

A Note on AI Language and Adoption in Education

By Matthew Pittinsky, Ph.D. · **DRAFT** · Last Revised May 8, 2026

At the 2026 ASU+GSV Summit in San Diego last week, I attended a panel called *Every Student Should Have an AI Learning Companion*. Early on, Isabelle Hau, the executive director of the Stanford Accelerator for Learning, pushed back on the title itself. Don't call it a "companion", she said. A companion is a human social concept. Yes, there are products in the market that are AI companions, but that is something altogether different.

Funny enough, the panel did not define what was actually meant by a learning companion. The popular understanding, I think, is software that works alongside a student throughout a course, using AI to help them stay organized, understand the material, and make steady progress. It's designed to be aware of what a student is actually studying, and the student's particular strengths and weaknesses, so the support it offers is personalized rather than generic. I am enthusiastic about these capabilities, which is why I think the language we use to describe them, and AI in general, matters.

Released at that same ASU+GSV conference, the 2026 Walton Family Foundation/GSV/Gallup survey of Gen Z found that excitement about AI dropped 14 percentage points over the past year, anger rose nine points, and pluralities say AI will hurt their creativity and critical thinking. Eight in ten worry that using AI tools now will make learning more difficult for them in the future. This deep skepticism is remarkable. During the rise of the Internet, young people were enthusiastic pioneers. Gallup and

Pew polls of that era found that young people overwhelmingly saw strong computer skills as necessary for their future success, and liked computers and technology, with very few expressing any fear about its risks. Faculty are skeptical too. In the [AAC&U/Elon University survey](#) released earlier this year, 95 percent of college faculty said generative AI will increase student overreliance on AI tools, and 90 percent said it will diminish critical thinking. Those are not the sentiments of people who see a useful tool. They are the sentiments of people who have been told, in the industry's own language, that something is *thinking* for them -- and may even replace them.

Neil Postman and Questioning Media

In 2002 I edited a book on the Internet's impact on higher education called *The Wired Tower*. For the closing chapter I invited the social critic Neil Postman to repeat his [Questioning Media](#) argument -- his case that all technological change is a trade-off, that new technologies always produce winners and losers, and that we have an obligation to question a technology's effects with as much rigor as we celebrate its possibilities. His six questions remain insightful and especially handy today as we grapple with the impact of AI on education. Hau's pushback aligns perfectly with Question 5: *What changes in language are being enforced by this technology, and what is being gained and lost?*

Postman argued that a technology is just the "physical apparatus" -- the "machine" or the "wiring." What matters is the medium: the "social creation" that emerges from how a culture actually uses that technology. The technology "television" is the same box everywhere. Television, the medium, is shaped by whether you have one channel or five hundred, whether it runs commercials, and whether it immediately starts the next

episode. The medium is what reshapes institutions, habits, and power -- not the machine. And the vocabulary we give a technology is one of the most consequential ways we construct the medium around it. That is why the language of AI in education matters. When we call a pattern-recognition model *a companion*, we are not labeling a feature. We are shaping the social context -- the medium -- through which students, faculty, and institutions will encounter and judge the technology.

Postman provides examples that make this concrete. An *iron horse*, the 19th-century name for a locomotive, made a train feel like a faster buggy and obscured what was actually different about it -- the track, the timetable, the standardized workday it would soon impose. An *electronic town hall*, the 1990s name given to televised events and early Internet polling, obscured the difference between 5,000 Athenians in a square and 250 million Americans pressing a button on a remote. Closer to home and the subject of *The Wired Tower*, the term *virtual classroom* obscured the qualitative difference between typing into a text box and engaging in live dialogue with a professor and peers.

Applying Postman to the language of AI

AI is doing this again, with a new dictionary. Words like *agent*, *copilot*, *study companion*, and *tutor*. A system no longer predicts a next token, it *thinks*; it no longer retrieves from training data, it *knows*; it does not produce a confident error, it *hallucinates*.

Postman feared that borrowed language obscures the differences that allow us to understand and evaluate a new medium on its own terms. Today's AI vocabulary does exactly that, and then it does more: it removes AI from the category of tool entirely. (As an aside, this is not

surprising as the pursuit of Artificial General Intelligence is explicitly a medium quest, not a tool quest.)

Mechanically, a modern AI system is a mathematical model of patterns. A neural network is a very large set of numerical weights, tuned by exposure to examples, that maps an input to a probability distribution over possible outputs. A large language model, at each step, computes which token is most likely to come next given what has come before. There is no conscious actor inside. As Arvind Narayanan and Sayash Kapoor have argued, AI is best understood as a *normal technology* -- pattern recognition at scale -- that can do extraordinary things precisely because the patterns it has absorbed are so vast and so much of life is now experienced through digital environments.

That framing matters because there is a great deal about AI that we should be critical of, and the critique only lands when the technology is described honestly. These systems confidently produce plausible output whether or not it is true, they have no actual stake in whether the student actually learns, and they can probabilistically and unwittingly lead users down dark paths. They embed the biases of their training data. They are built and controlled by a small number of well-capitalized vendors whose commercial interests are not necessarily the same as the interests of students or schools. Each of these is a serious concern, and each of them is sharper when we insist on seeing the model as a model.

What changes when we call a tool a tool

Anthropomorphic language dulls all of that critique. But it does something else, too: it dulls the excitement.

When we say a system *thinks*, *knows*, or is a student's *companion*, we are constructing a medium -- exactly as Postman warned -- and the medium is a presence rather than a tool. A presence can take your job in a way a tool cannot. A presence changes what learning is, where a tool only changes how you do it. And a presence is not something you direct; it is something you negotiate with. Each fear that shows up in the Gen Z and faculty surveys -- of replacement, of a hollowed-out education, of losing control of the classroom -- follows naturally from a vocabulary that has quietly moved AI out of the category of tool.

Now consider what happens when we describe the same capabilities as software. An academic planner that tracks deadlines, flags missing assignments, and models GPA scenarios is a genuinely useful piece of software. A study aid that generates flashcards, practice questions, and level-appropriate explanations from your actual course readings is a better version of something students have always needed. A system that indexes a professor's syllabus well enough to answer a question at 2 a.m. provides support that scales -- and every faculty member who has taught a large course knows the value of that. Described as software, these tools are not mysterious and they are not threatening. They are obviously useful, obviously evaluable, and obviously worth getting right.

The anthropomorphic vocabulary takes that clarity away. It converts a planner into a *companion*, a study aid into a *thinking partner*, and a TA-style interface into something that *understands you*. The upgrade in language is a downgrade in understanding and consequently trust -- for the student using the tool, for the faculty member being asked to adopt it, and for the institution trying to govern it.

Language matters

In the preface to *The Wired Tower*, I noted that the same move was underway with e-learning in the late 1990's. *Courses* became *content*. *Universities* were therefore *content providers*. *Students* were redefined as *users*. Each substitution obscured and commoditized the thing it was renaming -- and, importantly, it alienated the faculty and institutions whose adoption was essential. There was a period, early on, when the Internet-era vocabulary generated real resistance. The faculty heard the language of the market being applied to their classrooms and they pushed back -- reasonably.

What changed was not that we won the vocabulary argument. What changed was that, over time, the technology became ordinary. We came to see the Internet not as a force that would replace the campus or the professor, but as a set of tools -- a digital environment that could support classroom instruction, expand access to it, and improve the administrative experience around it. Once that happened, adoption followed. Not because the resistance was irrational, but because the technology, described honestly, turned out to be genuinely useful.

I think we are at a version of that moment with AI. The apprehension is real -- the Gen Z numbers and the faculty numbers confirm it. But I suspect that a meaningful share of that apprehension is being manufactured by the vocabulary, not the technology. When we call these systems *companions* and *tutors* and say that they *think* and *reason*, we are constructing a medium that sounds like it is coming for someone's job, or for the hard-won process of learning itself. Strip the anthropomorphic language off, describe the capabilities as software, and what you see are tools that faculty can direct, students can use, and institutions can govern -- tools whose value is, frankly, obvious and super exciting.

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