is having precisely the opposite effect, with students *learning less* on measurable tasks than before generative AI took off a few years ago (Rismanchian *et al.*, 2026).

Another example of changing research practices around AI in education is efforts by government departments to construct evidence from trials and tests in schools and classrooms in real time. This is happening, for example, in England, where the Department for Education and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology are running a

⁷ See: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-026-07310-z>. Accessed: 24 Aug. 2026.

scheme for incubating and live testing AI prototypes directly in school classrooms. This is a major national program that involves the government funding commercial educational technology firms to build AI tutoring prototypes and then conduct experiments in schools⁸.

It's an example of what sociologists have recently termed "testing in the wild" or "experimentation beyond the laboratory": the increasing tendency to treat social settings as test sites for new technologies and innovations (Phan, 2025). Whether by intention or not, the innovation model being practised by the Department for Education in England resembles the Research and Development (R&D) process from the tech industry: it's all about live experimentation with innovative technologies that remain in development, rather than the careful introduction of applications based on proven results from rigorously conducted independent analyses.

GF & MP

This live testing all sounds like it could raise some serious problems. What do you see as the major issues here?

BW

Yes. Live testing of technology is risky. It treats school children as experimental test subjects who are being exposed to a technological treatment and then measured for its effects. This is happening despite significant concerns among many in the academic research community that AI poses many threats to learners' acquisition of knowledge, skills and independent thinking. It also risks being seriously unpopular with the public, given recent media reports on growing parental anxieties about the deleterious effects of technology on their children's learning.

Tech testing also appears to treat these classroom-based experiments as the basis for rapidly "scaling up" AI use from one trial to the whole school sector. The logic is to embed the tech in a classroom testbed, trial it with the test subjects, then scale up the results. This raises some big questions: whether all schools and classroom sites are contextually similar enough for such "scaling", and how the whole range of social, economic factors that affect activities, relations and outcomes in schools are considered in such trials. Again, this isn't necessarily a commercial aim. It's a governmental objective to identify technical solutions to the social and political problems of schooling and to rush these out as quickly

⁸ See: <https://ai.gov.uk/our-work/education/>. Accessed: 24 Aug. 2026.

as possible in order to be seen to be doing something – anything – in the name of school improvement. The faith in AI to solve all the problems of schooling right now is a prime example of what many tech critics call “technological solutionism”: the idea that technology can solve society’s most complex problems with maximum efficiency, and by association that private tech companies are best placed to “fix” what are fundamentally public problems.

GF & MP

This is very worrying, Ben. Are there any other aspects you might like to highlight in this scenario of technological solutionism on steroids?

BW

There are also commercial efforts to generate evidence that will support industry efforts to drive their products ever deeper into the sector. OpenAI, for instance, has a big research partnership with the Estonian government to trial ChatGPT-Edu with thousands of students⁹. Part of that work involves OpenAI testing out a new research instrument for measuring the impact of AI in education. Google DeepMind has been running randomized controlled trials with thousands of schoolchildren in Sierra Leone and England¹⁰. Anthropic has been talking recently about a live research agenda in schools at scale too¹¹. The obvious thing to say about these research and evidence production efforts is that they serve to support the commercial ambitions of the companies running them. That’s not a new issue. It’s part of long-running efforts to present themselves as authoritative research sites and not only commercial vendors. But it does raise pretty big questions about conflicts of interest when tech companies are testing their own products or recruiting other academics to work with them on doing so and then blurring the lines between research and marketing when they publish the results. And we may also need to ask how it is that tech companies can so easily get into schools to run experiments in the actual learning practices of students at these scales – and question the ethics of big tech experimentation in schools.

⁹ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/may/26/estonia-phone-bans-in-schools-ai-artificial-intelligence>. Accessed: 24 Aug. 2026.

¹⁰ See: <https://deepmind.google/blog/measuring-the-impact-of-learning-with-ai-in-sierra-leone-and-beyond/>. Accessed: 24 Aug. 2026.

¹¹ See: <https://www.edtechinnovationhub.com/news/codepath-and-anthropic-team-up-to-open-source-what-they-are-learning-about-ais-real-impact-on-students>. Accessed: 24 Aug. 2026.

GF & MP

Companies entering schools in “improvised” ways is something that concerns us in various ways. In Brazil, specifically, we have procedures that need to be followed before research is conducted in the public school system, and there is strict legislation regarding product purchases and placement in schools. Yet, companies manage to gain access to the system by seemingly exploiting gaps in legislation (for example, by placing products “freely” offered, often in Beta stages). Concerted efforts to present these “experiments” as though they are based on research protocols are only beginning to emerge. At any rate, these and the commercial research efforts you describe seem very different from the kinds of studies normally carried out by educational researchers in schools or departments of education.

BW

I think what we can say about these industry evidence-making efforts is that these represent an emerging kind of big tech-funded education research conducted at scale, with very large teams, computational and data-intensive resources, access to really large samples of participants and test subjects, and presumably vast (but undisclosed) sums of financial funding. In other words, new infrastructures of analysis and knowledge production have been constructed to produce evidence about AI effects in education. As a result, they also get to circulate their research efforts and results to huge global audiences via their own platforms and channels, bypassing the usual processes of independent peer review for ensuring the integrity and ethics of the work. Many of these companies are arguing explicitly that they are advancing “learning science” insights, so they’re also claiming academic authority from proximity to a field that has gained serious prominence in educational research lately.

So, what we can say about this is that we are seeing the emergence of a new kind of educational “big science” with the sociotechnical infrastructure and resources to conduct studies of AI effects in education at scale.

For me, the question isn’t so much whether these academic, governmental or commercial studies “prove” AI improves learning, but how these new kinds of studies are conducted, what questions they ask, what methods they use, what claims they make, and – most significantly – what impacts they have on teaching and policy practices. These are all ultimately political matters that position AI as a uniquely important technology to centre in all efforts to understand and improve schooling. The choice of the methods, the theories

and the models are all also significant. As critical data studies have told us, no data are neutral but are always produced and bear the imprint of their producers. Most importantly, if such resources are thrown at investigating AI in education, then what does this mean for other research into other aspects of education and schooling? How could small-scale sociological study of the structural, embedded and historical factors underlying inclusion and exclusion practices in schools, for example, stand up in the face of a massive Google DeepMind experimental study claiming AI can improve equity in the classroom?

GF & MP

What strikes us is that this is a complex and, dare we say, horrifying picture, which makes our minds wander off to sci-fi scenarios in which geopolitics is structured around large corporations, changing the nature of, though never eliminating, inequalities.

But let's stick to our main theme and tease out some of what you said above: large-scale empirical research demands large-scale funding, so it doesn't seem surprising that it is big tech that is churning out things we cannot (and perhaps should not) do in academia. It is not only that there are political and ethical issues (regardless of "sexy" new labels spun by marketing departments, experimenting with people, especially children and youth, strikes us as a return to a time before research ethics committees were created), but there are epistemological and ontological questions that we, as academics, must engage with when we think about what we do. Data are never neutral, as you said, and methodology is never devoid of theory, regardless of how much "faith" people place on numbers being "objective", "neutral" representations of things, so we tend to think that there is much underlying the type of research you described above that can be questioned with the help of research on micro contexts studied from different perspectives.

We too worry about how large-scale research on AI may contribute to strengthening the type of "junk science" you talked about, so we wonder about ways in which key issues like inclusion can be made visible in research on AI (or, at least, be shown to be absent from research efforts), when we seem to be immersed in a scenario supported on a common-sense type of faith in maths. For a mundane illustration from our experience in training new researchers: a difficult part of the job is to help them understand that, although 3,33 is approximately 30% of 10, it makes no sense to talk in these terms in a study that involves a group of 10 participants, with phrases like "the majority", "most of", "a few" and the like being basically meaningless in this context. Does this all mean that we must again defend the legitimacy of qualitative research altogether? And can we avoid being caught in

an impossible competition on whose research results speak louder in the media?

BW

The allure of numbers in research certainly seems evident in some of these large-scale efforts to measure AI outcomes in education. The OpenAI “Learning Outcomes Measurement Suite” I mentioned before is a really good example of this. It involves multiple kinds of quantitative data, which it calls “signals” that are calculated up into outcomes measures and dashboard visualizations. In many ways, this isn’t new at all: the basic model here is much like academic learning analytics or educational data mining research from a decade or more ago. It’s the “big data” model of learning measurement that was being built into edtech platforms many years ago and was most spectacularly on display at places like Khan Academy and AltSchool. Before that were decades of testing technologies, the build-out of vast infrastructures of assessment, and what researchers have called the increasing quantification or datafication of education at large.

Underpinning all of this is a kind of logic that treats numbers, statistics and data as accurate representations of the world – as if they simply depict a world out there. But numbers and data are not like that. Because they have to be produced, as we already noted, data often reflect the assumptions and implicit theories of their producers. In educational research, for example, quantitative studies of technology often assume that the technology can be isolated from all other social factors so that its effects can be measured and then rendered as neatly datafied evidence that the technology has a statistically significant effect on a specific outcome. But many qualitative researchers take a completely different view. Technology can never be separated from social factors. What happens with a technology in a classroom is always affected by the work of the teacher, by the characteristics of the students, by the design of the pedagogy, and by the interpersonal relations of all involved.

To put it another way, the software code always makes contact with social contexts. They affect each other. That’s a completely different starting place for research on AI in education than any of the examples of governments, researchers and tech companies doing measurement work I mentioned just now. But, of course, qualitative research is slow. That means we have much less really good research of this kind exploring AI compared to the outpouring of effects measurement studies and their attention-grabbing headline figures.

However, I do think we also need to think hard about the kind of qualitative research that is meaningful and worth doing in relation to AI in education. I start from the position here of thinking that much of the research produced about AI in education is pretty

redundant – and yes, I mean some of the critical qualitative work, not just the rushed quant studies. It doesn't offer anything new to the research field. It's just repetitive of what has gone before, and either offers nothing new conceptually or nothing fresh empirically (or both). There is a real risk that if we over-concentrate on AI, then we crowd out all other topics of interest and concern. If we dedicate all our intellectual resources and attention to AI, then we leave other research “undone”, as the science and technology studies scholar Dawn Nafus recently put it (Nafus, 2026). That doesn't mean we *shouldn't* research AI in qualitative detail, but that we need studies that are either conceptually rich enough to shift our understanding and knowledge in the field or sufficiently evidenced and detailed to impact on educational practices or to convince policy workers to take into account.

So, I've been encouraged recently to see some interestingly novel work emerging. One is a special issue of sociological analyses of AI in education edited by Lulu Shi and colleagues, which situates AI as an object of deep analysis and theorization (Shi *et al.*, 2026). Another is a paper by colleagues Mathias Decuyper and Carlo Perrotta theorizing AI in education as an “atmosphere” (Decuyper; Perrotta, 2026). They treat AI not just as a technology, but as a kind of cultural, social and economic phenomenon that has made “landfall” in education and induced all kinds of emotional or affective reactions. Their proposal is to study empirically how this atmosphere of AI, and the different affects it induces, impacts on educational practices of many kinds. These seem like much more generative ways of researching AI in education than simply measuring it in terms of quantified learning outcomes, as if the technology and its effects can be artificially isolated from all other social, personal and classroom factors that shape activities and outcomes in schools.

GF & MP

We also wonder about the stretched ethics boundaries that we, as a community of educational researchers, have been accepting, not only in terms of research on AI, but research with AI, possibly as a generalised normalisation of its presence as a “tool” to improve research processes and ideas generation. Some calls against the use of research in AI have gained resonance in the media and some manifestos have been sharply and clearly exposing the dangers of this naturalisation¹², but the instrumental perspective seems bound to prevail, even in the Humanities. What is your take on this? Have we, as academics, lost

¹² See: Jowsey *et al.* (2025); Bender; Hanna (2025); Lupton (2026).

our ability to be outraged by unethical procedures in research, or have we simply given up the fight against a more powerful opponent – by which we mean not only the Big Tech, but also a (self-)imposed logics of efficiency and optimisation? Or are we perhaps simply accepting that academic/scientific knowledge has gained a different meaning?

BW

Now, I'm not sure “methods wars” are helpful for educational research about AI as we go forwards, so I'm reluctant to pitch quantitative and computational practices against qualitative or even analogue research approaches. As Rebecca Eynon and Nabeel Gillani recently argued, there is likely to be significant benefit in innovating with our methodologies, especially by bringing together methods of computational social science with critical studies of education and technology (Eynon; Gillani, 2026). One of their compelling arguments is that policymakers tend to listen to data experts, and it might therefore be worthwhile to combine computational and qualitative research in order to speak in a language that policymakers might hear.

Could generative AI become part of our research apparatus in critical social scientific studies of education, technology and AI? Clearly those who authored manifestos like you mentioned just now would argue that GenAI is completely inappropriate for use in research. And their arguments are pretty compelling: the tech still appears to make a lot of mistakes, fabricates material, and is based on the unauthorized extraction of the work of past researchers (whose papers were fed into the models without consent or compensation). Then there are others who say you can use GenAI to do all kinds of interesting analyses, as long as you do so with the same kind of methodological care you would when setting up any other kind of research apparatus. Others again might argue that the current rejection of GenAI research tools is a form of “methods policing” by those fortunate enough to have all the existing research resources they need – a luxury not shared by others, especially in more resource-constrained contexts. The challenge here is how you can continue to maintain control of your research when it's being mediated and filtered through Large Language Models (LLMs).

As you put it, do we give up the fight by subscribing to a methodological program that foregrounds the efficiency of fast analysis, while glossing over the alarming lack of ethical reflection of the companies producing the underlying technology?

Perhaps a more interesting way to view it, from a scholarly rather than normative perspective, is as a controversy over methods. In my recently funded project, for example,

colleagues and I have been studying how scientific research infrastructures have evolved over the last decade to support research in educational neuroscience and genomics (Williamson, 2026a). Those infrastructure arrangements, particularly new technologies for advanced digital data analysis, have allowed researchers to make new claims about learning as a process that takes place through certain brain structures and functions, and about the genetic factors that – it is argued, controversially – affect students’ cognitive capacities and achievements in education. The point we’ve made in the project is that these methodological developments in technologies for data collection and analysis have fundamentally mediated and shaped ways of knowing and understanding learning at a biologically-embodied level. New computing and data analysis arrangements have made it possible for scientists to advance neural and molecular explanations of learning. And in England there is now even a new government-funded policy research centre to translate these new biological explanations and knowledge claims into educational policy and practice discussions (Williamson, 2026b). So, these methodological and technological advances have enabled scientific knowledge to be produced that now stands to be translated into actual classroom routines.

Something similar is now happening with AI as a set of research instruments. As you said a minute ago, AI is introducing changes in the procedures and even meanings of scientific and academic research. These are really challenging to established practices and knowledge in our field of educational research. It’s not just academic research scientists now doing educational studies through very different kinds of research set-ups, but government contractors and tech companies too. How educational research is done, by whom, and with what AI assistance, is becoming a pressing issue deserving of much greater critical attention.

So we should look at generative AI as potential research infrastructure not normatively – as either an ethically compromised technology, or as an efficient tool for new analyses – but as an apparatus, set up in particular ways, that will generate new kinds of knowledge that may then exert effects in the world. This seems to me a worthwhile research agenda for studying the methods of GenAI and their effects as they are deployed in new educational analyses. Maybe that can move us away from ongoing fights about whether *we should* or *should not* use AI in our research to detailed attention to what happens when different actors *do use* AI to carry out particular research projects. What kinds of results and knowledge are produced from such methodological set-ups, and how do their practitioners seek to generate real-world impact based on those projects? And certainly, those who do use GenAI for research need to be super-reflexive about these new methods apparatuses and their role in making data, evidence and knowledge.

And this also means remaining attentive to the contests that surround AI in research. There is, as sociologists have previously pointed out, a kind of “politics of method” involved in decisions about using certain kinds of technologies and data in research (Ruppert; Scheel, 2019). This term refers to the struggles involved in making certain methods and technologies seem authoritative and legitimate as ways of knowing and understanding objects and phenomena. If you use different methods, then things can look different. So, controversies over the use of AI in research can probably be understood as such a struggle over methods, and an unfolding case of a politics of method that will remain important for us to attend to over coming years. How, in other words, will generative AI or LLMs affect knowledge production in educational research and with what effects and impacts as such knowledge is mobilized and circulates into sites of educational policy and practice?

GF & MP

We can envisage that it might be more productive to conceive AI as an “apparatus that can exert effects in the world”. We wonder, though, about the “new kinds of knowledge” at stake here. AI is being widely used in tasks very closely associated with tasks we’ve understood as “human” for a long time, tasks which require skills that tend to define us as such. So, we wonder about specific effects on research practices and on how researchers see themselves. Reviewing literature, for example, is not really a trivial task, and we gather a lot of the “junk science” circulating consists of this type of product.

BW

As a journal editor of *Learning, Media and Technology*, I’ve seen a lot of junk science being submitted lately. David Berry has called it “scholarslop” to recognize that the research literature is being infiltrated with AI slop called up on demand by other researchers when they outsource their writing (Berry, 2025). So yes, the question of what “new kinds of knowledge” are being produced here is an important one. One observation I have as an editor is that a lot of papers that appear AI-mediated tend to follow a particular formula. They set out a multi-part conceptual framework, follow an almost bullet-point like structure, and wrap up with an explicit list of conclusions, often presented in the form of a set of “principles” or “propositions”. It’s not that far away from the kinds of academic writing conventions that I’m sure are widely taught in university writing courses.

But there's something a bit weird and uncanny about it. Most of these manuscripts – in my experience at least – will prioritize the idea of conceptualization as the main contribution but have barely any empirical content. It's the kind of research you'd expect if it was produced on demand from a massive global database of the world's past academic texts, rather than from scholarly contact with the social world. I wonder if people are using AI to produce all these conceptual papers because that's what AI can do – it can summarize existing texts and present them as novel theoretical aggregates. GenAI is a convenience engine for producing conceptual synthesis papers. But if you used AI to produce a manuscript that claimed empirical insights, then that would be at risk of serious academic misconduct. So we're in this weird space now where we're facing all these critical conceptual paper submissions that superficially look quite interesting but then prove to be substantively empty. I've got to say, being a journal editor is pretty miserable when you're deluged with this kind of material, as many of us now are. It's just automated scholarly text production that accomplishes nothing of any originality or significance.

GF & MP

We entirely sympathize, so much so that the Scientific Committee of *Educação On-line* decided last year that the journal would no longer publish literature reviews. That people, especially researchers in training, are automating literature reviewing seems unfortunate, as the skills required to do a good review are important in different types of qualitative data analysis. Why do you feel this is happening so often, and possibly everywhere? What would be alternatives to this “more-of-the-same” pattern in academic writing with AI that appears devoid of creativity and, dare we say, sensitivity to the real world?

BW

Of course, there are many reasons for researchers to turn to AI to help write papers – pressure to publish, demands of academic advancement, tenure review, a brutal academic system that prioritizes speed, productivity and performance, as well as a publication industry that is pushing new AI tools on to authors. The problem is the incentives that make AI attractive – that it can help you be a productive scholar with a strong publications profile. So, if we want to disrupt this, then it's more than breaking up the pattern of academics writing with AI. It would mean addressing the structural factors that incentivize scholars to take the automation short cut.

GF & MP

What is your take then on the near-future scenario of the publishing system? Will it be automated peer reviewing of AI-supported writing? Is this going to change the meaning, or worse, curb the importance of scientific publications, and maybe even change the academic understanding of what knowledge production is for?

BW

I'm really disturbed by the idea of AI peer reviewing. Our publisher prohibits it. But I recently saw a piece by one of the executives at the Frontiers academic publisher arguing that AI peer review is both inevitably going to happen in the end, and even that it is necessary. If AI is the problem, he argued, then it must also be the solution¹³. Yes, we are getting close to the nightmare scenario where AI writes the papers, AI reviews the papers, and then AI ingests the papers as subsequent training data! I'm not even joking about this. If you follow developments in the academic publishing industry, you'll see it is all about finding automation solutions or launching new automation features and upgrades. Even the underpinning research, not just the manuscript production, is going to be increasingly automated with services like Claude Science – Anthropic's all-in-one science automation platform that does everything from reviewing the literature and managing data to running analysis and then writing up the results. It's fully automated academic knowledge production on demand.

The reality of the use of all this AI is probably not going to be as spectacular as its promoters make out, and maybe not as bad as some imagine either. Is AI going to change academic and scientific knowledge practices dramatically, or will it be domesticated by existing cultures that result in really quite mundane and incremental shifts in practice? If I was an early career researcher in a field like Science and Technology Studies, I would be all over this. Imagine doing an in-depth ethnography of how new AI and automated knowledge discovery technologies get enacted in scientific settings, and how that changes knowledge practices and knowledge itself. This, in fact, is probably what we need in educational research and academic publishing too. We need ambitious emerging scholars to get up-close to ongoing developments with AI tools and platforms and then report back so that we're not still speculating about what could be, but fully informed about where, when, if and how AI

¹³ See: <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2026/06/30/guest-post-now-is-the-time-for-ai-in-peer-review-and-publishing-policies-need-to-recognize-this/>. Accessed: 24 Aug. 2026.

is actually involved in transforming research and publishing. Maybe such studies would show us if AI is *not* exerting the transformative effects that were promised!

But you asked about potential scenarios for educational research and publishing. Well, about two years ago my co-editors and I at *Learning, Media and Technology* did a little speculative thought exercise where we extrapolated from our current editing experiences to imagine journal publishing over the next decade (Williamson; Macgilchrist; Potter, 2024). We anticipated a breakdown in both technologies and trust over coming years, as AI leads to huge burdens on legacy systems of peer review, publishers and big tech companies continue to profit from papers and the exploitation of academic labour, and automation intervenes in every part of the academic research and publishing pipeline to severe detrimental effect. We imagined an eventual mass withdrawal of academic labour from such systems, building out from the existing trend of journal editorial teams resigning from commercial publishers and setting up on open access platforms instead. But we also imagined beyond this breakdown to a more hopeful future, where publishers realize that AI and automation undermine their missions, big tech is barred from scraping academic content without consent, and publishers work more collaboratively with editors to encourage public engagement with research. We don't offer this as a prediction, but as a possible future, maybe even a future to aspire towards – something *otherwise* than what we see on the immediate horizon.

I actually think one of the most important things we can do right now is to cultivate our imaginations. Whether in academic research and publishing, or in teaching and learning, we're being told the future is inevitably going to be shaped by AI and automation. But we can and should imagine these futures otherwise, through exercises of speculation, extrapolation and scenario-building, rather than assume we're on some kind of linear track to either a techno-utopia or techno-pocalypse of automated education and research.

GF& MP

Thank you so much, Ben – there's a lot here to mull over, hopefully it will be as thought-provoking to readers as it's been for us!

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