

Joop Berding – February 7, 2023

Education: machine or human work? Thoughts on ChatGPT

In the 1970s, the Dutch teacher and philosopher Cornelis Verhoeven (1928-2001) wrote a veritable lampoon against the typical educational phenomenon of cheating. In his 1980 essay on cheating he describes it as the ultimate symbol of the superficiality, calculating thinking and aiming for quick mock results that destroy education. The phenomenon of cheating shows how quickly education can be corrupted when the core – an expert teacher who explores the world together with interested students – is abandoned in favour of societal “usefulness” and “relevance” on which no more than the absolutely necessary time is spent. For Verhoeven, education thus surrenders itself to forces that it cannot control and with which it should not be identified. Education has its own pedagogical and introductory task.

Let me now replace “cheating” with “using ChatGPT”. Then we read this: “So if the use of ChatGPT has to be called fraud, it is a mere self-deception. But it is more serious as a symptom of a frustrating development in education in which the continuity between the acquired skill and the good outcome is broken by a shift in educational weight, namely from the irreplaceable and personal skill to the separately available and in itself rather uninteresting results.” To continue with: “Using ChatGPT is one of the many ways in which our culture is skipping a road and replacing a reality that can only emerge in gradual growth with rapidly growing pretence and counterfeit.”

Indeed, applications like ChatGPT turn users into conformists who do not want to take responsibility for their tasks, do not want to make personal, perhaps painful sacrifices for them, in short, for whom the mechanically produced text is an external thing, not a lived and meaningful result of your own efforts. Such a subjectless “result” is nothing more than what machines produce. Applications such as ChatGPT contribute to the “machinification” that threatens to take hold of the entire education sector. Many roads, both beautiful and difficult, are thus skipped, only the “result” counts and that is mainly the production of a soulless apparent reality.

Can this be reversed? Probably not or not at all. After all, machines also have many advantages. It is true that we will never again be unsure or unsure about anything – after all, we can know everything (we think) – but we accept this loss of elementary wonder as a necessary collateral damage of progress.

And yet there are hopeful dissenting voices. Voices that say that, to begin with, education is about more than quick and unquestionable “returns”. And they add that education without a (permanent) teacher who is an example and who mediates between the students and everything that is available in the world is not worth the name education. By pointing out the things in the world and exploring their meaning(s) together, teachers and their students try to bring order to the chaos that is called “information” and to become acquainted with it. And even more: to connect with it in a personal way and to want to take it with them on their way in the world. Programs like ChatGPT are therefore not only a crisis phenomenon, but also a blessing because they show that when this personal involvement disappears from education, it degenerates into machine production of appearances. After all, as Verhoeven also writes: “Human relationships cannot be mechanized and cannot be replaced by copies.” So what is

needed more than ever is a strong defence of the core of education: people who contribute to the formation of people who want to take responsibility for themselves and for their tasks and who do not hide behind dehumanized hyper-algorithms. That this requires a fearless, powerful professional group of teachers is equally clear. Fortunately, there are hopeful developments in this area.

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