

Professor De Mill Knows You Can't Ignore AI in Education

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Educators are struggling with the uncertainty surrounding artificial intelligence's impact on learning and how to integrate the tool, if at all. For Professor Burt De Mill, AI is something to embrace, not ignore.

At UC San Diego's Rady School of Business, De Mill teaches courses on negotiation, marketing, and business ethics. This past fall quarter was the first time the professor used AI to build his final exam: a simulated negotiation over TikTok USA. Not only did De Mill use AI to create the exam's roles and instructions, he required undergraduates to use generative technology to produce individual deep-research reports.

Now, at the conclusion of this first in-class experiment, Professor De Mill wrestles with the role AI plays in the ultimate impact he hopes to have on his students.

Q: How do you feel about AI in education at UCSD?

De Mill: I've seen a lot of innovation in my decades of being in business; this is bigger than any of them. This is going to fundamentally change education as we know it now. I think the big lecture halls are going to go away. I think a lot of it's going to become AI self study. I envision breakout groups, smaller class sizes, and more group projects. AI can't do a group project. I mean, it structured how to do it- this final exam that I have now is all AI-generated.

Q: When did you start implementing AI in your classes?

De Mill: This is really the first quarter that I'm using it in an assignment where I actually encourage people to do deep research in ChatGPT. I'm still trying to figure out where it's useful. The vast majority of instructors don't know how to give assignments that can measure learning with AI. I'm trying to figure out how to let AI do the basics and then do more with small in-class group work assignments.

Q: How do you feel AI comes into play with the importance of face-to-face connection?

De Mill: Part of memorizing certain standard knowledge, how an integral works, memorizing your integrals, I don't need to stand up in front of a lecture hall and tell you that. We want to learn skills, we want to have a career, to be productive and contribute to society, and memorizing formulas is not going to do that. But you still have to do it in order to understand the basic concept. AI is really good at structured learning, where creativity is less important. If it gives you more time to be creative in different ways, I love it. If it does the thinking for you, where you just become lazy, I think it's dangerous. And I don't think we know where that line is. I think we're still trying to figure it out. But it's not going away, it's here to stay.

Q: What does it mean for AI to stay at UCSD?

De Mill: I can tell you our Associate Dean Eric Yorkston, who reports to Dean Ordóñez, said to all instructors here at Rady 'I want you to start incorporating AI. I want you to start using it in lesson plans. I want you to start using it in research. I want you to figure out how to use it, where to use it, and I want you to teach students how to be productive with AI.' Because to tell you guys not to use it for your homework- forget about it. People are just going to do it, right? I can't stop that. The basic knowledge that you get from AI, I want to see it applied. I want you to take that and turn it into something novel, and that's what I'm going to evaluate you on. There's going to be a shift away from rote memorization towards applied learning.

Q: Do you have any concerns about using AI in your classes?

De Mill: What I fear is that it will dumb students down and put critical thinking skills in jeopardy. I'm a big believer that smart people can connect the dots. They can take disparate topics and relate them and assemble them in a complex way. My fear is that students are going to rely too heavily on AI for answers, and they're going to let AI connect the dots for them. I think that would be disastrous.

Q: How might AI impact ungraded aspects of college learning like self-regulation and pushing through hard things?

De Mill: Tricky question. I think AI can help you be more productive. It can help you figure out where to spend time and where not to spend time. Do you need to learn that by trial and error?

Yes, you do. A lot of learning is doing things wrong, and my worry with AI is you won't have the opportunity to do it wrong. You're not going to screw it up and then look back and go 'Ah damn I should've done this this and this.' I think we tend to remember mistakes and learn from them more than we do our successes. If it's always perfect and you never trip and fall, you don't know how to manage adversity. I still don't know whether AI's going to help or hurt with that. Part of me says it's going to help you prioritize your day in a better way, but part of me says you have to screw up to learn.

Q: Do you think there will come a time when professors who implemented AI in their curriculum will have to revert to old teaching styles?

De Mill: That's always what happens with new technology, we lean on it too heavily. I think we're going to lean too heavily on it, and then the pendulum's going to swing back. That happens almost always with new technology that I've seen. We get too dependent on it, and then we have to move back towards the middle.

Q: Is there anything that I should ask you about that I haven't yet?

De Mill: How do I measure performance in a classroom with AI? I don't know the answer to that question. I'm struggling with that question. How do I evaluate you as a student with an AI tool sitting on the shelf? How do I know that I have enhanced your critical thinking skills? Because my major goal as an educator is to enhance your critical thinking skills, to open your eyes to new things that you haven't thought about before, that change the way you see the world, that change the way you work, the way you think. I'm not sure I'm able to evaluate that now with AI being in, it bothers me a bit, gives me a little pause.

Q: How do you think educators might measure AI's impact?

De Mill: We just don't know. And I think anybody who says they know- they're not telling the truth. We don't know what to do with this. Ignoring it is not a strategy, that I can tell you.

This interview has been edited and condensed.