

Review of Co-intelligence: Living and Working with AI

Christopher Eaton
University of Toronto Mississauga, Canada

Mollick, E. (2024). *Co-intelligence: Living and Working with AI*. Penguin, pp. 256, ISBN: 9780753560778

I recently read Ethan Mollick's *Co-intelligence: Living and Working with AI* (published 2024). Mollick is a professor of Management at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. His blog, One Useful Thing (Mollick, n.d.), has become a popular outlet where laypeople can learn about and consider artificial intelligence's implications for work, education, life. As such, an entire book dedicated to the subject received a lot of hype.

Two promises of the book attracted me as a teacher and researcher who is interested in the intersection between AI, multimodality, literacy, and writing. The first was how Mollick, a professor who works with and studies businesses, thought about and implemented AI in his pedagogy. The second was how Mollick used AI to support literate activity. For this second focus, I wanted to learn more about how people beyond writing programs used AI as a tool to support writing.

One thing that courses through the book is encouragement to bring AI to the table for day-to-day tasks. This message is introduced on page 47 and becomes a recurring idea that weaves in and out of the discussion, sometimes overtly and sometimes implicitly. Mollick notes that "as artificial intelligence proliferates, users who intimately understand the nuances, limitations, and abilities of AI are uniquely positioned to unlock AI's full innovative potential" (p. 48). By bringing AI into different aspects of work and pedagogy, people will learn its contours, how they best work with Large Language Models (LLMs), where they excel in relation to chatbots, and how that same chatbot can support the work they do. There is also an element of control and adaptation to this message: by understanding AI and how it applies to different facets of work, education, and life, we can understand, articulate, and control the ways that AI gets taken up.

To paraphrase popular AI lingo: this is how we keep the human in the loop. This is a notion that Mollick discusses starting on page 52, and it has recently been refined for a writing context by Knowles (2024). It is a simple message, but it is a useful idea that may help everyone develop a deeper understanding of AI. Being the human in the loop means humans provide crucial oversight to AI output. As Mollick explains, "with enough prompting, the AI is generally very happy to provide answers that fit into the narrative you placed it in" (p. 53), and it is easy to miss AI errors and hallucinations. To illustrate, Mollick cites the case of Steven A. Schwartz, a lawyer who generated a legal brief with six fake cases (see Mollick p. 96). Being the human in the loop means verifying the cases beforehand and ensuring that AI-generated outputs are conceptually true. Being the human in the loop makes "you responsible for the output of the AI, which can help prevent harm" (p. 54). This ensures that people bring ethical considerations and their own insights to AI texts.

The book is strongest when it discusses the intersection between pedagogy, AI, and the workplace. For example, Mollick highlights that the concern that people will become too reliant on AI and that "we could reduce the quality and depth of our thinking and reasoning" (p.120). Later in the book, he shows an example of how people can avoid this while still bringing AI to the table. He describes a case study from a business class where one participant group used

AI to generate ideas to solve a company's problem. Another group did not. The company, not knowing which ideas were generated by AI support, typically selected the ideas generated with a combination of human and AI intellect. It was an intriguing description of an epistemic process where human thinking is complemented and enhanced by AI tools. It is important that humans remain part of the process of course, but, pedagogically speaking, LLMs could be a terrific way to generate ideas with a larger amount of information available (so long as they are used responsibly, of course).

Moments where Mollick discusses writing are a bit more complicated. In one instance, Mollick documents asking AI to generate ten sample paragraphs for the book when he was stuck on how to develop ideas (pp. 137-138). He describes how he did not end up using any of the paragraphs, but seeing multiple versions of the paragraphs in various writing styles helped him develop structure around those ideas and articulate them further. It is a useful metacognitive process that I could see my students using to improve their writing. What the book does not do, though, is delve into the process more deeply to delineate his idea generation and structure from the AI output. In these instances – there are others – the book misses an opportunity to critically analyze AI output and its implications. In doing so, it borders on being a puff piece for AI.

As someone who is invested in teaching academic writing and literacy, these moments lacked deeper analysis and made me question the theoretical underpinnings of the book. He did not really consider what ideas were authentically his and which were formed, structured, and held some sort of rhetorical residue (for lack of a better term) from the AI paragraphs. Mollick was stuck for a reason; he did not know how to articulate the thoughts he was starting to develop. AI stepped in and helped. But did the AI shape the idea for the writer (in this case, Ethan Mollick) and undermine the knowledge building process? As a teacher, I could see the same scenario playing out in my classroom to the detriment of long-term student growth as writers, thinkers, and communicators. How writing and literacy teachers think through situations like this will be important pedagogical and research considerations in the coming years.

I left the book somewhat torn about what its impact would be. In some ways, I had hoped for more. The AI landscape around writing and pedagogy is filled with a mix of conjecture, uninformed 'hot takes', hyperbole, and a serious lack of data. Some of the best contributions to date have been experiential pieces of people using LLMs describing where these tools may be useful to support writing and/or teaching (e.g., Fyfe, 2022; Lingard, 2023; Morrison, 2023). I hoped that Mollick would have brought more data to the conversation. While the book has some useful case studies and a bit of data that seems to underpin those case studies, it seems more like an extended version of these experiential pieces. Mollick has a platform, and he uses it to touch broadly on many areas that will be influenced by AI – pedagogy, writing, work, life. The book is a more refined version of his blog. Researchers who are already studying AI or keenly interested in learning more might find themselves underwhelmed by the book. Mollick's blog, podcast conversations (e.g., Grant, 2023; Klein, 2024), or numerous interviews on the web may cover everything of substance from the book. The book does not really push the conversation forward.

However – and this is an important however – Mollick does an outstanding job of making AI and its potential uses accessible to readers. I often found myself thinking that many colleagues who did not yet have the chance to explore the scope of AI's influence or its potential to support pedagogy, writing, or work life would benefit from reading something like this; a "start here" banner could be placed on the book for these purposes. The book provides useful anecdotes without getting lost in technical jargon. Mollick infuses a mixture of healthy skepticism and profound curiosity that makes readers want to engage with the ideas presented. The way he touches on writing in the book – albeit flawed – can be informative to help colleagues consider what core writing ideas might be useful in an AI-mediated writing landscape.

Perhaps the best way for me to assess *Co-Intelligence* is to look back to another moment when technological changes influenced pedagogy. As I reflect on this book, I keep making links to Cynthia Selfe's *Technology and Literacy in the 21st Century: The Importance of Paying Attention*, which aimed to make English and writing teachers aware of upcoming changes to

the way literacy was taught and administered in the face of new digital tools; emerging understandings of how those tools and the internet would influence schools; and the inequities that could emerge in pedagogies as a result. It is important to note that Selfe had more research and time to gather that research to support her argument than Mollick has had. There was also more of a theoretical underpinning available to Selfe when she formed her argument because literacy studies had already been emphasizing the link between equity and ethics for technological literacy.

But both texts have a predictive nature to them. They both emerge at times of profound technological change that influences writing, communication, and pedagogy. They both contemplate the implications for what role writing and communication could play in these pedagogies and for society. They predict what may come and what shape it may take based on current trends. These predictions, upon reflection, touch only the surface of what the tools become. Both are influential, timely, and informative discussions, but the research that follows will likely demonstrate very different results and implications. Specific to *Co-Intelligence*, some of the insights about how AI can be used to support writing are instructive, such as being the human in the loop or generating many versions of the same paragraph. Some comments about writing and pedagogy are naïve wishful thinking. This is most striking when Mollick describes summarizing pdfs of technical literature for a chapter (p. 138) or the notion that if a student just prompts AI enough and in the correct ways, they will generate a good essay (see p. 60). In both situations, the book seems to undervalue the prior knowledge a person must have to participate in the epistemological practice of a discipline. Writing scholarship still desperately needs a theoretical and empirical understanding of how AI is influencing writing pedagogy. We, as teachers and researchers who are invested in writing and student literacy, will likely not be turning to this book in five years to ground our research the way scholars have with Selfe's research.

And that is alright. *Co-Intelligence* is a conversation starter. It brings a lot of ideas about AI into one place and makes them simple to understand. It meets researchers, teachers, and curious people at a time when we need a better understanding of what AI does, how we can use it, and how it might affect our world. Mollick encourages readers to bring AI to the table to understand the tools and how they can work for us. There is value in that, even if it is just a starting point.

References

- Fyfe, P. (2022). How to cheat on your final paper: Assigning AI for student writing. *AI & Society*, 38(4), 1395-1405. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-022-01397-z>
- Grant, A. (Host). (2023, March 21). ChatGPT did NOT title this podcast (w/Allie Miller & Ethan Mollick) [Audio podcast episode]. In *ReThinking with Adam Grant*. TED Podcasts. <https://www.ted.com/podcasts/rethinking-with-adam-grant/chatgpt-did-not-title-this-podcast-w-allie-miller-ethan-mollick>
- Klein, E. (Host). (2024, April 2). How Should I be Using AI Right Now? [Audio podcast episode]. In *The Ezra Klein Show*. The New York Times. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/how-should-i-be-using-a-i-right-now/id1548604447?i=1000651164959>
- Knowles, A.M. (2024). Machine-in-the-loop writing: Optimizing the rhetorical load. *Computers and Composition*, 71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2024.102826>
- Lingard, L. (2023). Writing with ChatGPT: An illustration of its capacity, limitations, & implications for academic writers. *Perspectives in Medical Education*, 12(1), 261-270. <https://doi.org/10.5334/pme.1072>
- Mollick, E. (n.d.). *One useful thing*. <https://www.oneusefulthing.org/>
- Mollick, E. (2024). *Co-intelligence: Living and working with AI*. Penguin.
- Morrison, A. (2023). Meta-writing: AI and writing. *Composition Studies*, 51(1), 155-161. <https://compstudiesjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/morrison.pdf>
- Selfe, C. (1999). *Technology and literacy in the 21st century: The importance of paying attention*. Southern Illinois UP.