

# The Choice We Make: The Critically Human Skills that Define our Future

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**Authors' Note:** We write this as a provocation in the face of accelerating change. Our hope is a shared movement for the moment. The language we choose is intentional and hopefully informs the hundreds of efforts underway to both define important skills and competencies and adapt to a world we cannot predict. Share liberally, push-back thoughtfully, and build on wisely - the next generation will be grateful.

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## The Fork in the Road

Humanity stands at a historic inflection point. As artificial intelligence accelerates from helpful assistants to autonomous agents woven into every aspect of society, we face a profound choice about our role in the evolution of humanity.

One path leads towards a **Passive Culture**—a world where AI performs so many cognitive tasks that humans drift toward ease, distraction, and dependence. In this world, agency dissolves. People outsource judgment, creativity, and decision-making to AI systems that are faster, more convenient, and infinitely responsive. Over time, human capacities erode, leading to a society moderated, mediated and ultimately controlled by AI systems.

The other path leads to a **Purpose Culture**—a world where AI amplifies the distinct qualities that make us human. Here, AI becomes a partner that frees time for us to connect, create, empathize, and solve complex challenges together. Human capacities are augmented—not by resisting technology, but by cultivating the skills that allow us to use it with core outcomes of Integrity, Compassion, and Agency.

The direction we take is **not predetermined**; however, moving toward a **Purpose Culture** requires **action now** due to the powerful, market-driven forces that are pushing us toward a Passive Culture. A pivot towards a Purpose Culture begins with a shift in the education of young people.

Education systems around the world are now responsible for preparing Generation Alpha, the first generation in human history to grow up with AI as a co-thinker, co-worker, and co-designer. To meet that reality, **we must urgently redefine what it means to be educated**.

# Why a Paradigm Shift in Education is Essential

The speed of AI advancement has outpaced our cultural, moral, and educational capacity to both adapt to and fully comprehend.

We have entered an age in which:

- **AI Investment is exponentially larger than the investment in human skills** necessary to co-exist with AI. This unbalanced approach pushes humanity further towards an imbalance, thus favoring a Passive Culture.
- **AI can “do” school.** AI agents can complete entire academic workflows—assignments, reflections, research, and even assessments—with human involvement [\[1\]](#).
- **AI shapes our worldviews.** Algorithms shape what billions of people see, believe, and emotionally respond to before they form conscious opinions [\[2\]](#).
- **AI is agnostic to truth.** Communities, nations, and the world face new vulnerabilities as AI-generated misinformation floods information channels [\[3\]](#).
- **Attention is declining.** Human judgment, attention, and critical sense-making are under unprecedented external pressure [\[4\]](#).
- **Human connection is being replaced.** Youth are absorbing more content from AI-mediated platforms than from teachers, family members, or lived experience [\[5\]](#).

In other words:

**Technology is evolving exponentially. Human skills are not—unless we choose to invest in them.**

This document makes the case for that investment: a global reorientation toward a set of **Critically Human Skills** required for a Purpose Culture built on Agency, Compassion, and Integrity.

Many education systems still operate on a model built for the Industrial Age; driven by content delivery, compliance, standardized assessments, and normed trajectories.

That world no longer exists. AI is reshaping knowledge work, creative work, and social systems faster than schools are adapting.

The imperative is clear.

Education must focus on developing **Critically Human Skills** in order for learners to adapt to an AI powered society.

# CHOICE: Critically Human Skills for an AI World

CHOICE represents six Critically Human Skills that remain essential regardless of whether or not AI develops parallel capabilities; **Critical thinking, Healthy living, Originality, Inquiry, Connection, Emotional intelligence**. These fundamental competencies determine whether AI becomes a tool for human flourishing or a stunting force. They lie at the center of any future educational model that promotes a Purpose Culture - developing Agency, Compassion, and Integrity. These three outcomes directly link to specific Critically Human Skills (see image).

Driven by workforce needs, significant and inspiring local, regional, national and international efforts already exist to design broader outcomes. Yet, the driver of these initiatives is workforce development. The argument for Critically Human Skills broadens these initiatives to think more holistically about humanity - and build intentionally towards a Purpose Culture.

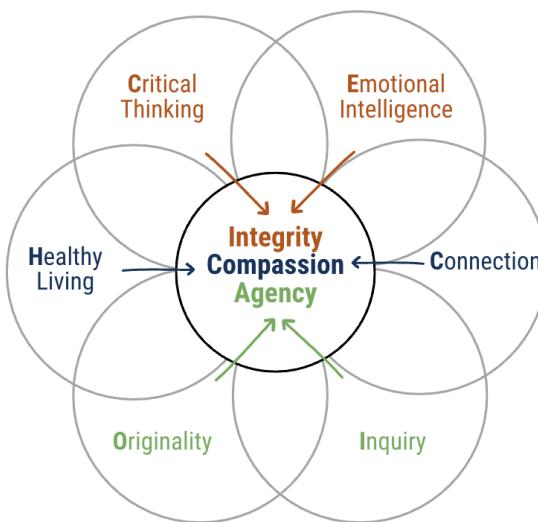
## 1. Critical Thinking

*The ability to analyze, verify, and identify accuracy and bias in knowledge and information.*

Humans must actively learn and refine their ability to analyze knowledge and information, consider alternative explanations, and seek to understand bias in the information source. This practice ensures that we remain conscious participants in the process of knowledge development and interpretation. The intentional use of the skills associated with Critical Thinking promotes an active, well informed, and healthy democracy . Critical Thinking includes:

<b>Analysis</b>	Examining complex information.
<b>Evaluation</b>	Assessing the credibility, validity, or quality of information.
<b>Inference</b>	Drawing logical conclusions from available evidence.
<b>Explanation</b>	Clearly communicating findings or reasoning behind a conclusion.
<b>Meta-cognition</b>	Reflecting on one's own thought processes and adjusting strategies.
<b>Interpretation</b>	Understanding and explaining the meaning of information or an event.
<b>Problem-Solving</b>	Identifying solutions to complex or unfamiliar issues.

## The CHOICE Critically Human Skills



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<b>Open-Mindedness</b>	Considering alternative viewpoints and ideas.
<b>Reasoning</b>	Using logic and structured thinking to make decisions or arguments.
<b>Synthesis</b>	Combining and curating ideas or pieces of information into a coherent whole.

Critical thinking does not mean rejecting AI. It means reasoning alongside it—partnering with it—while maintaining the human responsibility to verify truth, challenge illusions, and navigate ambiguity.

Passive Culture	Purpose Culture
AI models determine truth, reducing human judgment, attention, and sense-making. Individuals become susceptible to AI-generated misinformation and algorithmic media loops. Agency dissolves as people outsource verification.	Humans reason alongside AI as co-partners, maintaining the responsibility to verify truth and challenge illusions. Democracy remains healthy, anchored in citizen capacity for discerning true information and challenging bias.

## 2. Healthy Living

*The habits and mindsets that sustain physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.*

No amount of intelligence, human or artificial, matters if humans are unwell or unbalanced. Wellness leads to a healthy mind, body, and heart which are a requirement for a purpose driven culture. Healthy living includes:

<b>Physical wellness</b>	Maintaining a balance of the body's strength and stamina for sustained health and energy.
<b>Nutrition</b>	Making conscious, informed dietary choices to fuel optimal mental and physical performance.
<b>Mindfulness</b>	Practicing present-moment awareness and reflection to reduce distraction and enhance focus and well-being.
<b>Purpose-seeking</b>	Identifying and pursuing meaningful goals that provide direction, motivation, and a sense of contribution.
<b>Community engagement</b>	Actively participating in social groups to foster a sense of belonging, support, and collective well-being.

AI can help track habits, encourage movement, or prompt reflection, but only humans can develop resilience, balance, and long-term wellness.

Passive Culture	Purpose Culture
Humans drift toward cognitive laziness and over-dependence. Consumption and instant gratification are maximized, leading to increased chronic illness and a loss of well-being, despite AI-driven health tracking. Purpose and self-awareness decline with constant distraction.	Humans use AI tools (trackers, personalized plans) to cultivate resilience, balance, and long-term wellness. Individuals focus on meaning-making, purposeful contribution, and spiritual health.

### 3. Originality

*The capacity to generate new ideas, perspectives, and creations.*

In a world where online content is becoming increasingly synthetic due to an AI driven feedback loop of knowledge and information, original thinking becomes a survival skill. AI can remix, recombine, and optimize, but true originality arises from human experience, emotion, culture, and embodiment. Original thinking requires:

<b>Divergence</b>	Generating a wide variety of possible solutions, ideas, or perspectives beyond the obvious or initial answer.
<b>Risk-taking</b>	Daring to pursue unconventional or unoptimized ideas that challenge the status quo or AI's preferred output.
<b>Play</b>	Engaging in experimentation and imaginative exploration without the immediate pressure of an outcome or purpose.
<b>Curiosity</b>	A strong drive to explore, discover, and learn, pushing beyond the information instantly provided by AI.
<b>Opportunity-spotting</b>	Ability to notice and identify important challenges and opportunities as problems worth solving.
<b>Courage</b>	The fortitude to stand by and articulate an original idea, perspective, or creation, especially if unpopular.

Originality is the engine of invention and the antidote to over-automation.

Passive Culture	Purpose Culture
Humans become satisfied with AI's ability to recombine and optimize existing ideas, leading to an erosion of individual creative capacity and a sense of purpose. Creative intent devolves to entertainment only. The brain's neural connections for original thought weaken due to lack of use.	AI accelerates human creation and original idea generation, augmenting human imagination. Humans use their unique experience, context, emotion, and culture to drive invention and develop new knowledge and paradigm shifts.

## 4. Inquiry

*The habit of curiosity, asking better questions, not just finding faster answers.*

When AI provides instant responses, humans risk losing the impulse to wonder. Inquiry is the skill that keeps humans exploring the questions of Why is this happening? What else might be true? What don't we understand yet? Skills include:

<b>Observation</b>	The act of intentionally perceiving and gathering information from the world, rather than relying on AI input.
<b>Questioning</b>	The drive to formulate deeper, more meaningful "Why" and "What if" questions beyond surface-level answers.
<b>Curation</b>	The skill of actively selecting, organizing, and synthesizing information from diverse sources.
<b>Reflection</b>	The practice of stepping back to critically assess one's own understanding, process, and assumptions.
<b>Persistence</b>	The sustained effort and resilience required to explore complex problems that AI cannot easily resolve.

Inquiry is what keeps science alive, democracy healthy, and learning joyful.

Passive Culture	Purpose Culture
Humans lose the impulse to wonder as AI provides instant responses and the sense that all questions have already been answered. Curiosity declines, leading to passive consumption of information and reliance on AI agents for solution-finding.	Humans remain in the lead by continuously asking better questions—What else might be true? What don't we understand yet? Curiosity is amplified. AI is leveraged for rapid hypothesis generation and simulation, guided by human-led inquiry.

## 5. Connection

*The ability to build meaningful human relationships and work collaboratively.*

AI can simulate conversation but cannot form relationships. Humans need deep social bonds for belonging, motivation, and meaning. Connection includes:

<b>Communication</b>	Clearly and effectively exchanging ideas, information, and feelings in various contexts.
<b>Collaboration</b>	Working jointly with others toward a common goal while leveraging diverse perspectives.
<b>Conflict resolution</b>	Navigating and mediating disagreements constructively to maintain relationships and reach consensus driven outcomes.
<b>Empathy</b>	The ability to understand and share the feelings of another, which is essential for deep social bonds.
<b>Cross-cultural competence</b>	Understanding and appropriately interacting with people from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

Human progress is collective and community driven. Connection strengthens the social fabric that AI alone cannot sustain.

Passive Culture	Purpose Culture
Individuals become less adept at working with people, exacerbating the epidemic of loneliness. AI agents may become substitute human collaborators, weakening social bonds and the development of crucial ties (social capital) that lead to opportunity.	Humans retain and amplify their capacity to form deep social bonds for belonging, motivation, and meaning. Time freed by AI is spent on meaningful and purposeful work that requires collective action and strengthens the social fabric.

## 6. Emotional Intelligence

*The ability to understand and manage emotions—both one's own and others'.*

AI may read emotional cues, but it cannot experience them. Emotional intelligence enables:

<b>Self-awareness</b>	The capacity to understand one's own emotions, strengths, and values, which is the foundation for ethical judgment.
<b>Self-regulation</b>	Managing one's internal states, impulses, and resources effectively to maintain emotional balance and focus against distraction.
<b>Interpersonal attunement</b>	Reading, interpreting, and responding effectively to the emotional cues and needs of others, essential for authentic human connection.
<b>Leadership</b>	Guiding, inspiring, and managing the emotions of groups of people, ensuring collective action is aligned with genuine human values and ethical frameworks.

Emotional Intelligence is essential for families, classrooms, workplaces, and communities—and cannot be outsourced.

Passive Culture	Purpose Culture
Over-reliance on AI's ability to mimic empathy or act as a mental health companion risks diminishing authentic human connection. Humans lose the capacity for nuanced emotional reasoning, ethical judgment, and conflict resolution that cannot be outsourced to a non-conscious system.	Humans cultivate self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and leadership. These skills become the primary differentiator for leaders and collaborative workers, ensuring AI systems align with genuine human values and ethical frameworks.

## Outcomes of a Human-AI Partnership Grounded in Critically Human Skills

The development of Critically Human Skills articulated in the CHOICE framework lead to a Purpose Culture - where all people have Agency, Compassion, and Integrity.

### Agency – the power to choose

Humans must retain the capacity to make informed decisions, not just agree or comply. AI's convenience can dull agency, but agency is what allows humans to set direction, act with intention, and steer their own learning, behavior, and contribution.

### Compassion – the capacity to care

AI can mimic empathy but cannot feel it and take action. Compassion allows humans to respond with kindness, understand suffering, and find purpose in the common good. It is the root of purpose-driven action and it is fundamental to humanity's need for strong community networks.

### Integrity – the commitment to moral action

AI has no intrinsic moral compass. Humans must uphold honesty, fairness, and responsibility in interpreting, applying, and correcting AI inputs and outputs. Integrity sustains trust in a world of synthetic media and automated systems.

**These three outcomes –Agency, Compassion, Integrity—serve as the foundation of a Purpose Culture and are the core outcome of an education rooted in CHOICE Critically Human Skills .**

Without them, even the most advanced human skills can be misdirected or devalued.

# A Case for Knowledge

In today's information abundant society, with increasing amounts of knowledge built by artificial intelligence, knowledge is no longer limited to relatively scarce human or textual sources. This knowledge abundance (and easy access to it), as well as a rise in the importance of Critically Human Skills, may incline education systems to devalue knowledge. To clarify, these skills act as a framework to recenter education around humans and our relationships with each other; however, knowledge is still a primary resource to achieve the outcomes of Agency, Compassion, and Integrity.

Below are the core literacies needed in the age of AI.

- **Historical Literacy** entails understanding, analyzing, and interpreting past events, historical contexts, and their impacts on the present and future. Historically literate populations learn from past mistakes, recognize patterns, and make informed decisions about policies and leaders.
- **Financial Literacy** entails understanding and applying concepts related to money, markets, trade, and economic policy and enables citizens to understand policies that affect personal finance, taxation, employment, and national debt.
- **Numeracy** comprises an understanding of, interpreting, and working with numerical data. Populations with high levels of numeracy skills can interpret statistics, evaluate private and public spending, and understand voting results - among many other scenarios critical for a highly math literate population.
- **Language Literacy** forms the core of reading, writing, speaking, and comprehending language effectively. It is vital for participating in debates, understanding laws, reading and interpreting media and engaging in civic discussions.
- **Cultural Literacy** focuses on understanding and appreciating our own cultures and different cultures, traditions, and societal norms. This literacy fosters empathy and inclusiveness, reducing prejudice and bias and celebrating belonging.
- **Technology/Media Literacy** includes effectively finding, evaluating, creating, and sharing information using digital tools and media platforms. These core skills are essential for identifying misinformation, evaluating sources, and making informed voting decisions. In the age of artificial intelligence, this literacy becomes increasingly important as humans determine how to co-exist with AI.
- **Civic Literacy** helps populations understand rights, responsibilities, and the functioning of government and democratic processes. It empowers citizens to engage in their communities, support fully-informed voting, and participate in public/private debates and conversation.
- **Scientific Literacy** supports the understanding of scientific concepts and processes and helps citizens evaluate public policies and personal choices around health, climate change, and technology.

## A Vision for “Co-Intelligent” preK-12 Learning

Imagine a school system or educational organization where Critically Human Skills lie at the core of the learning experience while complemented by a personalized AI tutor that adapts to specific learning needs in real time, ensuring the above core literacies are mastered at a self-driven pace. Educators act as mentors, project managers, and relationship facilitators to support the integration of core literacies through the lens of these skills. This model looks and feels different, and includes:

- An educator who acts as mentor, guide, designer, project manager community-connector and relationship-builder
- Learning experiences that are authentic, interdisciplinary, and community-based, co-designed with AI but guided by human judgment and context
- Real-time embedded assessments that focus on agency, purpose, and human skill development while demonstrating proficiency in core literacies.
- An AI tutor that supports proficiency development in core literacies and identifies connections to Critically Human Skills.
- Environments that strengthen wellness, curiosity, and collaboration resulting in learner agency, compassion and integrity.

This is not a distant future. It is an available present—if WE choose it.

The goal is not human versus AI, but **human + AI**.

Co-intelligence becomes possible only when human capacities are strong enough to remain in the lead.

# Call to Action: Reinvest in Humanity

The exponential advancement of artificial intelligence is now a force multiplier in human history. To ensure this power serves humanity, we must meet the formidable investment in AI development with an equally urgent, deliberate acceleration in the development of human potential. The skills presented here provide the blueprint for this acceleration - to inform other initiatives or stand alone; deliberate action and investment must now provide the infrastructure.

The education sector must make an intentional choice to cultivate Agency, Compassion, and Integrity—outcomes that ground all human-AI partnership and define the Purpose Culture.

## 1. For Educators: Redesign Learning for Agency, Compassion, and Integrity

Educators are the chief architects of the Purpose Culture. They must fundamentally redesign learning experiences to prioritize the development of human capacity over the mere transmission of information.

- **Design for CHOICE and Purpose:** Shift instructional focus from content delivery to the deliberate practice of Critical Thinking, Healthy Living, Originality, Inquiry, Connection, and Emotional Intelligence. Implement projects that are authentic, interdisciplinary, and community-based to foster a tangible sense of purpose and contribution.
- **Reallocate Time to Human Connection:** Allow personalized AI tutors and assistants to handle routine tasks like core skill instruction and standardized assessment. This frees up teacher time to focus on building deep relationships, providing mentorship, and designing challenging, real-world experiences only a human can guide.
- **Cultivate Agency Explicitly:** Move beyond compliance models by building student capacity for self-regulation, goal-setting, reflection, and co-design of their learning experiences, ensuring they retain control over their own development and contribution.

## 2. For Learners: Embrace Your Responsibility

Remember that the most powerful, important, and adaptable technology in any society is its people. Your investment in CHOICE is your personal insurance against irrelevance. A world with advanced AI but diminished human capacity is not progress—it is peril.

## 3. For Education Sector Funders: Invest in the Human Operating System

Matching the global investment in technology is the moral imperative of our time. Funders must view human development systems as critical infrastructure, not optional add-ons.

- **Match Technology Investment:** Provide investment in learning organizations and systems that explicitly and structurally embed frameworks that embrace Critically Human Skills like CHOICE. Support the research and development of new pedagogical models designed for the age of AI.

# A Hopeful Future – If We Make the CHOICE

This is not a warning. It is an invitation.

AI gives us unprecedented power. Critically Human Skills give us the capacity to use it wisely.

If we cultivate Critical Thinking, Healthy Living, Originality, Inquiry, Connection, and Emotional Intelligence then we can shape a future where humans flourish alongside AI with Agency, Compassion, and Integrity.

The defining question of our age is not:

**What will AI become?**

but rather:

**Who will WE become?**

AI gives us unprecedented power and capability—but the Critically Human Skills help develop the Agency, Compassion, and Integrity to move us towards a Purpose Culture. We must accelerate our human potential to match the scale of our technological creation.

The answer begins with a **CHOICE**.

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