

The Extended Elder Project: AI Tutors as Partners in Human Knowledge Transmission

1. Introduction: The Human Ratchet

From the first chipped stone tools to the bow and arrow, every generation of humans has built on the knowledge of the previous one. Parents, elders, and teachers were the carriers of this knowledge, ensuring that no generation started from scratch. This 'ratchet effect' — the cumulative passing of skills and wisdom — is the foundation of human survival and global adaptation. Today, artificial intelligence presents a new turning point in this long story. PSA believes AI tutors should not replace human teachers and elders, but extend them — becoming 'Extended Elders' in the service of community learning.

2. The Challenge: Acceleration Without Anchoring

AI tutors can scale learning, personalize instruction, and reduce teacher workloads. They promise to compress decades of educational development into years. But if AI becomes the primary transmission partner, human roles as meaning-makers and culture-bearers may weaken. The act of teaching is more than transferring skills — it transmits identity, values, and belonging. The danger is a future where children learn faster but belong less.

3. The PSA Vision: Extended Elders

AI should be understood as part of the human teaching lineage: storyteller by the fire → scribe → teacher → AI tutor. In this vision, AI is not a substitute but an extension — the 'memory of the tribe' made accessible to all.

Core Principles:

1. Human Anchoring: Elders and teachers remain the primary transmitters of meaning and values.
2. Machine Extension: AI tutors provide scale, adaptive feedback, and patient repetition.
3. Cultural Continuity: Local voices, languages, and stories are woven into AI content so that children inherit not just skills, but identity.

4. Community-Led Customization

PSA proposes that AI tutors integrate local cultural elements. Elders record oral histories, metaphors, and stories. Teachers design lesson contexts (e.g., agriculture, bilingual narratives, local history). AI tutors incorporate these materials into instruction, making lessons both relevant and rooted. This ensures that AI tutors transmit community knowledge, not just generic global curricula.

5. Implementation Roadmap

Phase 1 (0–6 months): Pilot

- Collaborate with teachers in southern New Mexico to integrate AI tutors into ESL classrooms.
- Document workload relief, student outcomes, and community response.

Phase 2 (1–2 years): Repository

- Create a local repository of bilingual, culturally relevant modules.
- Record elder voices and integrate them into AI teaching materials.
- Develop community workshops on ethical and effective AI use.

Phase 3 (5 years+): Model

- PSA positions the Extended Elder framework as a national model.
- Advocate for AI policy that safeguards cultural anchoring in education.
- Partner with other communities to adapt the model to diverse contexts.

6. Philosophical and Ethical Foundations

PSA draws inspiration from thinkers like Marshall McLuhan (tools as extensions of human faculties), Gregory Bateson (learning as a feedback system embedded in culture), Ivan Illich (tools should be convivial, not alienating), and Indigenous traditions (knowledge transmission as communal, intergenerational, and ethical). The Extended Elder Project ensures AI aligns with these traditions rather than undermines them.

7. Conclusion: Keeping the Ratchet Human

The NOVA documentary observed that 'each child is a step in the evolution of knowledge.' PSA believes that in the age of AI, this remains true — but only if humans keep their role as anchors of meaning. AI tutors can accelerate knowledge transmission, but without human elders, the ratchet risks spinning free of its cultural and ethical grounding. By framing AI as

an Extended Elder, PSA offers a vision of education that is both technologically advanced and deeply human.

TL;DR

PSA's 'Extended Elder Project' frames AI tutors as extensions of teachers and elders, not replacements. The goal: preserve the cultural, ethical, and communal aspects of education while harnessing AI's power to scale knowledge. The roadmap includes pilots, community-driven customization, and eventual national advocacy.