

In the Age of A.I., Major in Being Human

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Credit...Adria Malcolm for The New York Times



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Last summer, a piece of [artwork](#) generated with artificial intelligence took a first prize at the Colorado State Fair. To me, the image looks like a view from the back of the stage at an opera. You see the backs of three singers, then, past them, vague squiggles and forms that may or may not be an audience, and all around, dominating everything, the fantastical Lord of the Rings-style palace where they are performing.

The artwork looks cool at first glance, but after a second it feels kind of lifeless.

“As I came back to the image and sat with it for a while, I found that my efforts to engage it at depth were thwarted,” L.M. Sacasas [wrote](#) in his newsletter on technology and culture. “This happened when I began to inspect the image more closely. As I did so, my experience of the image began to devolve rather than deepen.”

This is what many of us notice about art or prose generated by A.I. It’s often bland and vague. It’s missing a humanistic core. It’s missing an individual person’s passion, pain, longings and a life of deeply felt personal experiences. It does not spring from a person’s imagination, bursts of insight, anxiety and joy that underlie any profound work of human creativity.

This points to what could be the core reality of the coming A.I. age. A.I. will probably give us fantastic tools that will help us outsource a lot of our current mental work. At the same time, A.I. will force us humans to double down on those talents and skills that only humans possess. The most important thing about A.I. may be that it shows us what it can’t do, and so reveals who we are and what we have to offer.

If, say, you’re a college student preparing for life in an A.I. world, you need to ask yourself: Which classes will give me the skills that machines will not replicate, making me more distinctly human? You probably want to avoid any class that teaches you to think in an impersonal, linear, generalized kind of way — the kind of thinking A.I. will crush you at. On the other hand, you probably want to gravitate toward any class, in the sciences or the humanities, that will help you develop the following distinctly human skills:

A distinct personal voice. A.I. often churns out the kind of impersonal bureaucratic prose that is found in corporate communications or academic journals. You’ll want to develop a voice as distinct as those of George Orwell, Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe and James Baldwin, so take classes in which you are reading distinctive and flamboyant voices so you can craft your own.

Presentation skills. “The prior generation of information technology favored the introverts, whereas the new A.I. bots are more likely to favor the extroverts,” the George Mason University economist Tyler Cowen [writes](#). “You will need to be showing off all the time that you are more than ‘one of them.’” The ability to create and give a good speech, connect with an audience, and organize fun and productive gatherings seem like a suite of skills that A.I. will not replicate.

A childlike talent for creativity. “When you interact for a while with a system like GPT-3, you notice that it tends to veer from the banal to the completely nonsensical,” Alison Gopnik, famed for her studies on the minds of children, [observes](#). “Somehow children find the creative sweet spot between the obvious and the crazy.” Children, she argues, don’t just imitate or passively absorb data; they explore, and they create innovative theories and imaginative stories to explain the world. You want to take classes — whether they are about coding or painting — that unleash your creativity, that give you a chance to exercise and hone your imaginative powers.

Unusual worldviews. A.I. can be just a text-prediction machine. A.I. is good at predicting what word should come next, so you want to be really good at being unpredictable, departing from the conventional. Stock your mind with worldviews from faraway times, unusual people and unfamiliar places: Epicureanism, Stoicism, Thomism, Taoism, etc. People with contrarian mentalities and idiosyncratic worldviews will be valuable in an age when conventional thinking is turbo powered.

Empathy. Machine thinking is great for understanding the behavioral patterns across populations. It is not great for understanding the unique individual right in front of you. If you want to be able to do this, good humanities classes are really useful. By studying literature, drama, biography and history, you learn about what goes on in the minds of other people. If you can understand another person’s perspective, you have a more valuable skill than the skill possessed by some machine vacuuming up vast masses of data about no one in particular.

Situational Awareness. A person with this skill has a feel for the unique contours of the situation she is in the middle of. She has an intuitive awareness of when to follow the rules and when to break the rules, a feel for the flow of events, a special sensitivity, not necessarily conscious, for how fast to move and what decisions to take that will prevent her from crashing on the rocks. This sensitivity flows from experience, historical knowledge, humility in the face of uncertainty, and having led a reflective and interesting life. It is a kind of knowledge held in the body as well as the brain.

The best teachers teach themselves. When I think back on my own best teachers, I generally don’t remember what was on the curriculum, but rather who they were. Whether the subject of the course was in the sciences or in the humanities, I remember how these teachers modeled a passion for knowledge, a funny and dynamic way of connecting with students. They also modeled a set of moral virtues — how to be rigorous with evidence, how to admit error, how to coach students as they make their own discoveries. I remember how I admired them and wanted to be like them. That’s a kind of knowledge you’ll never get from a bot.

And that’s my hope for the age of A.I. — that it forces us to more clearly distinguish the knowledge that is useful information from the humanistic knowledge that leaves people wiser and transformed.