

## Beyond Work: AI and Educational Labour



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### Abstract

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into education has prompted significant reflection on the nature of work and labour among teachers and students. This essay examines the implications of AI on educational labour, highlighting the distinction between work, encompassing unpaid and broader educational contributions, and labour, defined by economic metrics. AI's capability to perform educational tasks raises concerns about its potential to replace certain aspects of teaching while emphasizing its limitations in fostering genuine educational experiences. The discussion explores how AI may transform schooling and education, reshaping roles and responsibilities, and addressing broader socio-economic and technological dynamics. Ultimately, this analysis considers the future of work in education amidst the evolving presence of AI.

*Keywords:* Educational labour, work and labour dichotomy, post-work society, AI and educational reform

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Since the end of 2022, the explosion of technological tools, innovations, and commentaries on the previously obscure topic of artificial intelligence (AI) has been nothing short of exceptional. This is true in perhaps most areas and industries—including, of course, education. Today, it appears as though all educators and education workers are increasingly intertwined and, indeed, entangled by the emergence and implications of AI in schools, classrooms, and learning across the globe. Whether AI will continue as an evolution or whether it will be a profound revolution is yet to be seen. Yet, prognostications of all kinds continue to discuss and debate our vision of a future with AI in educational circles. Educational reforms, more often than not, are a delicate dance between numerous goals, values, and interests (Cuban, 2001; Manzer, 1994), all of which ebb and flow over time. The AI revolution will no doubt fit into this larger framework—albeit in ways that cannot be readily predicted or foreseen. In light of these permutations, it may be valuable to reflect, examine, and evaluate what exactly it is about AI that is so important—and perhaps why it requires so much work. This essay then focuses on the implications of AI in education as it pertains to how we think about our work in the contemporary period and beyond.

### **Work and Labour**

The concept of work has existed throughout human history in various forms and definitions (Zwolinski, 2023). Generally, work can be described as human activities that are purposeful—productive or reproductive actions that an individual engages in at any given time (Standing, 1999). Conversely, labour is more narrowly defined as tasks of primarily economic means, specifically wages or paid employment (Standing, 2009). Work—particularly that which is unpaid or unrecognized—tends to be undervalued (especially by a metric of economic performance), while labour is more formally recognized (Beck, 2000; Jackson, 2010).

What exactly constitutes the work and labour of both teachers and students remains ambiguous at best. Teachers' work encompasses a broader range of activities, including both paid and unpaid efforts that contribute to students, schools, the educational environment, and broader communities. These efforts often go beyond contractual obligations embedded in the paid employment relationship (the job). Teachers know this, as do the labour organizations that represent them, and thus often engage in both work and labour as part of their defined and undefined roles and responsibilities. Hence, the difficulty in (re)defining teachers' work arises from the need to capture the broad, multifaceted, and dynamic nature of the role, which encompasses both the formal tasks for which they are paid, and also the myriad ways they contribute to the intellectual, emotional, and social development of their students and schools.

We may also endeavour to ask what exactly we mean by asking our students to engage in work. Taking on the role of student requires individuals to engage in activities that contribute to their development—academically, personally, socially, and beyond. We can consider classroom

attendance, active participation, doing homework, and partaking in extracurriculars as just some of the key activities involved in students' work. Yet, they also engage in these activities simultaneously as labour, as many of these performances are required to be completed in order to succeed through schooling. Hence, just as with teachers, students are simultaneously engaged in work and labour in their respective roles, complicated by open definitions and porous boundaries at any given place and time.

### **Education and Schooling**

Just as with the demarcation and overlapping nature of work/labour, we may also consider along the same lines the contested and intertwined boundaries between education and schooling. Education and schooling, while more often than not used interchangeably, embody distinct conceptual frameworks related primarily to the idea of learning (Davies & Guppy, 2018). As with work, education encompasses a broader term that includes all forms of learning experiences, formal and informal, which form the lifelong process of accumulating learning experiences. Schooling, as with labour, typically refers to the formal, structured system of learning that takes place within educational institutions (such as K-12 schools, colleges, and universities) under more standardized conditions. Educationalists hence see that while schooling is a significant component of education, it represents only a portion of the learning that an individual will accumulate or experience over a lifespan (Dewey, 1938).

### **Artificial Intelligence**

As outlined above, teachers and students engage in work and labour as part of their formal and informal roles and responsibilities. At the same time, teachers and students engage in education and schooling simultaneously, reflecting the broad and specific activities formed and required in relation to the goal of learning. It is within this nexus that we now contend with AI—the emergence of a technology that reflects both work/labour (in its ability to complete productive tasks) as well as education/schooling (in its ability to learn and improve over time) provides the basis for its import into the realm of education. In short, AI is going to change the way that we work, both as educators and as students. The key question is: how will this all unfold?

What appears likely and apparent at this juncture is that AI is able to do the labour of schooling (which perhaps causes notions of peril), while AI is not able to do the work of education (which perhaps provides numerous possibilities). For example, AI can effectively complete tasks such as answering homework questions or automating grading. However, it cannot manage a classroom of 30 students, build relationships, or else simulate the experience of education (Aoun, 2017). This distinction is fundamental to understanding why educators continue to worry about AI. That is, AI technology's impact is profound when it comes to human labour yet

simultaneously limited when it comes to human work. AI can significantly alter and reshape the configuration of schooling, but it cannot do much to change the nature of education. It is within this paradox of thinking about our work that we might find further insight into the AI (r)evolution and what exactly it means for individuals such as teachers and students (Celik et al., 2022).

### **Post-Work, Education, and Schooling**

The focus of the discussion on what AI can and cannot do reflects our fundamental and perhaps even innate concern with work itself. Hence, looking at the idea that AI will reshape the nature of work/labour in the field of schooling/education is where we locate the prognostications outlined by AI apologists and detractors alike. The promises of AI focus on the ability of technology to decentralize labour in our daily lives. This creates space for leisure time, which then allows individuals to engage in other forms of work (or education)—activities that may be conceived as valuable or productive in a broader post-industrial definition (Gorz, 1999). Nevertheless, many AI proponents continue to advocate instead for increased productivity (Selwyn, 2019), often rooted in ideas of efficiency (Mindzak, 2020). In contrast, AI displacement visions see a decreased role for labour, resulting in humans being removed from places such as the physical classroom or direct pedagogical role. Without access to formalized paid employment, the number of individuals working—including teacher-labourers within schools—will diminish.

Regardless of the outcome, introducing AI into discussions and debates concerning both work and education continues to push us towards thinking about a world in which both concepts are radically altered (Galanos & Stewart, 2024). These changes are truly about our work—how we work, when we work, and, most importantly, why we work. Indeed, in many ways, the work that we are undertaking today surrounding AI in education—as teachers, students, researchers, and policymakers—is about shaping how we will work in the future. How we spend our time—be it working, learning, or neither—relates directly to the purpose(s) of education and schooling. Both teachers and students are required to work—this is, fundamentally, part of the broader project that is education. However, what this work looks like and how broader socioeconomic dynamics and technological evolutions shape it appear, particularly at this juncture, to be quite uncertain. What any given society deems to be work or labour, leisure or productive activity, education or schooling, continues to change over time (Krahn et al., 2020). AI is a part of this next change, and our work today reflects our fundamental beliefs, values, and aspirations for the (human) work that is yet to come.

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