

You Are What You Think

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Received: May 25, 2026; **Accepted:** May 29, 2026; **Published:** June 08, 2026

You know the feeling. You eat a doughnut and it felt oh so deliciously wonderful in the moment yet within a few short minutes the pleasure is reversed. You feel gross. Your body tells you. You didn't need to analyze anything, you sensed what happened to you when you metabolized the doughnut, when its sugar, fats and additives entered your bloodstream.

Making Sense of the Sensing is Discernment

It's not analysis or critique, though prior knowledge that doughnuts are unhealthy may have quickened sense-making. But at its source it was something more primary. Your body knew.

Before the industrial revolution, you either farmed your food or you went out to collect it in the natural world through foraging. You knew where it came from. The food you grew was natural, organic: no synthetic pesticides or hormones used. You ate it and it nourished you, and that nourishment gave you the energy to go and do things: work, build, care for people and animals. There was a direct relationship between what you took in and what you could do in the world.

Then food became processed, chemically treated, industrially manufactured. And here's the key: the engineering of food wasn't aimed at nutrition, it was aimed at quantity, transportability, and taste. And it was aimed at return. Low cost, advertising and ease of preparation gets people coming back. You come back for the doughnut, even though it's not nutritious at all. And of course that saps your energy, because you are consuming food that isn't metabolized for maximum energy.

This is not just a story about food. Over time, when the input is engineered for consumption rather than vitality, we lose something fundamental: the capacity to distinguish what feeds us from what depletes us. The metabolic capacity atrophies through the atrophy of sense-making. You stop being able to tell the difference between what nourishes you and what just tastes good.

Thinking too is Being Processed

Before the internet, there was a scarcity of information. You went looking for it in libraries, fingering through the card catalogue. What you found on bookshelves had been filtered, not perfectly, but filtered. There was a relationship between effort and substance.

Since 1995, after the internet, there has been an abundance of information, too much information even. That was a real flip:

information became accessible anywhere you wanted or needed it, all the more so with the advent of the smartphone, which meant you had access to the entire body of documented human knowledge from the past 5,000 years. We had to figure out what to do with this new abundance and the speed at which we could access it.

Education shifted and the mantra became use technology to create, not consume. Since information is everywhere and accessible at any time, what is valuable is what you make with it. SAMR was the self-check framework that many followed.

That was the Right Response in a Time of Abundance. It's the Wrong Response to What's Coming

With AI, it's no longer even about the abundance, it's about the noise; the noise that distracts us, the noise that drowns out the signals that we may be looking for, that is, all the stuff that's valuable. We've gone from scarcity to abundance to having to discern the signal through the noise.

And this noise is going to get worse. Much worse. In a few seconds, you can write a prompt and push a button, and you conjure up any text you want. It takes almost no effort to mass produce text to post on a platform that reaches thousands, millions. So, the quantity of content out there is going to explode, because everybody just uses AIs. And if we're honest, that means there is going to be so much garbage.

And here's the thing about that garbage. AI is based on large language models, which are trained on what already existed. AI will most often write things that are found in the center, seldom cutting edge unless prompted, and even then. Because of the way it's trained, everything tends to get flattened. That's why AI-generated text seems familiar. AI can only recombine what's already been thought. Worse, AI is operationalized to seek coherence and resolution, seldom ever rupture or provocation. This means that to be able to sift through what's interesting and worthwhile, and what's all just more of the same, is going to be much more difficult. Even if you have something genuinely interesting to say, you'll get drowned out by the noise when you put it out there. No one's going to find you.

We think we're navigating this well. We believe we evaluate, understand, and synthesize at the speed of scroll. But really, we don't. We misread, misunderstand, and misinterpret. Even when we have an inkling, we fly over the information so fast, we can't

find the devil in the details. We've already scrolled onto some other headline.

We End up Consuming Thinking We've Processed, But We Haven't

What's coming is worse than post-truth: it's post-trust (see my article), where we stop trusting the entire architecture of information. But that is a longer conversation.

What Matters here is this: production is cheap.

You can do a video, you can do a podcast, you can do anything now with AI within a few keystrokes and a click. The creation part doesn't matter anymore because it has little value. Creation has been commodified.

The entire debate about AI in education is stuck on the wrong questions: How do we use AI for assessment? How do we use AI for co-creation? How do we use AI as a thought partner? Whether to allow it or ban it? How to prepare kids for an AI world? None of that matters anymore because the production of text is passé.

A computer can synthesize. So, what.

When we assess students by what they produce, we are measuring the cheapest thing in the ecosystem. The whole assessment architecture is built around production of artifacts. And every conversation about AI-as-co-creator, AI-as-thought-partner, or whatever, all of it is still operating inside the assumption that production to show what you've learned is the point. That assumption was only alive in a system that individualizes and rewards competition.

The old mantra creates, don't consume assumed creation was the scarce and valuable capacity. Maybe it was then, but it's not now.

What's Scarce Now is Discernment

Discernment is not analysis. I want to be precise about this.

Analysis, the way we practice it in classrooms, treats text as an object. Why did the protagonist do this? What is the author's argument? Compare and contrast. Take it apart. Examine it. This is useful. But it's not what I'm talking about.

Discernment is Metabolic

It's what your body does when it tells you the doughnut was a mistake. It's not "I have analyzed the nutritional content." It's "I feel what this did to me." How have I been transformed by what I just took in? Am I sensing something? Am I attuned? Am I more capable of acting in the world, or more depleted? How will this change me in future encounters?

Discernment asks what happened to me when I metabolized what I took in and what it is doing to me now.

Nothing Lives by Remaining What it is

And this is not metaphor. The same operation is at work: food, thought, same mechanism. When the input is engineered for dependency, the organism's own capacity to process, to sense, to discern, atrophies. It happened to food and it's happening to thought. In both cases, the organism stops being able to tell the difference between what transforms it and what merely passes through.

Maybe we need to go back to growing or foraging for our own thoughts, locally, and staying away from pre-packaged processed stuff.

So, the question for education isn't **how do we integrate AI, or whether we use it or don't. The question is: how do we cultivate the capacity to discern what is organic, what is nutrient-rich, and what gives us energy?** How do we discern what we put in our body for thinking?.

This is where being able to interrogate sources matters. This is where we go through the noise and find the signal. Not because we teach "critical thinking;" that framing has been flattened into a skill you can bullet-point on a curriculum document. Critical thinking matters, yes of course. It finds different positions and holds them in tension.

But finding positions isn't the endpoint. It's how we are transformed that matters

This requires sitting with raw, unprocessed, contradictory, context-dependent material and reconstituting meaning from it yourself.

The Friction is the Learning

That is exercise for discernment.

This is the kind of thinking that BiRD opens up to at Green School

Regenerative education begins with a question: how do we participate in this place in ways that deepen reciprocity? BiRD's flight paths (Sensing, Seeking, Shaping, and Storytelling) are how our learners develop the metabolic capacity to process what they encounter in the living world and be transformed by it.

Discernment is an entry point, a process, and a springboard all at once because it is a way of encountering the world. BiRD moves away from output that has lost its value as a measure of learning and shifts to input as the evidence of prior learning and the process of transformation that raises the quality of current and future learning.

Being able to discern is what the world is calling for. No longer output and production (even creative production!); discernment of the inputs that are organic, nutrient-rich, and give us the energy we need to respond to the local problems we encounter.

The debate about whether children should use AI or shouldn't is a debate about managing tools. What we are doing at Green School is something outside of this debate. We are cultivating the capacity to sense the difference between nourishment and noise. When that capacity is strong, the AI question takes care of itself.

So where does this leave us?

Not with new assessment frameworks or with AI-integration strategies. Not with a policy that fixes the problem by requiring you label your work "AI-assisted." (Yes, that still comes in, but is a subcategory.)

It Leaves us with a Different Question: what happened to you when you metabolized this?

What emerges from genuine discernment might be production of text. Or it might not. It will be adaptability. It will be a shift in how you see, or what you refuse, or how you act.

The point is that it's emergent, co-constituted in the moment between the learner and what they've encountered.

Learning is a Möbius Strip of Learning and Doing

There is no predetermined "what assessment do we attach to this unit?" Or there is, but it too is emergent, a decision made in this moment with those present, not designed in advance.

But production is not the point: it's not the totality of evidence of transformation, only one possible expression of it

And sometimes transformation doesn't express itself as production at all. This too goes back to discernment.

We have to stop asking "what did you make?" and start asking "**how have you shaped and how have you been shaped?**" This shaping is dynamic, not static. It is the metabolic process of learning.

The frontier is metabolic: how do we cultivate the capacity in young people, in communities, in ourselves, to sense the difference between nourishment and slop?

Much like with what you put in your body as food, we need to discern what we put in our body for thinking.

This article was inspired by Nate Hagens.

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