PERSONAL ESSAY

The AI vibe on campus: AI and our education

// BY NINA BODOW

Last month, I spent time at an AI conference in Berkeley, Calif., with politicians, journalists, frontier lab executives, safety activists, philanthropists and researchers. Aside from helping with event operations, I played the role of a sponge: there was information coming in from all sides at practically every second. I came in with a boatload of questions and a readiness to soak, soak, soak. Topics ranged, but conversations always seemed to end up touching on some aspect of existential doom or, if folks were feeling optimistic, just some catastrophic risk-talk.

But there was one question that came up repeatedly where I wasn't the sponge, but the source of an answer: "What's the AI vibe on campus?" Everyone wanted to know what Yalies were thinking and feeling.

To state the obvious, I can't encapsulate the precise vibes of all 6,667 of us undergraduates. I'm lucky to be in an array of social and academic circles, hearing opinions from journalists, athletes, historians, photographers, aspiring doctors, computer scientists, UI/UX designers, sports business folk — the list goes on. But beyond the conversations I happen to have with the students I happen to know, I don't know how every Yalie overall is thinking about and approaching AI. That being said, here's what I sense.

The way I see it, there are two main answers to the "campus AI vibe" question. One focuses on the process of education and learning itself: How are the professors, the institution and, mainly, the students approaching higher education in light of this technological revolution? What is working and what needs to change in order to serve — instead of diminish — the purpose of education?

Another question looks beyond education, to how we Yalies are thinking about, using and discussing AI in broader terms — in our lives, coming careers and society in general.

Today I'll attack the first.

Here's the thing: some aspects of higher education are just not as effective as they were before AI. And students are very much aware of it. I recently had a psychology major friend tell me that she wished that she didn't even have access to AI in her college education. She added that if she had access to AI even three years earlier, in the midst of high school, she feels like her brain would not have developed at all.

She, like many of us undergraduates, senses how detrimental this technology could be in these formative years. Enrolling in a class and obtaining a passing — or top-tier — grade no longer guarantees that you exercised your cognitive abilities in the ways intended.

The college experience still helps us learn how to function outside the safe-zone of our childhood homes. But figuring out food, laundry, friends and sleep doesn't require a $90,000-per-year expense. It would not be college without, well, the higher education of it all.

While I won't attempt to state THE PURPOSE OF HIGHER EDUCATION here, these things feel important: the ability to critically think and think for oneself; gaining an understanding of the world, and some subject-matter expertise in at least one area; developing a sense of self; innovating, augmenting curiosity and creativity; working collaboratively; building community, etc. I think you'll agree, here at early-AI Yale, a bunch of these feel like dying arts.

AI lets you cut cognitive corners. You don't have to spend time critically thinking, because you can consult your handy-dandy pal Claude or ChatGPT or whatnot and let it guide you through your friction. This is cognitive offload, and many students participate — from what I've observed — in one of two ways.

The first is full-blown and immediate, sounding something along the lines of "I'm just going to submit this 95-percent Claude assignment. I'm shutting my computer." While this is the rarer of the two, I've seen it multiple times. There is always an available ClaudeCushion there for you, so why not just dive head first into LLM-zone and avoid the discomfort, frustration, struggle and time the work would require of you?

The second is more common and more insidious: a slower seduction. We're told — on the one hand — that we shouldn't use AI to do our work for us, that we need to strengthen our minds and that the point is the process of doing the work, a process that goes to die if we just ask for the answer from a bot. But we're also told that we need to keep up with AI, that we're entering a workforce and a world where it is everywhere and that we must understand how to use it. So the seduction begins with an attempt to use it but in a small, helpful, thought-provoking way, not a do-all-my-work-for-me way. But pretty soon, a call for advice becomes a sentence swap, a paragraph copy-and-paste, and so on.

And no one should be surprised! Our success is measured by a result — a grade — and often, albeit not all the time, a high-level LLM can do the undergraduate-level work well enough to pass — sometimes well enough to earn an A. It takes an incredible amount of willpower to not turn to the speedy, "optimizing" AI when you can simply snap a photo of a pop quiz's questions and get a 100 percent in sub-minute territory.

Or, perhaps, you have the willpower to never let your AI pal do 100 percent of your work, but you'll still get slowly seduced by how easy some "optimization" is. You can just freshen up your introductory paragraph or proposed essay outline. But as a result of this "optimization," students avoid the friction of sitting down alone with their thoughts. A common quote heard in Sterling Memorial Library: "I'm just gonna ask Chat." You simply consult your LLM advisor the second you feel stuck or insecure with a thought.

I'd say that's a lot of the "AI and our education" vibe at Yale. Of course, the question that follows is: What needs to change?

Students' "optimizing" the results of education via cognitive corner-cutting is, paradoxically, completely nonoptimal. We need the friction! That's how our minds grow. The purpose of our classes isn't to have us ask some other entity to give us the answer that yields a good looking result. Grades mean something, in theory, because they mark the fact that a student went through the process of the mind-habit training. Dan Rockmore captured this idea in a recent New Yorker article titled "Should the Classroom be More Like the Gym" — that the process is the point. I love his analogy: going to the gym is a chosen discomfort. You can most definitely avoid bench presses, as you can avoid sitting down for three hours with nothing but your mind, your sources and a blank Google Doc. But you'd find it ridiculous if you paid for a gym membership to go and watch a robot split the reps with you. The goal in the gym is not the numerical result, but the process itself. The process needs to be the goal in education, too.

Yale students are driven, passionate, engaged and hard-working. I do not want to suggest that we students are allocating all of their tasks and questions to AI. But awareness of the problem and a passion for learning doesn't make it all okay. I've heard multiple students throw in the towel, letting their favorite LLM finish their work while they say something along the lines of, no joke, "AI is making me so dumb." We students can know that something is harming our education and still become victims. It is nearly unavoidable. How long are you willing to stay standing before you plop onto the nice, welcoming ClaudeCushion? How often will you sit on it? There are few that have never sat.

Reader, if your ClaudeCushion has become a California King, here's your summary.

1) The reality is that it is now harder to sit down with a long reading or essay assignment without taking a seat on your ClaudeCushion.

2) It gets a lot harder to not cut cognitive corners when you know others are, and you know you'd get a better — or at least sufficient and quicker — result if you did the same.

3) The students who cut the fewest cognitive corners are the ones who realize how much value lies in the process of learning and not only in the numerical results. Agency and a desire for the process is what will power students through this battle of dissolving mental autonomy.

4) The classroom is more than ever a sacred space. The value of in-person learning and assessment has skyrocketed. The value of out-of-class learning fully depends on the agency of the individual.

5) Many students are using AI to save the wrong kind of time. There's plenty of opting into cognitive offloading, and little familiarity with agents, vibe-coding and app-building.

6) It is very easy to both be worried about how AI harms your education while letting AI harm your education. We can only be so strong-willed. The education system will need to change, or we will need to find a magical potion that can inject indomitable agency into every undergraduate student in America. Let me know which seems more probable.

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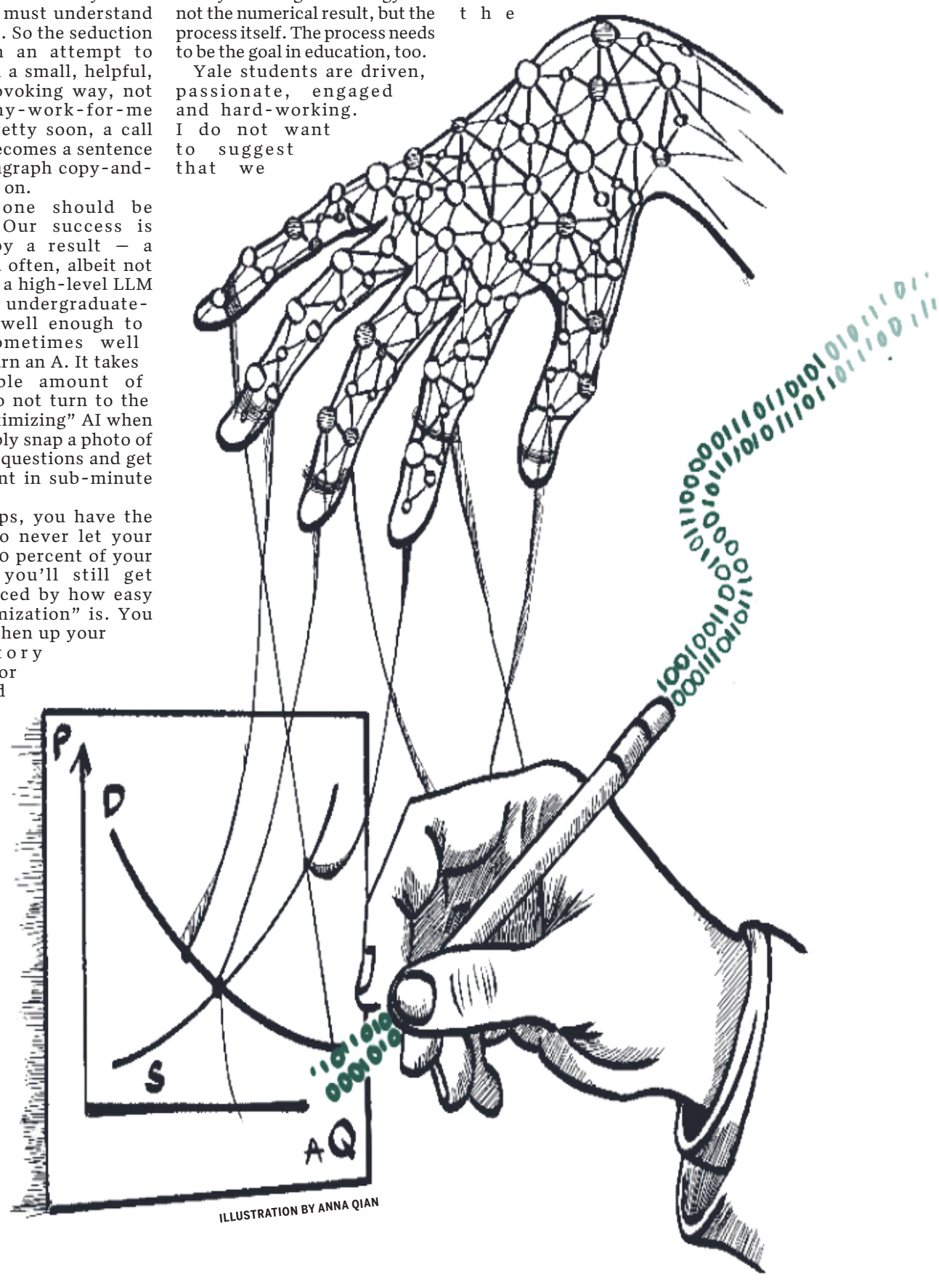


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WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:
NOT TEXTING THEM BACK