

Moral Agency in the Age of AI: A Meta-Ethical Framework for Educative Leadership

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Abstract

This article examines the ethical responsibilities of educative leaders in an era of rapidly advancing artificial intelligence (AI). While AI offers new opportunities for personalized and adaptive learning, recent research has raised critical concerns about its potential to erode critical thinking, exacerbate educational inequalities, and commodify educational processes. The article employs a four-dimensional meta-ethical framework—pragmatic holism, relational ethics, virtue ethics, and critical theory—as a basis for ethical leadership in AI integration. Through analysis of early case studies and media investigations, it explores how AI governance might safeguard human agency, intellectual virtues, and democratic purposes in education. The article argues that educative leadership is pivotal to ensuring that AI in education remains aligned with public values, moral integrity, and the flourishing of learners and democratic society.

Keywords

AI in education, educative leadership, AI ethics, critical thinking, ethical governance, pragmatic holism, relational ethics, virtue ethics, critical theory, democratic education, educational justice, algorithmic bias, intellectual agency, data ethics.

Introduction

The accelerating integration of AI into education presents both unprecedented opportunities and profound ethical challenges for contemporary educative leadership. From adaptive learning platforms to generative language models, AI technologies are reshaping how knowledge is created, accessed, and assessed. Yet this technological transformation also raises fundamental questions regarding the purposes of education, the nature of human agency, and the moral responsibilities of those who lead educational institutions.

This article argues that educative leadership must adopt an explicitly ethical stance toward AI integration—one guided not merely by technical and operational considerations but by deep reflection on education's normative aims. It uses a four-dimensional meta-ethical framework—pragmatic holism, relational ethics, virtue ethics, and critical theory—as a conceptual basis for navigating the moral complexities of AI in education (Macpherson, 2025). Through this lens, the article examines emerging case studies of AI use in educational settings, explores implications for institutional and policy governance, and offers reflections on the future of ethical educative leadership in an AI-mediated world.

The Ethical Landscape of AI in Education

AI's rapid proliferation in education has generated a complex ethical landscape. On one hand, AI systems promise to support personalized learning, provide real-time feedback, and enable new forms of engagement for diverse learners (Luckin, 2023). On the other hand, they risk exacerbating educational inequalities, undermining critical thinking, and commodifying learning processes (Williamson & Eynon, 2020).

For educative leaders, these ethical stakes are particularly high. They must ensure that AI tools align with the moral purposes of education, that they respect the rights and dignity of students, and that they contribute to—rather than detract from—the development of critical, autonomous, and socially responsible learners. These responsibilities intersect with key leadership frameworks—transformational, instructional, distributed, adaptive, ethical, and culturally responsive leadership—each of which emphasizes different dimensions of moral stewardship and educational vision.

Transformational leadership calls on leaders to inspire a shared moral purpose in AI adoption, ensuring that technological innovation serves the broader goal of human flourishing (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Shields, 2010). Instructional leadership emphasizes the ethical imperative to ground AI use in sound pedagogical principles and evidence-based practices (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Distributed leadership highlights the need for collaborative and participatory decision-making about AI integration (Harris, 2014; Gronn, 2009), while adaptive leadership underscores the importance of moral agility and reflective practice in responding to emerging ethical dilemmas (Heifetz et al., 2009; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Ethical leadership foregrounds transparency, accountability, and integrity in AI governance (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2020), while culturally responsive leadership demands that AI tools respect and reflect the diverse epistemic and cultural identities of learners (Gay, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Selwyn, 2019).

In this context, a more comprehensive ethical framework is needed to guide educative leaders as they navigate the opportunities and risks of AI.

Philosophical Foundations for AI Ethics in Educative Leadership

This article employs a four-dimensional meta-ethical framework to support ethical praxis in educative leadership for AI integration: pragmatic holism, relational ethics, virtue ethics, and critical theory.

Pragmatic holism, rooted in Deweyan pragmatism, calls for continuous, context-sensitive evaluation of AI's impact on educational outcomes. It resists both technological determinism and ideological rejectionism, advocating instead for iterative learning and adaptive leadership informed by empirical inquiry and reflective practice (Biesta, 2010; Campbell et al., 2022; Dewey, 1938/1997). In this view, educational leaders must remain attuned to the complex and evolving ways in which AI technologies mediate learning, requiring an ongoing process of inquiry, reflection, and adjustment.

Relational ethics, drawing on feminist and Indigenous moral philosophies, emphasizes the primacy of relationships, trust, and care in educational contexts (Gilligan, 1982; Holmes, 2020; Wilson, 2008). It reminds leaders that AI tools must serve—rather than supplant—the relational foundations of teaching and learning, and that transparency, dialogue, and consent are essential to ethical AI use (Cerratto-Pargman & Lindström, 2020; Knox, 2020). This perspective foregrounds the lived experiences of learners and the moral significance of human connection in education.

Virtue ethics focuses on the moral character of educative leaders and the cultivation of intellectual and moral virtues in students (Carr, 2007; Kristjánsson, 2022). It calls for leadership that models curiosity, humility, courage, and critical discernment in engaging with AI, and for pedagogies that nurture these virtues in learners (Babic et al., 2021; Dignum, 2019). By fostering reflective and morally grounded dispositions, virtue ethics equips both leaders and learners to navigate AI's affordances and limitations responsibly.

Finally, critical theory exposes the structural power dynamics and ideological forces shaping AI's development and deployment (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Feenberg, 2023; Zuboff, 2019). It equips leaders to challenge corporate-driven agendas, to advocate for democratic control and public accountability in AI governance, and to resist forms of technological colonization that undermine educational justice (Selwyn, 2019; Williamson & Eynon, 2020). A critical orientation ensures that AI integration remains subject to ethical scrutiny and aligned with public, democratic purposes.

Together, these dimensions offer a robust ethical foundation for leadership in the AI era—one that honours education's normative commitments while navigating its evolving technological landscape.

Case Studies of Ethical AI Integration in Education

Recent case studies underscore both the promise and the ethical complexities of integrating AI in educational practice. When interpreted through the four-dimensional meta-ethical framework, these experiences illuminate how educative leadership must carefully mediate the use of AI to preserve and promote deep learning.

In a humanities seminar at University X, educators and students collaboratively designed AI-integrated activities that positioned AI tools as aids to—rather than substitutes for—critical thinking. Students used large language models such as ChatGPT to generate preliminary essay drafts, which they then annotated with reflective commentaries explaining their reasoning processes. This design fostered transparency and self-awareness in the learning process. However, initial findings revealed that while students' reflective capacities improved, their first drafts remained relatively superficial, indicating that prompt design alone does not guarantee critical depth (Macgilchrist, 2021).

In a STEM laboratory at Technical Institute Y, second-year engineering students participated in an experiment comparing AI-assisted and unaided problem solving. The AI-supported cohort underperformed in creative problem-solving and troubleshooting, displaying lower reasoning complexity and originality (Luckin, 2023). These findings suggest that premature reliance on AI can inhibit the development of foundational reasoning skills.

These concerns are reinforced by a recent *Globe and Mail* investigation, which reported that AI is increasingly “dulling” students' critical thinking capacities as they outsource intellectual labour to AI systems (Alphonso, 2025, June 6). The report warned of diminished cognitive resilience and declining ability to construct nuanced arguments. From a relational ethics standpoint, such trends underscore the responsibility of educative leaders to ensure that AI use remains transparent and dialogical. From a virtue ethics perspective, leaders must structure learning experiences to cultivate intellectual virtues before introducing AI tools. From a critical theory perspective, the report highlights the growing influence of corporate actors in shaping AI adoption in education, underscoring the need for public oversight and democratic accountability.

Kingwell (2024) argues that AI is fundamentally reshaping—and potentially dismantling—the traditional structure and purpose of universities, especially within the humanities. He contends that AI-driven tools now allow students to bypass core intellectual tasks such as reading, note-taking, and essay writing, while professors rely on similar technologies for grading and detection of academic dishonesty. This mutual automation hollows out the pedagogical relationship, rendering both students and educators peripheral to a closed, self-replicating digital system. Kingwell sees in this a broader erosion of intellectual engagement, as whole book reading, deep writing, and discursive thinking give way to performative learning and algorithmic outputs. He critiques universities for compounding the problem through massification, market logic, and reduced expectations. Despite this bleak outlook, he insists that philosophy remains essential—not for utility, but for cultivating imagination, critical reflection, and the pursuit of meaning.

Kingwell's argument is compelling in its diagnosis of structural decay and existential drift in higher education, particularly in relation to neoliberal pressures and digital acceleration. His use of irony and philosophical reflection strengthens the rhetorical force of his critique, grounding it in longstanding concerns about the commodification of learning (Giroux, 2014). However, his polemic risks overstating the determinism of technological change and underestimating the resilience of pedagogical adaptation. The notion that students and teachers are already “extraneous” neglects innovative models of hybrid education,

collaborative learning, and ethical AI use emerging across institutions. Moreover, while Kingwell gestures toward the need for philosophical renewal, he does not propose actionable reforms, leaving his critique suspended between cultural elegy and moral exhortation.

In sum, these case studies reveal that ethical AI integration demands continuous moral reflection and proactive leadership to ensure that AI serves—rather than undermines—the development of critical and autonomous learners. Kingwell’s (2024) warning reinforces this imperative by illustrating how AI, when uncritically adopted, risks displacing the human practices at the heart of higher education: sustained reading, thoughtful writing, philosophical inquiry, and the cultivation of meaning. His vision is not simply nostalgic but cautionary, urging educators to resist the temptation of frictionless efficiency and instead defend the slow, often difficult processes through which genuine understanding and intellectual growth occur. In this view, AI is not only a technical challenge but an existential one, pressing universities to rearticulate their purpose beyond metrics, automation, and market logic. While Kingwell offers no technological blueprint, his call is for a principled recommitment to education as a humanising practice—one that cannot be outsourced to machines without losing what makes it worth doing in the first place.

Policy Implications and Institutional Governance for Ethical AI in Education

The governance of AI in education is not only a technical or procedural matter but a deeply moral and philosophical task. Educative leaders must interrogate whether AI’s integration serves the fundamental purposes of education or accelerates its hollowing out. The unchecked deployment of AI risks displacing the very practices—deep reading, reflective writing, open-ended inquiry—that form the core of humanistic learning. In this light, ethical governance requires more than safeguards and frameworks; it demands a renewed defence of education as a space for intellectual resistance, meaning-making, and moral imagination.

At the institutional level, pragmatic holism encourages iterative, evidence-informed assessment of AI’s educational impact, but must now be attuned to the deeper question: does AI support or subvert the development of intellectual autonomy? Relational ethics reinforces the importance of transparent processes, informed consent, and meaningful human engagement—prioritising dialogue over delegation. Virtue ethics demands leadership that actively nurtures intellectual integrity, humility, and courage in resisting the allure of frictionless automation. Critical theory reminds us that AI in education is not neutral; it is shaped by corporate interests and institutional economisation, trends that must be challenged to preserve education’s emancipatory potential (Williamson & Eynon, 2020).

Alphonso (2025, March 2) argues that without such principled leadership, AI adoption can deepen inequalities, de-skill learners, and entrench passive modes of thinking. In Kingwell’s view, this represents not just a policy failure, but a cultural one—the loss of belief in the intrinsic value of learning as a human practice. Educative leaders must therefore advocate for open, transparent, and democratically governed AI, rooted in diverse epistemic traditions and resistant to standardisation and surveillance. At stake is not simply the content of what we teach, but the kind of thinkers we hope to cultivate.

Concluding Reflections-The Future of Ethical AI and Educative Leadership

The rise of AI in education marks a civilizational inflection point—one that challenges the philosophical foundations of learning itself. While AI may offer efficiencies and tailored learning experiences, it also risks reducing education to a series of transactional outputs, where reflection is outsourced, reading is abbreviated, and the essay—long a vessel for independent thought—is rendered obsolete. These trends do not merely threaten academic standards; they imperil the moral and intellectual soul of education.

The four-dimensional meta-ethical framework advanced here offers both conceptual clarity and moral resolve. Pragmatic holism must remain anchored not only in empirical inquiry but in a philosophical defence of slow, uncertain, and often inefficient learning. Relational ethics reminds us that education is an encounter—between minds, across time, and through shared struggle—something no algorithm can replicate. Virtue ethics calls for leaders who model intellectual courage in resisting market logics and defending spaces for critical inquiry. Critical theory illuminates the structural forces—economic, technological, political—that seek to reduce education to a service industry and equips leaders to contest these pressures with principled dissent.

The future of ethical AI in education will demand more than regulatory reform or technological refinement. It will require public deliberation about the ends of education, institutional imagination to protect its moral purposes, and courageous leadership to resist the quiet substitution of human thought by machine simulation. We must ask not only what AI can do for education, but what it threatens to take away—and whether we are willing to lose it.

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