

Humanities and Humanity in an AI World: An Educator's Manifesto



On The Purpose and Practice of K-12 Humanities Teaching in Today's World
Co-written by Humanities Educators | 2026

At R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion, we are counting on humanities teachers to save humanity. That sounds like a joke, but in an AI world, it's really...not.

The Process

This **Educator's Manifesto** emerged from **Humanities + Humanity in an AI World**, a facilitated experience led by R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion. Over two months, a community of humanities educators and academic leaders came together to read, write, reflect, and engage in structured dialogue. Through this collaborative process, they created a shared understanding of what it means to teach the humanities at a pivotal moment shaped by AI.

Rather than centering tactical concerns such as academic integrity policies or AI tool adoption, participants wrestled with deeper philosophical and pedagogical questions about the purpose of humanities education in today's world. Ultimately, we co-created this Manifesto as an outcome of our conversation!

Our goal with this publication is to issue an invitation: We hope that what follows in these pages is a catalyst for the thoughtful, courageous conversation our world so desperately needs.

The Participants

We recognize and celebrate the following educators for their contributions, while also appreciating the many others whose school policies require anonymity.

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Humanities is About Humanity

A Educator's Manifesto on K-12 Humanities Instruction in an AI World

Today's children are growing up in a world where their very humanity can feel inconvenient, slow, and even scary. It's simpler to text than talk. It's safer to ask a bot than a friend. It's faster to get an AI-generated summary rather than to read, to think, to express yourself. Yet, we know that in an era of artificial intelligence, humanity – including the skills, experiences, and stories that define the human experience – matters more than ever.

In this new world, schools certainly should equip students to become skilled, ethical users of AI. (The question of how best to do so is indeed urgent and worthy of the attention it is receiving elsewhere!) But we believe that in this landscape, schools also have an obligation to defend, practice, and celebrate humanity on a daily basis. We see humanities classrooms as the heart of this work.

The study of history, literature, religion, and philosophy has always been of humans, by humans, for humans – and it should continue to be so. While thoughtful integration of AI tools in humanities courses makes sense, the purpose of humanities courses must be about being human: How can we design our courses so that students encounter their shared humanity, build connections with others, and strengthen the capacities that set people apart from machines?

As humanities teachers in this new era, we acknowledge that our content expertise is necessary but no longer sufficient. This document, created by two dozen humanities educators at schools across the US, outlines how we must shift our practice to prioritize teaching the essential human skills of reading, writing, and discussion in an AI world.

Evolving our teaching practices in the age of AI will demand a distinctly human investment, and we are ready to make it!

On The Teaching of **Reading** in an AI World

Reading is about encountering other humans' voices and perspectives. It gives context to our lives and helps us know who we are. Yet, the process of reading is perhaps as important as the content itself. Reading invites emotional and intellectual engagement – requiring sustained attention and resulting in joy, frustration, awe, confusion, insight, and triumph. AI-generated summaries may convey key content, but they undermine the reading experience. Sustained contact with a writer's mind, language, and syntax is what renders reading such a deeply human experience.

In today's world, we believe that reading is:

- >> An opportunity to teach students to do something slow and difficult in a culture that prizes speed and ease. This builds attentional and cognitive stamina that is useful in many areas of life.
- >> A method for creating common experiences and knowledge. This allows students to build community and cultivate qualities such as empathy, curiosity, and historical awareness, helping them to think beyond themselves and the present moment.
- >> An invitation to study the intentional use of language. Our world has been shaped by how previous generations have used language, and our shared future depends on our students' ability to communicate intentionally and clearly.
- >> A context for sharpening critical thinking skills in a world where mis/dis information abounds. Close reading teaches students to interpret, question, and analyze what they encounter, rather than accepting everything as reality.

Given these beliefs about reading in an AI world, we commit to the following actions in our schools and classrooms:

- >> Advocate for time for students to read during the school day. All students deserve to build the skills and stamina they need to experience the “flow” state of sustained reading.
- >> Continue to assign and expect students to read full-length novels and primary sources – and name and celebrate how challenging that experience can be. We believe students should encounter texts in their entirety when possible.
- >> Provide students with differentiated scaffolds and strategies for reading, helping them achieve success as they struggle with complicated texts. Especially for teachers of older students, this may be a new responsibility and require professional development in literacy instruction.
- >> Design reading experiences that prompt students to connect what they are reading to their own lives. This may mean assigning more immediately-relevant, contemporary literature or providing prompts that explicitly ask students to relate their own experiences to those in a text.

On The Teaching of **Writing** in an AI World

Writing is a human way of thinking and expressing, one that helps students make sense of the world and their place within it. The process of writing matters as much as any final paper because it asks students to engage in critical thinking, intentional expression, and rigorous revision. While AI may provide helpful support in some stages of the writing process, students need foundational skills to execute each on their own first.

In today's world, we believe that writing is:

- >> A tool for engagement. Whether it's critical thinking, deep analysis, effective persuasion, or sense-making, the ability to discern and communicate what matters most will be critical for students as they participate in workplaces and our democracy.
- >> An intrinsically valuable process. Writing is a way to process ideas and experiences, practice creative expression, develop a personal voice, and connect with others. In this way, writing increases self-awareness – a foundation for purposeful life and meaningful relationships.
- >> An opportunity to practice revision. Multi-draft writing assignments build the discipline, humility, and stamina students need to engage over time with complex ideas where there is no one clear, “right” answer.
- >> A human art form. Outsourcing fully to AI may well dull our collective creativity.

Given these beliefs about writing in an AI world, we commit to the following actions in our schools and classrooms:

- >> Designate class time for real-time writing assignments so we can accurately assess what students are able to do on their own. This will replace some other classroom activities – an opportunity cost we must own and treat as a reflection of our belief in the importance of writing skills.
- >> Design at-home writing tasks that are difficult to outsource wholly to AI because they require high levels of imagination, specificity, and personal context. Provide clear guidance about how/where students can use AI along the way and create space for students to reflect on their experience using it.
- >> Assess the revision process by creating opportunities for students to draft extended pieces over multiple class periods, including opportunities to receive and incorporate feedback. The goal is for students to demonstrate evolution in thinking and intentional improvement in rhetorical technique, not to produce a ‘perfect’ final product.
- >> Give students prompts that treat writing as play, meditation, and invention – insisting on the inherent and personal value of writing even when the final product is rough and mechanically flawed.

On The Teaching of **Discussion** in an AI World

Discussion is how humans build relationships, explore ideas, and solve problems. For centuries, discussion has also been at the heart of great humanities pedagogy and scholarship. Yet for many students today, live discussion can feel awkward, hard, and even scary. Humanities classrooms must emerge as places that teach the essential human communication skills students need to engage academically, socially, and societally.

In today's world, we believe that discussion is:

- >> A deeply human experience that should be celebrated in classrooms. It is a messy, authentic, real-time opportunity for live exchange, deep listening, respectful disagreement, and interdependence (a group discussion creates something you cannot do alone, or with a bot).
- >> A uniquely human skillset that needs to be taught and assessed. Discussion is perfectly teachable, but today's students need explicit instruction and intentional practice to build their skills and confidence communicating in-person.
- >> An important opportunity to slow down and be present with one another – human to human. In an era of constant distractions, discussion requires us to truly pay attention to each other.
- >> An opportunity to build community, even across lines of difference. Individually, students can feel heard, known, and valued through discussion and respectful disagreement. As a group, discussions build trust, relationships, and shared understanding.
- >> A context for “cross-training” the skills students need to become ethical users of AI. Great discussions cultivate many of the same skills students need to engage AI ethically: question-asking, discernment, and real-time reflection.

Given these beliefs about discussion in an AI world, we commit to the following actions in our schools and classrooms:

- >> Name and celebrate the humanity in our classrooms every day, helping students to verbalize and delight in both their own lived experience and the essentially human nature of our course content.
- >> Teach and assess discussion skills – not just “have discussions.” This is a pedagogical shift that may require additional professional development (e.g., creation of skills sequences, scaffolds, and assessment models that can span courses and grade levels).
- >> Commit to cultivating every student's voice in every discussion. This is easier said than done. It will require structures to promote authenticity, facilitate equitable participation, reward curiosity, and demand rigor – and avoid performative engagement (e.g., “saying what the teacher wants to hear”).
- >> Scaffold respectful disagreement so that students gain experience communicating live – and listening deeply – across different perspectives. This may require additional professional development focused on the effective curation of multi-perspective content, the creation of generative discussion prompts, and tactics for managing disagreements as learning experiences.
- >> Model good discussion practices and prioritize human interactions in our own lives and with our colleagues – even as it can seem countercultural in today's world.

On The **Experience of Being a Humanities Teacher** in an AI World

We can't consider the revision of humanities teaching practices in an AI world without also considering what these shifts mean for us as humans who have chosen careers as humanities teachers.

Fundamentally, we believe that in an AI world, teaching the humanities calls us to embrace, focus on, and celebrate our own humanity. While we may use AI to streamline administrative tasks or within the context of particular assignments, the heart of our teaching practice must remain human. Our humanity allows us to make important, real-time judgments to design and deliver the instructional experience students need and deserve.

What does this look like? It looks like doing what even the best bot never can: Spotting that triumphant smile, those sagging shoulders, or the quickly-blinked-back tears – and discerning the type of support students need in the moment. It means getting to know young people not just as individuals but within the context of a community. It means taking responsibility for ensuring that students access authentic literature and historical material in a world where inauthenticity abounds.

We believe that in this time of rapid technological change, great humanities teachers must also continue to be great learners: Scholars of our respective disciplines, but also of pedagogy and technology. So too must we be vigilant critical thinkers, especially in a period where the rapid introduction of generative AI technologies is often driven by commercial priorities as much as educational ones.

We can already see how genAI could reshape our classrooms, our profession, and our broader social reality in troubling ways. We know that the work of monitoring and mitigating these impacts falls, and will continue to fall, on teachers who both enact AI policies set forth by administrators and respond daily to on-the-ground student experiences. This is a set of responsibilities that is far beyond the scope of what most of us anticipated when we chose this vocation!

We hope that it will be acknowledged as such. Even so, we trust our collective capacity as educators to rise to this challenge, responding with creativity, solidarity, care, and an unflagging faith in both the humanities and our shared humanity.

Reflection Questions for Your School Community



It is our hope that this Manifesto **catalyzes discussion** among teachers and school communities **about humanities instruction in an AI world!** While humanities teachers tend to be a group with lots to say, here are some questions to catalyze thoughtful discussion in your next meeting:

- What in this Manifesto resonates most with your perspective and experience?
- What in this Manifesto is most philosophically challenging for you?
- What in this Manifesto is most logistically challenging for you?
- If you were to make a version of this Manifesto for your school or department, what would you keep, cut, or change?

Let's keep the discussion going!

We'd love to hear about how you used the Manifesto, what you would add, or how you'd like to be involved in future projects like this one.

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