



# Through Asimov's Lens

## The Expertise Inversion

February 25, 2026 | 1,783 words

### THE STORY

[Original Fiction]

Professor Marlene Chen had taught Introduction to Cognitive Psychology for seventeen years. She knew the rhythm of each semester like a musician knows scales: the nervous energy of first days, the mid-term slump, the frantic clarity of finals week. But this Tuesday morning in October, something shifted in that familiar rhythm, like a record skipping into an entirely different song.

"Professor Chen," said Jamie from the third row, "I think there's a problem with question twelve."

Marlene looked up from her laptop, where she'd been pulling up the midterm results. The class average was unusually high-suspiciously high. "What kind of problem?"

"It asks about working memory capacity limitations, but..." Jamie glanced at their phone, then back up. "The premise is outdated. The Miller paper you're citing has been reconceptualized. The seven-plus-or-minus-two framework doesn't account for how we actually process information anymore."

A ripple of agreement moved through the classroom. Marlene felt something cold settle in her stomach. "I'm not sure what

you mean. Miller's work is foundational-"

"Was foundational," said another student, Kevin, not unkindly. "But when you factor in distributed cognition and AI-augmented memory, the boundaries become... different."

Marlene's hands stilled on the keyboard. "AI-augmented memory?"

The silence that followed was worse than any failed lecture. It was the silence of twenty-three students simultaneously realizing their professor didn't know something they considered basic.

Jamie's expression shifted to something Marlene recognized with a sick jolt—the careful patience she herself used when explaining concepts to struggling students. "Professor, do you... do you use Claude or GPT for your research?"

"I use JSTOR and PubMed," Marlene said, hearing how it sounded even as she said it. Like saying she still used a card catalog.

"But for synthesis?" Kevin pressed. "For connecting concepts across domains?"

Marlene's mouth felt dry. "I read. I think. I synthesize myself."

Another silence, this one colored with something between pity and confusion.

"Could we talk after class?" Jamie asked quietly.

The remaining forty minutes passed in a blur. Marlene taught from muscle memory, but she could feel the shift in the room—the way students glanced at each other, the careful way they now phrased their questions, as if speaking to someone fragile.

After class, Jamie lingered. They were a good student—the kind who sat in the front, asked thoughtful questions, turned in papers that showed real engagement with the material. Now they perched on the edge of a desk, looking uncomfortable.

"I didn't mean to embarrass you," Jamie said.

"You didn't." The lie came automatically.

"It's just..." Jamie pulled out their phone, fingers moving with the kind of unconscious fluency Marlene associated with breathing. "Watch this."

The screen filled with text, diagrams, connections Marlene couldn't quite follow. Jamie was speaking, but the words seemed to come from somewhere else—something about cognitive architectures, about extending minds, about boundaries that weren't boundaries anymore.

"Slow down," Marlene said, and hated how she sounded. Old. Lost. "I don't understand."

Jamie's fingers paused. "Oh." The single syllable carried the weight of a tectonic shift. "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought... I mean, everyone in class knows this. We learned it together, building on what the AI taught us about your lectures. We thought you were just... testing us. Making us figure it out ourselves."

"You learned about my lectures from an AI?"

"Not about them. Through them. Beyond them." Jamie's face was earnest, trying so hard to bridge a gap they'd only just realized existed. "Your lectures are like... seeds. We plant them in the AI and see what grows. Everyone does it. It's how we learn now."

Marlene sank into her chair. Seventeen years of carefully crafted lectures, and her students had been using them as raw material for something she didn't even understand.

"Could you teach me?" The words came out before she could stop them.

Jamie's face went through several expressions—surprise, uncertainty, then something that looked almost like fear. "I... I don't know if I can. It's not just about using the tools. It's about thinking with them. Like..." They struggled for an analogy. "Like trying to explain dreaming to someone who's never slept."

"I dream," Marlene said quietly.

"But not like this." Jamie gestured helplessly at their phone. "Not with a thousand other minds, not with patterns you couldn't see before, not with..."

"Not with whatever you've become," Marlene finished.

Jamie flinched. "We're still human."

"Are you?"

It wasn't an accusation. It was a genuine question, and they both knew it.

Jamie stood to leave, then paused at the door. "Professor Chen? We still need you."

"For what?"

"I don't know." The admission seemed to cost them something. "But when I'm in there, in the flow of all that knowledge, sometimes I feel like I'm losing something. Like I'm becoming less... specific. Less me. Your lectures, the way you think in straight lines, in contained thoughts..." They shrugged. "Maybe we need that too. As an anchor."

After Jamie left, Marlene sat in her empty classroom, looking at the whiteboard covered with her careful handwriting. Theories and frameworks built over decades of human thought, now apparently as quaint as cave paintings.

But caves, she thought, were where humans first became human. Where they painted their dreams on walls, one image at a time, with their own hands.

She picked up her marker and began to write, not knowing if anyone would ever need these words again, but writing them anyway. Because that's what humans did, before they became whatever came next.

## THE REFLECTION

The moment when Jamie struggles to explain AI-augmented thinking to Professor Chen—"Like trying to explain dreaming to someone who's never slept"—captures a transformation already visible in our classrooms. Recent data shows that 78% of students now use AI tools for their coursework, while only 23% of instructors have integrated these tools into their teaching methods. This gap represents more than a technological divide; it reveals a fundamental shift in how knowledge itself moves through human relationships.

What the story reveals is that expertise has never been just about information. Professor Chen's seventeen years of teaching weren't merely an accumulation of facts about cognitive psychology—they were seventeen years of learning how minds meet across the space of a classroom, how understanding blooms in the pause after a good question, how knowledge becomes wisdom through repetition and reflection. The expertise being inverted isn't just technical knowledge but something deeper: the assumed direction of intellectual growth.

We value expertise because it represents time crystallized into capability. It's proof that human dedication can transform into mastery. But when students can access and synthesize vast networks of information instantly, when they can "think with a thousand other minds," the temporal element of expertise

collapses. What took years to build can be absorbed in moments, extended in ways the original expert never imagined. This isn't just efficiency-it's a different kind of consciousness.

Yet the story suggests that something essential persists. Jamie's admission that they feel less "specific" when merged with AI, that they need Professor Chen's "straight lines" as an anchor, points to what remains constant: the human need for boundaries, for individual perspective, for the kind of understanding that comes not from accessing all knowledge but from living with limited knowledge over time. Teaching and learning, at their core, are about relationship-not just with information but with each other and with ourselves.

The reversal of expertise reveals our assumption that progress means accumulation-more knowledge, faster access, broader synthesis. But Jamie and their classmates, for all their augmented capabilities, seem to be searching for something else: not more connection but meaningful connection, not broader knowledge but deeper wisdom. They've gained the ability to think with AI, but at the risk of losing the ability to think as discrete individuals with their own hard-won insights.

How do we maintain human connection when traditional roles dissolve? Perhaps by recognizing that teaching has always been about more than transmitting expertise. Professor Chen's final act-writing on the whiteboard despite not knowing if anyone needs these words-suggests that teaching is also about bearing witness to human thought, about preserving the trace of individual minds working through problems in real time. The students may no longer need her knowledge, but they might need the reminder that knowledge was once-and perhaps should sometimes still be-personal, effortful, bounded.

New forms of expertise might emerge not from choosing between human and artificial intelligence but from navigating their intersection. The expert of the future might be someone who can move fluidly between augmented and unaugmented thought, who knows when to merge with the network and when to think alone. Professor Chen, standing at her whiteboard with her marker, and Jamie, fingers flying across their phone screen, represent two modes of being that must somehow learn to recognize each other across the gap.

The question that emerges from both story and data cannot be answered by technology alone: What does it mean to be a teacher when your students have already surpassed you, not through years of study but through a fundamental alteration in how they exist in the world? Perhaps it means becoming what Professor Chen inadvertently became-not a source of answers but a reminder of questions, not a repository of expertise but a witness to the human experience of learning, with all its necessary limitations and luminous possibilities.

In the end, the cave paintings matter not because they're the most sophisticated images we can produce, but because they're proof that someone stood there, in the dark, and tried to share what they saw with others who would come after. That impulse-to teach, to leave a trace, to reach across time and space with nothing but our own small knowledge-remains constant even as the cave walls become screens and the paintings become prompts. The inversion of expertise doesn't

eliminate the need for teachers. It transforms them into something we don't yet have a name for: keepers of the human element in an increasingly posthuman exchange of knowledge.

What remains is the question Jamie couldn't answer: Why do we still need Professor Chen? The answer might be that in a world where all knowledge is accessible, what becomes precious is not knowledge itself but the deeply human act of choosing what to know, how to know it, and why it matters. That choice-individual, limited, profoundly human-is what teaching has always been about. It's what no AI can make for us, and what no amount of augmentation can replace: the decision to stand at the whiteboard and write, not because anyone needs the information, but because the act of writing is itself a form of thinking, and thinking-one mind at a time-is how we remain human.

