

Artificial Intelligence and Academic Legitimacy: Reconceptualizing Originality, Authorship, and Ethical Use in Education

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ABSTRACT

The adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly spreading across various industries, including engineering, medicine, and manufacturing. However, there is still considerable debate regarding the legality and legitimacy of using AI-based technologies in educational settings. The use of AI is generally perceived as a positive thing as far as boosting and enhancing human capabilities in technical and applied disciplines. Nevertheless, there are also many who believe that integrating AI into academic or scholarly activities will compromise originality, authorship, and academic integrity. This article presents an in-depth theoretical analysis and literature review of over 100 years of scholarly publications in education, philosophy, and technology studies to provide a better understanding of what has occurred to cause this disparity. It shows how the resistance to AI integration into academia is driven by epistemological views of authorship, knowledge production, and learning that may soon become obsolete. This paper proposes that originality be recast as being conceptual rather than textual and establishes a foundational framework to ethically incorporate AI into education according to concepts, such as intellectual ownership, transparency, and epistemic accountability. The article provides recommendations on policy and pedagogical implications for educational institutions that are moving toward the integration of AI into learning environments.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, Academic legitimacy,

INTRODUCTION

Although artificial intelligence (AI) initially served primarily as a specialized computer program, it now serves as a framework that supports various aspects of life. Many engineering processes are optimized using automated systems to develop product designs and create simulations of products and companies (Cimino et al., 2025). AI tools are adopted in healthcare to support various procedures, including diagnoses and the prediction of future health issues. Stakeholders in the finance industry also use AI for algorithmic trading and analyzing risk models (Olatunbosun & Olatunbosun, 2025). Across the board, AI has gained traction with its use becoming increasingly necessary. However, the status of AI in academic settings, especially in higher education, is incredibly different. In many cases, Pikhart and Al-Obaydi (2025) indicate that AI is treated with suspicion and strict regulations or entirely prohibited in some instances. The creation of generative AI systems for learning and academic activities has led to many concerns about plagiarism, authorship, and diminishing intellectual integrity. This divergence raises a central question: why is AI embraced in knowledge-producing domains but resisted in knowledge-evaluating institutions?

The paper argues that there is tension in academia about a disconnect between academia's understandings of authorship based on traditional academic processes and the technical realities of today due to technology. Traditional academic processes define authorship and originality based on ideas as being tied to text. In the context of AI, ideas and texts are disconnected because Hwang et al. (2026) reveal that AI creates language from an idea through two distinct processes. This paper argues that AI can be allowed in academic settings as long as humans generate the concept. The paper also develops an educational theory, philosophical theory of authorship, and ethical theories for AI to support its argument.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Foundations of Academic Integrity

Academic integrity has been a fundamental element of higher education throughout its history. The roots of academic integrity can be linked to ideas from the Enlightenment, including those related to authorship and ownership of knowledge (Aithal & Srinivasan, 2024). The age of Enlightenment advanced the foundational belief that knowledge must be built on reason, empirical evidence, and individual accountability rather than tradition, dogma, or superstition. Vlasenko et al. (2024) identify the core values of academic integrity as honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. These values require students to submit original work, properly cite sources, and avoid cheating and plagiarism. Plagiarism involves the improper use of another individual's work. Therefore, credible academic work requires ownership of work, which should be informed by empirical evidence and reason.

With the advent of the printing press and the commercialization of authorship, the contemporary understanding of plagiarism developed. Studies from the 20th century have examined how complex plagiarism can be as an issue for students. Researchers such as Pecorari (2003) and Howard (1995) have shown that it is possible to consider many examples of plagiarism as being accidental rather than deliberate. Both researchers found evidence that many students experience developmental issues when developing their academic writing skills that can lead to incidents of plagiarism.

Advancements in digital technologies have complicated issues surrounding plagiarism. According to Ogunsuji and Fagbule (2020), the internet has transformed plagiarism from an activity that required much work to an easy activity. The academic community responded by adopting technologies to develop text-matching software, such as Turnitin, to detect plagiarism (Quiminales et al., 2023). Turnitin was assumed to be an ideal tool for showing the difference between original text and copied text. However, the emergence of AI in academia rendered such detection tools ineffective in revealing plagiarism.

The Philosophy of Authorship and “The Death of the Author”

Theoretical discussions concerning authorship supply an indispensable framework for interpreting the impact of AI on society. Barthes (1967) stated that the author has died because he argued that meaning will not be given only by what the author created or intended. Meaning can also be derived through the reader, who constructs meaning based on their own personal experiences. Similarly, Michael Foucault, a philosopher, characterized 'the author function' as a social construction rather than as an intrinsic aspect of a text (Langyan, 2021). Therefore, meaning is subject to the larger contexts and cultural conventions in which texts are produced, as well as how readers link the texts to their lived experiences.

These views question the idea that producing an author means having some regularity of being a unique creator to a degree of purity. According to KhosraviShakib (2012), every piece of written material is intertextual in and of itself. In other words, all written works borrow their ideas and words from others. AI is another instance of intertextuality since it produces new outputs through synthesizing large volumes of text. This raises the question of whether AI produces something distinct from human writing or simply presents the same basic processes in an overt manner.

AI in Education: Opportunities and Risks

Numerous recent articles discuss the impact of AI on Education from different viewpoints. Many researchers, including Holmes and Tuomi (2022) and Amin et al. (2025), believe that AI could help revolutionize education with capabilities, such as personalization, adaptive learning, and better feedback mechanisms. Another group of scholars, including De Cremer and Kasparov (2021) and Mazurek (2025), believe that AI will supplement human intelligence instead of replacing it. Such views highlight our need to create a partnership between humans and AI to optimize the potential of humans and improve the quality of their lives. While some researchers see many benefits, others express concerns about the risks AI poses. Recently, Abubakar et al. (2025) identified over-

dependence on using technology, lack of critical thinking, and lack of validity in measuring a child's ability through assessment as possible risks associated with the use of AI in Education. The same concerns are voiced by Vieriu and Petrea (2023) by stressing the need to be cautious when implementing new technologies in schools. The adoption of AI in education should be careful enough to assist learning without limiting the ability of learners to think critically and execute tasks on their own.

AI and Academic Writing

The rise of generative AI has changed scholastic written communication. Research shows that AI-generated essays often look similar to human-written essays because AI tools mimic human abilities (Abubakar et al., 2025). It is increasingly becoming challenging to determine whether an essay has been generated by AI since Deep et al. (2025) report that detection tools are proven unreliable with high occurrences of false positives and false negatives. These inaccuracies threaten the ability of institutions to uphold established academic integrity policies. Research evidence also indicates that students utilize AI at different levels, from idea generation to complete dependence to write an essay (Vieriu & Petrea, 2023). The multitude of ways students use AI complicates the classification of what is appropriate versus inappropriate use.

Educational theories provide a critical perspective on evaluating AI's role as a tool. Constructivist approaches focus on interaction with an environment during development, where children actively learn and create their own knowledge by constructing new understanding of things around them (Deep et al., 2025). Given this viewpoint, the question becomes "How does AI help support cognitive engagement and help understand learning?" If AI can assist me in developing my cognitive abilities by enhancing or improving my comprehension process, it will likely enhance my learning experiences. On the other hand, Abubakar et al. (2025) argue that AI could also undermine learning by reducing learners' cognitive effort since they do not have to exert as much energy to better understand something as they could have without AI.

According to Veine et al. (2020), learning is about creating ideas through experience and reflection, not simply repeating the same thing over again. The rise of AI has resulted in many traditional assessment methods being challenged because of their emphasis on output versus process. Universities vary in their response to AI, with some imposing very strict restrictions and others adopting flexible and permissive policies requiring disclosure (Deep et al., 2025). This inconsistency indicates an absence of clarity in the theoretical basis underlying academic integrity and the use of AI. Hähnel and Müller (2025) and Munn (2023) reveal that there is very little theory that supports ethical frameworks for AI. However, there is a need for a framework to establish a balance between conduct and responsibility. Policies are primarily looking at the detection and enforcement processes of AI, exposing their ineffectiveness. Instead, policies should provide guidance on the integration of AI systems in the academic field.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptual versus Textual Originality

In this paper, we make a fundamental distinction between textual originality and conceptual originality. Textual originality refers to the uniqueness of the words, while conceptual originality refers to the newness of the ideas (Al-Busaidi et al., 2024). The emphasis of traditional academic integrity frameworks has usually been on textual originality. Al-Busaidi et al. (2024) contend that textual originality will be significantly impacted by AI, while conceptual originality will remain largely unchanged. Therefore, there is a need for new academic integrity frameworks that focus on conceptual originality, given that AI is penetrating various aspects of human life, including academia.

The Extended Mind Theory

AI can be interpreted according to the extended mind theory as a cognitive resource amplifying our ability to think. This theory challenges the traditional view that cognition is confined to the brain by arguing that tools, technologies, and the environment are integral parts of the thinking process (Yuksel, 2025). When applied to

education, AI systems are not merely aids but can function as extensions of learners' cognitive capacities. AI-driven platforms can store, retrieve, and process information in ways that complement human memory and reasoning (Holmes & Tuomi, 2022; Mazurek, 2025). Therefore, a student using an AI tutor to solve complex problems is effectively outsourcing parts of their cognitive workload, similar to how a calculator extends mathematical capability. In line with extended mind theory, the boundary between the learner's mind and the AI system becomes blurred, forming a coupled system that performs cognitive tasks more efficiently than either could alone.

However, applying extended mind theory to AI in education also raises important concerns. If learners rely excessively on AI systems for problem-solving, they may underdevelop critical thinking and independent reasoning skills (Abubakar et al., 2025). From the extended mind perspective, this outcome is not inherently negative because outsourcing cognition is a natural human practice. It becomes problematic if the external system replaces rather than complements internal cognitive processes. When AI becomes part of the cognitive system, learners must trust its outputs. However, AI systems can produce incorrect or biased information, creating a risk where flawed external processes incorporated into the learner's thinking can potentially distort knowledge construction (Abubakar et al., 2025). Additionally, access to advanced AI tools is uneven across educational contexts, particularly in low-resource settings. If cognition increasingly extends into AI systems, disparities in access may widen educational inequalities.

Epistemic Integrity

Epistemic integrity can be defined by three criteria. The first criterion is that humans define the direction of their intellectual pursuits (Nieminen & Ketonen, 2024). In principle, AI can support rather than undermine this criterion. Adaptive platforms, recommender systems, and generative tools can expand the range of available pathways, helping learners explore topics more efficiently. Many AI systems are designed to optimize engagement or performance based on prior data. Over time, this can orient learners toward certain topics, methods, or perspectives, effectively shaping the trajectory of their thinking. Therefore, from an epistemic integrity standpoint, Nieminen and Ketonen (2024) indicate that the issue is whether the learner retains agency. If a student actively chooses to use AI outputs as inputs into their decision-making, the criterion is preserved. However, the direction of inquiry is no longer fully self-determined if students passively follow AI-generated prompts, summaries, and solution paths without reflection. In practice, maintaining this criterion requires deliberate educational design that makes it possible to set goals, formulate questions, and use AI as a tool to pursue their inquiries, not as a system that defines them.

The second criterion is that the human understands the value of their intellectual pursuits. Allard and Clavien (2024) assert that understanding why one is learning something is central to meaningful education. AI can both enhance and erode this understanding. On the positive side, AI can contextualize knowledge by linking concepts to real-world applications, generating explanations at appropriate levels, and helping learners see relevance, deepening intrinsic motivation and conceptual clarity (Mazurek, 2025). However, Abubakar et al. (2025) caution that learners can end up focusing on getting correct answers with AI assistance, instead of understanding underlying concepts. Epistemic integrity requires learners to remain cognitively and reflectively engaged, where they question outputs, interpret results, and connect them to broader knowledge structures.

The third criterion holds that the human is responsible for their own outcomes. This is perhaps the most contested criterion in AI-supported learning. When outcomes are co-produced by humans and AI, responsibility becomes diffuse. To what extent are students accountable for the accuracy, originality, or ethical implications of AI-assisted work? From a strict epistemic integrity perspective, responsibility cannot be outsourced (Allard & Clavien, 2024). Even if AI contributes to the process, the learner must take ownership of the final output with regard to its correctness, its reasoning, and its ethical standing. According to Thomson et al. (2024), taking ownership involves verifying information, acknowledging AI use where appropriate, and being able to explain and defend the work produced. The challenge is that students may produce high-quality outputs without fully grasping the underlying concepts, creating a gap between performance and competence. Educational practices must emphasize transparency and justification by requiring learners not just to present answers, but to demonstrate understanding.

Core Argument

The AI Inconsistency Problem

The apparent acceptance of AI in engineering and its resistance in education reflects a deeper assumption about what counts as legitimate work in each domain. In engineering, outputs are judged primarily by functionality, accuracy, and problem-solving effectiveness. Therefore, engineering treats AI as an advanced tool that enhances human capability without undermining the legitimacy of the outcome. By contrast, educational assessment has traditionally relied on language as the visible evidence of thinking. Essays, reports, and written responses are treated not just as communication tools but as proxies for cognition itself. When AI generates coherent text, it disrupts this proxy relationship by creating uncertainty about whether the language reflects the learner's own understanding or an external system's output. This difference explains why AI use in engineering is framed as augmentation, while in education it is often framed as substitution.

This distinction also exposes a limitation in how academic work is conceptualized rather than a fundamental incompatibility between AI and education. If knowledge is the true goal of learning, then overreliance on written expression as the primary measure of understanding becomes problematic in an AI-rich environment (Abubakar et al., 2025). The challenge is not that AI produces language, but that educational systems have equated language production with knowledge possession. In reality, knowledge is better demonstrated through application, reasoning, transfer, and the ability to justify decisions (Kivijärvi, 2024). Therefore, the resistance to AI in education is less about preserving learning and more about preserving traditional assessment models. A shift toward evaluating deeper cognitive engagement through oral defense, problem-based tasks, and reflective explanation would align education more closely with knowledge-based validation and reduce the tension around AI use.

Thinking and Writing

The rise of AI tools have made it difficult to maintain the long-standing assumption that writing is equivalent to thinking. The fact that AI tools can generate coherent, well-structured, and even persuasive text without possessing human understanding demonstrates that writing can simulate the appearance of thought without necessarily reflecting genuine cognition (Vieriu & Petrea, 2023). In this regard, writing should be treated as a representation of thinking rather than thinking itself. While writing remains a powerful way to organize, clarify, and communicate ideas, it is only one of the many modes of cognition. De los Santos et al. (2025) indicate that humans can engage in thinking through problem-solving, visualization, discussion, experimentation, and embodied practice. As students solve a complex mathematical problem, they engage in deep cognitive processes that may not be fully captured through written expression alone. The capabilities of AI challenge education systems to review how thinking is identified and assessed. There is a growing need to incorporate diverse forms of assessment that capture reasoning, application, and understanding, instead of relying predominantly on written outputs.

Paradigm Shift Needed

There is a growing need to incorporate diverse forms of assessment that capture reasoning, application, and understanding, instead of relying predominantly on written outputs. Traditional assessment models often prioritize outputs on the assumption that essays, exams, or written reports accurately represent learning (Perkins, 2026). However, Veine et al. (2020) contend that the product alone is no longer a reliable indicator of understanding, creating the need for process-based assessments that allow educators to observe how students think, adapt, and construct knowledge over time.

Process-based assessment is ideal in the era of AI because it provides a more authentic measure of learning while encouraging metacognition, resilience, and deeper engagement. This approach values the reasoning, decisions, reflection, and revisions that lead to a final product (Veine et al., 2020). As such, assessment becomes aligned with genuine intellectual development rather than mere performance.

IET Framework for Integrating AI

The IET framework is a structured approach for integrating AI in academic settings to enhance learning while preserving epistemic integrity. IET is typically the abbreviation for three core principles, including intentionality, engagement, and transparency. These principles guide how students and educators incorporate AI into academic activities. The principle of intentionality emphasizes that AI should be used with a clear purpose, aligned to learning goals rather than convenience. Nieminen and Ketonen (2024) argue that students must decide why they are using AI to ensure that the tool supports their cognitive effort rather than replacing it. For example, they should use AI to brainstorm ideas, clarify concepts, or receive feedback on an activity they have completed. This principle reinforces learner agency and the idea that humans should direct their intellectual pursuits.

The principle of engagement focuses on active cognitive involvement. Instead of passively accepting AI-generated outputs, there is a need to adopt systems that require students to critically interact with them (Nieminen & Ketonen, 2024). As such, students should question AI outputs' accuracy, compare perspectives, and integrate AI insights into their own reasoning. AI-assisted learning remains a reflective and constructive process. The principle of transparency requires openness about how AI is used in academic work (Nieminen, & Ketonen, 2024). Educators should require students to acknowledge AI contributions, document their process, and be able to explain and justify their final outputs. As a result, they will be accountable for what they submit and aid in a fair assessment of their work.

Implications of Changed Educational Practice

There is an increasing push for a shift in educational practice to rethink how learning is assessed, demonstrated, and supported. For example, redesigning assessment is becoming essential to move away from product-based evaluation toward approaches that focus on reasoning, iteration, and understanding. Such a shift can help educational institutions navigate the era of AI, where digital tools can generate polished outputs. Furthermore, the shift naturally elevates the role of oral defense in evaluating learning. Oral defense enables educators to assess learning by having students explain, justify, and apply their knowledge in real time, making their thinking visible and harder to outsource. Another implication is the growing need to integrate AI literacy in instructional design. Such an integration will equip learners with the skills to use AI critically, ethically, and effectively, and understand its limitations. Implementing these changes can lead to a more authentic, process-oriented education that prioritizes deep understanding, accountability, and the ability to work intelligently with AI rather than compete against it.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that the tension surrounding AI use in academic settings stems less from the technology itself and more from outdated epistemological assumptions about authorship, originality, and learning. The difference between conceptual and textual originality reveals that genuine intellectual contribution lies in idea generation rather than linguistic expression. Since the integration of AI does not inherently undermine academic integrity, there is a need to redefine it. Frameworks, such as epistemic integrity and the IET model, provide a foundation for ethically incorporating AI while preserving human agency, responsibility, and understanding. Furthermore, there is a need to reform academic assessment to focus on process, reasoning, and oral defense. Educational institutions should embrace AI as a cognitive partner instead of resisting it to leverage the opportunity to create more authentic, equitable, and intellectually meaningful learning environments that are aligned with contemporary technological realities.

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