Collective Prosperity: Artificial Intelligence and Arts Education in an Age of Global Transformation

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A complex transformation of culture around the world is well on the way as humanity confronts artificial intelligence, demographic changes and a need for a new social contract. Educator and university administrator Venka Purushothaman argues for lifelong learning and why higher education needs to focus on soft skills and break down the undergraduate-postgraduate binary.

Culture, as a core concept of humanity, represents people's collective prosperity. Expressed through the arts and heritage, and organised through language, religion, education and politics, culture facilitates the articulation of kinship or shared origins and experiences, and the expression of time-tested resilience against adversities. It demonstrates the riches of a community, enabling its passage over time.

However, Culture (with a capital C) today is knotted in complexities, pushed and pulled in all directions—celebrated yet obscured, freed yet datafied, safeguarded yet ignored, nurtured yet devoured. These multi-directional perspectives of culture are not informed by time-tested collective prosperity but by the desire to capture the essence of living in the moment, what novelist James Joyce might deem "twitterlitter". Be it a sense of self, community, economy or nation, the push/pull levers are in full force at all levels of society, in both advanced and emerging economies, setting the stage for the contestation over information, technology and the environment.

Humanity stands at a new threshold. In attempting to appreciate and yet manage culture as both a creative enterprise and a policy imperative, cultural and state actors face two key shifts.

Firstly, the entry of artificial intelligence (AI) into the global village heralds the need for a new social contract, one that includes the state, people and technology to collectively articulate their desires for a nation-state, a community.

Secondly, this social contract must acknowledge the dynamic demographic changes stretching two ends of a continuum. High youth populations and their desires clamour for attention for jobs, a better quality of life and the freedom to develop one's sense of identity—an identity which, for the first time in history, is embodied digitally and powered by digital transformation as an extension of being a human. Screentime—the new stimuli for human focus and attention—is driving significant changes in education (online learning), economy (streaming and social media), finance (digital currency and banking), society (new values and interests), and well-being (changing behaviours and addictions).

This is stonewalled by an ageing population base and expectations for better care, enhanced quality of life, and the freedom to protect one's heritage. As advancements in science and health enable life expectancies beyond a hundred years of age, governments and societies have to reckon with redefining concepts such as retirement, pensions, and replaceability at the workplace. A new society is beginning.

While state actors globally are intent on setting an agenda and yielding power over the new, the potential and the effusive, there is an opportunity for collective prospering built around AI and education.

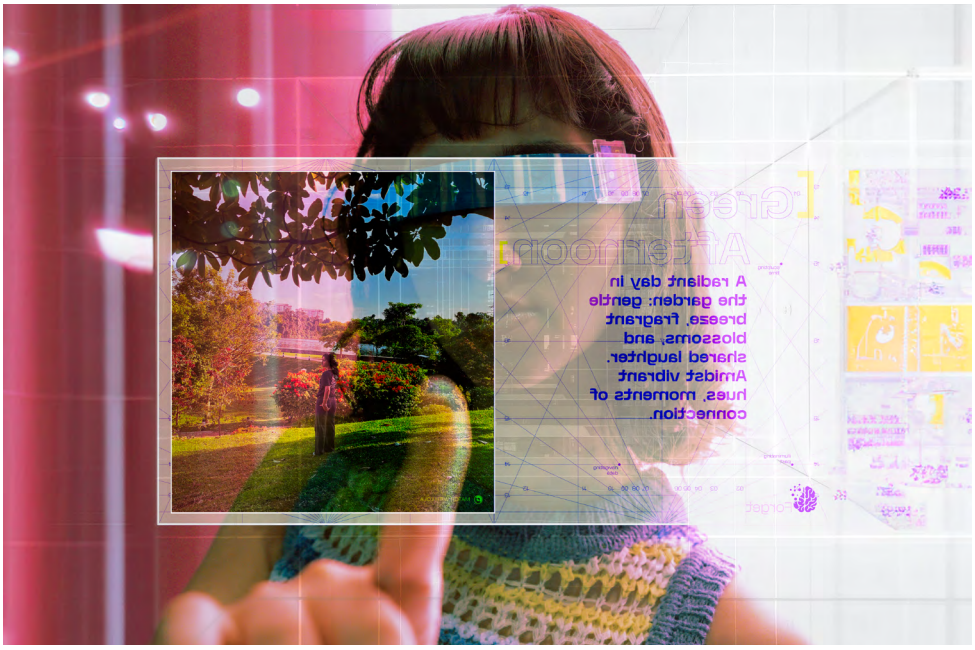

Figure 1. Kashmira Hira Ryat, Diploma in Design for Communication and Experiences, Class of 2024. The project *[Archive]* reflects on the digital era's impact on human identity and urges a thoughtful approach to memory, speculating on AI's ability to preserve, revisit, and even delete memories via digital footprints. Image courtesy of LASALLE College of the Arts.

AI and Cultural Convergence

AI has arrested the imagination of the world, fostering elation and trepidation. AI models, innovates and plays. While humanity's propensity for change is enormous, the speed of change, for that matter, the lightning speed of digital transformation, is alarming yet fascinating. According to a recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) report, 40% of global employment is exposed to some form of AI, and this increases to 60% in advanced economies. This is only the beginning.

AI's herculean potential is in its application to everyday life—converging and transforming policy, processes, ideation, learning, and the anthropology of everyday life. This has a real economic impact on communities. Stanford University's *Artificial Intelligence Index 2024 Report* reveals that "AI makes workers more productive and leads to higher quality work" and "bridges the skill gap between low- and high-skilled workers"[1].

However, I register the view that the obsession with AI will remain limited as long as it remains the exclusive purview of computational work and design, thereby creating inequalities arising out of limited access, inclusivity and literacy around the world, as observed by the United Nations' 2023 interim *Governing AI for Humanity* report. While AI presents tremendous economic opportunities, it places existential stress on stewards of lived and

Figure 2. Design Workshop at LASALLE Open House 2024. Image courtesy of LASALLE College of the Arts.

living practices who plan, maintain and harmonise different aspects of everyday life. People and their erstwhile sectors are guarded, as evidenced by the multilateral governance and security frameworks for AI that have emerged in recent years.

There is an opportunity for the arts and its associated creative industries to engage with AI collectively. The arts' focus on research, experimentation and interdisciplinary mapping aligns with how AI functions. Long before AI became fashionable, artists as researchers were inspired by the computational wizardry of Alan Turing (1924–1954), the interactivity of musician/video artist Nam June Paik (1932–2002) who is known as the founder of video art, and cultural theorist Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), which provided a social space for technology in the humanities. They, among others, informed contemporary artistic practices to engage with real-time live experiences, attuning artists to the vagaries of AI.

The AI Index 2024 acknowledges that AI can surpass "human performance on several benchmarks, including some in image classification, visual reasoning, and English understanding" but falters in areas such as visualisation, common sense reasoning and planning. This demonstrates that, as we wrestle with AI-generated work and whatever else it entails besides improving systems and processes, we are pressed to rethink our definition of creativity.

Such reflection can only be beneficial. Here, I postulate the opportunity for the arts and humanities to converge with the emerging AI discourse. We can see both AI and arts professionals as occupants of spaces that require diverse skills, gig economies, interdisciplinary practices and geographical and

digital mobilities. This model lends itself well to the skilled workforce in the creative sector and provides an opportunity to support the emerging invisible economies in the creative industries.

Future of Education: Wherefore, the classroom?

> "We are building a new school. The school is an experiment on the sustainability of (both material and immaterial) economies of organization. We want to test the idea of school as a garden of ideas, a laboratory of affects, and a space where new ideas clash and coalesce. We are not yet sure about what can be learned in this school. But we are absolutely sure about not starting from the premises that specify what needs to be learned and not learned. We want to study together, while interrogating the meaning of togetherness."
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> —*Letters: The classroom is burning* by KUNCI Study Forum and Collective (2020).

Are classroom walls formidable in the face of digital transformation?

The AI paradigm continues to have a significant impact on higher education. Universities have to, on the one hand, meet the economic pipeline of traditional sectors, while, on the other hand, incorporating disciplinary learning, technology experiences and situated knowledge practices in their curriculum to excite students to become captains of their new economy. Moreover, AI significantly impacts impressionable young learners who may be lured to abdicate their ability to analyse, synthesise and opine. As digital and kinetic systems enter the classrooms, educators— as custodians of pedagogic and curricular paradigms—flail, grasping the remnants of the 20th century educational systems which transacted education to the marketplace. At the core of the matter are two issues: what kinds of values should a good education espouse in the 21st century, and what are the coordinates of a "new" classroom?

Indonesian artist collective KUNCI provides a possible entry point into the "new" classroom as "a garden of ideas, a laboratory of affects, and a space where new ideas clash and coalesce". An arts school environment is indeed a "garden of ideas and a laboratory of affects" furthering disciplinary enquiries and charting new spaces for the economy.

In this vein, LASALLE College of the Arts has been a beacon of innovation in creative education for over four decades. Recognising early on an under-developed creative sector, in 1993, it launched Singapore's first fine arts degree in Singapore in partnership with Australia's world-ranked RMIT University. Subsequently customising and offering its unique brand of fine arts undergraduate and postgraduate programmes from 2003, it has produced world-leading artists such as Amanda Heng, Zai Kuning, Vincent Leow, Suzanne Victor and Shubigi Rao, several of whom have gone on to complete PhD studies in art. Through deep research as a pillar of an arts education, the college has fostered a pioneering spirit to launch Singapore's and Southeast Asia's first MA in Asian Art Histories, producing unparalleled exploration of the rich and diverse artistic traditions of Asia, and an MA in Art Therapy to address the growing need for therapeutic practices in mental health care. The graduates from both programmes form the backbone of their respective sectors today.

Integral to today's interconnected world, creative education must transcend traditional boundaries, embracing interdisciplinarity and global engagement by providing students with opportunities to work across disciplines, cultures, and continents. The well-established discipline of arts management has undergone a significant change at LASALLE. The undergraduate programme has integrated digital technology as a vector of professional training, applicable to studying digital museums, digital performances, and even digital diplomacy and business.

Similarly, designing the future cannot be left purely to time-tested institutions. The future requires participatory citizenry flexing its creative muscle to engage with change that is afoot. A new undergraduate programme, BA (Hons) Design for Social Futures, aims to do just that in converging the past and enabling today's youth to envision a design contract for their shared social space.

Generative AI—its opportunities, uses, and considerations—is now incorporated into the learning and teaching of these programmes at LASALLE, demonstrating how cutting-edge technology can be leveraged to enhance artistic expression and innovation. But this is balanced with critical thinking skills and contextual studies to enable students to go deeper beyond digital screentime to synthesise information, develop informed decision-making, and sensibly navigate and apply new technologies. In a manner, the future of education is one of balance—ensuring graduates are well-prepared to shape their futures.

Transforming Education and Training

In the last decade, the emphasis on lifelong learning (also known as continuous educational training or professional development) has enraptured governments and economies worldwide.

Lifelong learning was originally seen as an opportunity to "skill" fresh graduates, reskill the plateaued worker, and re-train the retrenched. However, McKinsey's 2019 research shows that "people who will thrive in the 21st century will be those who embrace lifelong learning and continually increase their knowledge, skills, and competencies". A paradigm shift in educational policies is emerging. The front-loading of skills for the economy, together with human development in the classroom, is no longer viable. As job and technological transformation occur alongside changes to the cultural makeup of a workforce, the "lifelong work" must be paralleled by lifelong learning so that new skills are acquired, new contexts appreciated, and new ways of thinking introduced.

Artists have always been lifelong learners. Searching, experimenting and discovering, they have an iron-clad mettle of curiosity and adventure that allows them to remain current and plugged into the matters of the day. This form of continuous learning and adaptation informs the essence of the creative industries. A life of learning involves both upgrading hard skills and technical know-how coupled with an openness to new global perspectives. Young creatives are well-positioned to embrace this to the fullest.

The key is to not look at lifelong learning as merely a tool to fill the gap in the economy or align it with prevailing economic or social policies. Often, these function within institutions and are tailor-made for sector requirements. Instead, we must take this opportunity to bridge industry needs, social needs and future enterprise, developing highly motivated people with multiple intelligences and skills to journey through the changing winds of the world. Lifelong learning must be a key tenet of our social contract.

In this regard, higher education must undertake two key changes. First, it must muster the courage to redesign its programme offer to not merely be locked into undergraduate and postgraduate studies. The field of education can be expanded to include durationally-truncated learning opportunities—shorter programmes which will enable localised experimentation, acquisition of highly nuanced skills, and confidence in researching nascent fields. It is vital that lifelong learning shifts away from the individual's desire—which is valid and should be honoured—to acquire skills to fit into a sector towards igniting an individual's creative potential to journey with industry.

The second change is in the area of soft skills. As a response to sectorial gaps, many continuous educational offers in the marketplace divide soft skills (behavioural-communication, creativity, empathy, adaptability) and hard skills (technical skills-knowledge synthesis, analysis, and application) to meet immediate needs. This compartmentalised approach has generated an acquisitive culture of collecting abilities rather than building cognitive attributes through these skills. I stress that soft skills are much more than interpersonal skills. They provide the space to ignite the emotional intelligence residing in all of us, bringing purpose and cognizance to the work that we do.

Soft and hard skills contiguously inform and shape every discipline, and this is integral to the future of work. Today, it is vital that higher education integrates them organically into curriculum to enable students to shape their discipline and become stewards of sustainable practices.

In many ways, lifelong learning unlocks that which is within all of us: the ability to multiply our intelligence to survive an ever-complex and exciting world and seek one of the basic tenets of being human, which is to be happy.

As an educator and university administrator, I work in a dynamic environment that exemplifies contemporary creative education; it is innovative, interdisciplinary, technologically-adept, and deeply interconnected with broader societal issues. At LASALLE, our commitment to excellence and innovation ensures that graduates are prepared to succeed and make meaningful contributions to the world around them.

The complex transformations that dictate the 21st century require new learning methods through innovative programmes, fostering global collaborations, and integrating technology into the arts. As we embark on a new social contract, we are at an opportune moment to redefine our collective prosperity through the creative leaders we produce. □

About the Author

Venka Purushothaman, PhD, is Deputy President & Provost at LASALLE | University of the Arts Singapore. He is an art writer, educator and university administrator with a distinguished career in Singapore's arts higher education and cultural industries. His research and writing span international cultural relations and policy, arts education, festival cultures and contemporary art. He founded the Asia-Pacific Network for Culture, Education and Research (ANCER), co-founded the Tokyo-initiated Global Design Initiative, and chairs the Zurich-based Shared Campus. He sits on several expert panels in Singapore, and is a member of the International Cultural Relations Research Alliance at Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (Germany) and a Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts (UK).

Notes

1. According to the Stanford University *AI Index 2024 Annual Report*, in 2023, 61 AI models emerged from the US, surpassing China's 15 and the European Union's 21. In tandem, US private investments in AI surged to an astounding US$67.2 billion while investments in China and the EU declined.

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