



Beyond the Hype: A Human Approach to AI Learning

When people talk about artificial intelligence in schools, the conversation often swings between hype and alarm. At Hong Kong International School (HKIS), Technology Coach Daniel Budd is trying to move that conversation somewhere more grounded: back to students, learning, and relationships.

As AI tools became embedded in students' daily lives, HKIS made a conscious decision not to chase innovation for its own sake. Instead, the school returned to its core philosophy.

"What we wanted to try and do is to pull that back a little bit and think about what are the principles of learning... allowing that to guide us, rather than focusing on the tools," Budd explains.

At the centre of that approach is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a framework grounded in research on learner variability. Rather than designing generalised lessons and adding accommodations later, UDL assumes diversity from the start.

"Every learner has unique needs, whether they're visible or not," Budd says. "And AI is really helping with that."

Reducing Cognitive Load, Deepening Thinking

Budd is cautious about claims that AI will automatically raise performance metrics. In his view, meaningful academic growth rarely comes from a single initiative. Instead, the focus at HKIS is on removing unnecessary barriers so students can focus on deep, relevant thinking.

"We want to make sure that what they're doing and the struggle that they're having is relevant to their learning," he explains.

In Hong Kong's multilingual context, that philosophy is especially important. Many students mentally translate lessons back and forth between languages throughout the day — a hidden but significant cognitive load.

"Through tools like AI... we can level that playing field," Budd notes.

Real-time subtitles and translation apps can reduce that burden and make content more accessible. Like offering glasses to a student who needs them, Budd says, AI can quietly expand access without altering expectations.

AI as a Thinking Partner

Concerns about cheating are unavoidable in any discussion of AI. Budd acknowledges them — but suggests the issue often lies in task design.

"I think it's definitely a concern," he says. "But... it's almost a design fault if students are given a prompt to say, 'Write 200 words... and hand that in by tomorrow.'"

Adults use AI to draft reports and organize ideas, he points out. Students will naturally do the same if assignments feel procedural rather than purposeful. The solution, he argues, is to design learning that has authentic value and audience.

At the same time, Budd sees AI as a powerful support for inquiry-based learning. Inquiry can unintentionally reward the most confident students — those willing to ask questions publicly and persist through uncertainty.

"Where I see AI helps is that it is this non-judgmental thinking partner," he says. "You can ask the stupid questions."

That privacy matters. Students can test ideas, identify gaps in their knowledge, and refine their thinking without fear of embarrassment. For quieter learners especially, that can be transformative.

Equity and Access

Beyond pedagogy, Budd sees AI as a potential equalizer.

"We've got students who can afford outside tutors, and we've got students who don't," he says. "We're levelling the playing field with these technologies and creating access."

In subjects such as Chinese, mathematics, or science — where home support varies widely — AI can provide additional explanation and practice at no extra cost.

HKIS also works to ensure that access to AI tools is equitable within the school itself. Approved platforms are available to all students, and data is carefully managed.

"We ensure that the data is contained and controlled by the school... so the students have a safe place to fail," Budd explains.

Mistakes, he believes, are part of growth. School should function as a protected environment where students can experiment, argue, and learn from missteps without long-term consequences.

Keeping Humans at the Centre

Despite rapid technological advances, Budd is clear about what must remain constant.

"We don't want technology to substitute the relationships," he says.

Instead, AI can reduce administrative burdens — from drafting feedback to analyzing classroom interactions — freeing teachers to focus on dialogue, mentorship, and connection.

"It gives us more time to be out in the playground interacting with the students and building our relationships," he adds. "So we can focus on dialog. We can focus on feedback."

Looking ahead, Budd believes schools must prepare students not to master a specific tool, but to develop adaptability, ethical judgment, and agency.

"The goal isn't a master of a particular tool," he says. "It's about that adaptability, that agency and really honing into that humanity and valuing community."

In an era defined by rapid technological change, HKIS's approach is neither alarmist nor blindly enthusiastic. It is deliberately human-centered — using AI not to replace thinking or relationships, but to deepen both.

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