Reassembling 'Merit' in the era of Artificial Intelligence: Networked Learning perspectives

Byungjoon Eric Yoo, Department of Education, Seoul National University, shamujr@snu.ac.kr
Kyungmee Lee, Department of Education, Seoul National University, k.lee23@snu.ac.kr

Abstract
A spectre continues to haunt education: the spectre of meritocracy. Once conceived as a moral and institutional alternative to aristocracy, meritocracy promised to reward one's ability and effort rather than bloodline (Young, 1958). Yet in the twenty-first century, even as critiques expose its ideological and structural contradictions through demonstrating how it legitimizes and reproduces inequality (Littler, 2017; Markovits, 2019; Sandel, 2020) and how the very definition of merit is not universal but varies across temporal and spatial contexts (Lamont, 2019; Mijs, 2019), 'merit' is continuously invoked as a universal measure and a personal trait central to fairness.
This paper argues that by paying attention to the socio-material conditions and processes through which merit is empirically conceptualized, enacted, and sustained within educational assemblages, education research can renew its critique of merit's long-held individualistic assumptions. Thus, this paper recognizes the rise of generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI) as an inflection point that renders this gap newly visible. As Gen AI becomes increasingly embedded in practices of learning, writing, feedback, and assessment, it unsettles previously taken-for-granted distinctions between human capability and technological function, individual skill and machinic augmentation. By blurring these lines, Gen AI demonstrates the potential to reveal the fragility of 'merit' as an individual and embodied construct, necessitating new theoretical vocabularies that allow us to trace merit as a relational, distributed, and mediated construct. Therefore, this paper proposes adopting Networked Learning (NL) as a framework for rethinking merit in the postdigital era, which allows us to understand learning as a relational and distributed processes between different actors and contexts (Goodyear et al., 2004; Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Gourlay, 2021).
Grounded in these insights, produced by connecting NL research with debates on meritocracy and educational justice, this paper concludes by outlining the implications of "networked merit." If merit is understood as a relational effect rather than an individual possession, then it becomes evident that contemporary disputes surrounding Gen AI, such as whether AI-assisted writing is "cheating" or just another demonstration of "AI-competency," cannot be resolved through moral appeals to individual integrity alone. Instead, they demand close attention both to the institutional arrangements that define authorship and the technology-entangled micro-practices of learning as sites of merit-generation. In doing so, it positions NL more than a descriptive and interpretive paradigm, as a political and ethical theory necessary for exploring how value, recognition, and justice could be timely 'reassembled' in this brave new era.

Keywords
Networked learning, Meritocracy, Merit, Networked Merit, Generative AI (Gen AI)

Introduction

A spectre is haunting and charming the modern education-the spectre of meritocracy. Emerged historically as the antithesis of aristocracy, promising a system in which rewards and social positions are distributed not hereditary but individual properties (Kang, 2016, p. 322), this spectre succeeded in promoting itself as the zeitgeist in the contemporary world. In less than a century after the term was coined by the British sociologist Michael Young in 1958 with a cynical tone, "meritocracy" has become a near-ubiquitous term with its own life. Today, merit circulates as a global moral currency, invoked in political, economic, and educational arenas alike. Leaders pledge to select and reward "based on merit" (Trump, March 5, 2025; Yoon, April 11, 2022) while schools and corporations reproduce the belief that success reflects personal capability and diligence (Sandel, 2020; Littler, 2017; Markovits, 2019; Khan, 2012; Nistotskaya & Kolvani, 2025).
Despite its pervasiveness, the legitimacy of meritocracy has long been contested. In contemporary social theory, two major strands of critique have emerged. The first is normative, exposing the moral and political contradictions

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of meritocracy as an ideal. From Sandel's (2020) moral critique of meritocratic hubris to Markovits's (2019) account of how the "meritocracy trap" breeds anxiety and self-blame, scholars have shown how the rhetoric of fairness conceals new hierarchies of worth. Littler (2017) similarly demonstrates that meritocracy functions as a moral narrative that legitimizes inequality by transforming structural privilege into the illusion of personal achievement. The second strand is empirical, investigating how the meaning of merit is historically and culturally constructed. Comparative and ethnographic studies (Lamont, 2019; Mijs, 2019; Khan, 2012; Ho, 2024) demonstrate that what counts as "merit" is never universal, varying across nations, institutions, and even within individual life trajectories. Young's (1958) formula, "merit = IQ + effort," has fragmented into plural forms of valuation: in some contexts, emphasizing standardized testing, in others aesthetic cultivation, entrepreneurial creativity, or moral discipline. Education, especially formal education systems, has been a rich hub for the critical empirical inquiries that attempt to reveal the mechanisms of meritocratic reproduction and justification. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and Collins (1979) illuminated how schools naturalize privilege under the guise of meritocratic selection, while more recent studies (Kim & Choi, 2017; Nam, Bae, & Oh, 2019; Chiang, 2022) reveal what and how students internalize and reproduce these ideals through everyday practices.

While both approaches have been invaluable in revealing the complex ideological and cultural dimensions of meritocracy, simultaneously catalysing public debates and reflections on the "tyranny of merit" (Sandel, 2020), they share a tacit assumption that is becoming increasingly untenable in contemporary education: that merit is an individual property, defined, measured, and enacted primarily through human cognition, judgment, and institutional arrangement. This anthropocentric, individualistic framing leaves underexamined the material and technological infrastructures that co-produce what counts as ability, effort, and achievement. As a result, it risks overlooking a growing body of scholarship that foregrounds the entangled nature of educational processes, including the infrastructures, platforms, and algorithms that mediate evaluation and recognition (Carbonel & Jullien, 2024; Noteboom, 2024). As educational technologies proliferate, merit becomes co-constructed by nonhuman actors: grading systems, data analytics, and performance-tracking tools that influence what counts as achievement or effort (Kim, 2023; Özer, 2024). These developments, especially the recent emergence of Generative AI(s) (Gen AI) (Moy & Feldstein, 2024; Gourlay, 2024) demand a theoretical shift toward a relational understanding of how merit is enacted through networks of humans and technologies.
In other words, we may have reached an inflection point at which we can no longer critique on meritocracy without critically understanding and redefining how its central concept, merit, is produced in education. Without responding to this new era with more fundamental conceptual changes, existing anthropocentric research and critique on meritocracy may drastically lose its critical sharpness and emancipatory potential. We may remain dependent on humanistic correctives, such as calling for humility instead of hubris (Sandel, 2020) or renewed reflection on luck (Frank, 2017), while leaving the socio-material arrangements that enact meritocracy largely unexamined and thus insulated from socio-political scrutiny.

Therefore, this paper proposes Networked Learning (NL) as a framework for understanding this transformation. Originally concerned with how learners connect through digital environments (Goodyear et al., 2004), networked learning has evolved into a postdigital and socio-material theory of education (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Gourlay, 2021). It views learning as a distributed process of translation among people, technologies, and artifacts; therefore, it also provides the potential conceptual tools to analyse how merit is performed, stabilized, and re-negotiated in contemporary education. Thus, this paper attempts to bring NL researchers and practitioners' attention directly to 'merit', a prevailing but often taken-for-granted and unquestioned idea, principle, and actor in this paper. It will enrich our understanding of the lived experiences of networked learning that embrace AI.

Meritocracy research and its missing connectivity

Existing scholarship conceptualizes merit through diverse theoretical lenses, ranging from normative and psychological to sociological and cultural approaches. This section briefly summarizes and classifies these conventional approaches to researching meritocracy, highlighting the missing piece in their analyses. Building on this foundation, the next section turns to NL to explore how merit can be reinterpreted as a relational and socio-material construct emerging within educational networks, thereby positioning NL as a promising theoretical framework to address this research gap.

Meritocracy in educational sciences: *ideal* and *realistic* camps

Across social sciences, meritocracy is primarily treated as a sociological and political construct: an ideology that legitimizes inequality by presenting social rewards as the outcome of ability and effort rather than inherited privilege (Littler, 2017). It has been theoretically analysed and criticized as both normative ideal and empirical illusion, which lead Park (2021) to classify them as research camps on "ideal" and "realistic" meritocracy. Whereas the former critiques meritocracy itself as an inadequate principle of justice through normative reasoning, the latter seeks to understand how "meritocracies" manifest in diverse contexts and how their actual operations diverge sharply from the normative ideal. Accordingly, the realistic camp turned toward empirical inquiry, seeking to show how structural inequalities of class, race, and gender are refracted through social institutions, thereby undermining the emancipatory promise that meritocracy once claimed to offer (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Education, as both the engine and mirror of meritocracy, remains a central site for such empirical inquiries, revealing how privilege is converted into merit through credentialing, evaluation, and performance (Khan, 2012; Chiang, 2022).

Static and dynamic approaches in *realistic* meritocracy research

Researchers interrogating realistic meritocracy share profound interests in how meritocracy appears as a phenomenon or functions as a mechanism. However, their approaches differ in their spatial-temporal scopes (table 1). Static approaches aim to capture the present configurations of meritocratic beliefs and practices, as well as their variations across social groups. One line of research examines cultural representations of meritocracy through discourse analyses of media such as literature, online forums, and popular television dramas, which serve as mirrors of prevailing social ideologies (Nam, Bae, & Oh, 2019; Wang, 2024). Another focuses on how and why understandings of meritocracy differ by generation (Im & Yoon, 2021, 2022, 2024; Yu, 2024), gender (Lee & Oh, 2022), and socio-economic or educational background (Park et al., 2020; Kang, 2016). Such works provide *zoomed-in snapshots* of how meritocracy operates in specific moments across various groups of individuals. Dynamic approaches, in contrast, situate meritocracy within temporal trajectories, tracing its historical formations, cultural genealogies, and key inflection points. They range from analyses of the long arc of credentialism (Collins, 1979) to studies of how East Asian examination systems have been reconfigured in the neoliberal era (Han & Ko, 2025; Noh, 2023). Others speculate on the digital and algorithmic turns of the twenty-first century, examining how technological infrastructures transform what counts as merit (Özer, 2023; Tyagi, 2023). Together, these works offer *zoomed-out videos* of meritocracy, depicting how it evolves and adapts over time in response to shifting economic, political, and technological conditions.

Table 1: Static and dynamic approaches to research on realistic meritocracy

Dimension	Static Approaches	Dynamic Approaches
Focus	Examines meritocracy within a fixed temporal frame; describes how beliefs and practices appear in the present.	Traces meritocracy's evolution, historical roots, and possible futures across contexts.
Main Question	1. How do different social groups (generation, gender, class) perceive meritocracy? 2. How is meritocracy represented in education, media, and culture? 3. What factors shape belief in fairness or effort-based success?	1. What historical or cultural roots underpin contemporary meritocracy? 2. Which social, political, or technological events function as inflection points? 3. How might meritocracy evolve or decline in the future?
Typical Method	Surveys, discourse and media analysis, cross-sectional studies.	Historical sociology, genealogy, institutional and policy analysis.
Key Insights	Reveals ideological contradictions and group-based differences (gender, SES, nationality); shows education and media as key sites of reproduction.	Identifies cultural and institutional genealogies; pinpoints inflection points and shifting meanings and moral justification of merit.
Limitations	Treats meritocracy as stable and static, overlooks historical contingency and micro-level change, neglects material and technological mediation.	Emphasizes macro-level transitions over lived experience, neglects everyday practices and micro-interactions where merit is enacted.

Dimension	Static Approaches	Dynamic Approaches
Analytical Metaphor	*Zoomed-in snapshot*: detailed but static.	*Zoomed-out video*: dynamic but distant.
Future Direction	Bridge both perspectives to create a *zoomed-in video* of meritocracy: analyzing how merit is enacted and transformed through socio-material processes	

Towards a *zoomed-in video* of meritocracy: a case for socio-material approach

Static approaches offer a *zoomed-in snapshot* of meritocracy, effectively capturing how merit is assembled and represented in the present, yet they often fail to account for how "merit" changes over time, overlooking its historical and technological contingencies by treating it mainly as a cultural or discursive phenomenon. Dynamic approaches, in turn, offer a *zoomed-out video* that trace broader genealogies, institutional shifts, and evolving moral justifications of merit, but their macro focus on economic and institutional trajectories frequently obscures the lived, micro-level practices through which meritocratic ideals are enacted and negotiated.

The challenge for future research on realistic meritocracy, then, lies in bridging these two approaches: in simpler words, producing a *zoomed-in video* of meritocracy that can capture the dynamic reconfiguration of merit within everyday practices: how merit emerges, circulates, and stabilizes through the complex networked interactions, and how it succeeds to retain its influence in education. This task is particularly salient in education, where learners actively construct their understandings of merit through participation in learning practices, shaping not only their sense of achievement but also their broader moral orientations toward fairness and social justice. But what does it mean to examine the dynamism of these daily practices in depth with a *zoomed-in video*? And what does it require for us as researchers to deviate from existing approaches that do not pay close attention to what happens in educational environments? It demands a shift toward methodologies that foreground lived experiences, micro-level interactions, and the socio-material entanglements (Weaver & Snaza, 2017; Lee & So, 2022; Gourlay, 2021). It also signals the need to move beyond conceptualizing merit as something perceived or conceptualized by a stable, self-contained human agent solely doing the perceiving. From the vantage point of these relational enactments, merit and meritocracy can be reexamine not as a static ideology or historical trajectory, but as an assemblage in motion, a networked process that continually redefines ability, effort, and fairness in response to new technological and institutional conditions.

Translating merit to networked merit

As NL scholarship reminds us, learning itself is a relational and distributed process, characterised by connections with interactions between humans and learning resources (Goodyear, 2004; NLEC, 2021). This unique orientation opens interesting possibilities in studying how merit is constructed and sustained in education, how the most material conditions comprising educational materials, technologies are interrelated to produce socio-material assemblages through which meanings of ability, effort, and fairness are continually negotiated. To investigate the possibility of championing NL as an orientation that foreground micro-level enactments and interactions, this section turns to one of the most neglected material dimensions in previous meritocracy research: technology. It revisits key genealogies of how technology has been theorized in relation to education and then examines how NL extends and develops these orientations by conceptualizing learning as a process of relational mediation among human and nonhuman actors within complex educational networks.

A short genealogy: technology, learning and mediation

The relationship between technology and education has evolved through multiple intellectual lineages. Early phenomenological accounts such as Husserl (1907) and Heidegger (1954) grounded learning in human consciousness and intentionality, often positioning technology as a neutral instrument or an external threat to authentic human experience. Marx's (1844) critique of machinery likewise framed alienation as a consequence of the separation between human and machine, reinforcing the notion of the human subject as the exclusive locus of meaning-making; in education, similar processes could alienate students from their intellectual labour, alienating them from forming meaningful relations with others as well as themselves, alienated from their true 'essential' human potential, finding themselves as "outsourced managers of AI learning" (Lucas, 2024) in the age of "cognitive proletarianization" (Steigler, 2010)

Post-phenomenology, spearheaded by Ihde (2009), rejected both technological determinism and consciousness-centred essentialist inquiry lamenting of the loss of human dignity. It conceptualized technology as a mediator

that expands, transforms, and sometimes constitutes human perception and experience. Technologies could be embodied, interpreted, or act as quasi-autonomous agents. Aagaard (2017) extended this approach into educational research, showing how the concrete practices through which learning and teaching are technologically mediated. Parallel insights emerged in cognitive science and distributed cognition research. Clark and Chalmers (1998) introduced the idea of the "extended mind," arguing that human cognition is not confined to the brain but distributed across tools, artifacts, and environments. Hutchins (1995) further demonstrated how cognition is enacted within socio-technical systems, such as navigational teams relying on instruments. Applied to education, these perspectives imply that learning is not an internal process supported by technology, but a relational phenomenon constituted by humans and their tools. Science and Technology Studies (STS) further radicalized this insight by treating technologies as actors in networks of practice. Actor–Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005; Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Adams & Thompson, 2016) emphasized that educational phenomena emerge not solely from human agency but from heterogeneous assemblages of humans, policies, infrastructures, and devices.

All in all, strong lineages of education research emphasise the necessity to understand everyday educational interactions, even the most mundane ones, as something constituted and mediated in relation to technology. These complexities and entanglements may sometimes become omitted when we exclusively consider human-as-agents (Kim, 2022; Jung, 2024) and either ignore or simply leave technology largely as a 'background.' Considering that technology is deeply entangled with human processes of perception and conceptualization, it is logical to regard it as a constitutive element of the material conditions under which "merit" is defined, enacted, and contested through everyday interactions.

Networked Learning: a socio-material lens for merit

Networked Learning provides a robust theoretical framework for analysing how merit is relationally and materially produced in educational contexts. Defined as learning through connections between learners, resources, and technologies (Goodyear et al., 2004), NL shifts the focus from internal cognitive processes toward the orchestration of relations across human and technological nodes. By promoting connections "between people, between sites of learning and action, between ideas, resources and solutions, across time, space and media" (NLEC, 2020, p.319), it moves beyond traditional, learner-centred epistemologies that conceptualize learning as an individual act of construction. As Brandstedt (2022) argues, such demarcation is crucial: grounding NL within a socio-material ontology, rather than within cognitive constructivism, clarifies its distinctiveness among educational research paradigms and repositions knowledge as relationally enacted rather than privately possessed. From this orientation, learning is not a matter of the individual learner processing content, but of networked interaction through which content, meaning, and agency are co-produced. The postdigital turn (Jandrić & Hayes, 2022) makes these entanglements increasingly visible, as technologies no longer merely support learning but co-produce its very conditions, values, and evaluative standards. NL thus provides conceptual tools, a way of seeing, or a "frame" that can travel across domains and interrogate human activities (Brandén, 2022), allowing researchers to examine how merit, often treated as an individual property, and meritocracy, often considered as a set of belief system that ultimately individuals embody, actually emerge from, circulate within, and stabilizes through these distributed networks comprised of humans, technologies, and institutions. Although not explicitly invoking the language of "merit" or "meritocracy," recent scholarship within the NL community has been illuminating the changing ontology of learning itself. Forshaw (2024), in the study of networked apprenticeship, demonstrates that learning is no longer a linear transfer of expertise but an orchestrated ecology in which humans and technologies co-produce the very conditions of competence and recognition. Similarly, Gibson (2024) traces how emergent pedagogical encounters not only transfer knowledge but bring about students' transformations, signifying that what counts as knowledge and how it is created must be understood in relation to relationality. Both accounts demonstrate the significance of pedagogical relations distributed across teachers, students, and technological agents becomes the site where expertise, knowledge, and ability are negotiated.

Consequently, these works exemplify how NL could provide the analytical resources needed to produce a *zoomed-in video* of merit in its production and translation. Moreover, they reveal the normative potential of such *zoomed-in videos* of merit: they invite us to ask not only *how* connections orchestrate learning, but also *whose* connections, infrastructures, and performances come to be recognized as meritorious under emerging postdigital conditions. On this foundation, the paper now turns to Gen AI as a contemporary inflection point where such assemblages and translations are most visible, contested, and dynamically reconfigured.

Where to start: Generative AI as an inflection point

In historical-sociological research on realistic meritocracy, an *inflection point* refers to a critical juncture at which the mechanisms and moral foundations of meritocratic systems are redefined in response to structural change (Han & Ko, 2025; Noh, 2023). Inflection points mark the moments when established social categories, such as ability, effort, and fairness, are recalibrated under new institutional, technological, or economic conditions. Just as standardized testing or neoliberal reforms once restructured notions of merit, the rise of Gen AI may signal a contemporary inflection point. Continuing the tradition of historical-materialist analysis, recent studies have focused primarily on the macroeconomic implications of this transformation. Tyagi (2023) argues that Gen AI, like earlier meritocratic logics, may enhance efficiency while deepening inequality, necessitating new normative frameworks that reconcile innovation with justice. Özer (2023) similarly demonstrates how digital infrastructures unsettle conventional measures of ability and reshape what counts as merit in education and labour markets. Yet these inquiries remain closer to theoretical projection than to empirically grounded demonstration.

NL, however, opens a distinct line of inquiry by suggesting that Gen AI constitutes not merely another technological advancement, but a *relational inflection point* in the historical evolution of meritocracy, one that cannot be understood solely through macroeconomic critique. Instead, NL foregrounds the transformations in relationality within educational practice, revealing how Gen AI destabilizes the individualized and embodied conception of merit by redistributing agency, authorship, and recognition across human and nonhuman actors. As Gen AI increasingly participates in learning, writing, and evaluation, it "un-blackboxes" the socio-material networks through which ability and achievement are performed. What was once attributed to human agency alone now appears as the outcome of complex translations among people, technologies, and institutions.

Recent NL scholarship, most notably presented at the 14th Networked Learning Conference (2024), further supports the significance of Gen AI as the relational inflection point in educational research. Gourlay (2024) argues that Gen AI technologies foreground the "more-than-human authorship" of learning and writing practices, unsettling long-held assumptions of the autonomous learner and exposing the hybrid nature of knowledge production within higher education. In this view, grounded on Husser's phenomenological horizons, AI is not a mere tool but a participant in meaning-making, reshaping the embodied and intentional experience of study. Similarly, Moy and Feldstein (2024) situate Gen AI within networked ecosystems of learning, emphasizing that its integration transforms how students, faculty, and institutional infrastructures co-create educational value over time. Paiuc (2024) demonstrates how technology and AI are becoming new vectors of multicultural and digital leadership through systematic literature review. Likewise, Jansson et al. (2024) explore semi-automated tutoring systems, showing how AI support systems alter pedagogical dynamics by redistributing cognitive and affective labour between human and artificial agents.

Together, these studies highlight that Gen AI may function as an epistemic inflection point, one through which researchers can produce a *zoomed-in video* of networked merit as it is assembled in practice. It is worth noting that what counts as *ability* or *merit* may never have been solely determined by individual traits; as critics of meritocracy have long argued, the very criteria of merit depend on social, cultural, and institutional environments that value certain capacities over others. What distinguishes the proliferation of Gen AI and the theoretical prowess offered by NL, is their capacity to un-blackbox fantasies of individual merit by rendering visible the distributed and mediated processes through which merit is performed. In doing so, it may unsettle the user's sense of authorship and competence, blurring the boundaries between human skill and algorithmic assistance, and compelling both educators and learners to question where, and in whom, merit truly resides.

However, this argument of Gen AI as an inflection point must not be misunderstood: While it has often been heralded within Silicon Valley discourse as a force of "disruptive innovation," such narratives risk reproducing a deterministic and techno-solutionist view of social change. This paper adopts a different stance. It does not assume that Gen AI will inevitably bring positive transformation through collective reflection or enhanced connectivity, nor that it will enable us to transcend outdated humanist notions of merit and meritocracy to build a society where individuals are appreciated simply for their being rather than their achievements. Rather, it calls for a sharper ontological sensitivity, to trace how and under what conditions Gen AI operates as an inflection point, and through which socio-material interactions among human and nonhuman actors it reconfigures learning, value, and recognition. The task, then, is not to celebrate technological disruption but to map its translations: to investigate how the very assemblages of agency and authorship through which merit is enacted are being reassembled in contemporary education.

Networked Merit: a door to practical implications

Grounded in these insights at the intersections of NL research, meritocracy critique, and debates on educational justice, an interesting theoretical construct emerges. If merit is understood as a relational effect than an individual possession, we could coin the term "Networked Merit" to signify its connected, relational, and emergent nature in contrast to traditional individualistic, embodied nature of merit. Through this theoretical lens, the NL community is positioned to offer practical implications and recommendations on the contemporary disputes surrounding Gen AI.

Consider, for instance, the recurrent question of whether AI-assisted writing constitutes "cheating" or merely a new demonstration of "AI competency." This is a classically dichotomous dispute, premised on an individualistic and anthropocentric conception of merit. Under this framing, the complex issue of technological entanglement is collapsed into two polarised narratives of human-technology relations: either you are expected to be wholly independent from technological influence, or else they are celebrated as having mastered technology as a neutral instrument, subjugating it as a mere means under pre-existing human intentions and skills. What this binary miss, and what the networked merit can reveal, is that Gen AI does not simply "destroy" nor "enhance" to an otherwise stable individual capability; it reshapes the very conditions under which competence, authorship, and achievement are enacted. Under this renewed understanding, researcher-practitioner and policy makers may call for institutional guidelines that move beyond binary prohibition-versus-permission frameworks. Rather than attempting to categorize myriads of possibilities of Gen AI usage in academic environment, institutions may proceed to investigate and specify what kinds of socio-material support may be recommended or negotiated for particular learning aims, and under what conditions. Through such conceptual and practical engagement, guidelines and documents can become more than mere "dead" compliance tools, but "living" nonhuman actors (Yoo et al. 2025), acting both as normative statements and scaffoldings that illuminate the possible forms of relational works between human and nonhuman are institutionally recognised, how responsibility and agency are distributed across educational assemblages, and under what terms co-produced outcomes may still be understood as meritorious.

On the other hand, NL invites a critical caution: institutional responses to Gen AI may paradoxically re-individualize merit by translating complex socio-material entanglements into the language of personal responsibility and "competency." As Gen AI is domesticated through curricula and assessment rubrics, "AI competency" may come to function as a new individualized trait, another credentialised attribute students are expected to possess and perform, thereby blackboxing the educational assemblages that make such competency possible. The issue is not that competency is irrelevant, but that competency-talk can obscure unequal access to tools, tacit literacies, and infrastructural support, while shifting accountability back onto individuals ("use AI responsibly") without examining the conditions that shape what responsible use can realistically entail. A networked merit lens therefore reframes competency as a situated and mediated achievement, produced through training regimes, interfaces, platform governance, and evaluative cultures. In this way, NL becomes not only a descriptive paradigm but also a political-ethical orientation for keeping merit open to institutional scrutiny and reassembling value, recognition, and justice in an emerging educational order.

Conclusion: tracing the spectre in motion

The spectre of meritocracy continues to haunt education, not as a static ideology, but as a living, adaptive formation that continually reshapes itself through the very technologies once imagined as the sword to cut through the Gordian knot of educational injustice. This paper has argued that the rise of Gen AI constitutes a contemporary inflection point in this long genealogy, revealing the limits of understanding merit as an individualized and embodied possession. Through the lens of NL, merit could be analysed and argued instead as a networked effect, a distributed accomplishment emerging through the orchestration of human and nonhuman relations (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Gibson, 2024)

If earlier research on realistic meritocracy offered either a *zoomed-in snapshot* of present beliefs or a *zoomed-out video* of historical change, the challenge now is to produce a *zoomed-in video* of merit: tracing, with empirical sensitivity, how merit is enacted, translated, and stabilized across digital infrastructures, institutional practices, and embodied encounters. Such research would move beyond describing meritocracy as either an ideology or a historical structure and instead investigate the micro-politics of how value and fairness are materially negotiated in everyday educational life. This agenda requires more than enthusiasm for technological "innovation," more than a naïve optimism nor a deterministic pessimism. It demands a sharper ontological and methodological

attentiveness to the socio-material relations (Gourlay, 2024) that assemble learning and recognition. Future studies should explore, empirically, how Gen AI participates in producing hierarchies among different abilities, how it redistributes cognitive labour, reshapes authorship, and reconfigures who and what can be considered "meritorious." In doing so, researchers can begin to map the subtle translations through which the spectre of meritocracy survives within the postdigital age, neither exorcised nor transcended, but continuously reassembled through networked interactions

Ultimately, the task for both meritocracy scholars and networked learning researchers is not to declare the end of merit, but to trace its mutations, to understand how the meaning of merit is being rewritten in real time through our engagements with generative technologies. By following these translations, we may come closer to recognizing merit not as an inherent property of individuals, but as a relational achievement, one that must always be critically examined, ethically situated, and collectively reimagined (NLEC, 2021; Jandrić & Hayes, 2022).

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