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Emerging ideas about education for discussion and debate

Review of 'Should robots replace teachers?'

This book by Neil Selwyn looks at the reality and rhetoric around AI in education. It feels like an easy read but it raises a number of complex critical issues and questions that anyone involved in education or developing AI based tools should engage with.

Whilst the title talks about robots this is (quite rightly) taken to include both physical robots and software that utilises artificial intelligence - such as intelligent tutoring systems, pedagogical assistants, and other 'behind the scenes' technologies.

As you would expect Neil takes a critical stance towards the claims for AI in education. He highlights the multiple agendas of people advocating AI in education and working in this field - including: commercial imperatives; desires to 'teacher proof' education and overcome claimed resistance to change by teachers; naïve (if not disingenuous) claims about personalisation and learners exercising free choice; efficiency gains; and addressing teacher shortages.

Neil raises many familiar issues to do with AI - around privacy, lack of transparency, and the danger of bias being programmed into the systems. He flags up concerns about the degree to which AI will empower teachers - or undermine their professionalism - concluding that

> "Teachers having to work like robots is a far more likely scenario than their being replaced outright by robots. … these are technologies that are most likely to control, deskill and demean the teachers they are assisting." (p.122)

The key messages seem to be that "educational AI is a high-profile vehicle for advancing alternative visions of what education in the future might look like" (p.117) and whilst
'We cannot be sure of exactly what *will* happen, but we should at least be clear about what we would *prefer* to happen." (p.xi). He warns of the danger of AI moving us towards a dehumanising technological model, particularly if we focus on using AI to try to replicate what human teachers do.

We have a choice about what role AI should play in education - but we need to be proactive in considering the dangers and potential benefits so that we can create the educational future that we want.

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