

AI and Education: A Framework

Introduction

AI - artificial intelligence - has become impossible to ignore in our society. We are confronted with it daily in education as well. Pupils use it, teachers experiment with it, and school leaders reflect on policy. Developments are moving quickly, and at the same time generative AI raises fundamental questions. These questions are not only about what is possible, but above all about what is desirable and responsible. This is especially true for Christian education. We want to ground our choices in a vision that does justice to our calling as educators: to form young people into persons who are able and willing to serve God and their neighbour. This requires reflection on the place of AI within a broader framework of convictions about technology, humanity, knowledge and education. We therefore need to return to the foundations, to the underlying convictions. What we currently experience as normal or common practice in education is not the measure of all things.

This document discusses four central themes:

1. technology and technological practice
2. the human person
3. knowledge
4. education

These themes are closely connected. We begin with technology and technological practice because AI is the reason for this framework, but knowledge or education could just as well be placed first. The themes can be read separately, but they become truly fruitful only when they are seen in relation to one another. Each section contains brief, firm statements intended to prompt conversation and stimulate deeper reflection. They are intended for teachers, school leaders and policymakers in the field of education. Students may also benefit from them.

This framework does not claim to be complete or definitive, and it will be expanded and revised on the basis of advancing insight. For example, we would like to add scenarios, sketches of situations and explorations. The framework is an invitation to further reflection, conversation and development. The document 'Bouwstenen voor AI-beleid' (see literature) offers a process for this.

On Technology and Technological Practice

- Technology and technological practice are gifts from God. He has placed these possibilities within creation; it is our task to discover and use them to His glory. The Bible is full of examples of technology: Noah's ark, the tabernacle, the temple, tools and instruments.
- Technology may therefore be valued. At the same time, after the Fall nothing is neutral anymore. Technology, too, is subject to misuse, absolutisation and ideologisation. It tends to want to control everything and draw everything to itself - something about which Prof. Egbert Schuurman and others have often warned.
- Technicism is the conviction that everything can be solved technically. This leads to reduction: problems are reduced to procedures and algorithms. But reality is more than that. Technicism fails to acknowledge mystery, the relational and the moral. It touches on idolatry.
- AI is a form of technology that brings all of this into even sharper focus. (Generative) AI systems can perform impressively, but they derive their power from large amounts of data, mathematical calculations and pattern recognition. They are not persons. AI's do not have knowledge; 'beneath' the outputs there is nothing, no meaning. They know no wisdom, no sense of responsibility, no love. We must therefore continue to bring these in ourselves.

- At the same time, we can also use AI for good in many professions and sectors. Think of medical technology, Bible translation work, taking over administrative tasks, or didactic support. AI can also make life more pleasant. Its use is therefore not 'wrong by definition' - the way in which it is used is decisive.

On the Human Person

- The human person is created in God's image. This means: relational, responsible, spiritual, bodily. Only a human being can bear responsibility, because he has a will. AI cannot do this. A system cannot bear moral responsibility, however advanced it may seem.
- This view of humanity is at odds with many assumptions that are common in technological circles. A materialistic or naturalistic worldview often predominates there. Reality is understood in terms of matter, such as chemistry, biology and measurable physical processes. The fundamental difference between human beings on the one hand, and animals, plants or lifeless nature on the other, effectively no longer functions.
- This way of looking influences assumptions, insights and predictions about what AI can and should do - whether that future with AI is viewed positively (utopian), negatively (dystopian), or somewhere in between. When AI systems concern human beings, there is a risk that they reduce people to a collection of characteristics or measurable data. Often these are figures: behaviour, preferences, performance, and so on. Such simplification does no justice to the full human person as the image of God - with feelings, consciousness, relationships and values - who cannot simply be captured in numbers.
- Theology has emphasised that the image of God in the human person has been damaged by sin, but is renewed in Christ by the Holy Spirit. In upbringing and education, therefore, there is a deep calling: to point pupils to the need for, and possibility of, a restored relationship with God, and thus to help them find their place in the world.
- From a biblical perspective, the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount and the apostolic letters provide direction for ethical action. Virtues such as moderation and truth deserve special attention in the conversation about AI. They help us stay away from legalism or casuistry that does not lead to wisdom.
- AI also touches on questions of Christian values and worldview. How do children relate to technology? Who or what determines what is 'true', what is 'good', what is 'meaningful'? Precisely for that reason, we must continually take the view of humanity into account in pedagogical and didactic choices.

On Knowledge

- In the Bible, knowledge is never merely intellectual or cognitive. True knowledge is connected with the heart (Proverbs 1:7). It is relational, experiential and connected with God and His reality.
- AI generates information at lightning speed. But information is not yet knowledge, and certainly not wisdom. What AI produces must be weighed - it may be accurate, but it may also be misleading. 'Hallucinations' (errors) can continue to occur, precisely because ultimately it is a matter of statistics and probabilities.
- AI repeats patterns from the past, but it has no understanding, no context, no ethics. AI is trained on data from the internet, with all the characteristics of that data, including bias in many forms. Human assessment of an AI-generated result is therefore indispensable. Expertise, judgement and insight into sources remain crucial.
- Knowledge must also be shaped by experiences with real, tangible reality - nature, culture, people of flesh and blood. Precisely this experiential knowledge provides anchors for critical thinking. Acquiring real knowledge begins early, with outdoor play, reading, doing and discovering.
- Scientific knowledge is provisional and bound up with presuppositions. AI is trained on data that reflects worldviews, usually implicit ones. This calls for critical reflection on both source and form.
- The modal aspects of the Reformational Philosophy (Dooyeweerd) can help to counter reductionism. Every aspect of reality must be understood in coherence - also when designing teaching materials or assessing AI output.

On Education

- Education is a purposeful activity, but its purpose cannot be captured in schemes. It touches on who a pupil is, what he or she is called to, and how he or she may grow in wisdom and insight. This requires openness, patience and direction.
- In Christian education, that purpose is deeply rooted: teaching the pupil to live before God's face. This goes beyond preparation for the labour market. It is about formation, character and spiritual discernment. The Westminster Catechism (Question 1) gives direction: 'What is the chief end of man? To glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.'
- AI challenges education to look again at goals, methods and assessment. Some current assignments - most of them, it seems - can easily be completed by AI. This calls for a different didactic approach: more emphasis on process, conversation, reflection and application.
- Teacher and pupil must truly encounter one another. AI can help with tasks, but it can never take over education. The contact between teacher and pupil remains crucial. The teacher remains responsible, even when AI 'pre-sorts' something.
- Values such as truth, moderation, community and responsibility must be addressed explicitly - in learning objectives, content, didactics and school culture. The Didactic Diamond (Murre, 2021) offers a practical and well-considered tool for this.

Closing Thoughts

AI is a given. We cannot ignore it, but neither do we need to embrace it without discernment. What is needed is wisdom: discerning what is good, what is moderate, what is true. This requires reflection and practice, policy and experiment.

This framework seeks to contribute to that. Not as a final word, but as the starting point for a conversation that must be held during study days, in departments, in the classroom, at the board table and at home. In this, let us think not only technically, but also theologically, pedagogically and morally. AI without measure is a harsh, unreliable master. With moderation, AI may perhaps be a good slave.

P.S. We used AI to style this document.

Bibliography

There is a great deal of literature available on each of the topics. Here are several sources, which themselves also contain many useful references.

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