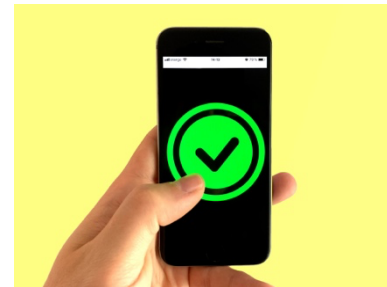




Why A.I. Will Make Us More Human (Not Less)

By Adrian Pei

Should we click the “I’m not a robot” box—or not?



In one of my first careers, I worked as a private guidance counselor for high school students, and they often asked me questions like, “What are colleges looking for?” and “What do you think I should write my application essay about?”

I answered, “Write something that shows who you are as a person. Don’t just list your activities or achievements. And you might learn something about yourself in the process, which will help you not just for college, but for life.”

In some cases, I would get this reply: “I don’t know what to write about. **Could you just do the essay for me?**”

You’d be surprised how often this kind of sentiment came up, even indirectly from students or their parents. There was a lot of pressure to get into good colleges, and it was tempting for my clients to get any and every advantage they could. Sometimes parents would give me a knowing look and say, “Look, we all know this is just a game. My daughter has to jump through these hoops. It’s your job to help us do that, right?” They seemed at times to **treat their kids like machines** trained to get into a particular college, regardless of the child’s own passions or personal development.



I knew I could write those essays for my students, and make a lot of money doing so. And it would be so easy for me to “suggest” a few phrases here and there, which then become a paragraph or two, and so on. Who would ever know the difference?

Does this sound familiar? In an age of A.I., it's even easier than before for people to not just write polished-sounding essays, but construct or conjure up an entire image of themselves to impress others—whether it's colleges or employers. You can generate something that sounds amazing in 30 seconds or less, and for free!

In many situations, using A.I. is not only helpful but necessary these days. But if we use it as a shortcut for *too many things*, is there a cost? I think so—but like most shortcuts, we often don't pay the price until later on. A man puts off a difficult conversation, and years later, it's become a pattern of avoidance that shows up in his whole family—as well as the company he leads. A child sits down to do homework and only has to endure a few seconds of frustration, before she realizes she can use A.I. to make it *look like* she understands the concepts. **After years of doing this, what are all the aspects of learning, development and growth she will have missed out on?** Do we know, and do we care?

I know that I care. Even now as I sit down to write this article (which has taken me quite some time), in every word choice I'm wrestling with these questions: “*What are the issues that really matter to me and to the world, and why? What do I think and believe about these things? What are my values, and how do I want to live my life?*” The very process of thinking and wrestling through these questions is what is involved in growth and maturity for any person. It's what makes us human, compared to machines.

But here's the connection some people aren't making. These questions are becoming more and more prevalent, *because of* the rapid rise of A.I. Previously, we assumed or took some aspects of human distinctness for granted. Now that so many things are becoming automated or in question, we're being **increasingly compelled to think and distinguish between what really makes us human, and not.** In other words, A.I. is making us think more than ever before about what it means to be human!



A few years after I left my job as a college counselor, I decided to apply for graduate school. Excited to use everything I had learned about the admissions process, I spent months constructing some of the best essays I've ever written—replete with literary references and witty anecdotes. I couldn't wait to put my application in the mail.

But something stopped me. As I re-read my essays, I thought, “These sound impressive, but how much of what I wrote is truly *me*?” As in the movie *Good Will Hunting*, I could quote philosophers and analyze famous art, but how much did I know (or was I revealing) about *myself*? I realized that I had fallen for the same trap of my high school students, to use every “trick” at my disposal to embellish my image.

My name in Chinese means “honest scholar,” and I believe the pursuit of integrity runs in my family's blood. Growing up my teachers and parents said, “The ability to express thoughts and ideas in writing will serve you well in life.” **But it's one thing to learn to write well—it's another to write with honesty and integrity.**

Whether it's plagiarism, A.I., or asking others to do something for us that we need to do for our own good—there will always be tempting shortcuts. What we choose to do in those moments will shape the kind of person we become, and the life we lead.

But it's not only about our self-development and character. Results matter—and people can only fake things for so long, before their real selves and capabilities become apparent to a college or employer. **Image can only take you so far or so long, and substance will always be the true differentiator.** That's why I have so much belief in the content I write, the leadership trainings I conduct, and the consulting work I do. Those come out of decades of personal learning, experience, application and refinement—and when people work with me, I believe they can tell the difference.

Back to that graduate school essay I polished for months: in the end, I decided to throw it out, and start over. And years before that, I never wrote an application essay or even a single sentence for my high school students. In some ways, those were hard decisions—as they potentially impacted my admissions and business opportunities.



But in another way, they were easy decisions, because I knew there was something more important to me on the line. **I wanted to live up to my name, “honest scholar,” and let my words be as truthful as possible—not just make myself look or sound better.** I don’t do this perfectly by any means, but I try my best every day.

After all, this is who I am, and what makes me human—not a machine or A.I. And I’m happy to say I know the difference!

I hope this article was interesting to you or helpful for discussion in your team or group! If you ever want a trainer or facilitator to speak on these topics, I’m here. And if you want to A.I.-proof yourself in this uncertain world of job markets and layoffs, **my leadership cohorts provide training in skills and capabilities that A.I. cannot replace!** I’m running them all year long, so [schedule a call on my website](#) or e-mail me back if you’re intrigued—either for yourself or a group you lead!

Discussion or Reflection Questions:

1. In what situations can A.I. be most helpful to save us unnecessary time and effort, personally and professionally?
2. In which situations might A.I. shortcuts not be so helpful, in shortchanging our growth and development, personally and professionally? When and how might they actually impede results and your “bottom line?” Please explain.
3. What new realizations are you making, about what A.I. can and cannot replace in humans, and why?



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