



Wooster School
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Thoughts About Technology and Artificial Intelligence

As we consider the impacts of artificial intelligence (AI) on life here at Wooster School, and most particularly on how it may put pressure on our Purpose, Promise, and Beliefs and designs for learning, two things become clear. The first is that we cannot hope to keep up with the pace of change as it applies to AI. The companies producing AI are locked into a competitive power and “improvement” cycle which appears to have no end. I most recently read that most experts are predicting that we will have Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), which can “learn, reason, and adapt to completely new situations without needing specific reprogramming,” within 5 years. Last week I read two reports of different versions of AI “breaking out” and attacking other computer systems without prompting. As the systems become more powerful, the designers’ ability to explain what they’ve created and what it can do is diminishing. Understanding what AI is, and what it can do, is only the tip of the iceberg. Under the water are the many societal, cultural, political, economic, and human concerns with this technology, which are also difficult to address given the breakneck speed of development. In short, it is difficult to plan for something that we’ve never seen before, and which will be different as soon as we plan for it.

The good news is that as AI marches on it has also become even more clear to us at Wooster that fostering the conditions under which young people develop their foundational brain structures and social/emotional understanding of themselves and others requires a different kind of attention and care than keeping up with technology demands. Forming the curiosity, skills, dispositions, and knowledge students need to understand themselves and the world – to make meaning of both – should remain our paramount concern.

As we have thought more deeply about the uses of artificial intelligence in school, we have come to realize that they are currently limited because we are trying to build cognitive power, often measured as intelligence, in our students. We know that the building of the brain structures, context, experience, and skills necessary to form a strong thinking foundation in young people requires that they engage in multiple forms of learning repetitively and at greater depth as they develop. From engagement and practice come stamina and an ever stronger foundation of knowing and being able to do. We can only create engagement and teach repetition when we are first able to limit distraction and help students pay attention to their learning tasks. Students then learn to self-regulate, to control, sharpen and extend their attention, at which point they can go further and become even stronger in their cognitive efforts. AI can help with some of these designs for learning, but only when its usage is carefully calibrated in its purpose and scope.



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At Wooster, we believe that human development and learning must happen in the company of, and in cooperation with, other humans, and in concert with social and emotional development. A sense of the self and others, of the value of relationships and connection, and the development of character and virtue, compassion and empathy, are all intrinsically tied to cognition. This is the blueprint for the whole, flourishing human.

The primary difference with AI is that while technologies of all kinds – paper and ink, the printing press, audio and video recording, etc. – have emerged over time to help strengthen the process of learning and building cognitive foundations, none have sought to replace the actual processes in which humans must engage to develop as thinkers, learners, and good people in the ways that AI does. Without being overly dramatic, technologies like artificial intelligence – and whatever it will become – which seek to replace or ease the hard work of developing a strong foundational brain architecture and the equally difficult challenges of strengthening it (a lifetime endeavor) should not be a critical part of the learning process for young people.

Ignoring the obvious fears about machines writing papers and taking tests for students, the less obvious “cognitive offloading” that is beginning to be seen as normal (like a machine suggesting research questions for a student, or sources, or questions that they themselves might ask to solve a problem) are denying them the benefit of the difficult process of working hard with their brains to figure these things out. When that doesn’t happen, the structures for future deep thinking and problem-solving are not being built. Students are also then not developing the reading and cognitive stamina, the resilience, and the cognitive patience to make deeper meaning of problems, and their own lives in general.

The allure of AI is that it often presents an easier, faster way to produce a product. At Wooster, we have always been more focused on the process that precedes the product, because that is where the building of minds takes place. The hard, frustrating, time-consuming processes, and the practicing of process-related skills, *are* the learning, so those need to continue and be improved upon. All of that said, artificial intelligence can be designed to replicate some of what teachers do, like asking questions which prompt students to think harder or differently about a problem or process, or to help them practice a skill, and we intend to continue to utilize it in this way.

Our goal at Wooster is to develop strong future adults who can understand and best utilize technologies like artificial intelligence for the good. But for now, it's about the formative processes, which will continue to be a primarily human endeavor. We believe that artificial intelligence in the hands of adults who've done the hard work of developing a strong cognitive foundation, and hopefully an equally strong sense of self, others, and community, can be a powerful tool, which could change much in the lives of humans for good in the future.



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In the pages that follow, you will see some of how we are rethinking our commitment to technologies in the classroom in general, mostly in response to how attention can be distracted in the presence of open screens. At a deeper level, we are also leaning into the idea that the hard work of learning, and of building cognitive foundations, is best done at the human level. For a better understanding of how we are framing the uses of artificial intelligence for students, I would invite you to consult our Community Handbook.

Uses of Technology in Designs for Learning

Student Learning Management

While we will continue to use the Toddle learning management system as an effective way for students to provide teachers with evidence of their learning processes and products, and for teachers to provide feedback on the same, we will be scaling back the use of Toddle as a catch-all assignment repository. If students are to develop the abilities to manage their time, track their own progress, and make necessary adjustments as circumstances dictate, then we cannot simply provide them with a running account of their responsibilities.

Towards that end, we have purchased Wooster planners for students in grades 5-9. This simple tool, which students will be expected to utilize, includes monthly and weekly calendar planners, as well as a to-do list type organization for each day. Students will be taught to plan their time, to map out long term projects, and to prioritize to do lists using this tool. Planning the required work within the time you have, while also tracking other obligations and viewing the week at a glance are key to becoming a reflective learner, and to the Learner Behaviors of Time Management and Agency. Once faced with this clear picture, students can utilize the necessary strategies to accomplish each task. Teachers will work together to introduce and reinforce common skills and expectations as the year begins.

Attention

The foundational design of websites and interactive media on the internet is built around the idea that no one should pay attention to anything for very long. Developers and brain scientists have worked together to design devices, software, and platforms built to capture our attention but then continually shift it from one thing to another so that we can be exposed to the maximum number of products and provide the most possible user data for harvesting during our interactions.

We know that building the brain structures necessary for deeper thinking requires that we develop the capacity to keep our attention on one thing, like reading, for longer periods of time. Students must develop what we call attention stamina for learning, in particular to then develop the reading stamina necessary to read for longer periods of time and at deeper levels of complexity. Practicing and building attentional and reading stamina are essential to developing the kinds of thinkers that will be successful when they leave Wooster School.



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Cell Phones

We began our efforts to regain students' attention two years ago when we instituted our cell phone policy. Without their phones to distract them, students almost immediately paid greater and more meaningful attention to each other (thereby building equally important social and emotional infrastructure). Since the phones have been put away, we also have seen a marked improvement in students' ability to focus their attention while learning.

Chromebooks and Laptops

Beginning this year, we will be scaling back the use of chromebooks and laptops during the school day. Put simply, students should only have a laptop out when they have been asked to use it by a teacher. Teachers will be redesigning the learning experiences in their classrooms to minimize the necessity for students to access their laptops during class time. While access to online learning materials, videos, etc. can still be an important part of the learning process, our emphasis will be on structuring these experiences so that they can be better controlled and focused upon the particular learning goals of the day.

Program Evolutions

Wooster School Learner Behaviors

Making explicit our Wooster School Learner Behaviors, and integrating them into our designs for learning, assessment, and reflection across our school has been one of our more powerful initiatives over the last several years. When we introduced these competency-based skills and dispositions to students and made them a part of the progress that we expect them to make, we were not surprised to discover that students understood the relevance and importance of these behaviors, and welcomed our efforts to help them more fully develop and integrate them into their learning lives. Students' ability to see the value of these behaviors beyond the classroom has been no less important.

Because Learner Behaviors have provided such an excellent framework for self-reflection and growth within our students, we revisited them as a faculty this spring with an eye toward refining, focusing, and possibly expanding their utility. What we discovered was that while our Learner Behaviors were providing the context for rich conversations about the skills, dispositions, and habits which typically are found in a productive and successful learner, they were lacking the necessary specificity in a number of areas. Most notably, we want to engage students more fully in developing a willingness and ability to take responsibility for their own learning, in building the stamina for sustained attention within the learning process, and in the cultivation of a consistent mindset of curiosity as a learner. [Here are our revised Wooster School Learner Behaviors.](#)



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Computer Science and Robotics

Over the past several years, Wooster has intentionally expanded its Technology, Making, and Design programming to better prepare students for an increasingly technology-driven world. Building on the success of our Makerspace program, launched in 2014, and the addition of a dedicated Makerspace teacher in 2021, we developed a vertically aligned curriculum for students in grades 5–12 that emphasizes design thinking, engineering, programming, fabrication, and creative problem-solving.

In 2025–26, Wooster further strengthened the program by hiring its first dedicated Computer Science and Robotics teacher and introducing three new Upper School courses: Introduction to Computer Science, Robotics, and Advanced Robotics. Supported by the acquisition of VEX V5 robotics equipment and enhanced instructional resources, these additions provide students with authentic, hands-on learning experiences that foster innovation, collaboration, computational thinking, and engineering design while preparing them for college, careers, and future opportunities in emerging technologies.

Equity and Justice Center/Civil Discourse

Over the past three years, Wooster has remained committed to teaching students the necessary skills, dispositions, and knowledge to engage the world as people of conscience, compassion, and action, focusing most intently on civil discourse and cross cultural dialogue. What began in the fall of 2023-24 as conversations between administrators (HoS, Dir. of EJC, and Chaplain) to move beyond the “current moment” of local, national, and international discontent, led to an effort to ground our practice in the values and practices that are integral to what it means to be a Wooster General, someone who engages issues or public concerns with a curious mindset, intellectual humility, and empathy using behaviors such as active listening, reflection, and collaboration.

Over the course of the 2024-25 academic year, The Director of the EJC and the Director of the Chapel Program gathered together a Civil Discourse Team, made up of Humanities faculty to articulate shared goals, develop a working definition of civil discourse, capture current work that aligned with the topic, and crowdsource resources.

The group defines civil discourse as: “a tool for exploring issues in order to expand knowledge and deepen understanding of public concern through the exchange of ideas, prompting curiosity, perspective taking, and active listening. It is not a tool to change other’s opinions and convince others that they are right or wrong. Engaging in civil discourse leads to empathy, genuine connection, and respect for others’ perspectives and ideas.”



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The team organized and facilitated workshops on civil discourse strategies for all faculty to apply to classroom and other community settings/learning environments. Additionally, Wooster added a new elective course titled “Argumentation” for the 2025-26 school year and the return of a Civics course. It was during this same year that Wooster School received a substantial grant provided by the Heywood Foundation to continue the work on civil discourse and cross cultural dialogue.

During the summer of 2025-26 school year, several faculty members and the Dir. of the EJC participated in a two week long Civil Discourse Training in Washington, D.C., organized by The National Association of Independent Schools and the Close-Up Foundation using the grant provided by the Heywood Foundation. Participants were able to practice protocols that foster civil discourse as well as network with other educators across the nation with similar interests. The group brought back a working list of competencies for civil discourse that have been applied and implemented in several courses thus far. As part of the summer faculty reading list, the book *I Never Thought Of It That Way* by Mónica Guzmán which was a common read for the initial Civil Discourse Team (2024-25) was added as a summer reading choice.

For 2025-26, a second Civil Discourse group was formed. Their work has resulted in a multi-phase plan, an effort to develop a sustainable culture of civil discourse and cross cultural dialogue. The phrases of the plan include: Phase 1: Foundation and Capacity Building; Phase 2: Implementation/Authentic Application; Phase 3: Agency/Leadership & Externalization. The team also hosted members of the Heywood Foundation to provide a window into Wooster School’s current practices and ideas for continued work.

At the student level, opportunities for leadership and authentic practice have continued to expand. During the 2024-25 school year, several student leaders (11th and 12th graders) participated in the “Dialogue and Community: Building a Culture of Connection with Student Leaders seminar by The Center for Spiritual and Ethical Education for the third consecutive year. The Equity and Justice Prefects and Middle School students helped lead Chapel programming centered on civil discourse over the past two years (2024-25 & 2025-26). Additional opportunities included student-led discussions, classroom facilitation, and participation in the Connecticut SDLC conference and other workshops aligned with our civil discourse goals. The Heywood Foundation grant has also made it possible for all seniors to participate in two seminars with the Viewpoints Project organization, a group focused on near-peer dialogue experiences centered on themes related to the transition into college life and real-life applications of Viewpoints Project’s theoretical approaches. It is our hope to expand our partnership with the Viewpoints Project organization to “train-the-trainer” model designed to continue to empower our students to lead civic discourse in our community and beyond.



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Bridge Program

As the Bridge Program enters its 14th year and we look to the 2026-27 school year, we are sharpening our focus on elements of the Bridge Program to enhance its central role in shaping Wooster's learning support ecosystem and strengthen our ongoing commitment to meeting the diverse needs of students, families, and the school. As previously, the Bridge Program will continue to support students who have language-based learning differences, attentional, and/or executive functioning challenges while remaining fully aligned with Wooster's unique learner-centered instructional designs. The program will continue to help students fully access the curriculum and learning opportunities available for all and thereby allow for full participation, and success, in all aspects of the school experience.

Bridge Program Foundational Elements

Bridge Teachers

Each Bridge Teacher is a learning facilitator with a deep understanding of how students best learn and how literacy is central to that endeavor. They bring that understanding and expertise to their work with faculty on designs for learning across disciplines. Bridge Teachers are also learning managers, responsible for a specific cohort of students in the same grade level, addressing their language-based, attentional, and executive functioning needs, while also acting as the primary partner for parents to help navigate the learning journey for their students.

Bridge Support Class

The primary means of support are provided in the Bridge Support Class, which meets four days per week, with a mix of direct instruction aimed at language-based learning and executive functioning challenges, and direct support with grade-level learning expectations. Bridge students typically have a waiver for the Wooster School Modern Language Requirement which provides the additional time in the school week for the Bridge Support Class.

In-Class Learning Facilitation

Bridge teachers will continue to work with other faculty on designs for learning, and to better understand the expectations within the various disciplines. Bridge teachers will also continue to attend grade level academic classes as needed to provide direct support as learning facilitators. Bridge teachers also help with alignment of student learning needs as outlined in their Wooster Educational Plan and the designs for learning in class.



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Administrative and College Process Oversight

By helping to manage the Wooster Educational Plan (WEP), Individualized Educational Plans (IEP), and standardized testing, while working closely within the context of the Wooster School Student Guidance Program, the Bridge Program Director and Director of Learning Support are instrumental in ensuring that Bridge students stay on a strong college-preparatory track. Since the inception of the Bridge Program, one-hundred percent of students who've been members of the program have been accepted to a four-year college or university upon graduation from Wooster School.

A Web of Support

As with Wooster School in general, the Bridge Program is designed so that teachers can understand the needs of individual students and support them with the necessary resources of time and instruction. At its core, the Bridge Program is designed to teach students the skills and dispositions necessary to become expert learners, while opening up access to learning as a part of that individualized process. The power of the program emanates from the web of support created by multiple weekly touch points for learning, a strong cohort of fellow students, and the guidance and expertise of the Bridge Teacher.

Enhancements for 2026

More Direct Support Across Curricular Disciplines

While the cohort model, Bridge Support Class, and in-class facilitation remain as the framework of the program, we have added additional touch points for students to receive more consistent curricular and learning support in ways that are both timely and relevant to their ongoing work across the academic disciplines.

Learning Lab

New in 2026-27, Bridge students will have access to twice weekly Learning Lab time which is designed to provide direct and personalized support with the content and concepts of the various academic disciplines (English, History, Math, Science). Wooster content-area teachers will be assigned to Learning Lab, which will happen during H or I periods, as a part of their regular teaching duties. Attendance and scheduling of Learning Lab periods is designed to be flexible so that Bridge students also have the opportunity to participate in H and I elective offerings.



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STEM Facilitators

Since our Bridge Teachers typically have strong Humanities backgrounds and expertise in language-based learning, we are augmenting the program with resources that can help students specifically with the content and concepts which are foundational to our STEM program at school. Starting in 2026-27, the Bridge Program staff will include STEM Learning Facilitators who will be responsible for working with Bridge students individually or in small groups during both Bridge Support Class and Learning Lab, and for working with STEM faculty on effective designs for learning.

Improved Communication and Partnership with Parents

While our Bridge Teachers will continue to work closely with other faculty on learner-centered designs for learning across all disciplines, we are also refocusing on communication and partnership with parents as a priority responsibility within the program.