

Embracing AI – but in a responsible way

By Rachele Terranova, Parker Schug & Brendan Carpenter

Continuing a series exploring the presence of artificial intelligence in our schools — and, over time, in society as a whole. Thoughts? Questions? Ideas? Email us at exeditor@liherald.com.

What place does artificial intelligence have in schools? Should it be feared? Embraced? Somewhere in between?

These are conversations that didn't even exist a year ago — at least as far as education is concerned. But as AI becomes more and more accessible, students and teachers alike are finding they can use software to ask questions, find answers, and even complete their work faster — and maybe even better — than they ever could.

But no matter how some may feel about AI — or simply not even understand what AI is — the tool is making its way into schools and curriculum. How fast and how much depends on the district. But at this point, it seems teachers and administrators on Long Island are accepting AI rather than running from it.

Revolutionizing teaching and learning

One of those districts is Bellmore-Merrick Central High School, which is not just introducing AI to its students — it's already turning it into a college-level course.

Offered through the computer science department at Calhoun High School in Merrick, the magnet course partners with Long Island University to offer the college credit to not only Calhoun students, but also those from Kennedy and Mepham high schools in Bellmore, too.

"Each project is aligned with artificial intelligence topics that showcase the practical applications of AI," said Danielle Caliendo, the district's mathematics and computer science chair.

Students learn the Python programming language while creating AI chatbots. They also program a robot created by a French technology company to use AI features like facial recognition. And they fly drones.

Students also completed a linear regression project designed to make predictions based on existing data, like how public company stocks might perform.

Each project is aligned with AI topics that showcase the tool's practical applications.

Joe Innaco, who leads the district's administrative and instructional technology efforts, sees technologies like ChatGPT — a free chatbot system designed to provide a human-like response to a prompt — as fascinating possibilities.

"Our vision is of opportunity and innovation," he said. "That's how we see technologies like these. Opportunities and innovations for teachers. We want to provide training. We want to encourage exploration in model classrooms, spotlight success, and really host conversations about it."

Embracing AI goes right to the stop of the Bellmore Public Schools district, where superintendent Joe Famularo already serves on several AI advisory boards at institutions like Adelphi University, New Tech Institute and LIU. He also participates in think tanks conducted to discover how to incorporate AI into the classroom in a safe and responsible way.

While change might be daunting to many, Famularo points out that it's not unprecedented. Just think about how much opposition there was to bringing something as simple as a slide ruler into a trigonome-



Courtesy Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District

New to schools in Bellmore and Merrick is a college-level artificial intelligence course. Partnering with Long Island University, the class is offered at Calhoun High School, where students can earn college credit by learning about the emerging technology.

try class.

"If you look at the history, there was a lot of resistance because it would eliminate all the thinking of doing trigonometry," he said. "It was used, and it was embraced. And it saves more time for creative thinking and innovation."

Eventually came scientific calculators, and then the internet. Both received significant pushback, but now who could imagine a classroom without them?

Learning responsible use of AI

Instructors at Lawrence Woodmere Academy in the Five Towns are guiding students there in to use AI responsibly. John Tiliakos — who teaches computer science in the middle and upper schools — tends to let his students lead discussions surrounding AI.

AI is coming into his middle school-level engineering and technology classes, as well as his more high school-level courses in aviation, aerospace and computer programming.

But even before that, Tiliakos was spreading the word about AI, teaching a class at LWA on how artificial intelligence works in our world.

While that class no longer exists, Tiliakos said he and the other teachers at LWA are still focusing on the same values of providing knowledge for proper use of the technology.

"AI is a great tool," Tiliakos said. "There's nothing wrong with it, if it's used in a positive way."

That's why he focuses so much of his attention on inputs — the written instructions given to AI systems. Tiliakos believes that inquisitive nature of teenagers could lead to devious uses of the technology — like writing term papers and the like.

His responsibility, Tiliakos said, is to direct students toward feeding AI prompts that result in helpful information to be used for beneficial causes.

"When you use AI, you see scenarios based on what you did," he said. "Every action is a reaction."

But some teachers — even at LWA — aren't too keen about the AI presence.

"I don't think it's positive or negative," said Christopher Clark, a senior at the school. "It just depends on how you use it."

One unlikely way of putting AI to use is through another somewhat newer technological offering: podcasting.

"AI is still new. But for podcasting, it's still very, very new," said Henry McDaniel, a theatre arts and oration teacher at LWA. "What it can do is help you write a script for your podcast."

Podcasting students also can use AI to reproduce their own voice to read their scripts, McDaniel said. They then post the productions online.

"Our motto here is 'at home with the world,'" he said. "What we're trying to do is give them skillsets, but (also) teach them the responsible way of using those skillsets."

Testing the waters

Implementing AI has been a little slower going in Long Beach, where the discussion on how best to use it continues.

Lorraine Radice, the school district's literacy director, has worked to alleviate many of the fears some Long Beach teachers might have when it comes to AI, while looking for ways they could try to implement the technology into their respective classrooms.

"Over the summer, I taught two professional development courses in the district and taught teachers how to use ChatGPT," Radice said. "I surveyed teachers in the fall across the district as to who was using ChatGPT and who knew about it. Even in the fall — after about nine months of ChatGPT being in social media circulations and in the news — not as many people had used it as I expected."

While Radice would very much like developing ways on how AI chatbots like ChatGPT can be used in classrooms, a lot of her time is still focused on educating teachers what exactly the AI software is.

"So, part of the goals of those summer professional development courses was to raise awareness of how to use it," Radice said, "and then to really start to support teens in thinking about how it could be used from the planning side of being a teacher. And then also how it can be used as a tool to provide support and equitable access to writing and generating ideas for

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Some teachers worry AI goes a little too far ⁷

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kids.”

Having access to AI has impacted classrooms already by allowing students to use it to aid research, while many teachers worry they could go too far and have AI completely answer questions and even write essays for them.

But that just means adapting.

AI is a great tool. There's nothing wrong with it, if it's used in a positive way.

JOHN TILIAKOS
teacher,
Lawrence Woodmere
Academy

But there is still a ways to go before AI becomes more commonly accepted in classrooms, Radice said. At least on Long Beach.

“I wouldn't say that there is a push,” she said. “I think part of that is because of the privacy. We want to make sure that we're using tools that are safe to use in school. And once we do that, then it can become a more consistent part of our practice.”

“A teacher raised a great question during a session when talking about using artificial intelligence tools to analyze classical texts,” Radice said. “The same question has been asked so many times, and she asked, ‘If I could just get the answer from a tool like ChatGPT, then what's the point of even asking this type of question?’”

“That's a great thing for people to think about. What is the point of this question? Can I rephrase this question that really puts the student at the center of the thinking, and not so much (a) media tool?”



Parker Schug/Herald

Lawrence Woodmere Academy in the Five Towns has a professional podcasting room where students learn to develop, record and upload audio programs using open-source artificial intelligence technologies to not only write scripts, but to handle actual audio production.

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