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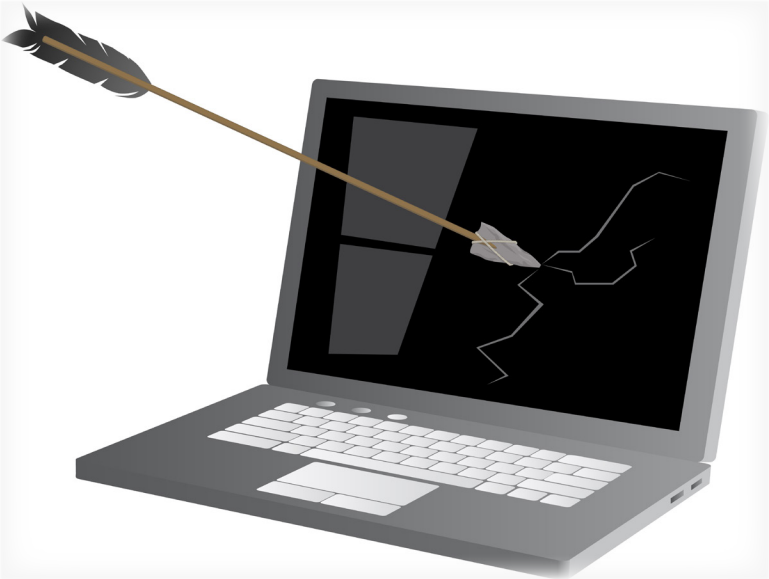
Newsletter

Lessons From Luddites



If you've been called a Luddite, it probably wasn't meant as a compliment.

Maybe it should have been, argue Charles Logan of Northwestern University, NEPC Fellow T. Philip Nichols of Baylor University, and Antero Garcia of Stanford in a recent issue of Kappan.

Luddites were 19th-century English cloth workers who broke into factories and destroyed newly automated machines that threatened their livelihoods.

"Although frequently caricatured as anti-technology zealots, the original Luddites were actually skilled artisans who rejected not machines themselves but the ways particular technologies were being used to de-skill labor, concentrate power, and undermine community values," Logan, Nichols, and Garcia write.

The researchers suggest that there are parallels between the technologies the Luddites resisted and many of the generative artificial intelligence enabled tools currently being introduced in schools.

"[I]n both eras, the primary beneficiaries of automation are those who profit from it, not those whose work it transforms," they state.

For instance, power looms were touted as time-saving technologies, as are AI-based grading and lesson planning. But the researchers contend that, in reality, "[h]istorians have demonstrated that gains in efficiency don't tend to reduce our workloads—instead, they increase expectations for productivity."

> When AI handles lesson planning or essay grading, teachers don't suddenly gain time to build relationships with students. That time gets absorbed into managing platforms, troubleshooting tech, and entering data—tasks often more tedious than those that were automated away. The skilled aspects of teaching, like crafting learning experiences and offering meaningful feedback, are replaced not with more space for reflection but with a different form of "drudgery" that is closer to the work of a data clerk than a professional educator. This is what's known as de-skilling, and it's something the Luddites recognized. . . . Automating these processes doesn't "free" teachers; it unmoors them from the core of their professional practice.

Logan, Nichols, and Garcia suggest that educators concerned about the implications of AI might adopt some of the strategies that worked for the Luddites, albeit with a modern twist.

For instance, the Luddites used strategic playfulness, such as ominous letters signed by their namesake Ned Ludd, a mythical apprentice who smashed a stocking frame to protest his bosses' cruelty. The researchers point to projects like *Mystery AI Hype Theater 3000*, which raises serious questions about AI by poking fun at the earnest aura of the inevitability of adoption embraced by marketing that exaggerates tools' benefits and downplays their costs.

Like Luddites, educators might also build networks of resistance. The authors point to The Alliance for Refusing Generative Artificial Intelligence (ARG AI) and The Civics of Technology community as examples.

Finally, like Luddites—whose struggle took on different forms in different regions and among different types of craftsmen—educators should

adapt their resistance to local contexts, the researchers say. In some settings, resisting might mean expressing technoskepticism out loud during mandatory professional development: How does the company that makes the tool safeguard student data privacy? What biases do the tool's algorithms contain?

In other settings, resistance might look more like writing op-eds for the local newspaper or simply refusing to use AI-enabled grading tools that can reduce a teacher's ability to develop deeper knowledge of individual students' progress and interests.

"The question for the Luddites was never simply whether to accept or reject a new machine, but rather who controlled it, how it was deployed, and whose interests it served," Logan, Nichols, and Garcia conclude.

> Technological change, in their view, was not some inevitable force of nature but the result of human choices about power, work, and dignity—choices that could, and should, be contested when they don't align with community values. These insights remain relevant for educators today.

NEPC Resources on Digital Technologies and Artificial Intelligence in Education

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