When History Meets Artificial Intelligence: A Teacher's Reflection

What Niall Ferguson's ideas taught me about Critical thinking, and the future of Education

A recent conversation between Dan Senor and historian Niall Ferguson about Ferguson's essay *The Death of History*, co-authored with AI researcher John-Clark Levin, prompted me to reflect on questions that have accompanied me throughout more than fifty years in education.

This article is not a summary or a review of their conversation. Rather, it is a reflection on the ideas that resonated with me and how they intersect with my own philosophy of teaching, Bloom's Taxonomy, and the growing conversation about artificial intelligence in education.

Only a few days earlier, I had written a LinkedIn article about the increasing debate surrounding AI, academic integrity, and the changing role of the teacher. As I listened to Ferguson describe the challenges facing historians today, I realized that many of those same challenges are now facing educators in every discipline.

The question is no longer simply how students find information. The more important question is whether they know how to think about the information they encounter.

The Challenge: Information Without Reflection

One of the ideas that particularly resonated with me was Ferguson's concern about today's digital environment. He argues that artificial intelligence has made it easier than ever to create convincing but misleading content. At the same time, many social media platforms tend to reward material that attracts attention rather than material that is accurate. As a result, misinformation can spread at remarkable speed, often reaching millions of people before careful scholarship has a chance to respond.

Some educators may feel that if we cannot compete with these technologies, then perhaps we have become outdated. I see the situation differently. Ignoring this new reality is not an option. The real question is how education should respond.

Why is this happening? Ferguson suggests that the answer lies not only in artificial intelligence itself, but also in the way today's digital platforms operate.

When Technology Shapes What We Believe

One observation from Ferguson particularly stayed with me. His concern is not simply that artificial intelligence can generate false information. Rather, it is that today's digital platforms can spread that information with extraordinary speed and to enormous audiences.

He illustrated this with several examples, including AI-generated videos in which historical figures appear to speak in ways they never did. One example he mentioned was Hitler

speaking fluent English in a fabricated video. Technology itself is impressive, but it also reminds us how easily history can be manipulated when convincing images and voices can be created in minutes.

Ferguson also referred to surveys showing that many young adults obtain much of their historical knowledge through social media rather than through books, classrooms, or carefully researched sources. When this information is filtered through algorithms designed to maximize attention, sensational claims often travel farther than accurate ones.

Another observation that caught my attention was his observation that today's digital networks can connect and amplify extreme voices far more effectively than in the past. Groups and ideas that once existed on the margins can now reach millions of people within hours. The challenge is no longer simply misinformation; it is the speed, scale, and influence with which it spreads.

As I listened, I realized that this is not only a challenge for historians. It is equally a challenge for educators. Our task is no longer limited to helping students acquire knowledge. We must also help them develop the judgment needed to distinguish reliable information from persuasive manipulation.

Why Does Misinformation Spread So Easily?

Ferguson argues that the problem is not only the false information itself. It is also the way today's digital platforms are designed.

Their goal is simple: to keep people looking at their screens for as long as possible. The longer people stay online, the more advertising space these platforms can sell. Because of that, their algorithms often give greater visibility to content that surprises, shocks, or angers people. Careful, balanced explanations often struggle to compete with content designed to provoke strong emotional reactions.

In other words, what attracts attention is often rewarded more than what deserves attention.

From Books to Memes

One idea I kept returning to resonated with me was Ferguson's observation that history is increasingly communicated through short videos, memes, and brief online posts rather than through books or careful historical research.

This does not mean that books have lost their value. Rather, it means that historians and educators now face a new challenge. A thoughtful explanation that takes years to research can be overshadowed in minutes by a dramatic video or an emotional social media post.

The speed of digital communication has changed not only how people receive information, but also how they judge what is true.

If the speed of communication has changed how information spreads, artificial intelligence has added another layer of complexity.

When Technology Creates the Illusion of Truth

Ferguson also points out that artificial intelligence has introduced another challenge. Today, it is possible to create highly convincing images, voices, and videos that never actually existed. At the same time, automated accounts can repeatedly promote the same message until it appears that "everyone" believes it.

When people encounter the same idea over and over again, they may begin to accept it as truth simply because it seems so widespread.

For educators, this makes critical thinking more important than ever. Students need to ask not only "*Is this interesting*"? but also "*Is this accurate*"? "*Who created It*"? "*What evidence supports it*"? For me, the answer is not to resist technology, but to strengthen the habits of mind that technology can never replace.

In this environment, knowing facts is no longer enough. Students must also learn how to question, verify, and evaluate the information they encounter.

Bloom's Taxonomy: More Relevant Than Ever

Rather than viewing artificial intelligence as a threat to education, I believe it reminds us why Bloom's Taxonomy remains remarkably relevant.

If our teaching stops at helping students remember facts or understand information, artificial intelligence can often perform those tasks more quickly than humans. But education was never meant to end there.

Bloom challenged educators to guide students toward higher levels of thinking: analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Those abilities are becoming even more essential in an age when information is abundant, but wisdom remains scarce.

When students learn to analyze evidence, evaluate sources, compare perspectives, and ask thoughtful questions, they become active thinkers rather than passive consumers of information. Instead of accepting every message that appears on a screen, they begin asking, *Is this true? What evidence supports it? What voices may be missing?*

To me, that is where the true value of education lies—not in competing with technology, but in teaching students how to think critically about the world technology presents to them.

Hope for the Classroom

After listening to Ferguson's reflections, I did not come away feeling discouraged. On the contrary, I found myself feeling even more convinced that teachers have an essential role to play in the age of artificial intelligence.

Technology will continue to evolve. New platforms will emerge, algorithms will become more sophisticated, and artificial intelligence will undoubtedly transform the way information is created and shared. Yet none of these developments changes education's fundamental purpose.

As educators, our greatest contribution is not simply to transmit knowledge, but to help students become thoughtful, curious, and responsible learners. When we encourage them to ask meaningful questions, examine evidence, evaluate different perspectives, and think independently, we prepare them not only for today's technologies but also for tomorrow's challenges.

Perhaps this is where I differ from those who see artificial intelligence primarily as a threat. I believe that every technological revolution invites educators to rediscover what has always mattered most. Technology may change the tools we use, but it does not change our responsibility to cultivate thoughtful human beings.