

The learning paradox: why educators must unlearn to embrace generative AI

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Introduction

The higher education landscape is undergoing a paradigm shift in teaching practices with the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). GenAI's rapid emergence implies moving beyond simple technology adoption and automation to generate new content, ideas, and solutions like never before (Kohnke *et al.*, 2025). GenAI is reshaping how educators approach higher education teaching and learning, research, and administration (Ng *et al.*, 2025). The paradigm shift requires extensive reflection, and educators must unlearn to relearn and embrace GenAI's possibilities (Barros *et al.*, 2023). This study examines how higher education educators should approach unlearning traditional teaching practices to effectively adopt GenAI. The study adopts organizational unlearning as a pathway for meaningful GenAI integration.

Theoretical foundation: Organizational unlearning theory

Organizational unlearning is an intentional process of shedding obsolete knowledge, routines, practices, and behaviors that have become redundant or hinder acquiring new knowledge and behaviors (Sharma and Lenka, 2022). Three dimensions of unlearning exist within the higher education context:

1. *Cognitive unlearning*: Higher education has a long history, and while many teaching methods have been developed over time, changes in society necessitate that educators relinquish outdated approaches. Eliminating these structures helps remove conflicting norms and ideals that hinder the mental process of reflecting and resetting old assumptions.
2. *Behavioral unlearning*: Humans are innately behavioral, and discarding conscious and subconscious actions is essential. Behavioral unlearning requires discarding actions rooted in routines and practices no longer relevant or effective to establish new behavioral patterns.
3. *Structural unlearning*: The environmental influence of social, cultural, economic, and political factors plays a significant role in the organizational unlearning process. Dismantling institutional barriers is challenging, as structural norms are often subconsciously embedded within daily operations.

GenAI's "existential threat" is disruptive, and unlearning is a prerequisite to overcoming cognitive, behavioral and structural norms. Using old methods can prevent higher education from adapting to new and necessary approaches. Organizational unlearning provides the platform to actively discard norms and allow higher education institutions to absorb, adapt, and creatively apply GenAI to fit their needs. An unlearning approach

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maximizes the transformational potential for innovation, productivity, and improved decision-making.

The educator's dilemma: What must be unlearned

Higher education educators are inherently traditionalists, and unlearning is not instinctive. There are multiple unlearning dilemmas that educators must reflect on, including traditional role conceptions, assessment paradigms, control and authority, and time allocation beliefs. The information deluge of the digital era means that educators must transition from information gatekeepers to learning facilitators who collaborate with students and peers to learn. There must be a shift from a content deliverer to a critical thinking coach that empowers holistic thinking and problem-solving in and beyond the classroom. The emergence of GenAI has led to an increase in assessment discrepancy policing, and educators must reflect on the design and practices of authentic assessment to enable critical thinking and problem-solving. The control and authority of knowledge sharing is now about creating knowledge together with technology and GenAI. Educators must embrace uncertainty emanating from technological advancements and adapt a co-learning teaching and learning environment conducive to pragmatic learning. These dilemmas affect how educators manage their time. It's important to unlearn the idea that being "busy" is valuable. Rethinking and redefining productive time require a paradigm shift in how educators manage their time effectively, utilizing technologies such as GenAI.

Generative AI as an educational mechanism

Operationalizing GenAI as an educational mechanism requires reflecting on educators' unlearning dilemmas. GenAI affords educators administrative efficiency, where feedback systems can be automated to alleviate productivity barriers to foster focus time. Higher education educators exist in environments where student learning is not linear or uniform. Developing personalized learning pathways significantly impacts educators' workload, and GenAI provides multiple platforms to simplify the process. Educational enhancement through GenAI is unprecedented, given its capability to be used as an AI teaching assistant for designing, developing, and facilitating a robust educational experience. Traditionally, educators have relied on existing sources (e.g. case studies) to promote authentic learning and assessment. GenAI can draw from various sources to create scenarios or simulate contexts that directly relate to a student's environment, thereby boosting relatability and contextual understanding. From the research perspective, GenAI uses include clarifying concepts, guiding literature reviews, analyzing data, and supporting supervision feedback. Student support is arguably a core responsibility, but it is subject to an educator's availability and workload commitments. GenAI can provide 24 / 7 support for basic queries and guide students when workload expectations are challenging for educators.

A practical framework for unlearning and relearning

This research uses the conceptual integration of organizational unlearning and digital maturity to map multiple unlearning stages for higher education educators to integrate GenAI as an assistant. The digital maturity model of [Ladu *et al.* \(2024\)](#) is adapted to develop a practical framework ([Table 1](#)). Five maturity stages are proposed for higher education educators. Stage one begins with unlearning misconceptions about GenAI and academic integrity by emphasizing fear identification and challenging GenAI controversies. Stage two embeds deliberate unlearning of traditional content delivery and assessment methods, facilitating GenAI exploration and experimentation. Stage three challenges traditional knowledge creation and rigid curricula to create a collaboration and co-creation environment. Stage four deepens unlearning by moving away from lecturer-centered

Table 1 Mapping unlearning maturity stages for higher education educators to integrate GenAI

Stage	Recognition activities	Unlearning level	Key actions
Stage 1 – Foundation awareness	- Identify fears about AI replacing educators - Acknowledge AI is not only a cheating tool - Consider AI's role in lesson planning - Review and map current assessment methods vulnerable to AI misuse	Initial unlearning - Discard AI fears and resistant mindsets - Challenge beliefs that AI undermines learning - Move away from discrepancy detection and policing approaches	- Create a safe space for AI experimentation - Draft an AI-assisted lesson plan - Establish initial AI usage guidelines - Study basic AI literacy vocabulary
Stage 2 – Educational experimentation	- Review existing teaching practices for AI-assisted opportunities - Evaluate assessments that AI can easily complete - Reflect on opportunities for AI-enhanced student learning - Assess current feedback and grading practices	Deliberate unlearning - Abandon "information gatekeeper" mindset - Move away from memory-based assessment methods - Embrace that there is no one-size-fits-all teaching approach	- Embed AI writing assistants for student feedback - Realize the reality of designing AI-proof assessments - Test AI for creating context-relevant case studies and scenarios
Stage 3 – Strategic implementation	- Document and share AI integration stories and examples with peers - Analyze student AI usage patterns - Reflect on AI's impact on industry's professional requirements	Systematic unlearning - Challenge "sole expert" identity and beliefs - Accept that students are AI proficient - Move away from rigid curriculum ideals	- Co-create AI policies with students - Design collaborative human-AI assessments - Explore personalized learning pathways development using AI - Experiment creating creative activities - Create subject specific AI prompt libraries
Stage 4 – Transformational practice	- Assess readiness for AI-first curriculum design - Identify interdisciplinary AI opportunities - Determine ethical AI integration practices	Deep unlearning - Stop lecturer-centered education - Abandon traditional grading models - Move toward integrated and interdisciplinary qualification structures	- Drive AI literacy initiatives in immediate context - Design AI-collaborative assessments - Explore AI-enhanced experiential learning - Develop ethical AI usage frameworks - Integrate multimodal AI (text, image, video, code)
Stage 5 – Institutional readiness	- Monitor emerging AI capabilities constantly - Evaluate institutional AI readiness - Review global AI education trends	Transformative unlearning - Abandon fondness to current AI tools - Move away from legacy curriculum models - Embrace Human-AI collaboration	- Drive institutional AI policies - Mentor AI adoption across departments - Research AI's role and impact on learning - Develop future-ready contextual competency frameworks - Lead discussions on post-AI education

learning and exploring interdisciplinary avenues to embed human-AI collaborative approaches. Stage five manifests institutional readiness to promote transformative unlearning that drives future-ready contextual competency frameworks through active monitoring of AI education trends.

Implementing unlearning in higher education enables educators to adopt GenAI without relying on linear progressions. Instead, educators can integrate unlearning levels and actions across multiple stages, starting with low-stakes GenAI experiments. This

progressive integration enables reflective practices to document unlearning journeys and align activities with available resources. Forming AI communities of practice fosters holistic stakeholder engagement, while ethical frameworks developed through collaborations ensure that all stakeholders are heard and empowered. Continuous assessment and change underlie each maturity stage, facilitating the adaptation of educators and institutions to evolving AI.

Conclusion and future directions

Retrofitting disruptive technologies into higher education structures is challenging. Educators are often the most reluctant to change and adapt, given their traditional mentoring style. Higher education and educators must adapt to disruptive technologies, such as GenAI, to enhance teaching practices. Unlearning is a transformative endeavor that higher education cannot ignore or protest. The underlying notion of education is to advance human development. Educators must critically reflect on the role of AI to ensure the discipline is not left behind and maintains its human-centered progression and stature.

Keywords:

Higher education,
Teaching and learning,
Learning and teaching,
AI literacy,
Generative AI,
GenAI,
Organisational unlearning,
Maturity levels

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