Becoming More Human in the Age of AI

Preparing Students to Exercise Judgment, Build Relationships, and Act with Purpose

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Executive Summary

Access to better answers is not the same as readiness to act on them.

A student arrives with a polished recommendation. The analysis is persuasive and the slides are clear. Then someone challenges an assumption. Can the student explain the reasoning, listen without becoming defensive, and decide what should change? AI may have helped produce the work. What happens next reveals something different about the person's preparation.

That distinction matters for higher education. As AI expands what students can produce, institutions must also attend to how students develop judgment, purpose, and relationships. The opportunity is not merely to help them adapt to disruption. It is to prepare them to shape what comes next.

Mental fitness offers a practical contribution to that work. As used here, it is the trainable capacity to meet everyday pressure with awareness, regulation, resilience, and choice. Repeated practice can give students opportunities to notice a reaction, recover their attention, and take a thoughtful next step rather than let pressure decide for them.

Research on AI-assisted work and learning shows why design matters. Better performance with a tool does not necessarily mean stronger independent capability; carefully designed tutoring can also improve learning. [2–4] Human development should therefore be part of how institutions teach AI use, not an optional supplement.

This paper proposes embedding practice in courses, team projects, advising, and career preparation. Students make a decision, encounter feedback or a changed condition, and try again. Educators look for evidence in what students can explain and do, not only in the quality of the finished output or their reported confidence.

Institutions must provide the conditions for that development: access to appropriate tools, mentors, meaningful work, and human feedback. Resilience cannot substitute for opportunity. The goal is to help students use powerful tools while becoming more capable of directing their own lives and contributing to others.

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Why This Matters Now

AI can make difficult ideas more accessible, widen the range of options students explore, and create room for experimentation. The question for educators is what to do with the capacity it creates.

A faster assignment is not automatically a richer learning experience. When a tool supplies the reasoning, resolves uncertainty, or rehearses every response, an educator needs to know which capabilities the student is still exercising. The risk is not assistance itself. It is mistaking successful completion for development.

The distinction is between friction that obstructs learning and challenge that develops capability. Inaccessible materials and confusing instructions should be fixed. Having to explain a choice, hear a different perspective, or revise a decision may be precisely the experience worth preserving.

For students, the stakes extend beyond assignments. What can I contribute? Where do I belong? How do I choose a direction when career paths are changing? A tool can suggest options. Finding purpose and testing those options requires experience, relationships, and opportunities to act.

Higher education's response should connect three responsibilities: help students use AI well, develop their capacity to act with judgment, and create genuine opportunities to contribute. Treating these as separate concerns risks preparing students to operate tools without helping them decide what is worth doing with them.

"Becoming more human" means developing capacities we already possess, not earning our humanity through performance. Education has always served that purpose. AI gives institutions a reason to make it more deliberate.

Mindset Is More Than Positive Thinking

Mindset appears in choices. Do I ask a question or hide uncertainty? Investigate a better answer or defend my first one? Take a useful next step or wait until I feel completely ready? These choices influence whether students engage with the experiences intended to develop them.

The aim is not a preferred personality. Quiet students can exercise agency; confident students can avoid learning. What matters is how students respond when their assumptions, plans, or sense of competence are tested.

Five orientations deserve particular attention:

1. Curiosity Keeps Inquiry Open

Curiosity keeps a plausible answer from ending the inquiry. Students practice it by asking what is missing, whose experience differs, and which assumption deserves testing. AI can generate alternatives; curiosity gives students a reason to investigate them.

2. Agency Means Taking Part

Agency means helping shape a situation rather than only adjusting to it. A student identifies a worthwhile problem, chooses how to use assistance, and takes responsibility for a next step. Seeking help can be an expression of agency, not a surrender of it.

3. Humility Makes Room for Learning

Humility allows a student to say "I do not know yet," distinguish confidence from evidence, and change a view without treating revision as defeat. It connects knowledge with an honest understanding of its limits.

4. Resilience Helps Us Stay Engaged

Resilience keeps a setback from becoming the end of the effort. It includes recovery, a change of approach, and recognizing when support or a different environment is needed. It is not an instruction to endure every obstacle.

5. Purpose Gives Capability a Direction

Purpose gives capability a direction. It can begin with a problem worth solving, a community a student cares about, or a contribution they want to make. Students do not need a lifelong calling before they can take meaningful action.

These orientations develop in context. Students need room to question, access to support, and consequential work in which their choices matter. They are not a scorecard for explaining why some graduates succeed while others struggle.

Connection Is Part of the Learning

Human connection is one of the ways learning happens. A classmate challenges an assumption. A mentor notices hesitation beneath a polished plan. A community partner explains why an elegant solution misses the problem. Each encounter can change what a student sees and does.

Empathy becomes concrete when another person's needs alter a decision. Collaboration becomes real when a team works through disagreement rather than dividing an assignment into separate pieces. These experiences help students learn both how to contribute and that they belong in the conversation.

MIT's report warns against a transactional view in which assignments become outputs, teachers become evaluators, and peers become optional. It argues for education that helps students make meaning, form identities, exercise judgment, and participate responsibly in community. [1]

AI can help students prepare questions, rehearse a difficult conversation, or explore an unfamiliar perspective. The next step still matters: engaging with a person who can disagree, be affected, and hold them accountable. Preparation should lead toward that encounter rather than replace it.

A useful design test is whether AI makes meaningful human engagement more likely or easier to bypass.

What the Research Helps Us See

Three studies illustrate the distinction between assisted performance and developed capability. They examine different populations, tools, and tasks; they should not be read as a single verdict on AI in education.

Better output is not always better judgment

In a field experiment with 758 Boston Consulting Group professionals, AI improved performance on tasks within the tested system's capabilities but reduced correctness on a selected task outside them. [2] This is evidence about professional task performance, not student development. It highlights the importance of recognizing when persuasive assistance deserves trust.

Completing practice is not the same as learning

A study of nearly 1,000 students at one Turkish high school found that GPT-4-based tools improved mathematics practice performance. Students using the less constrained tool subsequently performed worse on an unaided exam than students without AI access. Teacher-informed tutoring safeguards largely mitigated the harm, without producing an unaided exam advantage over the control group. [3]

The educational question is not only what students finish with assistance, but what they can understand and apply afterward.

Thoughtful design can help

A randomized crossover study in a Harvard undergraduate physics course found greater immediate learning gains with a carefully designed AI tutor than with comparison active-learning classroom lessons. [4] The result concerns structured tutoring for particular lessons, not unrestricted chatbot use or lasting gains across disciplines.

Together, these findings support deliberate learning design and assessment beyond assisted output. They do not test the mental fitness approach proposed in this paper; its contribution to AI-related learning and behavior requires evaluation.

UNESCO's AI competency frameworks already include ethics and human agency. [5] Connecting that instruction with repeated decisions, feedback, and human interaction is an extension of responsible AI education, not a competing initiative.

An employer example of integrated development

Goldman Sachs offers a workplace example. In a Forbes interview, its global head of human capital management, Jacqueline Arthur, described reinforcing judgment, transparency, and oversight within the firm's AI training, alongside the continuing importance of relationship skills. [6] This is one employer's reported approach, not evidence of training effectiveness. Its relevance is the integration: learning to use AI includes learning to exercise human responsibility.

For educators, this suggests a direct connection to graduate readiness. Students can practice explaining an AI-assisted recommendation, disclosing how it was produced, questioning its assumptions, and discussing its consequences in the same assignment.

Making the Human Side Practical Through Mental Fitness

A student may know that a claim needs checking and still rush to submit it. They may recognize a flawed recommendation and remain silent to avoid conflict. They may have a workable career plan and stop acting after rejection. The missing piece is not always information. It can be the capacity to use that information when pressure changes the response.

Mental fitness focuses practice on that moment. It is distinct from subject knowledge, emotional intelligence, and AI literacy, while supporting the application of each. The approach here is educational rather than clinical; it does not replace mental health care or remove institutional barriers.

One practical cycle is notice, reset, act, and learn. It can be repeated during ordinary academic and professional work, with feedback that helps students see whether their response is improving.

Notice the reaction

Identify what is influencing the choice. "I want to finish quickly." "I am embarrassed to ask." "I am defending this because it was my idea." Naming the reaction privately creates a chance to examine it. Personal disclosure is not required.

Reset attention

Pause long enough to return attention to the situation. What needs checking? Who needs to be heard? What help is needed? A brief grounding exercise, a written prompt, or a clarifying question can create space for a more deliberate response.

Act, learn, and repeat

Take the next useful action, receive feedback, and try again. The important step is not the pause by itself. It is what follows: verifying a claim, raising a concern, revising a decision, or following through despite discomfort.

Repetition turns the idea into a practice educators can observe and improve. A student who explains composure fluently has demonstrated understanding; a student who listens, revises, and remains engaged when challenged has demonstrated behavior. Both matter, but they are not interchangeable.

Three Learning Experiences That Put People First

The following scenarios are illustrative designs, not reports of measured outcomes. Each combines a real task, a moment of pressure, human feedback, and another opportunity to act.

1. Moving Beyond a Polished Answer

A student uses an approved AI tool to explore options for a fictional market-entry case. She checks the claims and prepares a convincing recommendation. A classmate asks whose interests it overlooks. The facilitator then changes a budget constraint.

Rather than immediately defending the work, she notices the impulse, pauses, and asks what the new information changes. She revises the recommendation and explains why in her own words. Peers challenge the reasoning and identify what became stronger.

The learning is visible in how she responds to a changed condition, not simply in the original presentation. A later case gives her another opportunity to practice without requiring the same prompt.

2. Speaking Up When Efficiency Misses a Person

A team reviews an AI-generated staffing proposal. One student spots an unsupported cost claim and an overlooked accessibility requirement. The group is eager to move on.

The student practices raising a specific concern without attacking a teammate or withdrawing. A partner provides feedback on the clarity of the concern, the evidence needed, and whose expertise should inform the decision. The team repeats the conversation with a different constraint.

The task brings judgment, communication, and responsible AI use together. A sound process still requires appropriate expertise and institutional procedures; confidence alone cannot make the recommendation safe.

3. Finding a Next Step After Rejection

After a job rejection, a student uses AI to improve a résumé but avoids contacting anyone. The obstacle is no longer the document. It is the conclusion that the rejection means there is no place for them.

An advisor helps the student separate what happened from what they are assuming. They identify a manageable action, such as requesting feedback, speaking with a contact, or contributing to a relevant project. At the next meeting, they review the action and decide what to try next.

This is practice in agency within a difficult labor market, not an explanation for that market. The institution must also help create access to mentors, employer relationships, and meaningful work, especially where financial or other barriers limit participation.

Where Higher Education Can Begin

Choose one existing setting, one behavior, and one person responsible for supporting the work. A course team might focus on revising a decision after feedback. A career program might focus on following through after a setback. Begin where the need is recognizable to both students and staff.

Build a short practice cycle into that setting. Capture an initial attempt, introduce feedback or a changed condition, and make time for another attempt. Use a common prompt such as “What did you notice, what did you choose, and what will you try next?” Faculty and advisors can experience the cycle themselves before facilitating it.

Review observable work alongside student reflections. Did the explanation become clearer? Did the student seek relevant input, revise a weak assumption, or complete the agreed action? Confidence and satisfaction are useful context, not substitutes for those behaviors. Use what the first cycle reveals to adjust the design before expanding it.

Provide time, accessible materials, suitable AI access, and clear rules for use. Protect private reflections and offer meaningful accommodation alternatives. Participation should not depend on a student’s ability to purchase tools, disclose personal experiences, or find a mentor without support.

This makes human development a shared institutional practice rather than another demand placed on students. It connects learning, career preparation, and leadership without reducing education to employability.

The Leadership Opportunity

AI gives higher education a choice about how to use the time and capability it creates. Institutions can ask only for faster, more polished work, or use that capacity to deepen inquiry, relationships, and responsible action.

The practical leadership question is where students will get repeated opportunities to exercise judgment when the answer is unclear, another person disagrees, or a setback makes withdrawal tempting. Those opportunities need a place in the learning experience, people to support them, and evidence that they are helping.

Preparing students for the future means more than helping them keep up with tools. It means helping them find worthwhile purposes, participate in communities, and influence the world they are entering.

The question is not only what students can produce with AI. It is who they become while learning with it.

For institutions ready to explore this work, The MBA Experiment can help identify a practical starting point within an existing program, design repeated opportunities for practice, and consider how to evaluate what changes. I welcome a conversation about what your students need and where that work could begin.

Kevin Thibodeaux | kev@mbaexp.com | mbaexp.com

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About The MBA Experiment

The MBA Experiment works with business schools and professional programs to help students make decisions, communicate, recover from setbacks, and prepare for leadership. This paper offers a human-development perspective and practical approaches for institutions to consider and evaluate.

Kevin Thibodeaux | kev@mbaexp.com | mbaexp.com | linkedin.com/in/kevinthibodeaux