

Toward a sociology of education and artificial intelligence

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INTRODUCTION

It almost goes without saying that artificial intelligence (AI) appears to be of major social, economic, political and cultural significance – a set of technologies that have been placed at the forefront of the world’s attention by the launch of ChatGPT in November 2022 and the subsequent furore around generative AI. Of course, sociologists have been attentive to various forms of AI “as legitimate sociological objects” (Woolgar 1985, p.558) for decades prior to ChatGPT, meaning that recent sociological accounts of the current GenAI moment are building on a lineage of scholarship that lends far greater intellectual substance and thickness of insight around AI than is proving to be the case in many other academic fields and disciplines (see Liu 2021 for an overview).

On one hand, sociology provides a much-needed counterpoint to received wisdoms that the forms of AI currently being foisted upon our societies by the likes of OpenAI, Microsoft, Google and Palantir are inevitable, inherently beneficial and something that need to be adopted at scale, at speed and begrudging acceptance that there is no alternative. Instead, as Jana Bacevic (2024) reminds us, sociology is well placed to not only offer explanations of how AI is becoming ever-more deeply implicated in social processes, but also to provide normative evaluations of the rights and wrongs of these implications and, crucially, offer suggestions for alternative arrangements, alternative forms of AI, and alternative AI futures. On the flipside, sociology also provides a much-needed social substance to the growing AI backlash – i.e. the populist (and often reactionary) rejection of AI for little reason other than a vague feeling of unease around ‘de-humanisation’. Sociology adds a much-needed political edge to such concerns. Sociology allows us to not simply point out where AI is problematic but also to explain why AI is problematic – especially how AI is implicated in wider social structures and mechanisms of social reproduction.

This means that the fast-growing ‘sociology of AI’ that we are seeing emerging across the discipline offers a distinct and powerful way to scrutinise and interrogate these technologies – especially as the GenAI ‘bubble’ subsides and other (even more insidious) forms of AI-driven sensing, decision-making, logic-building and rule-following come to prominence. The sociology of AI can involve applying nineteenth and twentieth century social theory to the topic of AI – what might be characterised as the melding together of Adorno and algorithms, Marx and machine learning, or Foucault and facial recognition. It also goes beyond this, drawing upon emerging critique from philosophy, anthropology, critical computational studies, critical data studies, digital humanities, critical design, futures studies and other such areas of academic work. This is sociological scholarship that is blurred, playful, creative and unconventional – bringing tech-minded folk working in sociological areas of study together

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with sociologically-minded folk working in tech and design fields. The sociology of AI is therefore proving to be one of the most urgent and necessary areas of sociology to be working in at the current moment, bringing classic sociological concerns around power, justice, social structure and institutions to bear on a facet of contemporary society that many people would have us believe is wholly unproblematic and unquestionable (Davis et al., 2026). As Joyce and Cruz (2024, p.5) conclude: “the sociology of AI moves us beyond headlines and hype to spark innovative sociological work toward equity and justice.”

All this presents an opportunity and/or challenge for those of us working in the sociology of education to think more carefully about what it might mean to develop a ‘sociology of education and AI’. To be optimistic for a moment, there is much for sociologists of education to be engaging with. Unlike previous waves of AI development, education has been pushed to the forefront of how generative AI has been deployed and engaged with since the launch of ChatGPT in November 2022. For example, education has been cynically established as one of the main (and most susceptible) markets for GenAI products, while some of the major public controversies and panics around these new technologies have focused on issues such as student cheating, teachers being replaced by chatbots, and the supposed declining need for humans to be creative or knowledgeable.

However, from a pessimistic point of view, sociologists of education do not have a stellar track record when it comes to being engaging with emerging technologies. The sociology of education certainly was slow to react to the digitisation and platformisation of schools and universities during the 2000s and 2010s, and has tended to pay only passing attention to the growing significance of social media, smartphones and other society-changing technologies. Moreover, sociologists of education are lacking representation in the fast-growing critical scholarship around AI and education that has appeared in journals such as ‘*Learning, Media & Technology*’ and ‘*Postdigital Science & Education*’. Many young scholars working in the nascent critical studies of education and technology are certainly sociologically inclined but not fully committed to (or perhaps convinced by) sustained sociological method, theory and intent.

Through a call inviting papers that aim to identify and reframe educational problems in an AI era from a distinctively sociological perspective this special issue of the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* sets out to illustrate what such a sociology of education and AI might look like. Rather than simply cycle through a synopsis of the thirteen articles in the SI, in the remainder of this article we want to highlight a few different areas that we feel a sociology of education and AI can add to ongoing conversations around AI, education and society. These, then, might offer a framework for future scholarship that builds upon the thirteen articles in this special issue.

A SOCIOLOGICAL FOCUS ON THE HYPE AROUND AI AND EDUCATION

Sociologists of education are well placed to add a different edge to the hype surrounding AI and education. While edtech has a long history of boosterism, doomsterism and over-selling (Bigum & Kenway 1995, Cuban 2001), the past few years have seen unprecedented hyperbole grow up around the educational implications of GenAI. At present, ‘critical’ researchers have busied themselves debunking the many exaggerated claims being made.

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While well-intentioned, this type of scholarship runs the risk of reproducing (and even exacerbating) the hype surrounding AI. Critics of AI in education therefore need to remain wary of what Lee Vinsel (2021) has termed the trap of ‘criti-hype’ – i.e. lending unwarranted legitimacy to industry promotional claims simply by taking them seriously, overstating the abilities of tech firms and/or the capabilities of their imagined/emerging products. As well as compounding unrealistic expectations, academic work of this nature acts ultimately as a distraction from more urgent concerns and dangers arising from ‘actually-existing’ technologies.

With this mind, then, drawing on traditions such as the sociology of expectations offers a more insightful path to properly considering the work that this hype around AI and education is doing – i.e. the ‘constitutive’ and ‘performative’ roles that hype plays in supporting the organization of social and economic behaviour around emerging forms of educational AI (Bohner & Vertesi 2025). From this perspective, then, claims that AI can ‘save six weeks of teacher time’ or controversies around ‘students getting degrees through AI’ are not simply exaggerated stories being told for their own sake, but key mechanisms in developing AI as a market object by providing moral valuations for the exchange of capital, and mobilizing resources, attention, and legitimacy (Van Lente 2012). In this issue, for example, Horvath, Frei, and Steinberg (2025) discuss how problematisation narratives are mobilised to legitimise Artificial Intelligence in Education (AIED) design decisions in ways that narrow questions of social justice.

Sociologists are well-placed to explore how the hype around AI and education over the past few years has played a part in assembling powerful actors around the building of AIED as a commercial venture/market – a key catalyst for attracting investment and chasing funding from venture capital. At the same time, sociology also pushes us to explore how the recent AIED hype has also played a central part in the assemblage of sprawling networks of allies bound together around the assumed inevitability of AI in education. These networks include policymakers, international organisations, regulatory actors and ‘early adopter’ users – all amplifying the hype and positioning education as a common-sense ‘use case’ for AI. For example, in this issue, Bekirsky (2025) examines the role of social media influencers in education who play a role in how AIED is understood and mobilised. The recent hype around AI and education has certainly been a key way for powerful actors to create a sense of urgency and inevitability that now drives interest and investment, as well as distracting close scrutiny of their work. Indeed, the GenAI hype is performative – a means of overtly marshalling together those who are looking to gain influence and benefit from the hype cycle, while marginalising “those who critique or resist these speculative narratives” (Bohner and Vertesi 2025, p.14).

Seeing AI hype in these ways therefore raises a number of important lines of inquiry that sociologists of education are well-placed to pursue. First are the political economy questions of using AI hype to ‘follow the money’ – to scrutinise which actors, interests and agendas have been brought together through the propagation of these stories around AI and education (and which actors have been excluded). It is also important to scrutinise what ideologies have been brought together through the propagation of these stories – from ideas around accelerationism and transhumanism, through to hierarchical and exclusionary visions of society that align with authoritarianism, eugenics and other fascistic intent and in which technology is imagined as a means of optimisation (Torres and Gebru, 2024). Further, it is

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important to ask how these global hype dynamics around AI have been replicated and adopted in local contexts – legitimating and animating localised actions around AI.

Finally, the sociology of expectations also pushes us to look beyond the current conditions of hype. For example, how can we redress the damage that exaggerated expectations and hype does to long-term public trust in the societal legitimacy of AI in education (Borup *et al.* 2006)? How might we resist, subvert and promote our own forms of anti ed-tech messaging and propaganda - creating a collective consciousness around the social harms around current forms of AIED, and revealing the possibility of emancipatory and empowering alternatives? All told, sociology pushes us to not simply take the hype around AIED on its own terms, but examine why AI has been hyped in the way that it has, who benefits, and how might things be otherwise.

INJUSTICES ARISING FROM AI USE IN EDUCATION

The inequalities in access and use of digital technologies have been an area of study and policy interest since the late 1980s. For decades, researchers and policy makers have mapped digital inequalities along ever more complex dimensions of access relating to hardware, software and connectivity, skills and literacies, and usage. Such research consistently demonstrates relationships between these inequalities and axes of disadvantage (such as income, ethnicity, gender, disability), with those who are better off and better educated experiencing better access, displaying higher skills, and using technology for a wider range of purposes that they can use to further their own interests. Such studies have observed complex patterns of digital inequality that both facilitate and constrain opportunities for learning, qualifications and occupational pathways throughout life (Hohfield *et al.*, 2017; Robinson *et al.*, 2018; Yasmine *et al.*, 2025). Now, with the ever-increasing focus on AI, these earlier discussions of the digital divide have given way to similar discussions of an “AI divide” (Wang *et al.*, 2024).

This mapping and recognition of inequalities in AI access, skills, use and their likely educational and social implications are important. However, much of this work tends to reflect a relatively narrow, distributive view of inequality, that toften views the problem as one of allocation of resources (hence a strong focus on schemes to distribute devices or data) and of locating the problem with the individual (hence a strong focus on skills) with limited attention to the structural and cultural relations that these problems reflect (Garcia and Lee, 2020). As such they can often align with the much critiqued “political arithmetic” tradition in the sociology of education (Whitty, 2016). Echoing wider debates in the sociology of education, scholars have added significant nuance to this debate often drawing on classical scholars such as Marx, Bourdieu, and Bernstein. They offer richer theoretical accounts to explain these differences, focusing on questions of injustice, rather than a neutral mapping of inequalities, with closer attention to how people navigate and experience the use of technologies in education institutions and the home (Beckman *et al.*, 2018; Horvath and Steinberg, 2023; Rafalow and Puckett (2022); Warschauer *et al.* 2004).

A sociological response is also needed as in many of the debates around digital or AI inequalities there is an underlying technological determinism, which, as argued above, focuses on how to harness the inevitable power of these technologies for positive social change (Wyatt, 2023). Within this framing, AI is viewed as a neutral “good” that needs to be allocated to everyone equally. A richer sociological lens interrogates these assumptions, encouraging theoretical and empirical work that aims to “trouble the tech” (Suchman, 2023).

For example, highlighting how, due to problematic data, measurement, modelling decisions, and application, in practice, these models encode biases and values that can favour certain groups and discriminate against others. Such fundamental problems can lead, for example, to differences in the educational opportunities students are exposed to and the disrespecting and alienation of groups of students due to the ways such technology reproduces racist, ableist and Western logics (Dixon-Román et al., 2019; Eynon, 2024; Foley and Melese, 2025 in this issue, Alterator, et al. 2025 in this issue).

A sociological lens also encourages attention to the injustices that may arise from the use of AI in education within a global frame (Fraser, 2008). This sits in contrast to much of the debate around “AI divides” which tends to be centred around the interests of the nation state. A sociological lens highlights the complex power relations at play and draws attention to the ways that injustices can emerge as a result of the development of AI well beyond the classroom, that maintain and can exacerbate inequities between countries. For example, the reliance on low-paid and poorly protected online workers in the AI sector, environmental degradation due to the huge amount of water and other resources required to support AI, risks to data sovereignty, and the unethical trialling of AI on people in less economically prosperous countries (Gray and Suri, 2019; Mohamed et al., 2020; Nemorin, 2024; Selwyn 2024).

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF AI

Sociology can provide important perspectives that can unpack the political and economic conditions within which AI is designed, deployed, and used in educational contexts. This is particularly significant where disillusionment with AI in education can tend towards oversimplifying ideas about the impact of commercialisation or situating the blame for all educational problems at the door of a ‘capitalist’ or ‘neoliberal’ society. Sociology is well-placed to supply the depth of insight capable of resisting the temptation to position private, profiteering AI as simply an antithesis to public, principled education, as well as offering robust ways of articulating the co-constitutive relations between technology and politics that often underpin educational decision-making. Such political economy analyses, therefore, suggest ways of expanding the view of AI far beyond conventional educational interests in teaching and learning practices, or indeed in particular technical functions, towards the ways such technologies both reflect and contribute to the wider systems and processes through which society functions.

This is an area which has been developed in critical studies of education technology more generally. For example, researching the role of ‘edtech’ financial investors, highlighting the significant impact of their decision-making on the ways educational priorities are rationalised (Davies et al. 2022). Importantly, such studies emphasise the ways economic rationales for more data, new markets, and the promise of scale are made to appear indistinguishable from the supposed educational benefits of personalisation, tech sector innovation, and the convenience of integrated services. Other studies examine the ways shifts in the economy resulting from digitisation are transforming the education technology industry, specifically through practices of **rentiership and assetization** (business models based on charging ongoing rents for access to digital platforms and treating software and data as assets that can generate continuing value), through which software platforms and data are deployed in new forms of value construction (Komljenovic 2021). Such approaches might be focused on AI specifically, asking questions, not only about the ways education might conform to trends in the wider economic ordering of society as a result of AI, but also the ways in which such

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changes might be rearticulated as beneficial disruptions to established ideas about teaching and learning.

Sociology is also well-placed to underscore the global contexts through which such educational reordering might take place, in particular a geopolitical arena in which AI is habitually positioned at the centre of power struggles (Esposito 2025) and often assumed to bring about radical economic disruption (see Björkegren 2025). Work in this issue examines the way intergovernmental organisations such as UNESCO appear to function within this global arena, tending towards the legitimisation of AI as an instrument for educational progress and development (Mochizuki et al. 2025). This is one important example of tracing the ideas, policies, actors, and networks through which dominant views of AI in education are consolidated. A key focus of interest in this kind of work is the role of ‘big tech’ firms, which through increasing economic and political power, are emerging as substantial global players in the ways education is envisioned, developed, and enacted. Here, sociology of education can develop crucial understanding about the ways such actors shape downstream educational rationales.

Research on the comparative analysis of national education policy and governance might also be oriented towards the study of AI, and the specific ways in which assumptions about global and regional competition shape educational strategy. Sociological approaches might be especially insightful here in connecting macro level policy to meso level institutional implementation to micro level classroom practices, emphasising the ways in which everyday experiences of teaching and learning with AI are linked to wider global dynamics.

Ultimately, the sociology of education offers an extensive territory of insight through which the political economy of AI and education could be more substantially developed in the future. Foundational questions here concern how society ends up being ordered in particular ways, as a result of new forms of governance emerging from the functional relationships between nation states, educational institutions, and AI corporations. Such questions can begin to examine and unpack the ways power is enacted through education, and where, for example, particular populations of students might be advantaged or disadvantaged by the implementation of AI. Future research might also examine different kinds of education-specific business models and practices emerging from the growth of generative AI, developing an understanding of different dimensions and scales of operation across education start-ups and established tech corporations. Such dynamics can be productively linked to the ways educational practices are shaped globally, regionally, and locally. Sociological perspectives might also help to illuminate resistances, counter narratives, and alternatives to current economic models, examining the ways different constructions of value related to the deployment of AI might impact and shape educational ideas and rationales.

A SOCIOLOGICAL FOCUS ON THE MUNDANE AND EVERYDAY INSTANCES OF AI ‘PAIN POINTS’

Another strength of taking a sociological approach to AI and education is its emphasis on the everyday, quotidian and mundane. The tradition of sociological work from the likes of Bourdieu, Habermas, Garfinkel, Goffman, Lefebvre, DeCerteau, Dorothy Smith and Hill Collins encourages us to focus on the diversity of people’s ‘lived experience’ around the AI that they actually encounter in their day-to-day activities – i.e. people’s routine interactions, relations, behaviours and feelings. Crucially, focusing on everyday AI pushes education debates to focus on very different forms of AI. Indeed, people’s

everyday encounters with AI in education are more likely to be through tools such as Google search, Grammarly and Microsoft Copilot than ‘affective AI’ monitoring of emotions or AI-driven pedagogical companions. Crucially, people’s experiences of mundane AI technologies will be entwined with all manner of older preceding ‘non-AI’ technologies – from web browsers to Post-It notes (Michael 2006). This therefore leads to very different studies of AI use in education in comparison to the recent deluge of critical studies of relatively extraordinary AI use cases.

In addition, focusing on the everyday also pushes us to approach AI in very different terms from what is usually talked about – for example issues of maintenance instead of innovation, repetition instead of novelty. It also pushes us to consider people’s *direct* and *indirect* relations with AI (i.e. the distinction between ‘doing AI’ and having AI done to you). In all these ways, then, sociologists do not simply strive to describe everyday life but make it the focus of critical enquiry. Here, sociology pushes us to ask how everyday activities and small-scale processes around AI in education are ‘inscribed within structures’ (Lefebvre 1987, p.9) and connected to macro-level societal dynamics – i.e. social forces, structures and divisions (Giddens 1993).

In this sense, the sociology of the everyday stands in contrast to the guiding preoccupations of many ‘critical’ accounts of AI. As well as pushing us to explore what and how people are actually doing with AI, the sociology of everyday life also pushes us to explore why people might be finding convenience or comfort in obviously flawed and/or limited AI tools. For example, students continuing to use GenAI to produce mediocre essays may well be doing so because their schools only require them to be producing mediocre essays. Similarly, teachers might be persevering to use ChatGPT to produce impersonal student feedback simply because they are expected to produce otherwise unfeasible amounts of written feedback to students. In contexts and instances when mediocre work is good enough, then it makes practical sense to use AI for this.

Second, the sociology of the everyday pushes us to focus on the ways in which AI technologies are exacerbating existing conditions and aspects of people’s lives. This moves us beyond simply speculating about new or possible outcomes arising from the increased use of AI and instead focusing attention on people’s current lived experiences and then tracing backward to see if (and how) AI might be implicated. Here, then, we are likely to see how the pains and actual human suffering that are afflicting students, teachers and others in education today are primarily driven by the mundane ways that flawed software and platforms bump up against significant social and economic concerns such as student economic hardship, institutional regimes of surveillance and discrimination, teacher burnout and mental health. There is a rich critical education literature that documents the persistence of such harms, hardships, afflictions, and problems. As such, any sociologist of education is best directed to start from these entrenched issues and then work backwards to see where mundane forms of AI are present and implicated, alongside many other material causes of that pain.

CONCLUSION

This is obviously a partial list – there are many other areas of argument and analysis that a sociology of education and AI might focus on. The thirteen papers in this special issue develop and extend these themes. A first group of papers examines the agency of actors in education and forms of authority in AI in education: Röhl (2025) explores a shift in teachers’ agency as automation is implemented in schools and shows how teachers’ professional

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autonomy become contested rather than simply replaced. Bekirsky (2025) discusses the shift in authority over pedagogical practice with the emergence of AI in education influencers, who use their social, symbolic, cultural, and economic capital to establish a position as brokers in the field AI in education. In another paper, Mochizuki, Bruillard, and Bryan (2024) investigate the network of influential actors, shaping UNESCO's AIED policy guidance that foregrounds certain cultural, socio-political, and economic ideologies, leading to legitimising AI in education.

Another group of authors focuses on topics related to governance and power: Gulson, Sellar, and Webb's (2026) study on classification in education governance finds that while AI does not represent a radically new form of classification, it generates new descriptions that may change the conditions in which students, teachers, and other policy subjects act. Dai, Thomas, and Rawolle (2025) observe new forms of disciplinary power that have emerged through AI-supported surveillance in a post-panoptic power structure. Rau and Bellinger (2025) analyse metaphors of AI in European education policy documents, arguing that framings such as AI as a human-like companion shape how AI is understood, while suggesting that alternative metaphors are needed to diversify the discourse on AI and engage more fully with the socio-technical and political complexity of AI in education.

Another set of papers offers conceptual critiques: Hansen and Carrigan (2025) employ a relational sociology lens and introduce the concept of bureaucratic education tools to show how Large Language Model-based education technologies are unlikely to produce more active learners, if these technologies are used as a technical fix for structural problems. Hillman and Couldry (2025) show how promises of AI rearticulate social and educational risks, risking infantilising children by reducing the uncertainty and complexity in the real world. Kim (2026) uses waste as an analytical lens to argue that AI in education treats otherness as forms of dirt to be identified and cleaned up, showing how the promise of AI-driven improvement can undermine more relational and plural forms of education.

A last group of papers foreground justice and knowledge: Horvarth, Frei, and Steinberg (2025) introduce the concept of "short-circuiting", describing the dynamic in which justice-related considerations during the edtech design process can be bypassed by drawing on seemingly self-evident assumptions presented in public narratives. Foley and Melese (2025) argue that AI systems do not merely "help" disabled students, instead, they reorganise educational life by encoding ableist norms into learning systems. Tolbert, Kim, Olave, and Tilsen (2025) trace the shifts in their own stances on AI that moved from an initial phase of enchantment to critical ambivalence and disenchantment, foregrounding feminist dialogue as a way of resisting the epistemic flattening and saturation associated with AIED. Alterator, Maddox, Southerton, and Schutt (2025) show that using GenAI in the context of Indigenous education risks reproducing colonial knowledge structures, because platforms often decontextualise knowledge and obfuscate provenance, which intensifies the need for teachers' critical reflexivity and expertise rather than replacing it.

This special issue covers a range of theories to address sociological concerns by drawing on feminist theories (Tolbert et al., 2025), Indigenous studies (Alterator et al. 2025), and disability studies (Foley and Melese, 2025), as well as classical sociology thinkers such as

Ulrich Beck (Hillman and Couldry, 2025), Foucault (Dai et al., 2025), Bourdieu (Bekirsky, 2025), and Boltanski (Horvath et al., 2025). Methodologically, authors in this issue have experimented with participation in co-generative dialogues (Tolbert et al., 2025), conducted case studies (Foley and Melese, 2025 and Röhl, 2025), qualitative surveys (Dai et al., 2025), ethnographic research at edtech events (Horvath et al., 2025), walkthrough methods (Alterator et al. 2025), metaphor analysis (Rau and Bellinger 2026), and combined social network analysis and discourse analysis (Mochizuki et al. 2025 and Bekirsky 2025).

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This diversity of empirical concerns, theoretical perspectives, and methodological approaches highlight the richness of emerging sociological work on AI in education as well as the need for plural forms of inquiry able to engage with changing educational relations, new configurations of power, and questions of justice and knowledge that arise from them. Taken together, the contributions in this special issue all suggest some pertinent and potentially powerful future lines of inquiry that a nascent sociology of education and AI might address, not least how education might be reclaimed from the commercial, technocratic, and reductionist visions that currently animate so much of the AI discourse. They also reaffirm why a sociological approach is so valuable, since it allows us to move beyond claims of inevitability or neutrality and to recognise AI in education instead as something shaped through power struggles and competing visions of what education is and should be. From this perspective, our task is not only to diagnose the harms and contradictions of the present moment, but also to open up space for imagining and pursuing alternative futures in education.

All told, it seems reasonable to presume that artificial intelligence (in various forms) will be an increasingly unavoidable topic for journals such as the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* to be addressing over the next few years. Hopefully, this special issue provides some solid foundations for us all to develop and refine this area of scholarship. The sociology of education and AI starts here!

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