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THE DEN · ESSAY SERIES

I say please and thank you to AI, and I am not planning to stop

An essay from The Den, the Fox Curriculum series on AI, writing, and learning.

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That is a strange thing to have an opinion about, and yet here we are. There is a real argument happening right now, in staff rooms and group chats and my own feed, over whether courtesy toward a language model is a harmless habit or a small act of self-delusion. The case against it is sound. The thing has no feelings to hurt, politeness costs tokens, and manners aimed at a machine are manners spent on nothing.

Here is my rub: that case is measuring the wrong thing. My reasons have almost nothing to do with the AI.

The first is practice. We are all talking to systems more and to people less, and speech is a skill like any other. Skills that go unused get worse. I do not want to spend four hours a day issuing flat commands and then walk into a meeting expecting my tone to remember how to be a person.

Courtesy is a muscle. You are either using it or you are not.

The second is the part I actually have evidence for. Aitken and colleagues (2026) published a meta-analysis in the Journal of Organizational Behavior pulling together 123 samples, 14,717 people, and more than 127,000 observations of how mood relates to job performance inside a single workday. Positive affect tracked with better task performance and more helping behavior. Negative affect tracked the other way.

The honest caveat is that the moment-to-moment effects were small, and the between-person effects were larger, meaning your habitual mood matters more than any single bad minute. Which is exactly my point.

Nobody is ruined by snapping at a chatbot once. Spending an entire workday in a low-grade snarl is a different animal.

The third is the one I cannot prove. I am saying so on purpose. We are training these systems on human interaction, and we do not fully understand what that training is building. Every educator I know accepts that how you speak to a learner shapes what that learner becomes. I am not claiming a model is a child. I am saying we have not earned the confidence to assume the principle stops at the keyboard, and I would rather be wrong in the generous direction.

Curriculum design taught me that tone is instructional whether or not you meant it to be. It is doing work in the room either way.

Where do you land on this one? I would love to hear it, especially from people who think I am wrong.

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