

INSIGHTS

Learning with AI in Cambodia: A Phenomenological Perspective on Exam-Oriented Classrooms

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Introduction

Societal standards evolve over time, sometimes preserving existing structures and sometimes creating new forms of development. With rapid technological advancement, academic systems have become more responsive to social change. John Dewey (1916) argued that learning should be flexible and responsive to social change, as it is central to societal development.

Beyond academic performance, AI is also shaping how students experience learning. From a phenomenological perspective, learning is not merely an outcome but a lived experience where knowledge is integrated into a student's world. Drawing on Edmund Husserl's concept of intentionality, which describes the aboutness or directedness of mental acts, consciousness is pointing beyond itself toward something (Husserl, 1970; Engelland, 2020). In this sense, Cambodian students are not passive receivers of knowledge; they actively interpret and respond within their cultural and academic context.

While research has explored the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on educational outcomes (Holmes et al., 2019; Luckin, 2018) and the local landscape of benefits and concerns within Cambodia (Pum and Sok, 2024), limited attention has been paid to the intersection of AI and the high-stakes, exam-oriented structures of the Cambodian system. This paper argues that AI reshapes student intentionality by transforming how attention is directed and whether meaning is constructed or merely retrieved under evaluative pressure.

The Hybrid Classroom: Reconfiguring Intentionality

Artificial intelligence has become an increasingly significant part of Cambodian classrooms. This emerging learning culture has expanded opportunities for both educators and learners, breaking traditional limitations and reshaping access to education in more flexible and continuous ways. However, this shift also suggests that it often limits students' cognitive engagement, reduces independent reasoning and deeper critical thinking (Zawacki-Richter & Marin, et al., 2019).

The deployment of AI-supported platforms, such as the MoEYS Capacity Development Platform (CDP) launched in late 2025, is shifting the center of gravity in Cambodian classrooms (UNICEF, 2025). Traditionally, a student's intentionality was directed toward the teacher as the sole authority of knowledge. With the CDP, this consciousness becomes

distributed across a triad consisting of the teacher, the student, and the algorithm, transforming the educational experience from a passive reception of facts into an active, mediated journey of professional and cognitive growth.

This shift creates a Paradox of Agency. AI enables personalized support and instant feedback (Pum and Sok, 2024), allowing students to become more active in their inquiry. However, when AI is used primarily for rapid outputs, it risks inducing detrimental cognitive offloading. This is a state where students outsource parts of their thinking to AI systems. (Lodge and Loble, 2026). In this environment, the process of thinking is often replaced by a performance paradox where achieving the correct answer bypasses the cognitive effort required for deep learning.

The Exam as a Lived Phenomenon: From Event to Atmosphere

In the Cambodian context, examinations are far more than technical assessments; they represent pivotal life events closely tied to social mobility and future opportunity (Pum and Sok, 2024; Nhor et al., 2022). Traditionally, the lived experience of these exams has been defined by high-pressure environments that demand intense focus. Today, this reality can inadvertently intensify the Paradox of Agency, as the urgent need for success may lead students to prioritize the immediate efficiency of AI over the long-term development of their own independent thinking.

The integration of AI transforms this phenomenon from a distinct event into a continuous atmospheric pressure. Students now use AI to simulate exam questions, predict potential topics, and navigate assessment criteria around the clock. Intentionality narrows as knowledge is no longer experienced as an open-ended exploration but as something to be retrieved and reproduced (Giansanti and Cosenza, 2026). By turning exam readiness into a constant digital simulation, the AI-mediated environment can turn learning into a defensive act of uncertainty reduction rather than an offensive act of discovery.

While AI use within exam-oriented environments may contribute to increased reliance on algorithmic efficiency, it simultaneously offers opportunities for cognitive support and academic enhancement. As Jose et al. (2025) argue, AI in education embodies a cognitive paradox in which it can both enhance learning capacity and risk undermining independent reasoning. In this perspective, AI functions as an enabling tool that enhances academic performance without necessarily replacing independent reasoning and critical thinking.

Intersubjectivity and the Algorithmic Mediator

Learning is social and based on shared meaning between individuals. The traditional Cambodian pedagogical relationship is defined by the bond between teacher and student. AI adds a non-human mediator to this relationship, prompting the question of whether the algorithm deepens human understanding or encourages surface-level engagement in which correctness matters more than insight.

In one regard, the challenge for Cambodian education is to ensure that AI serves as a co-creative partner that enhances student authorship rather than replacing it. According to the PMAISE model (Pedagogical Mediation of AI for Student Engagement) (Long et al., 2026), AI fosters engagement when it is embedded in interactive pedagogies that require active student reflection. Without this level of mediation, the algorithm may unintentionally validate metacognitive laziness. This creates a false sense of mastery where students feel competent because they can use AI to produce answers, while the underlying logic and deep learning remain unmastered (Lodge and Loble, 2026).

By contrast, the integration of AI-driven systems among learners opens up new possibilities for a more dynamic educational environment. By providing educators and students with greater flexibility in Cambodian classrooms, AI's impact on learning depends on how it is integrated into classroom practice (Loch and Hout, 2025). Therefore, AI represents a shift in learning practices where learners engage with intelligent systems in ways that reshape classroom interaction and learning processes.

Conclusion and Policy Pathways

Rather than viewing AI and examinations separately, their interaction shows changes in how students guide their own learning. To preserve cognitive agency, our educational transition must prioritize inquiry-based engagement over mere algorithmic output. This requires a systemic shift in assessment policy: we must move from testing for correctness to evaluating the actual learning process and the student's ability to reflect on their own reasoning. Likewise, professional development should empower educators to move from being transmitters of formal systems to being essential mediators who help students maintain their own thinking power in an AI-saturated world. Academic performance should not rely only on standardized scores, but also consider how students think and learn with AI support as they develop the ability to guide their own thinking and integrate those capacities.

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