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Book Review

Co-Intelligence and the Reconfiguration of Human Work and Learning: A Critical Review of Ethan Mollick's Living and Working with AI

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Abstract: Ethan Mollick's *Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI* offers a timely and accessible examination of generative artificial intelligence as a transformative general-purpose technology. Written at a moment of rapid technological acceleration, the book advances the concept of "Co-Intelligence" to describe emerging forms of collaboration between humans and large language models. This review critically evaluates Mollick's central arguments, situating the book within contemporary debates on artificial intelligence, education, and the future of work. It assesses the theoretical framing, narrative structure, and empirical claims presented across the volume, with particular attention to its implications for learning, productivity, and professional practice. While the book succeeds in translating complex technical developments for a broad readership, it also raises unresolved questions concerning power, ethics, and institutional responsibility. Overall, the work constitutes an influential intervention in current discussions on how societies might meaningfully adapt to AI-mediated futures.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence; Co-Intelligence; Human–AI Collaboration; Education and AI; Future of Work; Generative Technologies

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Ethan Mollick's *Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI* (2024) appears at a pivotal socio-technological moment marked by the rapid public diffusion of generative artificial intelligence following the release of large language models such as ChatGPT. Written against the backdrop of widespread uncertainty, enthusiasm, and anxiety about artificial intelligence, the book intervenes in debates that extend across education, labor, creativity, and epistemology. Rather than framing AI as either an existential threat or a purely instrumental tool, Mollick advances the central concept of "Co-Intelligence," a relational framework that positions AI as a novel cognitive collaborator rather than a replacement for human agency. This framing reflects the author's distinctive standpoint as an innovation scholar situated at the intersection of management studies, educational research, and applied experimentation, rather than computer science per se.

From the opening pages, Mollick establishes a reflective and experiential perspective. The introduction, tellingly titled "Three Sleepless Nights," situates the book within the affective turbulence generated by generative AI's sudden capabilities. He describes the moment of realizing that large language models "*don't act like you expect a computer to act*" but instead "*act more like a person*," producing a sense of disorientation alongside fascination (p. 7). This narrative choice foregrounds the book's methodological orientation: Mollick does not seek to offer a purely theoretical treatise but rather an interpretive guide grounded in lived encounters with AI systems. His standpoint is

pragmatic, empirically informed, and ethically attentive, emphasizing use, experimentation, and human judgment rather than deterministic prediction.

The book engages implicitly and explicitly with a growing body of scholarship on artificial intelligence as a general-purpose technology. Mollick situates generative AI alongside historical technological transformations such as steam power, electricity, and the internet, arguing that AI's cognitive reach may exceed previous innovations in both scope and speed. This claim resonates with economic and organizational research demonstrating significant productivity gains associated with generative AI use, particularly for novice and mid-skill workers (Noy & Zhang, 2023). Mollick's discussion aligns with emerging empirical findings while resisting technological solutionism. Unlike more speculative or futurist accounts that center artificial general intelligence or singularity narratives, *Co-Intelligence* diverges by emphasizing near-term institutional consequences and everyday practices. In doing so, the book contributes to a growing scholarly conversation that foregrounds sociotechnical systems over autonomous machines (Brynjolfsson, Li, & Raymond, 2023).

The primary aim of the book is twofold: first, to explain how contemporary AI systems function in accessible terms; and second, to articulate principles for productive human–AI collaboration. These aims are largely achieved through a careful balance of explanation, narrative illustration, and applied guidance. In Part I, Mollick provides a lucid account of large language models, tracing their development from early symbolic AI through transformer architectures and reinforcement learning. His description of AI as an "alien mind" captures both the familiarity and strangeness of systems that generate fluent language without understanding in a human sense. He underscores this paradox when noting that AI can appear self-aware while merely "*playing a role that I subtly give it*" (p. 28), a reminder of the performative illusion at the heart of generative systems.

The conceptual core of the book emerges in Chapter 3, where Mollick outlines "four rules for Co-Intelligence." These principles—inviting AI into work processes, maintaining human judgment, understanding the limits of automation, and learning through experimentation—function as a normative framework for engagement rather than a prescriptive methodology. Importantly, Mollick emphasizes what he calls the "jagged frontier" of AI capability, arguing that performance varies dramatically by task and context. This insight challenges simplistic narratives of linear technological progress and aligns with research demonstrating uneven productivity effects across domains (Brynjolfsson et al., 2023). The strength of this section lies in its refusal to overgeneralize; instead, it advocates situated experimentation as an epistemic practice.

Part II extends the co-intelligence framework across multiple social roles, examining AI "as a person," "as a creative," "as a coworker," "as a tutor," and "as a coach." This organizational structure allows Mollick to explore how relational metaphors shape human expectations and behaviors. In discussing AI as a creative partner, he reflects on his own writing process, describing how AI collaborators helped sustain momentum without replacing authorial voice (pp. 115–118). These passages offer rare transparency about scholarly authorship in the age of AI and raise important questions about originality, augmentation, and intellectual labor.

The chapters on education are among the book's most substantial contributions. In "AI as a Tutor," Mollick draws on examples such as Khan Academy's Khanmigo to argue that AI systems can approximate aspects of one-to-one tutoring, long considered the gold standard of educational effectiveness. He explicitly links this potential to Bloom's "two sigma problem," suggesting that AI may finally enable scalable personalized learning (pp. 139–140). This argument is particularly significant for educational research, as it reframes

AI not as a threat to assessment or academic integrity but as a structural intervention in global educational inequality. At the same time, Mollick acknowledges that technological access, pedagogical design, and institutional governance remain unresolved challenges.

The subsequent chapter, "AI as a Coach," extends this educational lens into professional learning, arguing that AI may disrupt traditional apprenticeship models that rely on repetitive entry-level labor. Mollick warns that if AI automates formative tasks too early, novices may lose opportunities for skill development (pp. 141–149). This tension between efficiency and learning constitutes one of the book's most analytically generative contributions, opening space for future research on how AI reshapes developmental trajectories within professions.

Structurally, the book is coherent and logically progressive. The movement from technological explanation to social application allows readers to build conceptual understanding before engaging normative questions. While the narrative style occasionally relies on anecdotal illustration, this choice enhances accessibility without undermining analytical depth. The epilogue, "AI as Us," reinforces the central thesis that AI ultimately reflects human values, incentives, and institutional choices, rather than operating as an autonomous historical force.

Despite its many strengths, the book leaves several questions unresolved. While Mollick acknowledges issues of power, data ownership, and corporate concentration, these concerns are not developed in sustained analytical terms. Similarly, although global education is discussed aspirationally, the political economy of AI deployment in the global south receives limited attention. These omissions do not undermine the book's contribution but indicate areas where further scholarly engagement is needed.

The intended readership of *Co-Intelligence* is broad, encompassing educators, knowledge workers, policymakers, and students. Yet the book's analytical clarity also makes it valuable for researchers in education, organizational studies, and digital literacy. For scholars concerned with language education, in particular, Mollick's emphasis on explanation, feedback, and dialogic interaction offers fertile ground for rethinking pedagogy in AI-mediated environments.

Overall, *Co-Intelligence* stands as one of the most balanced and intellectually responsible contributions to contemporary AI discourse. Its greatest strength lies in refusing extremes: it neither succumbs to apocalyptic fear nor uncritical optimism. Instead, Mollick offers a framework grounded in agency, experimentation, and ethical awareness. While the book does not resolve all tensions surrounding generative AI, it provides a conceptual vocabulary through which educators and researchers can meaningfully engage them. In doing so, it marks an important step toward understanding not what AI will become, but how humans choose to think and work alongside it.

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