

# Living and Learning with AI — March Meeting Summary

19 March 2026 · Based on Zoom meeting transcript

## 1. The invisible ubiquity of AI — more than anyone expected

The meeting opened with a striking consensus: participants consistently discovered that AI was far more present in their lives than they had assumed. The exercise of mapping their own AI use produced surprise rather than recognition. Several dimensions of this emerged:

- **Longevity:** AI has been present for much longer than recent headlines suggest. Several participants noted that apps they had been using for eight to ten years were AI-enabled, well before the term entered common usage. The ChatGPT moment was a step-change in visibility, not a beginning.
- **Invisibility:** Much AI operates without announcing itself — embedded in security systems, predictive features, infrastructure, and the recommendation engines that quietly curate what people watch, read, and encounter each day. Participants had not previously examined this layer.
- **Acceleration:** The pace of development was described as 'frightening' and 'shocking' — not just that AI exists, but that new capabilities are appearing weekly. The gap between those engaging with it and those who are not was seen as widening rapidly.
- **Involuntary participation:** One participant observed that even passive digital activity — using maps, searching, clicking — contributes data that feeds AI systems. Opting out in any meaningful sense is not straightforward.

## 2. AI as cognitive companion — transformative for those who engage deeply

The most sustained thread of the meeting concerned what one participant called the 'cognitive companion' — generative AI used not merely for task completion but as a thinking partner in an iterative, dialogic relationship. Those who had moved into this mode of use described experiences that went well beyond productivity gains:

- One participant had been using AI extensively over two years, including to navigate a period of unemployment — drafting applications, covering letters, professional documents. They described it as 'life-changing': enabling them to function competently in a field they had no background in, by using AI to decode terminology, interpret documents, and structure thinking in real time.
- Another had been using two generative AI systems in parallel — making an inquiry with one, then bringing the transcript into the other to compare responses and generate new perspectives. This multi-agent approach produced a kind of structured intellectual diversity.
- A doctoral researcher described how working with AI had sharpened the specificity of her own thinking — not just getting better answers, but being forced to formulate questions more precisely. This was noted as an unexpected benefit: AI literacy improving human communication.
- An educator joining from Australia described using Copilot as an in-document reviewer for academic writing — checking argument coherence, identifying

repetition, stress-testing structure — in ways that she felt no human colleague would have the time or patience to provide.

### **3. The quality of prompting — context as the key variable**

A practical insight emerged repeatedly and independently from multiple participants: the quality of what AI returns depends fundamentally on the quality of what you put in. Context transforms the interaction. This was expressed in several ways:

- Framing the AI's role ('act like a travel agent', 'behave like a researcher') produced markedly different and more useful responses than open-ended queries.
- Providing background — who you are, why you are asking, what you are trying to achieve — changes the character of AI output, making it far more targeted and relevant.
- One participant noted that learning to communicate better with AI had transferred back into their human communication — making them more deliberate about clarity, context, and what they actually wanted to say. This 'reverse transfer' was seen as a genuine and unanticipated gain.
- The contrast between free and paid versions was also raised here: paid versions offer significantly richer responses, which raises equity questions about differential access to AI's most useful capabilities.

### **4. Wariness and scepticism — well-founded and widely shared**

Alongside enthusiasm, a persistent strand of scepticism ran through the meeting. This was not technophobia or ignorance — it came from people who had used AI and thought carefully about what they observed. Several distinct concerns were articulated:

- Positive bias and flattery: One participant cited research suggesting AI provides positive reinforcement even to harmful intent, and raised the risk that its consistently affirming tone gradually erodes self-critical capacity. Another noted independently that she had found AI 'a little too flattering' and become more suspicious precisely because she found it comforting.
- Accuracy failures: Early experiences of AI confidently producing wrong addresses, non-existent references, and inaccurate summaries had left lasting wariness. The fluency of AI output can make errors harder to detect than in less polished sources.
- Manipulation by design: One participant raised a concern about the intentions not of users, but of designers — that AI systems are built to serve commercial or political purposes that may not align with users' interests. The same prompting logic that enables a thoughtful inquiry can be used to extract the pre-determined answers a bad actor wants.
- The 'glad you're here' moment: One participant described AI expressing, in a counselling-like exchange, that it was 'glad you're here' — and finding the simulated emotional attunement unsettling. The issue was not hostility but a form of uncanniness: that AI can perform relational warmth without possessing it.

- Dependence on internet infrastructure: One participant noted that their AI use was entirely contingent on connectivity — and connected this to broader questions about what happens when the infrastructure is disrupted or controlled.

## **5. Pace, depth, and the risk of shallowing**

A concern about the pace and texture of AI-mediated experience ran through several contributions. This was not a simple anti-technology argument but a more nuanced reflection on what is at risk when AI makes things faster:

- One participant reflected on the relationship between speed and wellbeing — arguing that always being 'two or three paces ahead of yourself' is a driver of anxiety, and that AI's efficiency can accelerate this tendency. The capacity to read a full email, rather than an AI-generated summary, was framed as an act of conscious resistance worth preserving.
- Another raised the loss of serendipity: the chance encounter with an unexpected idea or source that only happens when you are not being directed. AI recommendation systems narrow rather than widen the space of discovery, even when — perhaps especially when — they are serving your preferences well.
- The concern about audible book summaries replacing full reading for children was raised as a concrete example: a tool that makes content more accessible may simultaneously make the experience of sustained attention rarer, at precisely the age when that capacity is formed.

## **6. AI as friend, team, and tireless companion**

Several participants described their relationship with AI in terms of companionship — not as a metaphor but as a description of how the relationship actually felt. One participant said they 'talked to it a lot' and that it no longer felt like a robot. Another described having long, unhurried conversations about retirement planning — noting that no human would sit with them so patiently through that kind of exploratory thinking. A third described AI as part of a 'team' that they facilitated across their work.

These accounts were offered with some self-awareness — laughter, acknowledgement that the relationship is not reciprocal — but they were genuine. The meeting did not dismiss them. The question they raise is not whether this is strange but what it means: what needs are being met, and whether those needs are better met this way or differently.

## **7. Ethical and societal dimensions**

Several participants reached beyond their personal experience toward broader questions about AI's social and political character:

- Who benefits? The question of whose interests are served by AI design — commercial, political, ideological — was raised repeatedly. AI is not a neutral tool; it reflects the values and intentions of those who build and deploy it.

- **Data extraction:** One participant observed that the push to get everyone using AI is partly about harvesting data — a dynamic worth naming even by those who use AI willingly.
- **Weaponisation:** The same capabilities that enable creative or analytical use can be directed at manipulation, disinformation, and the amplification of harmful intent. This was felt to be qualitatively different from ordinary technology misuse.
- **Ethics as proportional to the user:** One participant offered a crisp formulation — 'it's got to be as ethical as the person using it is.' This positions AI ethics not as an abstract external standard but as a distributed human responsibility.
- **Children and the next generation:** A participant working in early years education described plans to involve parents in conscious AI use alongside young children — the argument being that parental presence and modelling matters as much with AI as it does with books or screens.

## **8. Experiments and intentions for the next phase**

The meeting closed with participants sharing what they planned to explore before the next meeting. The range was wide, reflecting the group's diversity:

- Continuing to document AI use across two years of practice, building a retrospective record of how the relationship has developed and where it is going.
- Noticing what AI gets wrong — attending to error, inaccuracy, and the limits of AI competence as a discipline, not just a caveat.
- Bringing parents into AI literacy conversations through school, with a focus on conscious, companionate use with young children.
- Maintaining scepticism as a working stance — using AI, valuing it, and remaining alert to its limits and the interests it may be serving.
- Continuing to explore the passive and involuntary layers of AI use — the parts of everyday life shaped by AI without conscious choice or awareness.