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**Can technology replace teachers? You asked Google – here’s the answer.**

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Anxiety about losing your job to technology is both a rational and growing fear. Andy Haldane, the chief economist at the Bank of England, recently estimated that [15m jobs in the UK were threatened by automation](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/nov/12/robots-threaten-low-paid-jobs-says-bank-of-england-chief-economist). Technology is reaching such levels of sophistication that it is capable not only of manual tasks but cognitive ones too, putting a wide range of jobs are at risk. The areas most vulnerable include driving and administrative work. But according to a [report from Oxford University](https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0ahUKEwid9oacy9_QAhVjJMAKHWf6AiMQFggaMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk%2Fdownloads%2Facademic%2FThe_Future_of_Employment.pdf&usg=AFQjCNFujcxMopCcadhq7bdkRjZoy0qCYg&sig2=49l2BzjU3rxzs9iTzPb1gQ&bvm=bv.139782543,d.ZGg) that looked at over 700 areas of work, teaching at all levels across the educational spectrum is a safe bet.

Yet the apparent safety of teaching as a profession doesn’t quite square with the boom in online courses. From the comfort of my sofa I can watch lectures from prestigious [universities around the world](https://www.edx.org/course/justice-harvardx-er22-1x-0), join the hundreds of millions of people who have enrolled on a Khan Academy course, enrol in a [Mooc – a massive online open course](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/dec/03/massive-online-open-courses-universities) – or upskill and change my career with a course from many other education providers.

A lot of these courses are free, but those with accreditation attached tend to charge. The appeal for educational institutions is simple: you can pay a teacher once to deliver a lecture to an unlimited amount of students without having to pay for all the overheads it takes to run a building. Students are offered flexibility and can learn at a time and location that suits them. However, drop-out rates for these courses are extremely high and they present no real threat to education as we know it. It seems students still prefer a real classroom.

So why not replace teachers in classroom with technology? To understand why teachers’ careers are safe we need to ask two questions: what do teachers do all day and where does technology fall short?

A quick survey of teacher friends answers the first question: teachers recognise and assist vulnerable pupils, cover break-time duty, mentor new teachers, collate data about pupils’ attendance and behaviour, mark homework, rig lights and dress sets for school performances, order resources such as textbooks and classroom equipment, take school trips, assess pupil attainment, meet parents, spot potential terrorists (ahem) in accordance with the government’s [Prevent guidelines](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/04/prevent-hate-muslims-schools-terrorism-teachers-reject), lead assemblies, make endless photocopies, and appraise other members of staff. This list is incomplete and already sounds like a lot for a piece of technology to cover. But if you’re looking for an easy and long-term job, this isn’t it: almost a third of teachers quit [within five years](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/oct/24/almost-third-of-teachers-quit-within-five-years-of-qualifying-figures).

It’s likely that some of the administrative tasks that teachers do will be conducted by technology in the future, just as in other sectors, but what about the actual teaching? The act of teaching isn’t just imparting what’s in your head to a captive audience. [Teaching](https://www.theguardian.com/education/teaching) is a performance, it’s reading the room and working it. This is where technology really falls short. Empathy is a key area of difficulty for technology and automation. Are the kids at the back of the classroom bored because you’re talking about something they find too difficult, because they know it already, or because you’re not presenting the information in a meaningful way? Human beings are able to pick up on a multitude of contextual clues to determine and respond to the emotional states of others. Technology can’t detect emotional states, let alone adapt its behaviour to cater accordingly.