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From Guru to GPT: Reimagining the Mentor–Protégé Relationship in the Age of AI-Driven Digital Learning

¹**Kanishka.K. J.*** (Research Scholar)

PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore

²**Dr. M. John Suganya** (Associate Professor)

PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore

Abstract:

The emergence of artificial intelligence in education has fundamentally altered the dynamics of the mentor–protégé relationship, one of the oldest and most formative bonds in human learning. This paper examines how AI-driven platforms such as intelligent tutoring systems and large language models simulate, and in some respects challenge, the functions traditionally performed by human mentors. Drawing on three theoretical frameworks—Human–Machine Interaction Theory, Paul Ricoeur’s Narrative Identity Theory, and the Mentor–Protégé Relational Framework—the study investigates how learner identity is reconstructed in the absence of a human guide and what ethical implications arise when algorithmic systems assume the mentor’s role. Analysis of learner experiences reveals four key patterns: initial resistance to AI mentorship followed by measurable intellectual growth; the development of stronger self-directed learning identities; the irreplaceable deficit of empathy, lived experience, and moral imagination in AI systems; and the superior outcomes produced by hybrid models that combine human mentorship with AI precision. The paper further explores the ethical dimensions of AI mentorship, including the commodification of the learner’s vulnerability, algorithmic bias rooted in Western-centric datasets, and the risks to learner data privacy. While AI holds genuine promise as an equalizer in global education extending quality guidance to learners in underserved communities this potential is contingent on inclusive design, cultural sensitivity, and strong ethical governance. The paper concludes that the human core of mentorship remains irreplaceable and advocates for a thoughtfully designed hybrid model as the most educationally sound and ethically responsible path forward.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, Mentorship, Learner identity, Narrative Identity, Hybrid learning model.

***Corresponding Author:**

Kanishka.K. J.

Email: Kanishkakjresearchscholar@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION:

Mentorship is perhaps one of the oldest educational relationships known to humanity. Long before formal institutions existed, the transfer of knowledge, values, and identity happened through direct, personal bonds between a teacher and a student. The Guru-Shishya tradition of ancient India, the Socratic dialogues of classical Greece, and the apprenticeship models of medieval Europe all point to the same fundamental truth: human beings learn not just from information, but from other human beings who walk beside them, challenge them, and shape who they become. This relationship, built on trust, empathy, and shared experience, has long been considered irreplaceable.

In the present moment, however, that relationship is being quietly transformed. The rapid growth of artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT, intelligent tutoring systems, and adaptive learning platforms has introduced a new kind of guide into the educational landscape. Millions of learners across the world now turn to these systems not just for information, but for feedback, direction, and even a form of intellectual companionship. The question this raises is not a small one. If algorithms are now

performing some of the most essential functions once associated with human mentors, what happens to the learner? What happens to identity, growth, and the very meaning of education?

This paper attempts to examine that question carefully. Drawing on three theoretical frameworks. Human-Machine Interaction Theory, Paul Ricoeur's Narrative Identity Theory, and the Mentor-Protégé Relational Framework. It explores how AI platforms simulate mentor-protégé dynamics, how learner identity is reconstructed in the absence of a human guide, and what ethical implications arise when machines begin to take on the mentor's role

The Ancient Bond: Mentorship as a Human Institution

To understand what is at stake when AI enters the mentorship space, it is worth pausing to consider what mentorship has traditionally meant. In the Guru-Shishya tradition, the relationship between teacher and student was not simply transactional. The guru did not merely deliver content; the guru was responsible for the shishya's

complete formation like intellectual, moral, and spiritual. The student, in turn, was expected to be open, humble, and willing to undergo transformation. This was not a short-term arrangement. It was a lifelong bond that shaped identity at its deepest levels.

Socrates operated in a similar way. His method of questioning, what has come to be called the Socratic method, was designed not to give answers but to draw them out. Socrates believed that knowledge was not poured into a student from the outside, but was already present within and needed to be awakened. This meant that the relationship between Socrates and his students was intensely personal. It required presence, attention, and a kind of moral courage on both sides. When Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living, he was not just offering a philosophical position; he was modeling a way of being that he expected his students to internalize.

What both of these traditions share is an understanding that mentorship involves more than knowledge transfer. It involves what we might call moral imagination of ability of the mentor to see not just who the student is, but who they might become, and to guide them accordingly. It also involves

empathy, lived experience, and the kind of wisdom that only comes from having navigated difficulty oneself. These are qualities that, as this paper will argue, present a significant challenge for any artificial system attempting to replicate the mentor's role.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in three theoretical frameworks that together help explain what happens when AI enters the mentorship relationship.

The first is Human–Machine Interaction Theory, which positions the learner as an active agent navigating a new kind of relational disruption. When a student encounters an AI tutoring system, they do not simply receive information passively. They interact, adapt, and develop strategies for working with a system that behaves like a mentor but is not one. This framework draws attention to the new power dynamics that emerge in digitally mediated learning. Unlike a human mentor who may know the student personally and adjust guidance based on subtle emotional and social cues, an AI system operates through patterns in data. The relationship is real in its effects but fundamentally different in its nature.

The second framework is Paul Ricoeur's Narrative Identity Theory. Ricoeur argued that human identity is not a fixed essence but is something that is constructed and reconstructed through storytelling. We understand who we are by telling stories about ourselves, and those stories change as we encounter new experiences. In the context of digital learning, this framework becomes particularly useful. Learners who use AI platforms often document their experiences through blogs, social media posts, testimonials, and reflective journals. These digital narratives are not just records of learning; they are acts of self-making. They reveal how the learner is processing the disruption of the traditional mentorship model and constructing a new sense of identity in response.

The third framework is the Mentor–Protégé Relational Framework, which identifies the core elements that make human mentorship transformative: empathy, moral imagination, lived wisdom, and the capacity for genuine emotional connection. This framework is perhaps the most directly relevant to the central question of this paper, because it provides a standard against which AI mentorship can be measured. When we ask whether an AI can truly perform the

functions of a human mentor, we are essentially asking whether it can provide these qualities.

Key Findings

A close examination of learner experiences with AI mentorship platforms reveals a pattern that is both encouraging and troubling. The first finding is what might be called disruption leading to growth. Many learners who initially resisted AI-based guidance eventually reported superior intellectual outcomes. This resistance is understandable. When a student has grown up expecting a human teacher who will acknowledge their frustration, celebrate their progress, and offer the kind of encouragement that feels personal, an algorithm can seem cold and inadequate. But over time, several learners found that this very absence of human validation forced them to develop a stronger, more self-reliant intellectual identity. Without someone to depend on for approval, they had to learn to evaluate their own understanding and trust their own judgment.

The second finding concerns what can be called algorithmic agency. Learners who worked extensively with AI tutoring systems often developed a more self-directed

approach to their education. Because the AI could not motivate them through personal connection or emotional investment, they had to generate that motivation from within. In some cases, this produced learners who were more intellectually independent than those who had been guided exclusively by human mentors. This is not an argument against human mentorship, but it is a genuinely interesting finding that complicates simple narratives about AI as educationally inferior.

The third finding is perhaps the most significant, and it concerns the critical limits of AI mentorship. Despite the intellectual gains documented above, learners consistently identified a gap that AI could not fill: the absence of empathy, lived experience, and the capacity to understand what it actually feels like to be a struggling student. An AI system can recognize that a learner has answered a question incorrectly and can provide an explanation of why. What it cannot do is understand the particular kind of discouragement that comes from failing at something you have worked very hard at, or the specific courage it takes to keep going. Human mentors bring their own histories of failure and recovery to the relationship, and this lived wisdom is

something that cannot be coded or simulated.

There is also a risk of standardization. Because AI systems are trained on large datasets, they tend to produce responses that reflect the average or the typical. But education, at its best, is not about producing average outcomes. It is about recognizing what is unique in each learner and helping them develop that uniqueness. A system that treats all learners as variations on a pattern risk flattening the very diversity that makes education valuable.

The fourth finding is perhaps the most practically useful: a hybrid model, combining the depth of human mentorship with the precision and accessibility of AI tools, consistently outperforms either approach alone. Human mentors bring empathy, moral imagination, and lived wisdom. AI systems bring availability, patience, adaptability, and the ability to track and respond to learner progress across vast amounts of data. When these two are combined thoughtfully, the result is a richer educational experience than either could provide independently.

Ethics and Global Implications

The ethical dimensions of AI mentorship are significant and deserve careful attention. The first concern is what might be called the commodification of mentorship. When educational guidance is delivered through a commercial AI platform, the relationship between mentor and student becomes, in some sense, a product. The vulnerability of the learner—their uncertainty, their anxiety, their desire to grow—becomes a data point that can be harvested, analyzed, and used to refine the product. This is a troubling transformation of something that has traditionally been understood as a gift, a service, or a calling into something that generates profit.

The second concern is algorithmic bias. The datasets on which most AI educational systems are trained reflect the cultural assumptions, pedagogical values, and educational priorities of their creators, who are predominantly located in North America and Western Europe. When these systems are used by learners in India, Africa, Southeast Asia, or Latin America, they may impose alien frameworks on learners whose educational needs and cultural contexts are quite different. A student in rural Tamil Nadu preparing for the UGTRB examination, for instance, brings to their learning a set of

linguistic, cultural, and social experiences that a system trained on Western educational data may not be equipped to address well.

The third concern is data privacy. When learners interact extensively with AI systems, they inevitably share a great deal of intimate information: their confusion, their errors, their questions, their fears. This information is valuable to educational researchers and to the companies that develop these platforms. Without robust ethical frameworks for protecting learner data, there is a real risk that this information will be used in ways that learners have not consented to and would not approve of.

At the same time, it would be dishonest to ignore the genuine promise that AI holds for education at a global level. One of the most persistent injustices in global education is the unequal distribution of high-quality mentorship. Students in well-resourced schools in major cities have access to experienced, skilled teachers who can give them the kind of individual attention that transforms learning. Students in remote villages or underfunded schools often do not. AI tutoring systems have the potential to address this gap by providing every student with access to a patient, knowledgeable, and

responsive guide, regardless of where they live or how much money their family has.

This potential, however, comes with a warning. Without careful attention to issues of access, infrastructure, and inclusive design, AI mentorship could deepen rather than reduce existing educational inequalities. A student who lacks reliable internet access, a functioning device, or the digital literacy to navigate complex platforms will not benefit from an AI tutoring system, however sophisticated it may be. The promise of AI as an equalizer is real, but it is not automatic. It requires deliberate, committed effort to realize.

Identity Reconstruction in the AI Learning Environment

One of the most interesting questions raised by the rise of AI mentorship is what happens to learner identity when the human guide is removed or reduced in importance. Drawing on Ricoeur's Narrative Identity Theory, it is possible to see this process as a form of narrative reconstruction. When a student's expected educational relationship with a teacher who knows them, remembers them, and cares about their development is disrupted by an AI system, they are forced to

tell themselves a new story about who they are as learners.

For some students, this reconstruction is positive. Freed from the sometimes-limiting expectations of human teachers, they discover capacities they did not know they had. They learn to set their own goals, evaluate their own progress, and find their own sources of motivation. The digital narratives these students produce—blog posts, social media reflections, online forum contributions—reveal a genuine process of self-discovery and intellectual maturation.

For other students, the absence of human guidance produces a different kind of story: one of isolation, confusion, and a sense of being lost without the relational anchor that a human mentor provides. These students remind us that identity is not always constructed in solitude. For many people, self-understanding develops through relationship through the experience of being seen and known by another person who can reflect our growth back to us. An AI system, however sophisticated, cannot provide this experience in the same way that a human being can.

This variation in learner response suggests that the question of whether AI mentorship

is good or bad for identity development is not a question that can be answered in a single, universal way. It depends on the individual learner, their prior experiences, their cultural background, and the specific context in which the AI system is used. What it does suggest, however, is that the design of AI educational systems should take identity seriously not just as an outcome to be measured, but as a process to be supported.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The relationship between mentor and student is one of the most powerful forces in human development. It has shaped civilizations, produced great thinkers and artists and leaders, and given countless individuals the confidence and capacity to become more fully themselves. The question of what happens to this relationship in an age of artificial intelligence is therefore not a technical question. It is a deeply human one.

This paper has argued that AI disrupts the mentor-protégé relationship but does not destroy it. The disruption, navigated thoughtfully and ethically, can produce genuine growth. Learners who engage seriously with AI tutoring systems can develop stronger self-directed identities, greater intellectual independence, and a

more nuanced understanding of their own learning processes. These are valuable outcomes.

At the same time, the paper has argued that the human core of mentorship is irreplaceable. Empathy, moral imagination, lived wisdom, and the capacity for genuine emotional connection are not qualities that can be coded into an algorithm. They emerge from human experience, human vulnerability, and human relationship. Any educational model that forgets this will ultimately fail its students, however impressive its technological achievements may be.

The way forward, therefore, is the hybrid model. This means designing AI systems that support rather than replace human mentorship, that are culturally sensitive and inclusive, and that are governed by robust ethical frameworks for the protection of learner data and the preservation of learner dignity. It means investing in the human teachers and mentors whose wisdom and empathy cannot be replicated, while also embracing the genuine potential of AI to extend access to quality educational guidance to learners who have historically been excluded from it.

Alexandra K. Trenfor once observed that the best teachers show you where to look but do not tell you what to see. This is a useful description of what both human and artificial mentors, at their best, can offer: not answers, but direction; not certainty, but the confidence to keep looking. The challenge for education in this new era is to hold onto that vision while navigating honestly and thoughtfully the profound changes that artificial intelligence is bringing to one of humanity's oldest and most important relationships.

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