ALGORITHMIC HEARTBEATS
AFFECTIVE EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF THE FOURTH REVOLUTION

REN International Conference 2026

The educational relationship in the age of artificial intelligence

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What happens to the educational relationship when an artificial interlocutor can offer words of reassurance, adapt its communicative register and appear endlessly available? This question lies at the heart of the REN International Conference 2026, devoted to Algorithmic Heartbeats. Affective Education in the Age of the Fourth Revolution. The theme invites us to examine the conditions under which technological change can contribute to personal development, recognising affective experience as a constitutive dimension of learning. The interdependence of emotion, learning and social judgement provides a neuroscientific foundation for this perspective (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007).

The call's reference to Isaac Asimov's Evidence introduces a question that runs through the debate: how much can we know about another being from observable behaviour? Within contemporary educational thought, the suspicion surrounding Stephen Byerley acquires a further significance. A plausible response may lead us to attribute understanding to its source; a coherent conversation may be experienced as attentive listening. We must therefore distinguish the experience of feeling acknowledged from the attribution of emotional experience or moral responsibility to a system. The perceived effectiveness of an interaction does not settle the question of its nature.

This distinction does not exhaust the educational possibilities of conversational technologies. Generated text may provide words for an emotion that remains difficult to articulate, suggest an alternative perspective or help initiate a personal narrative. Such mediation becomes educationally meaningful when what emerges from the exchange is revisited, discussed and situated within the learner's own history. Its value depends on intentional guidance, opportunities for revision and a setting in which individuals retain the right to reject the account of themselves proposed by an algorithm. Learning can likewise be understood through the interplay of cognitive, emotional, motivational and experiential factors (Peluso Cassese & Lembo, 2023).

Educational care, however, entails a commitment that extends beyond the appropriateness of a response. It develops through sustained presence, attention to what remains unspoken and a willingness to answer for the consequences of one's decisions. The body participates through rhythm, distance, silence and the reciprocity of the gaze. Even when a human relationship is mediated by a screen, there remains a person who can be held accountable for their actions. This assumption of responsibility makes human involvement indispensable

within educational processes. Research on sociable robots and digitally mediated intimacy sharpens the question of what we expect from technological companionship and from one another (Turkle, 2011).

Here lies the significance of Digital Affective Literacy, which the conference identifies as a field for reflection and educational design. Understanding a relationship mediated by a digital system involves recognising how tone, personalisation and apparent familiarity are constructed, examining the expectations they generate and learning to calibrate trust and emotional involvement. Adults also need this literacy. Teachers and educators require resources for discussing digital interactions with students, acknowledging the emotions these encounters may evoke while critically examining unsupported anthropomorphic interpretations. The concept of connected intelligence offers a complementary framework for considering networked cognition (de Kerckhove, 1997); extending this perspective to affective education requires asking how connectivity shapes the conditions of encounter.

An inclusive perspective gives these questions particular urgency. In social robotics and applications designed for neurodivergent learners, the predictability of an interface may be investigated as a resource for mediation. Educational objectives must nevertheless be defined in relation to each person, their communication preferences and their opportunities to participate. The success of an activity cannot be assessed solely through increased interaction with a device. It must also be considered in terms of autonomy, well-being and the transfer of learning to everyday settings. Inclusion requires that no learner be directed towards technological interaction simply because human relationships are less readily available to them.

The REN International Conference 2026 therefore offers a forum in which the philosophy of care, special and inclusive education, educational research and technology design can develop shared criteria for inquiry. Empirical studies can document possibilities and limitations; theoretical work can clarify underlying assumptions; educational practice can reveal the consequences of design decisions. The algorithmic heartbeat evoked by the conference title thus becomes a question addressed to the scientific community: what conditions are we creating so that every person can learn, be recognised and participate? The quality of our response will depend on the responsibility with which we engage in these emerging spaces of relationship.

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