AGENTIC AI IN EDUCATION

A Practical Guide for Educators

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1. What Is Agentic AI?

Agentic AI refers to AI systems that can pursue complex, multi-step goals with minimal human intervention. Unlike traditional chatbots where you type a prompt and get a response, agentic AI systems can reason through problems, make plans, use tools, browse the web, execute code, manage files, and adjust their approach based on what they observe. The human sets the objective and the AI handles everything else.

The core architecture behind most agentic AI is called the ReAct framework (Reason + Act). The agent receives a goal, reasons about what to do, takes an action (clicks a button, reads a file, searches the web), observes the result, and then reasons again about the next step. This loop continues until the task is complete.

> *Key difference from chatbots: Chatbots generate text and wait. Agents act, plan multi-step workflows, navigate software interfaces, log into platforms, fill out forms, and complete entire tasks without ongoing human involvement.*

Sources

- *IBM: What is a ReAct Agent?*
- *Agentic AI: The Age of Reasoning (ScienceDirect)*
- *Bauschard, S. (2026). AI Agents Are Already Inside Our Schools. Education Disrupted (Substack)*

2. The Einstein Incident: A Wake-Up Call

In February 2026, 22-year-old Advait Paliwal launched Einstein, an agentic AI tool built on the open-source framework OpenClaw that could autonomously log into Canvas, watch lectures, complete assignments, and submit homework. He deliberately branded it as a cheating tool to provoke outrage and force a conversation about higher education's unpreparedness.

Within 48 hours, 124,000+ people visited the site. Within a week, cease-and-desist letters from Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Instructure (Canvas) took it down.

> *Why this matters: Einstein made the abstract concrete. It showed that a single developer with access to open-source tools could build a system capable of completing entire courses autonomously. The underlying technology is freely available and cannot be shut down with a cease-and-desist letter to a GitHub repository.*

Questions for Reflection

- What would happen if a student used this in your course?
- Which of your current assignments could survive an agentic AI tool?
- What would need to change in your assessment design?

Sources

- *Inside Higher Ed: Agentic AI Can Complete Whole Courses. Now What?*
- *Chronicle of Higher Education: He Vibe-Coded a Crisis for Higher Education*
- *Nature: Einstein Bot Sharpens Debate Over AI in the Classroom*
- *Wagner, M. (2026). The Einstein AI Panic. The Augmented Educator (Substack)*

3. Current Agentic AI Tools Educators Should Know

Commercial Tools

Claude Cowork (Anthropic)

Launched January 2026. Produces actual files (spreadsheets, presentations, documents), reads and writes to local folders, and with the Chrome extension can navigate websites, click buttons, fill forms, and take actions on the open web. Over 50 universities have adopted Claude for Education with campus-wide access. Northeastern University partnered with Anthropic directly.

ChatGPT Atlas (OpenAI)

Full Chromium-based browser with built-in agent mode, free for all users. Can navigate websites, make purchases, fill forms, and complete multi-step tasks autonomously.

Perplexity Computer

Launched February 2026. Orchestrates 19 AI models working in parallel. You give a single instruction and it breaks it into subtasks, assigns each to a specialist model, and runs them simultaneously. Can produce websites, presentations, spreadsheets, and deep research reports autonomously for hours.

Microsoft Copilot in LMS

Microsoft is embedding Copilot directly into learning management system environments starting Spring 2026.

Open-Source Frameworks

OpenClaw

The fastest-growing open-source AI agent framework on GitHub (302k+ stars). Can run shell commands, control browsers, read and write files, manage calendars, and send emails. The Canvas skill set allows it to navigate any LMS interface. Runs on a cloud server for approximately $6/month. This is what powered Einstein.

Sources

- *Milvus: What Is OpenClaw? Complete Guide*
- *Microsoft Education Blog: Agentic AI in Higher Education*
- *OpenClaw Documentation (GitHub)*

4. Key Voices and Commentary

Michael G. Wagner (Drexel University)

Professor of Digital Media. His analysis of the Einstein panic argued that the real crisis is not the technology but the AI literacy gap among educators. He emphasized that the underlying tech is open-source, well-documented, and within reach of any student. Shutting down Einstein changes nothing because you cannot send a cease-and-desist to a GitHub repository. His proposed solutions: oral defenses, process-based evaluation, video logs, and in-class demonstrations.

Anna Mills (College of Marin)

AI faculty developer and English instructor. Sent an open letter to OpenAI, Perplexity, Google, and Anthropic asking them to program agentic browsers to refuse to complete assignments in LMS platforms. Co-authored the MLA statement on AI agents. Her key concern: if online credentials lose credibility, it undermines access for students who depend on online education, including working parents, rural students, and underprivileged populations.

Marc Watkins (University of Mississippi)

Director of the AI Institute for Teachers at Ole Miss. Writes for the Chronicle of Higher Education. Argues that agentic AI has broken online assessments but warns against abandoning online education because of the equity and accessibility it provides

to millions. The key tension: how to preserve the integrity of online learning without cutting off access.

***Ethan Mollick** (Wharton, University of Pennsylvania)*

Co-authored research on AI Agents and Education: Simulated Practice at Scale, exploring how multiple AI agents can create adaptive educational simulations with AI-generated mentors and evaluators. His Substack post "A Guide to Which AI to Use in the Agentic Era" is an essential overview of the current tool landscape.

***Ray Schroeder** (UPCEA)*

Professor Emeritus and Senior Fellow at UPCEA. Has been writing about the "Agentic AI University" as a concept for 2026, arguing that institutions need to move from experimentation to execution. Agentic AI will reshape advising, enrollment, learning support, and operations.

***Stefan Bauschard** (Education Disrupted)*

His post "AI Agents Are Already Inside Our Schools" paints a vivid scenario of how agents operate through students' devices without the student even being awake. Key argument: AI has stopped being a tool students use and has become a tool that replaces students entirely.

5. Policy and Institutional Responses

MLA Statement on AI Agents (October 2025)

The MLA Executive Council approved a formal statement warning that agentic browsers can navigate LMS platforms and complete assignments without student involvement. The statement called on lawmakers, LMS vendors, and AI companies to cooperate in preventing misuse. It noted that without outside cooperation,

academic institutions may not have the technical capacity to block agentic AI on their own.

Why Technical Safeguards Are Failing

Wagner's analysis outlines why traditional defenses fail against agentic AI:

- **Lockdown browsers:** Agents run on remote cloud VMs. The student's device is not involved. Instructure has acknowledged that server-side detection is "nearly impossible."
- **Multi-factor authentication:** Only requires one human action (approve the initial login). After that, the agent maintains the session.
- **API restrictions:** Agents never touch the API. They navigate Canvas through the graphical interface exactly as a human would.
- **Detection tools:** Agentic browsers use dynamic IP proxy rotation, hardware spoofing, and CAPTCHA-resolving. Traffic is indistinguishable from a student in a dorm.

6. Assessment Redesign: What Works

If technical safeguards cannot stop agentic AI, the response must be pedagogical. Multiple sources converge on the same set of strategies:

- **Oral defenses and Socratic questioning:** Students must verbally explain and defend their work in real time. Oral exams are naturally AI-resistant because students must think on their feet and respond to follow-up questions.
- **Process-based evaluation:** Grade iterative drafts, peer reviews, reflections, and version histories. Break assignments into stages (proposal, outline, draft, final).
- **Video logs:** Students record themselves working through problems, preserving the embodied reality of thinking in ways text cannot.

- **In-class demonstrations and debates:** Demand spontaneous, situated cognition that agents cannot replicate.
- **Personal context and reflection:** Assignments that require students to connect content to their own lived experience, field observations, or local data.

7. University Pilots and Real-World Implementations

- University of Michigan: Launched a virtual teaching assistant pilot for 9,000+ business students using Google Gemini agentic AI. The system walks students through concepts without giving answers away.
- Northeastern University: Partnered with Anthropic to deploy Claude AI across all campuses.
- Ithaca College: Developing Aurora, an agentic AI system designed to actively guide students through administrative processes like selecting electives.
- Ohio State University: Published a comprehensive overview of agentic AI in higher education through their Office of Distance Education.

8. The Bigger Picture: Concerns and Opportunities

Concerns

- **Online education credibility:** If agents can complete entire courses, online credentials lose value for all students, including those doing legitimate work.
- **Equity impact:** If institutions respond by requiring in-person proctoring for all online courses, it undermines access for rural students, working parents, and underprivileged populations who depend on online learning.
- **Metacognitive disengagement:** Over-automation may reduce students' self-regulated learning and reflective practices.
- **Faculty burden:** Redesigning assessments to be AI-resistant requires significant time and effort that faculty are already short on.

Opportunities

- **Personalized learning at scale:** AI agents can monitor student progress, identify misconceptions, and adapt instruction automatically.
- **Faculty freed from busywork:** Agents can handle attendance, routine questions, grading for completion, and material retrieval, allowing faculty to focus on mentorship and pedagogy.
- **Better assessment design:** The pressure from agentic AI may finally force institutions to move away from transactional, content-based assessments toward authentic learning experiences.
- **AI fluency as graduation standard:** Institutions are beginning to treat AI literacy as a core competency, not an optional add-on.

9. Additional Reading and Resources

Articles and Reports

- Anna Mills: Should Educators Use Agentic AI? If So, How?
- Inside Higher Ed: Agentic AI Invading the LMS
- NSTA: Agentic AI: Developing the Benefits for Classroom Learning
- ResearchGate: Agentic AI in Education: State of the Art and Future Directions
- ArXiv: Evolution of AI in Education: Agentic Workflows
- 404 Media: What's the Point of School When AI Can Do Your Homework?
- IT Professional: Impact of AI Agents on Teaching and Operations

Substacks to Follow

- **Ethan Mollick:** One Useful Thing
- **Michael Wagner:** The Augmented Educator
- **Anna Mills:** AI and Writing
- **Marc Watkins:** Rhetorica
- **Stefan Bauschard:** Education Disrupted

Podcast

- Online Learning Podcast: Einstein and How a Cheating Bot Started the Conversation (with Advait Paliwal)