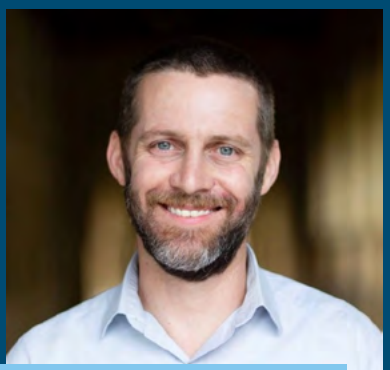

MIKE TAUBMAN

TEACHER, PROGRAM DIRECTOR & AI INNOVATION LEAD

"I think of students' reactions as lighthouses, showing us how to navigate this foggy AI-in-education moment."

AN AI DRIVER'S LICENSE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

Tiana: AI has been helpful in checking my school work after I've already done it on my own. It's become a consistent routine, and it allows me to improve from my work, but only because I tried it on my own the first time.

Mehki: Outside of this class, I use AI to constitute ideas on something I'm not particularly knowledgeable on, then I re-fabricate those through my own thought process, in my own way.

Blessing: AI helps me understand topics better. I use it to explore interests, get advice. It's changed my day-to-day routine by making me more active and curious. I feel more motivated and willing to learn something new every day.

Those are quotes from high school seniors I teach in the purpose development and career exploration program I run at Uncommon Schools. They've been using custom AI tools regularly, engaging with AI using an "AI Driver's License" framework I designed.

I think of students' reactions as lighthouses, showing us how to navigate this foggy AI-in-education moment. Their insights both guide us forward and warn us where the risks lie.

To develop successful AI learning models, we must, above all, center student experiences. Students might share those experiences with

us directly, but in some cases, we can make inferences from their work, their outcomes, and the broader research done about them. However, when we encounter students' perspectives, it is critical that we pay attention to them. As Aniya said, "Adults need to value the input of kids more because we were all kids once, and our voice deserves to be heard."

While some of these experiences and perspectives will be positive beacons, some of them will undoubtedly be warnings. In the words of my students:

> *Miskul: Adults don't understand that people use AI since they are lonely. They don't have anyone to talk to and feel alone, both in the real world and online, so they try to gain some connection through AI.*
>
> *Alayah: I'm lowkey scared because we are the new adults and we have to make sure we all don't fail as a community*
>
> *Destinee: I feel nervous because the world is moving fast. It's important to know how to use AI wisely and how to think for ourselves.*

To me, these quotes suggest that sometimes educators need to act as the lighthouse themselves and guide students to use AI "wisely," which requires intentionally weaving AI into education. These concerns voiced by my students also suggest that we need to ensure AI is not omnipresent in students' lives. They want to be able to think for themselves, and they want to feel that they aren't always alone with a screen. They're craving community, and they want to believe that the communities they create can succeed.

With students in mind, and after 21 years of teaching, leading, and innovating at Uncommon Schools, I've been building one learning model for this era. My program runs in loops to help students realize life-building is not linear. Each three-week loop includes a series of checkpoints. They need to reflect on their emerging sense of purpose, engage with moral philosophy, research a career, contact professionals in that field on LinkedIn to set up informational calls, explore how to use that career to solve problems that are important to them, and finally, leverage the design thinking process to undertake a long-term project that synthesizes all the previous steps. Throughout, they collaborate with peers and use AI regularly for support. At the end of each loop, students share their projects in a showcase.

After nine loops, in the fourth quarter of the year, we shift to capstone presentations. Each student presents their journey with peers, family, teachers, and mentors: where they've been, where they're going, and how they'll get there. These presentations are often emotional turning points as students publicly claim their purpose and their community pledges support.

I was inspired to create this program in part by Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine's work on the concept of deeper learning, which argues that students learn best at the intersection of mastery, identity, and creativity. I launched my program in the fall of 2020, starting the year entirely online, but even in that setting, students immediately showed me the power of this new approach. Elijah, a student in the inaugural cohort, worked for months with a journalist mentor on a piece about the college admissions process, which was eventually published in *The New York Times*. Elijah later studied English and journalism at Morehouse College and, after graduating this past spring, was accepted into a fully-funded graduate journalism program at NYU.

Elijah and hundreds of other students have pushed my thinking on the program's design as I work to make sure it evolves to meet the needs of the moment. AI is now infused into the program as both a tool and a topic: a tool students use to support their projects and a topic they explore in class discussions.

That tool-topic tension is central to the "AI Driver's License" framework we use to engage with AI. The framework has four parts:

1. **Choose a Destination:** Reflect on personal, academic, or career goals before using AI.
2. **Learn to Drive:** Master practical AI tools while pursuing authentic goals.
3. **Open the Hood:** Understand how AI systems work and their limitations.
4. **Reflect on Rules of the Road:** Grapple with the big questions AI raises, in your life and our society. Know when to turn AI off and think on your own two feet.

Students cycle through various parts of that framework as they move through each loop of the program. The goal is to help students see AI, as Victoria put it, as "my assistant."

"Know when to turn AI off and think on your own two feet."

The following design principles have guided my development of the program and offer an approach others might adapt:

- Purpose comes first and remains the north star throughout.
- Structured, regular reflection catalyzes students' growth and agency.
- In-person community creates accountability and, more importantly, connection.

- The analog should be the context for the digital, not the other way around.
- Students learn from each other, teachers, AI, and professional experts.
- Real-life experiences matter most; real-world problems should guide those experiences.
- AI should be essential but not the point. AI is the car; students are the drivers.

Many of those principles are already present in schools, but they are often scattered. They are more powerful when woven together into a coherent whole.

Programming that integrates those principles makes students more connected, more confident about college and careers, and more clear-eyed about the AI age ahead.

"AI is the car; students are the drivers."

Or, as Tiana put it:

" I'm nervous for the world I'm graduating into, but I do feel prepared."