AI use alone is not the problem.
Unexamined output is.

What PISA 2025 reveals about attention, AI and the place of visual literacy

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The SEEU™ Method: four interconnected filters, after Leonardo

Access is not literacy. Use is not understanding. A polished output is not evidence that learning has occurred.

50% **of Australian 15-year-olds use AI chatbots to learn at least weekly** **OECD average: 46%**	2.6 h a day on digital devices at school for learning OECD average: 1.7 h	39% report peers distracted by devices in most or every science lesson OECD average: 28%

A five-hundred-year-old habit of mind

Leonardo da Vinci did not accept a beautiful idea simply because it had survived for centuries. He looked, measured and compared.

That habit of mind feels unexpectedly current. Australian students are already using artificial intelligence at scale, so the question is no longer whether AI belongs in education. It is whether students are learning to think with it, question it, and recognise when it has begun to do their thinking for them.

The newly released PISA 2025 results make that distinction difficult to ignore. Half of Australian 15-year-olds reported using AI chatbots to support their learning at least once a week. Thirty-five per cent used AI for preliminary research, 33 per cent to summarise material they were expected to read, and 27 per cent to draft written assignments. Only 15 per cent reported never or almost never using AI for the schoolwork activities examined by PISA.

At the same time, Australia recorded its lowest PISA results yet in reading and mathematics. Australian students reported spending an average of 2.6 hours a day using digital devices at school for learning, compared with an OECD average of 1.7 hours, while 39 per cent said their classmates were distracted by digital devices during most or every science lesson, compared with 28 per cent across the OECD.

These findings do not prove that AI or screen use caused the decline. PISA identifies relationships between reported behaviours and performance, not simple cause and effect, and the OECD notes that in Australia, digital distraction is not associated with a statistically significant difference in science performance, even though it is across the OECD on average. The pattern still gives educators something more useful than another argument about whether technology is good or bad: the quality of the thinking matters more than the mere presence of the tool.

The finding that matters most

Across participating systems, students who did not use AI for schoolwork generally scored higher in science than those who did, but the picture varied by task and by how often students used it. Using AI weekly to help them learn was associated with scores about the same as non-users, while heavier use for tasks such as drafting and summarising was associated with lower scores.

These are associations, not evidence that AI caused lower results, and the OECD says so. The more hopeful finding sits alongside them: students who reported being taught at school how to assess AI-generated information, especially those who also used AI frequently to learn, tended to score higher. That is a distinction education should take seriously.

Students need explicit instruction in how to inspect an AI response, test its evidence, recognise its assumptions, and decide what deserves to be accepted, revised or rejected. They also need to make their own reasoning visible, particularly when assessment must distinguish authentic learning from outsourced production.

There is an equity question here, too. The OECD found that socioeconomically disadvantaged students were less likely to report being tasked with assessing AI-generated information during school lessons, and warns this could open a new socio-economic divide in the age of AI. If we expect every student to question a convincing AI response, we need to teach and practise that judgement with every student.

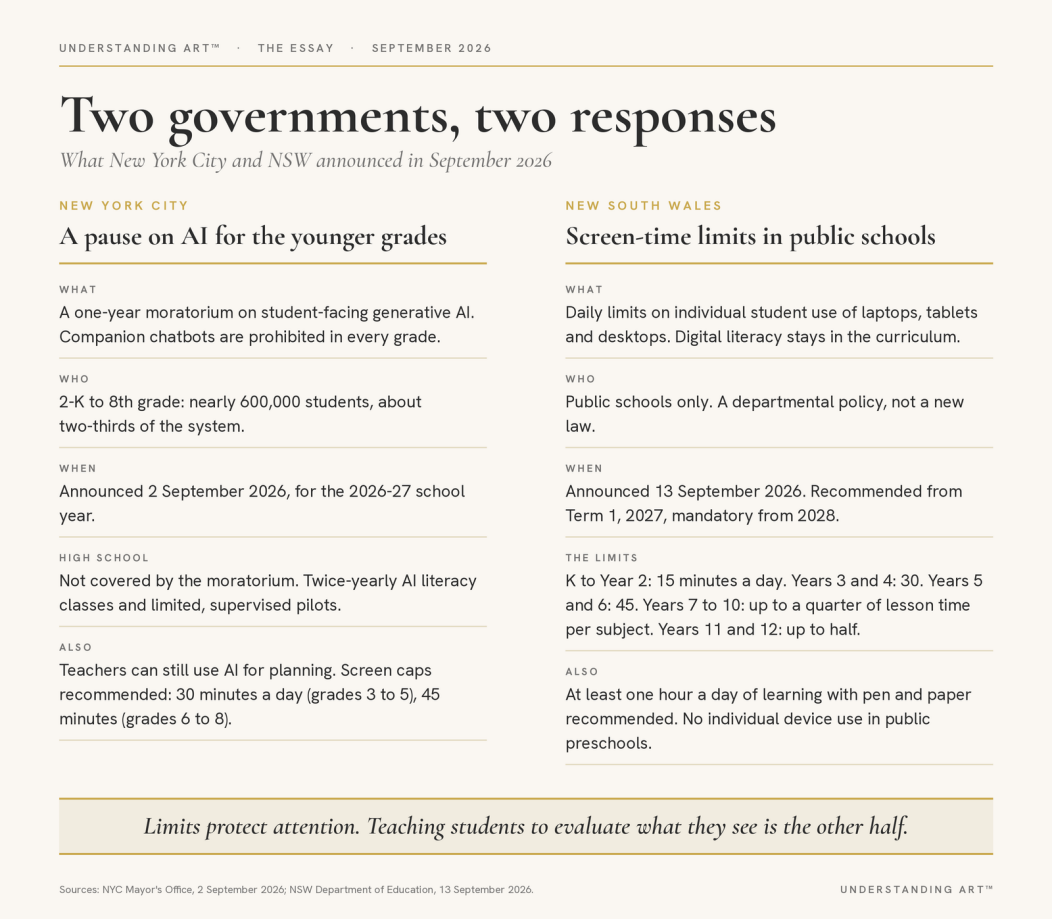
Queensland's senior assessment policy is already moving in this direction. The QCAA handbook advises teachers to collect evidence at stages of a response's development, consult with students at

checkpoints, and design tasks that establish authorship of final responses. The challenge is turning those principles into an everyday classroom process.

Governments are drawing lines

Two decisions in September show how quickly policy is moving. On 2 September, New York City announced a one-year moratorium on student-facing generative AI for children from 2-K to eighth grade, affecting nearly 600,000 students. Companion chatbots are prohibited in every grade. High school students are not covered by the moratorium: they will instead receive twice-yearly AI literacy modules, designed to help them think critically about AI before they begin to rely on it, alongside a small number of supervised pilots. Teachers may still use AI for planning, and the city will spend the year studying the impact.

Eleven days later, on 13 September, New South Wales announced staged limits on individual student screen use in public schools. They begin as recommendations in Term 1, 2027 and become mandatory in 2028, with maximum times averaged over a school week rather than a strict daily cap, starting at 15 minutes a day for Kindergarten to Year 2. Digital literacy will remain in the curriculum, schools will receive implementation guidance and professional learning, and the guidelines recommend at least one hour a day of learning with pen and paper.



Less screen time is not enough

There is real value in protecting time for handwriting, sustained reading, conversation, drawing, making and material exploration. Visual Arts has a particularly important role in restoring these forms of embodied attention. But reducing screen time does not teach students how to evaluate what appears on a screen when they return to one, and a pause on AI for younger students does not prepare them for the day the pause ends.

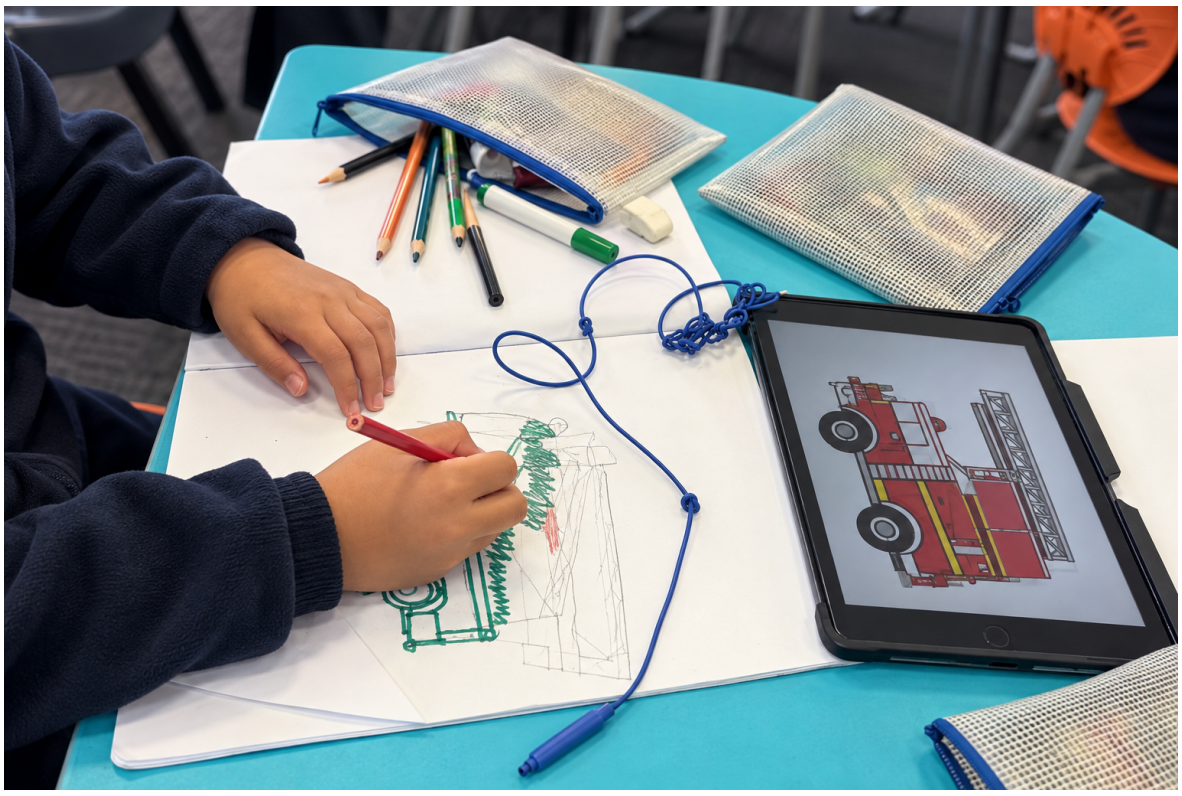
Schools need both: more opportunities for deep, tactile and human learning, and stronger instruction in how to use digital tools deliberately.

The goal is not maximum technology or zero technology. It is purposeful technology, supported by visible thinking.

When the device becomes the textbook

In the classrooms I work in, the iPad is no longer an optional extra. It is where students find the reference material, images and examples that might once have come from a textbook. That changes how we read the 2.6 hours: at least some of that time is the textbook itself, not distraction. Digital literacy is not simply the ability to answer questions on a screen. It includes knowing how to locate, select, examine and use information as part of thinking.

PISA 2025 did look at learning with digital tools. Its innovative domain, Learning in the Digital World, placed students in a simulated digital learning environment and assessed computational and scientific inquiry, with results on self-regulated learning due in 2027. That matters, but it is not the same as a student moving between a screen, a sketchbook and their own observation. My own reading is that this movement calls on the same thinking the SEEU™ filters make visible, though PISA has not tested that claim.



The device has become the textbook. AI-altered classroom image: an AI-generated illustration of a young student moving between digital reference material, observation and drawing.

Why visual literacy belongs at the centre

PISA did not directly assess visual literacy, and we should not claim that it did. It did, however, assess students who live and learn inside an increasingly digital information environment, and that environment is profoundly visual.

Students meet information through image-led search results, video, data visualisations, advertisements, memes, thumbnails, edited photographs and AI-generated media. Representation and symbolism shape meaning across Visual Arts, English, Humanities, Science and Mathematics, while an AI response can combine language, imagery, layout and data in ways that create an impression of authority before its accuracy has been established.

Reading words remains essential. So does learning to read what has been made visible, what has been left out, and how presentation influences belief. Visual literacy is not an optional enrichment activity, nor is it confined to the art room. It is part of the critical infrastructure students need to navigate contemporary knowledge.

Visual Arts offers one of the richest places to teach it, because students learn that meaning is constructed through choices. They investigate viewpoint, framing, material, composition, context, representation, symbolism and audience, and they discover that several interpretations may be possible, but not every interpretation is equally supported by evidence. Those habits transfer directly to the evaluation of AI-generated information.

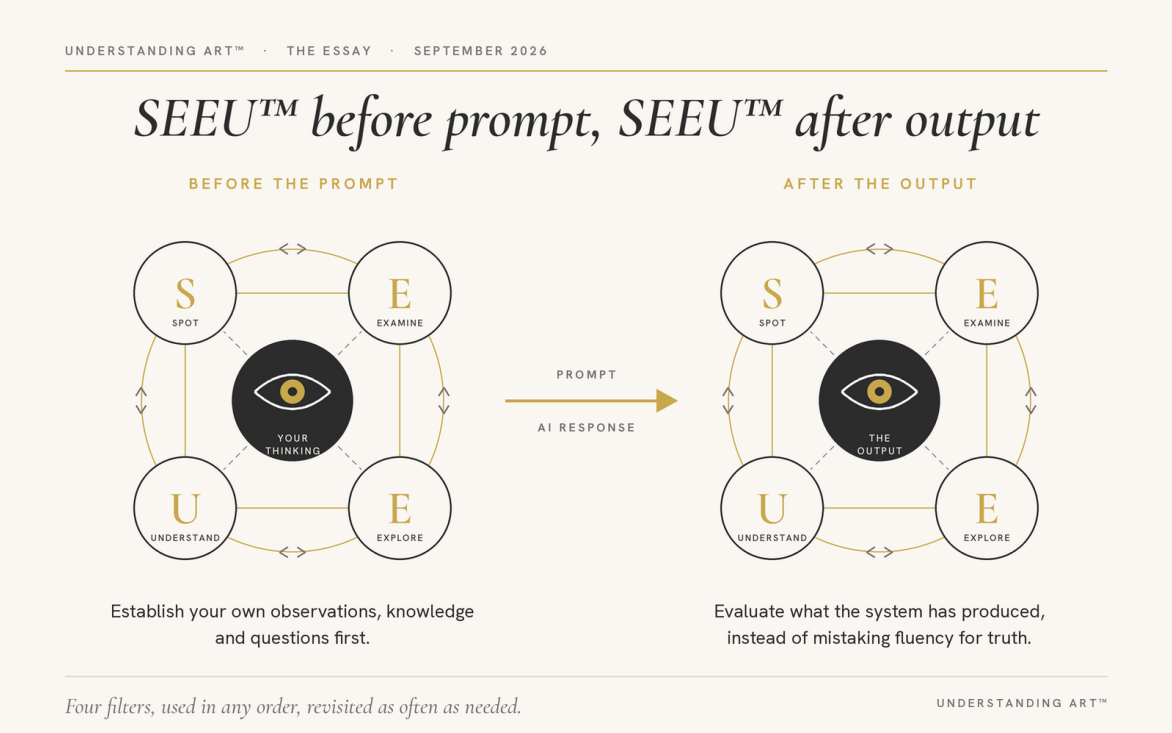
SEEU™ before prompt, SEEU™ after output

Four filters for visible thinking

The SEEU™ Method gives teachers and students four filters for making thinking visible. They are not steps. Students move between them in any order, and often return to an earlier filter once a later one has changed what they see.

S **Spot**	What stands out immediately? What does the output appear to claim, and what feels familiar, persuasive, surprising or emotionally charged? The first response matters, but it is a way in, not a conclusion.
E **Examine**	What details, choices and clues can be identified? What evidence is provided, and how are language, imagery, representation, symbolism, style or layout shaping the response? Here, students slow down and move from impression to observation.
E **Explore**	What contexts, sources and perspectives need to be considered? What might the AI have omitted, simplified, invented or misunderstood, and how does the response compare with authoritative evidence or with the original work viewed in context? This filter sends students beyond the generated answer and into investigation.
U **Understand**	What meaning can now be constructed, and what conclusion is justified? What remains uncertain, how has the student's interpretation changed, and what part of the final response genuinely belongs to the student? This is where judgement and authorship become visible.

Used before a prompt, SEEU™ helps students establish their own observations, knowledge and questions. Used after an AI response, it helps them evaluate what the system has produced instead of mistaking fluency for truth.



The questions school leaders should ask

Are students being taught how to evaluate AI-generated information, or merely warned about it?

Can teachers see how a student's understanding developed before and after AI assistance?

Does assessment capture reasoning and authorship, not only the final product?

Are digital tools being selected because they improve learning, or because they have become the default?

Is visual literacy being developed across the curriculum, or left solely to individual Arts teachers?

The answer is not another generic AI policy that lists risks without changing classroom practice. Teachers need practical pedagogies that help students pause, observe, question, verify and explain, while school leaders need professional learning that connects those behaviours to curriculum, assessment and authentic evidence of learning.

PISA 2025 does not tell us to remove AI from education. It tells us that technology cannot substitute for attention, effort or understanding.

Students must learn to see before they prompt, and to see again before they believe

Sources and publication details

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About the author

Angela McCormack is the Director of Understanding Art™ and the creator of The SEEU™ Method, a visual literacy framework of four filters. Her work focuses on visual literacy, authentic learning, curriculum, assessment, and professional learning for teachers and school leaders.

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