Unteachable Machines and Unlearned Lessons: How the Death of Creativity Made Us Afraid of AI.

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There's a growing fear that artificial intelligence (AI) is taking our place, that it's stealing the way we think, create, and connect. But that fear didn't begin with AI. Long before machines could mimic our words, we had already started losing our voice in the rush to standardize learning, we stripped away the individuality of education, the curiosity, wonder, and adaptability that fuel innovation. In their place, we adopted test-centric models that prioritize measurable outcomes over meaningful ones.

Not so long ago, creativity was a cornerstone of American education. In the decades after World War II, schools wove art, music, theater, and creative writing into daily learning [1]. During the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S. government made significant investments in cultural institutions, most notably through the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) under President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society [1]. These investments were grounded in the belief that a healthy democracy requires citizens capable of critical thinking, creative expression, and civic engagement. Art wasn't an "extra;" it was an essential. Students might have learned to balance chemical equations, but they also learned to balance the rhythm of a poem. They were encouraged to draw, to dance, to debate, to dream.

Somewhere along the way, that vision changed. We began to measure intelligence in test scores alone, narrowing what counted as “learning” until the parts of ourselves that make us most human, curiosity, empathy, imagination, were pushed to the margins. Now, as AI becomes more capable, we are realizing too late that the skills we most urgently need are the very ones we’ve neglected.

During the pandemic, we gave children screens instead of support. Distractions instead of direction. They adapted, because that’s what kids do, but at what cost? Now we look at them: quiet, numb, disconnected. We ask, “What happened?” But perhaps the better question is, “What did we choose to value?” The fear that AI is dulling our children isn’t new; it echoes the numbness we began noticing long before algorithms entered the classroom, when screens replaced curiosity and structure replaced wonder. This fear didn’t just appear out of nowhere. It’s the result of years of small, quiet decisions, budget cuts, policy changes, and a cultural shift that slowly pulled creativity out of our classrooms.

I didn’t need national statistics to see the shift happening, I lived it. My own education felt like the slow closing of a door. In elementary school, I had art on Mondays, music on Wednesdays, and danced in P.E. on Fridays. Mondays meant the smell of sharpened pencils and tempera paint, the joy of turning a blank page into a world that had only existed in my head that morning. Wednesdays were my favorite, the sound of instruments tuning, the way my chest felt lighter when we sang. And Fridays, even if I didn’t particularly love line dancing, gave me a chance to laugh with my friends, to move, to feel the rhythm in my own body.

By the time my youngest brother reached elementary school, that world was gone. There were no paintbrushes or inconsistent access to recorders, no sketchbooks waiting for his ideas. His school days were measured in worksheets and screen time, the hum of creativity replaced with the quiet buzz of Chromebooks. The contrast between his experience and mine was more than just personal nostalgia, it was a glimpse into the narrowing of an entire generation's imagination.

I think about my older brother, who had access to home economics and woodshop classes, spaces where he learned skills both practical and creative. He could walk out of class with a shelf he'd built himself or having learned how to prepare a meal he could cook for our family. I never had those classes, but I still had music and art. My younger brother didn't even learn cursive. By the time my youngest brother came along, he didn't really have any of it. Very few art days. Next to no music. No chance to learn the tactile patience of kneading clay or the quiet pride of finishing a painting. It's not that my youngest brother isn't creative, it's that his creativity has been pushed into the margins, treated as an afterthought rather than a birthright. And when you see that happen up close, you understand why so many students grow into adults who think they're "not creative people." They've never been given the tools or the time to find out.

A study conducted by Brian Kisida (University of Missouri) and Daniel Bowen (Texas A&M) found that art education "boosts students' writing skills, builds social and emotional skills, and increases school engagement." But even with that evidence, art education has been steadily deprioritized in K–12 classrooms since the 1980s, as budgets shrink and testing takes center stage [2] [3]. Kisida and Bowen's research followed roughly 15,000

students from third through eighth grade across two school districts. Their team partnered with Houston's Arts Access Initiative, a collaboration of over 50 cultural organizations, local nonprofits, and community leaders working to expand access to the arts in public schools. The curriculum wasn't just an add-on; it included theater, dance, music, and visual arts through in-school performances, teaching-artist residencies, field trips, after-school programs, and hands-on workshops [2] [3].

The impact was clear. Compared to the control group, students in the arts-enriched classrooms showed noticeable improvements in behavior, standardized writing scores, school attendance, and peer relationships. They were more engaged, more compassionate, and more hopeful about their futures. Interest in college rose, along with long-term educational goals [2] [3]. The only area that didn't show any real change? STEM subjects. As Kisida explained, "The fact that there is no significant difference in factual recall between the two groups may be the most important finding of all." This underscores that the value of arts education lies not only in what students remember, but in how it shapes their ability to think, feel, and engage with the world. [2] [3]

Still, even with these outcomes, schools continue to strip away the arts. As the American Academy of Arts & Sciences notes, the arts play a pivotal role in developing empathy, cross-cultural understanding, and lifelong curiosity [3]. But the funding tells a different story. According to The Wallace Foundation, U.S. spending on arts education plummeted from around $169 billion in 2001 to just $100 million in 2019. That drop doesn't just reflect a budget shift; it reflects a mindset. A mindset that undervalues creativity, emotional development, and the kinds of learning that help students feel seen [3].

Creativity doesn't just spark ideas; it nurtures our capacity to feel *with* others. Yet evidence shows that as arts programs disappeared, empathy declined alongside them. A cross-temporal meta-analysis of nearly 14,000 college students from 1979 to 2009 found a 40% decline in empathy levels. The steepest drop occurred after 2000, a period that coincided with increased standardized testing and the rise of digital media consumption. [5].

But why? Why did we steer so far from the arts in our schools? Part of the answer lies in policy. The sharp decline in arts education wasn't random, it was written into policy. The turning point came in 2001 with the reauthorization of the "Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965", more commonly known as the "No Child Left Behind Act" (NCLB) [3]. While the law was presented as a bipartisan effort to close the achievement gap and ensure that all students reached proficiency in core subjects by 2014, its methods placed nearly all the weight on standardized test performance in reading and math. Schools that failed to show adequate yearly progress risked losing federal funding, and in this high-pressure environment, subjects not tied to state tests, including art, music, and theater, were often the first to go [7].

Research confirms the effects were swift and measurable. Kisida and Bowen's analysis of Houston's Arts Access Initiative found that increased arts exposure improved writing skills, social-emotional learning, and engagement [7], yet NCLB-era schools systematically cut those very opportunities. Research shows that during the NCLB era, schools serving high proportions of low-income students cut arts instruction by almost 49 minutes per week, disproportionately impacting visual arts and music access in already

underserved districts [4]. These cuts disproportionately affected students of color and those in rural or high-poverty areas, the same students NCLB claimed to prioritize.

In 2015, NCLB was replaced by the "Every Student Succeeds Act" (ESSA), which acknowledged the importance of a "well-rounded education" and explicitly named the arts as part of that vision. However, ESSA left most decision-making to the states, and without strict federal requirements, funding for arts programs remained inconsistent and vulnerable to budget cuts [8]. As the Wallace Foundation observed, while ESSA provided states with new flexibility to support arts education, many have struggled to translate that flexibility into meaningful, sustained investment [8].

And with those budget cuts came lasting damage not just to programs, but to students' sense of connection, expression, and self-worth. The result? A generation of students raised in systems that taught them how to perform, but not how to think. They learned to meet standards, not question them. And now, as artificial intelligence becomes more accessible, especially in academic settings, we're seeing the impact of that shift. Students aren't turning to AI because they're lazy. They're turning to it because they've been conditioned to value the product over the process, to prioritize speed, correctness, and output more than anything else. When you take away opportunities for creativity, exploration, and expression, you can't be surprised when students reach for the first tool that promises easy answers.

Research consistently shows that cutting arts education undermines student success, yet the data is often ignored when budgets tighten. Referring back to the Kisida and Bowen's study of Houston's Arts Access Initiative, it offers some of the clearest

evidence [2] [3]. Their randomized control trial, involving more than *15,000* third- through eighth-grade students, found that arts-rich instruction improved writing scores, boosted school engagement, and strengthened peer-to-peer compassion, all without any negative impact on STEM performance. In other words, the arts lifted students up without pulling them away from academic achievement [2] [3].

Similar findings have emerged nationwide. A *K–12 Dive* report summarized how expanded arts programming, including theater, music, and visual arts, fostered stronger social-emotional skills and increased long-term educational aspirations [10]. The American Academy of Arts & Sciences has also emphasized that arts education supports empathy, cross-cultural understanding, and lifelong curiosity, qualities essential in an interconnected world [3]. International comparisons tell a similar story: countries like Finland and Japan, where arts remain embedded in national curricula, consistently score high not only in creativity measures but also in critical thinking and collaborative problem-solving.

The Wallace Foundation has repeatedly pointed out that the benefits of the arts extend far beyond the classroom [3] [8]. Their 2023 report, “More Arts = More Benefits for Kids,” details how arts participation correlates with increased civic engagement and community connection, skills that AI can never replicate. These findings challenge the persistent myth that the arts are a luxury, showing instead that they are a proven driver of academic and social growth [3].

But it’s not just about academic shortcuts. The deeper crisis is emotional. Students today navigate a world where their main forms of connection, often through social media,

offer stimulation but not stability. The pandemic intensified this. Classrooms went digital, relationships became pixelated, and emotional development stalled. Kids adapted to learning through screens and coping through scrolling, but many never built the regulation tools or social-emotional skills they needed to thrive. They're not just using AI to write papers; they're using technology to fill the gaps left by systems that forgot how to care for them.

Many fears about AI eroding empathy, flattening nuance, and encouraging detachment are already realities of social media, just quieter. The research shows empathy is declining, but you can hear it in the way people speak: colder, more dismissive, and less curious. Disagreement has become detachment. The louder someone is, the more convinced they are of their correctness, and the harsher they are to dissent. It's hard to hold space for nuance in a culture that rewards performance over understanding, and harder still to build empathy in a system that doesn't value it.

This isn't just a technology problem; it's an education problem. Long before ChatGPT, schools were narrowing what "learning" meant. High stakes testing policies like No Child Left Behind pushed districts to prioritize reading, math, and science because they were easy to measure [6]. Arts and creative disciplines were cut or sidelined because they resisted quantification. Advocates for a STEM-heavy approach pointed to higher salaries and job security [6], and in a world where technological literacy drives economic stability, that logic holds weight. But it also comes at a cost: the erosion of skills, like creativity, empathy, and adaptability. Which are harder to measure but essential for a thriving society.

Others, like Kisida and Bowen, contend that creative skills can be nurtured outside of school, through extracurricular activities, community programs, or self-directed practice. In this view, the responsibility for fostering imagination and self-expression belongs more to families and communities than to already overburdened schools. For districts facing budget shortfalls, cutting arts programs is presented as a painful but necessary sacrifice to protect “essential” academic instruction.

But these arguments overlook a critical truth: creativity is not a luxury, it’s a literacy. Studies like the Houston Arts Access Initiative have shown that arts participation improves not just artistic skill, but writing, empathy, and engagement [3], skills that are transferable across all academic and professional fields. Removing the arts from the school day sends an implicit message about what we value, and that message reaches students long before they enter the workforce.

Even the assumption that creativity can flourish without formal support ignores equity. Community-based arts programs are not equally accessible, especially in rural areas or low-income neighborhoods [4]. When schools cut arts education, the students most affected are often the ones with the fewest outside opportunities. This is not simply a question of curriculum design, it’s a question of access, representation, and preparing all students for a future where problem-solving and adaptability are as critical as technical skill.

While underinvestment in arts education has created a slow erosion of critical thinking, the rise of AI has sparked a more urgent fear: that machines are now actively

replacing the need to think at all. Educators, parents, and policymakers have voiced growing concern that AI tools, especially large language models like ChatGPT, are becoming cognitive crutches rather than learning aids [9] [12]. As one New York Post editorial warns, “far too many kids won’t build crucial cognitive skills because a chatbot does all the heavy lifting for them while their brains are developing. [12]” Researchers at UPenn and Wharton echoed this anxiety, finding that while students who used AI completed research tasks more quickly, they also demonstrated significantly lower retention and understanding of the material. The worry isn’t just about academic performance; it’s about long-term cognitive health. Another recent study even found a strong negative correlation between frequent AI tool usage and critical thinking skills, especially among teens. As one educator put it, “AI surpasses human intelligence, not because AI got better but because human intelligence got worse.” [12] These fears are understandable, but they miss the deeper issue. AI didn’t cause the decline in cognitive skill; it exposed and accelerated a trend that had already begun when creativity, nuance, and complexity were pushed out of the classroom.

I’m not immune to that fear. I use these tools at times, and I still feel that flicker of unease: Where does my voice end and the machine begin? That feeling isn’t a flaw, it’s a signal. It tells me authorship matters, provenance matters, and that the parts of creative work I value most are the ones AI can’t convincingly perform: lived perspective, taste, discernment, and the courage to make choices that aren’t average.

For me, AI becomes less threatening when I treat it like a studio assistant, not a ghostwriter. It can help me collect references faster, surface counterexamples I might

have missed, or suggest alternate framings when I'm stuck. But it doesn't replace the sketchbook, the red pen, or the editorial meetings. It can't feel the weight of a sentence that carries a life. That is the work of a human director, deciding what stays, what changes, and what a piece is ultimately for.

So, I draw boundaries. I'm comfortable using AI for ideation (brainstorming directions, making mood boards, outlining options), for organization (summarizing my own notes, generating checklists), and accessibility (plain-language rewrites, alt text drafts I then refine). I'm not comfortable using it for final lines on the page, for replacing artists, or for training on creators' work without consent. If a tool assists, I'll say so. If it influences the process, I'll disclose it. And if it ever moves the work away from the values that guide me like care, authorship, equity, I step back.

In that sense, my worry about AI is really a worry about what we reward. When education prizes speed and standardization, AI feels like the natural next step: faster, smoother, and less messy. But creativity is supposed to be messy. It asks us to make choices, to risk being seen, to listen longer than what's comfortable. If we protect that process, through critique, revision, and genuine authorship, AI becomes a tool inside it, not the point of it.

As a creative director, my job is to hold those lines. To build environments where artists and writers remain the authors of their work; where tools are used with consent and credit, and where the "how" of making is as important as the "what." If I can do that, the question shifts from "Will AI replace us?" to "What do we want to make possible for each other that a machine can't?" That's the future I'm working toward: not fear-driven, but

standard-driven. Not anti-technology, but pro-authorship, pro-process, and pro-human.

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