

Supporting the Thinking, Not Replacing It

Three questions to ask before bringing AI into a learning activity

AI can offer help instantly, endlessly patient, always available. But it can also hand over the answer before a student has had the chance to struggle with the thinking — and sometimes, the struggle is where the learning actually happens.

This isn't an argument against AI as a tutor, a brainstorming partner, or a source of feedback — it can be an excellent one. The distinction that matters is between supporting the thinking and replacing it. Use the three questions below when designing or reviewing any assignment, case study, or lab that involves AI.

1. **Where does the student need to wrestle with this alone?**

Identify the specific reasoning step that is the point of the exercise — the moment the student should sit with confusion before getting help. If AI can shortcut that exact step, the assignment isn't teaching what you think it's teaching.

2. **Where might AI offer useful scaffolding?**

Everywhere else. AI can surface background information, offer a Socratic question instead of an answer, check reasoning after the student has committed to it, or provide feedback on drafts. Scaffolding supports the climb; it doesn't carry the student to the top.

3. **What thinking has to stay the student's responsibility, no matter how available the shortcut is?**

Name it explicitly in the assignment instructions. Students will use whatever tools are available to them — the clearer you are about which parts of the thinking are non-negotiable, the more useful AI becomes for everything else.

Our job was never to remove the hard parts of learning. Sometimes it's to give students just enough support to keep thinking — not enough to stop.