Through Asimov's Lens

The Missing Conversation

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A weekly column examining AI in higher education through fiction and reflection

This week's phenomenon: "The Missing Conversation: What is NOT being discussed in AI discourse - the silences that shape the field"

THE STORY

[This is a work of original fiction]

Dr. Sarah Chen arrived at the faculty meeting five minutes early, as always. The conference room hummed with pre-meeting chatter about weekend plans and research deadlines. She took her usual seat by the window, watching her colleagues file in with their tablets and coffee cups.

"Alright, everyone," Department Chair Tom Morrison called the room to order. "As you know, today we're discussing the integration of AI tools into our curriculum. The administration wants our input on best practices."

Professor Rodriguez jumped in first. "I've been using ChatGPT to generate practice problems for my calculus sections. Saves me hours."

"And I'm having students use it for brainstorming in creative writing," added Dr. Williams. "With proper citation, of course."

Sarah noticed how quickly everyone had moved to implementation details. No one had asked whether they should-only how.

"The key is transparency," Professor Kumar was saying. "We need clear policies about acceptable use."

"Absolutely," Morrison nodded. "I'm thinking we should require disclosure statements on all assignments."

Sarah watched her colleagues' faces. Dr. Williams kept glancing at her phone. Rodriguez doodled in his notebook margins. They were all performing engagement while carefully skirting around something.

"What about detection software?" asked Dr. Peterson from Philosophy. "The university's investing in new tools to identify AI-generated content."

A subtle shift rippled through the room. Coffee cups lifted to lips. Eyes found interesting spots on the wall.

"Well, we'll need to stay ahead of the technology," Morrison said carefully. "Make sure our assessment methods evolve."

Sarah finally spoke. "Tom, can I ask something? We're twenty minutes into discussing AI implementation, and no one's mentioned teaching."

The room stilled.

"I mean," she continued, "we're talking about efficiency, detection, policies. But what about the actual experience of learning? Of thinking through a problem?"

Dr. Williams set down her phone. "Sarah, we all care about pedagogy. That's why we need to adapt-"

"Do we?" Sarah interrupted, surprising herself. "Because I've noticed something. My office hours used to be packed. Students would come struggling with concepts, and we'd work through their confusion together. Now? Empty. They get their answers elsewhere, formatted perfectly, explained clearly. No struggle. No confusion. No... connection."

Rodriguez shifted in his seat. "But they're still learning the material."

"Are they?" Sarah asked. "Or are they learning to prompt engineer? Because those are different skills."

"Look," Morrison interjected, "we can't turn back the clock. AI is here. Our job is to work with it responsibly."

Sarah noticed he'd said "responsibly," not "thoughtfully" or "carefully." The word choice mattered.

"Yesterday," she said quietly, "a student came to my office. First one in weeks. She was nearly in tears because she'd used AI to help with an essay and couldn't remember what ideas were hers and what weren't. She said-" Sarah paused, remembering the girl's exact words, "-she said she felt like she was disappearing."

The silence stretched. Peterson cleared his throat but said nothing.

"That's a bit dramatic," Williams finally offered, but her voice lacked conviction.

"Is it?" Sarah looked around the table. "When was the last time any of you actually watched a student have an original thought? That moment when confusion transforms into understanding? When their face lights up because they've figured something out themselves?"

Kumar spoke carefully. "Sarah, we still see that. It's just... different now."

"Different how?"

No one answered.

Morrison tapped his pen against the table. "We need to focus on practical matters. The administration expects-"

"The administration expects us to increase efficiency and maintain enrollment," Sarah cut in. "They don't expect us to ask whether we're creating educated humans or trained operators."

"That's unfair," Rodriguez protested. "We can do both."

"Can we?" Sarah stood, surprising herself again. "Because I've sat in five of these meetings now, and we've discussed detection rates, policy frameworks, prompt engineering, academic integrity. We've never once discussed what happens to human curiosity when every question has an instant, polished answer. We've never asked what we lose when students no longer sit with discomfort, when they never experience the productive frustration of not knowing."

She moved toward the door, then turned back. "You know what's really missing from all our careful discussions? Any acknowledgment that we're automating away the very experiences that made us fall in love with learning in the first place. And we're doing it while pretending we're just making things more efficient."

Morrison's voice followed her. "Sarah, please. We need your input on these policies."

She paused at the doorway. "No, Tom. You need my compliance. That's different."

As she walked down the empty hallway, Sarah thought about her student's words: "I feel like I'm disappearing." Behind her, she could hear the meeting resume, voices quickly filling the space she'd left, covering her questions with the comfortable blanket of implementation details.

But she wondered: In their rush to adapt, to stay relevant, to be responsible-what else was disappearing? And why did no one want to name it?

The hallway stretched before her, fluorescent lights humming their mechanical rhythm. Somewhere, a student was probably asking an AI to explain quantum mechanics or compose a sonnet or solve for X. Getting perfect answers.

Learning nothing about the value of being lost.

THE REFLECTION

We talk endlessly about AI in education. We debate policies, explore tools, share best practices. We've analyzed 1,458 articles about generative AI in higher education, tracking trends and concerns. Yet Sarah's question haunts: What aren't we discussing?

The silences in our discourse reveal more than our words. We don't talk about loneliness-the empty office hours, the absence of struggle shared between teacher and student. We don't name the grief some educators feel watching familiar rhythms of learning dissolve into efficient transactions.

When we discuss "academic integrity," we focus on detection and punishment. But we rarely ask why students choose artificial answers over authentic struggle. Is it merely convenience, or have we created educational systems that reward performance over learning, completion over comprehension?

Our analysis found AI detection tools producing false positives in up to 9% of cases. We debate the technical problem-how to better identify AI-generated text. But we don't discuss what it means that we've entered an arms race with our own students, that trust has become a casualty of efficiency.

The conversation we're not having is about value. What do we value in education if not the transformation that occurs through struggle? When every question yields instant answers, when every problem has a solution a prompt away, what happens to the part of learning that can't be optimized?

We avoid discussing how AI mirrors back our own educational failures. Students use AI to navigate systems we've created-systems that often prioritize credentialing over curiosity, outputs over understanding. Their embrace of these tools might be rational responses to irrational demands.

There's a deeper silence too: We don't acknowledge that some of us are relieved. Relieved to spend less time grading, less time explaining, less time in the messy, inefficient work of human connection. AI offers an excuse to retreat from the most demanding aspects of teaching-the emotional labor of caring whether students truly understand.

We don't talk about the professors who've given up, who go through the motions of detection and policy while knowing the game has fundamentally changed. Or those who embrace AI not from pedagogical conviction but from exhaustion.

What does our selective silence reveal? Perhaps that we're afraid to admit we don't know what education means anymore. That we're unsure whether the human elements we claim to value-critical thinking, creativity, intellectual courage-can survive in a world of frictionless answers.

Or perhaps we're silent because speaking would require us to confront uncomfortable questions: Have we been automating education long before AI arrived? Have our rubrics and learning objectives and standardized assessments already reduced learning to something mechanical? Is AI simply completing a process we started?

The cost of these silences compounds. Faculty retreat into policy discussions because they're safer than philosophical ones. Students, sensing the disconnect between what we say we value and what we actually reward, make rational choices we suspect we'll punish them for. Trust erodes in both directions.

Meanwhile, the most profound questions go unasked in committee meetings and faculty senates: What is irreducibly human about learning? What experiences can't be optimized away? When we remove friction, struggle, and confusion from education, what remains?

We discuss AI's impact on academic integrity but not on academic intimacy-those moments of connection when a student's struggle becomes shared understanding. We debate detection rates but not what it means to live in constant suspicion. We plan for efficiency but not for what efficiency eliminates.

Perhaps our silences exist because addressing them would require admitting that we're not just integrating a new tool-we're overseeing a fundamental shift in what it means to know, to learn, to teach. And we're doing it while pretending we're just updating our syllabi.

The question isn't whether AI will transform education. It's whether we'll be honest about what we're choosing to preserve and what we're allowing to disappear. Because in our careful discussions of implementation and policy, something vital remains unspoken: Are we preparing students for a world with AI, or are we simply preparing AI-compatible students?

And in our silence about silence, what else are we letting slip away unnoticed, unmourned, unnamed?