

Is AI in the classroom a study buddy or silent cheater?

From explaining difficult concepts to writing essays, AI is transforming the way students learn. However, experts warn it should support learning, not replace independent thinking.

BY GLORIA IRANKUNDA

World over, Artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT are finding their way into classrooms, study sessions, and homework routines. Students are using them to summarise notes, explain difficult concepts, generate revision questions, and draft essays.

Unlike a teacher who may not be available after school hours or a friend who may not know the answer, AI tools can provide immediate responses at any time of day. Students can ask questions repeatedly without fear of being judged for not understanding.

Irene Kemigisha, a Senior Five student, says she regularly uses ChatGPT when revising for examinations.

"Sometimes the teacher explains something in class and I do not fully understand it. When I get home, I ask ChatGPT to explain it in simpler terms and it helps me grasp the concept better," she says.

Kemigisha adds that she uses AI to create summaries from lengthy notes and generate quiz questions for self-testing.

Many students share similar experiences. Some use AI to organise their study schedules, brainstorm project ideas, or understand difficult topics in subjects.

EXPERTS

Experts warn that AI systems can sometimes generate incorrect answers, outdated information, or entirely fabricated facts. Students who accept every response without verification risk learning misinformation.

Education technology experts argue that when used correctly, AI can serve as a personalised educator.

Victor Lwanga, an AI trainer explains that the technology can support learning by providing explanations tailored to the learner's needs.

"AI can be a powerful educational tool. You can use it to ask questions, explore ideas, and receive instant feedback. The problem comes when you stop thinking for yourself and allow the tool to do all the work," he explains.

Lwanga says students should view AI as a guide rather than a replacement for effort.

When help becomes cheating

While many students use AI responsibly, others admit that the temptation to take shortcuts exists.

With a few prompts, AI can generate essays, solve equations, answer comprehension questions, and even write speeches. This convenience has sparked concerns among educators who worry that some learners are submitting work they did not actually complete themselves.

Shadrack Oloya, a Chemistry teacher at a secondary school in Kampala says the signs are becoming increasingly familiar.

"At times, you can tell when an assignment does not reflect a student's usual writing style. A learner who normally struggles with grammar suddenly submits work that sounds like it was written by a professional," he explains.

However, detecting AI-generated work is not always straightforward.

Oloya notes that students are becoming more sophisticated in how they use the technology. Some ask AI to generate content and then edit it to make it appear more personal.

Others combine information from different sources before submitting the fi-

nal assignment.

"This makes it difficult to know exactly how much of the work came from the student and how much came from AI," Oloya says.

The challenge has forced some educators to rethink alternative assessment methods.

"We are introducing more classroom-based assignments, oral presentations, and practical exercises that require students to demonstrate their understanding in person," he shares.

Blurry line

Oloya points out that the biggest challenge is that there is no universal agreement on where the line between acceptable use and cheating should be drawn.

If a student uses AI to explain a concept they do not understand, most people would consider that a legitimate learning activity. If the same student asks AI to write an entire essay and submits it without making any changes, many would consider that academic dishonesty.

"But what about situations in between? What if a student uses AI to generate an outline and then writes the essay themselves? What if they ask AI to improve grammar or suggest better sentence structures?" he wonders.

These grey areas are making the conversation more complicated. Oloya believes the focus should be on transparency and developing AI policies in schools.

"Students need to be honest about how they are using AI. Just as people cite books and websites, there may come a time when students are expected to acknowledge the role AI played in their work," he explains.

Globally, institutions are developing policies that define acceptable and unacceptable AI use. Education experts believe similar discussions are needed in schools.

Bright Future High School, Karagi says schools cannot afford to ignore the technology because it is already becoming part of students' daily lives.

"Whether we like it or not, AI is here. The question is not whether students will use it, but whether they will use it responsibly," he says.

Tumuhairwe says outright banning AI may not be realistic. Instead, schools should teach students how to use the technology ethically and effectively.

He argues that students still need to develop critical skills such as analysis, creativity, problem-solving, and communication.

"If AI is doing all the thinking, learners may miss opportunities to build these essential abilities," Tumuhairwe warns.

Risks of over-reliance

Although AI can provide useful information, it is not always accurate.

Experts warn that AI systems can sometimes generate incorrect answers, outdated information, or entirely fabricated facts. Students who accept every response without verification risk learning misinformation.

"For example, a student who always relies on AI to summarise notes may struggle to identify key points independently. Another who routinely uses AI to write essays may miss opportunities to improve their writing and critical thinking abilities," Lwanga explains, adding that students should remember that learning often involves effort.

"Part of education is learning how to think through problems. If you immediately turn to AI whenever you face a challenge, you may not develop the resilience needed to solve problems on your own," he shares.

Skill for the future?

Despite these concerns, Lwanga believes AI literacy will become an important skill for future generations. Just as students today learn how to use computer programmes, they may also need to learn how to work effectively with AI.

He maintains that understanding how to ask good questions, evaluate AI-generated information, and identify inaccuracies will become valuable skills in higher education and the workplace.

"AI is likely to become part of many professions. Students who learn how to use it responsibly will have an advantage. But they must also maintain the ability to think critically and independently," Lwanga advises.

Schools coping

School administrators are also paying attention to the growing use of AI among learners.

Reagan Tumuhairwe, a headteacher at

