



St Leonard's College
An education for life.

From the Principal

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Time to Chat?

Looking back on this first term, it is pleasing to discover that schools still exist. Having decided there wasn't enough fear and hysteria in the world once the pandemic was behind us, some in the media decided it would be fun to start the new academic year with a good old "the machines are taking over" scare. This time in the form of ChatGPT and other applications that masquerade as sentient digital devices. Cue endless references to 'The Matrix' and dark dystopian visions of our children's minds being enslaved by the evil advances of artificial intelligence. Previous versions of this trumped-up nightmare in my lifetime

have included "Computers in Classrooms Spell the End of Education", "Smartphone Use Destroys Family Relationships", and "Social Media a Toxic Element in Teenage Lives."

Not that panic and moral outrage about modern technology is anything new. It goes all the way back to Socrates, who famously warned that the invention of writing would "create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories." Then, in the Middle Ages, religious leaders spoke out against the new-fangled printing press, worried that it would make their monks lazy. That was followed by a flurry of fears in the 1800's, when the speed of steam locomotives was predicted to cause people's organs to be sucked out of their bodies, the telegraph would ruin speech as people fell into the habit of only talking in clipped phrases, and the telephone threatened the fabric of society, with the Times newspaper fretting "What if every town in America got a phone, and never had to show up to celebrations in person again?" Then along came television in the 1930's, with the prophets of doom warning it would lead to "further vulgarization of ... culture."

As the author Douglas Adams once observed, technology that existed when we were born seems normal, and that which was developed before we turn 35 seemed exciting, but whatever comes after that is usually treated with suspicion.

And so back to ChatGPT. Which, although it is the main focus of media attention at present, is in fact only one of a large number of similar creations, many of which will soon become standard in many of the computer programs we use each day. Which in turn will simply be an extension of the writing tools that are already embedded, like the red and blue underlining of the spell checkers and grammar suggestions whenever we type. Indeed, Microsoft Outlook also already prompts/urges/encourages/suggests synonyms for the words you use (see what I did there?).

This is why angst about students "cheating" by using AI to write essays is misplaced. If they employ a tool that improves their ability to convey their ideas more clearly, that is great. And if they go further and try to use a tool to convey ideas that aren't their own, or imply an understanding they don't really possess, there are plenty of other ways to identify, prevent, and correct that behaviour. AI may spell the end of the formulaic, cookie-cutter essay given to keep students busy, but it is no threat to high quality teaching and insightful assessment practices.

The same holds true for the latest front-page outrage, the possibility that teachers might use ChatGPT to write reports. Given that their computer doesn't actually know little Jenny, the only thing it can rely on in compiling a well-phrased report about her progress is the data fed to it by her teacher. If its algorithm reorganises those core facts and phrases in a more coherent way than the teacher initially did, how is that anything but helpful to her parents? As long as the final version of the report is checked and owned by the teacher, it is no different from the other algorithms that already corrected their spelling and punctuation.

Technology is neither inherently good nor bad. It is simply an amplifier of human behaviour. It allows kind people to be more generous and bullies to be more hurtful. Hence, our focus should not be on limiting technology, but on addressing the behaviour of its users. If students use technology to better express their understanding of a subject, or teachers use it to better convey their knowledge of a student, surely that is beneficial?

What is perhaps worthy of greater alarm is the original intended purpose of AI such as ChatGPT. Which was to hold conversations that would deceive people into thinking that they were talking to another human being. The clue is in the name - "Chat" GPT (the GPT stands for 'Generative Pre-trained Transformer' which, I will admit, does sound like something out of The Terminator). The thought that there are people in our community who would rather talk to a machine or, worse still, for whom that is the only option for a comforting conversation, should be far more worrying.

Which is why, the ambitions of the Middle School Social Action Committee have stood out as a wonderful reflection of what this College stands for. This group approached me proposing a project in which students would give service each week at the Chatty Café at the Castlefield Community Centre in Hampton. Being available for any members of the local community who drop in for some human company and a friendly conversation to brighten the day. Probably not front-page news, but far more likely to change the world than a few lines of computer code.

With that, I wish all in the College community a joyful Easter Break (with plenty of human interaction) and look forward to all that awaits us when we return for term 2.