

Postplagiarism and the Remaking of Education, 2000 to 2050

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Abstract: I have spent much of my career studying ethics and integrity in educational contexts, including plagiarism, contract cheating, and other forms of educational and scientific fraud. From where I sit in 2026, the half-century from 2000 to 2050 divides into two phases. The first (2000-2025), now a matter of record, was organized around detection of misconduct: institutions increased access to education while building ever more elaborate machinery to verify that student work was authentically human. The second half of this century, now beginning, rests on a different premise. Humans and machines write together, and policing where the human ends and the machine begins is not only difficult, it may well be an exercise in futility. In this, my first editorial as the incoming editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Educational Thought* (following in the footsteps of my colleague, Ian Winchester) I take a position. The detection paradigm has failed on its own terms, and the sooner we say so, the sooner we can build what comes next. I explore the postplagiarism era as an entry point to the second half of the first century in this millennium.

Keywords: postplagiarism, education, ethics, future, higher education, academic integrity, plagiarism, artificial intelligence, GenAI, academic misconduct, academic fraud

The Era of Detection, 2000 to 2025

The first quarter of the century was defined by scale. Enrolment in higher education rose from roughly 100 million students in 2000 to nearly 269 million in 2024 (UNESCO, 2026). International student mobility nearly tripled over a similar period, from 2.5 million students in 2002 to 7.3 million in 2023, a figure UNESCO projects will reach 9 million by 2030, though fewer than 3% of students ever study abroad

(UNESCO, 2026). Beneath the growth sat a single organizing logic: governments treated education as investment in human capital and national competitiveness (Spring, 2008).

The technology arrived in stages. For example, learning management systems (LMSes) moved the institutional centre online in the 2000s, open online courses promised wider access in the 2010s, and the COVID-19 pandemic compressed years of digital adoption into months, reshaping tertiary education and exposing access to devices and connectivity as a condition of participation rather than a convenience (UNESCO, 2026).

A defining contradiction of the detection era was not technical, but ethical. As students grew adept with networked tools, institutions answered with surveillance: text-matching software (erroneously called plagiarism detection software), remote proctoring, and algorithmic monitoring. Ian Winchester (2024) noted the “great fuss” that generative AI provoked in scholarly circles, yet the deeper problem preceded ChatGPT. Detection carried a cost, one which fell unevenly. Remote proctoring has been described as ableist, and AI-detection tools produce false positives that land disproportionately on neurodivergent students and on those whose first language is not the language of instruction, with documented psychological and material harm to the accused (Eaton, 2023). Institutions adopted these tools to protect the integrity of assessment. In practice, the tools penalized difference.

Postplagiarism

By 2025, we had crossed a threshold. Once human and machine routinely wrote together, the search for purely human text became futile. Muñoz-Cantero and Espiñeira-Bellón (2024) reached the same conclusion from medical publishing, noting that text produced through AI and machine translation evades the text-matching tools built to catch copied work. I began to explore postplagiarism in 2021 and developed it into a full framework in 2023 to name this shift (Eaton, 2021, 2023). Postplagiarism describes a period in which advanced technologies are integrated into everyday academic life so completely that technology cannot be decoupled from education, and in which humans are co-creators of knowledge alongside machines rather than sole authors. It is not the abandonment of

integrity. It is the recognition that integrity now has to be built on different ground.

I framed postplagiarism around six tenets (Eaton, 2023):

1. Hybrid writing, co-created by humans and AI, becomes the norm.
2. Human creativity is enhanced rather than threatened by AI.
3. AI lowers the language barriers that have long divided writers and readers.
4. Work can be offloaded to AI, but responsibility cannot. Humans remain accountable for what is produced.
5. Attribution remains important, understood as respect for those we learn from rather than as the technical mechanics of citation.
6. Inherited definitions of plagiarism, never universal to begin with, require rethinking.

These tenets carry the trends I take up through the rest of this editorial. They have also drawn objection, and I am well aware of it. Bali (2023) presses the third and fourth tenets in particular, asking whether machine translation can be treated as neutral and whether using a tool amounts to relinquishing control. I hold the fourth tenet as stated. Control over a process may pass to a machine, but accountability for the result does not.

The first tenet is about authorship. The fourth carries assessment. The fifth and sixth ask what academic integrity even means once detection stops working. Postplagiarism is not a separate topic appended to a discussion of education futures. It is the thread that runs through every change ahead.

Everything to this point is a record of what has occurred, supported by the figures and sources cited. What follows is projection.

What Can We Expect Between Now and 2050?

So what should we expect? No one has a crystal ball, and I cannot predict the future. What I can do is read the signals already visible and ask what they make probable (Eaton, 2025). In this editorial, I am influenced by the work of futurists whose work centres around reading signals (e.g., Dator, 2009; Gorbis, 2013; McGonigal, 2022).

The first projection rests on the first tenet and on early evidence. In a study of graduate students using generative AI, my colleagues and I found that students wanted to use these tools ethically and wanted agency over how they combined their own judgment with a tool's suggestions to produce original work (Eaton, 2025). A second study points the same way. In a qualitative case study of eleven undergraduate business students, Ramazanov (2026) found that students treated generative AI as both an aid to efficiency and a constraint on originality, and that they kept final judgment over the work. One empirical study on postplagiarism shows that post-secondary students' responses are complex and evolving (Kumar, 2025). We do not yet have sufficient insights into how students of the future will regard GenAI or writing or co-creation that is a product of human-AI collaboration. Having said that, I expect hybrid authorship to settle into routine across the sector through the 2030s, much as calculators and spreadsheets did before it. The basis for this projection is the behaviour students already report, not a forecast of technology that does not yet exist.

The second projection follows from the fourth tenet. If responsibility cannot – and should not – be offloaded even when work can, then assessment has to measure what the tools cannot supply: a student's reasoning, judgment, and capacity to work with ambiguity. UNESCO (2026) reports both the promise of AI for personalized learning and the reality of students using large language models to complete whole assignments. Detection cannot resolve such tensions. Wearable technology sharpens the point. Examining AI smart glasses, detecting a device cannot establish that unauthorized assistance occurred, nor whether it affected performance, because the assistance leaves no external trace (Corbin et al., 2026; Eaton et al., 2026). We could reasonably expect assessment to move from the surveillance of a finished product toward the documentation of a learning process, driven less by policy than by the failure of the alternative. Healy (2024) shows this shift already underway in K-12 contexts. He adapts the University of Sydney two-lane assessment model (Bridgeman et al., 2024) to secondary schools in Ontario, Canada, separating supervised, AI-free tasks from open tasks where human-AI collaboration is assumed. He frames the change as postplagiarism applied to K-12. Integrity built on epistemic plurality, rather than on detection and punishment, is a more inclusive path,

and it matters most disabled and neurodivergent students, as well as those with other cognitive differences (Eaton, 2026).

My final projection is the least certain, but it is worth our attention. UNESCO and others have begun to treat neurotechnology and brain-computer interfaces as signals worth watching for education, not because classrooms will adopt them soon, but because the ethical questions they raise (cognitive privacy, consent, and the integrity of a student's own thought) will need answers before the technology arrives rather than after (Eaton, 2025). Wearable AI is the leading edge, and it is in classrooms now. Examining AI smart glasses, my colleagues and I described technology that places cognitive assistance in a student's perceptual field while staying cosmetically discreet, a step along the path from external tools toward implantable and embeddable systems that I traced in earlier work (Eaton, 2023; Eaton et al., 2026). The current research on these interfaces sits in clinical and rehabilitation settings. As I have argued before, paying attention to emerging technologies and their possible uses (and misuses) in education, is not speculative, but rather, it is pre-emptive. Now is the time to pay attention to wearable AI technology and neurotechnology because they will almost certainly have an impact in the coming years and decades.

A New Social Contract for Education

UNESCO (2021) stated that the contract underwriting twentieth-century education, schooling exchanged for credentials exchanged for employment, no longer matches present conditions, and called for a new social contract built on the right to quality education throughout life and the defence of education as a common good. I concur with that diagnosis. A contract designed for an industrial economy cannot serve students who will learn across far longer working lives and who face the grave risks to the living planet that UNESCO (2021) speaks to. What we need most now is action, not a rhetorical shift. Education should be lifelong in practice and governed as a public good, capable of meeting economic change, and ecological strain.

Within that contract I place two commitments. The first is epistemic plurality, which treats diverse ways of knowing as a resource rather than a deviation to be corrected. The second is neurodiversity understood as an asset rather than a problem to be

accommodated. Both follow from the postplagiarism tenets, and both move assessment away from a single, surveilled standard of performance (Eaton, 2026). Rather than enforcing a single norm, assessment can be reimagined as a space where multiple ways of knowing, being, and doing, are valued and sustained.

Building Integrity Without Surveillance

The detection paradigm is not failing because educators lack resolve, but because the premise that underpins it, specifically, that human and machine output can be cleanly separated, no longer holds. Postplagiarism provides us with a way to name this. The changes of the next quarter-century, in authorship, assessment, integrity, and the slower (but almost certain) arrival of neurotechnology, all run through postplagiarism. The task ahead is not to decide whether to permit AI or how to rewrite an honour code, but rather to decide what exactly we are educating people to do in a world where knowledge is produced in partnership with machines. My answer is integrity built on accountability and judgment, not on surveillance. The students of 2050 and beyond will inherit the consequences of the decisions we make today. We owe them an answer that helps them become excellent stewards of the future.

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