Asia Pacific Science Press

Asia Pacific Economic and Management Review
ISSN(O):3005-9275
ISSN(P):3005-9267
Vol. 3 No.6 (2026)

A Situated Inquiry-Based Teaching Model for Ideological and Political Courses: Ethical and Legal Tensions in the AI Digital Economy

Yu Fu*

Taizhou University, Taizhou, Zhejiang, 318000, China

Corresponding author: Yu Fu, fionafu@tzc.edu.cn

Copyright: 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY-NC 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, and explicitly prohibiting its use for commercial purposes.

Abstract: With the rapid development of the AI-driven economy, production models and daily life have been transformed, and new ethical dilemmas and legal grey areas have emerged. Generally speaking, the form of the standard moral and jurisprudential guidance in ideological and political courses is a normative teaching model; that is, first, ethical norms and regulatory rules are presented, and then, in conflict-free situations, students are asked whether they can apply these norms. The "conclude first and verify later" method of teaching cannot solve all the problems that have arisen due to algorithmic sorting, creative content rights, flexible digital employment and breaches of information security in modern AI economic systems. Given these new issues, the traditional way of teaching is likely to fall short of cultivating students' sense of situated morality and law. Incremental additions merely introduce new hot topics in the existing structure of lessons; however, this paper will not use them as supporting material but will focus on the ethical and jurisprudential conflicts of AI in digital economies. It will set new educational objectives, rearrange the structure of teaching and learning, and change the method of assessment. The new teaching model presents economically grounded normative conflicts first, engages learners in evidence-based group discussions, and finally, under the guidance of instructors, leads them to form justified moral-legal judgments.

Keywords: AI Digital Economy; Ethical and Legal Tensions; Ideological and Political Courses; Situated Inquiry Teaching; Pedagogical Reform

Published: Nov 19, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.62177/apemr.v3i6.1821

1. Introduction

The development of generative artificial intelligence and algorithms has rapidly advanced the old digital economy into an AI-driven economy. Such systems have changed the value chain, distributed tasks, altered output ownership and spread risk in the gig economy, creative works, consumer profiling and automated content generation (Srnicek, 2017). In a relatively short time, platform-based labour markets, generative content services and algorithmic advertising have moved from the periphery to the centre of the modern economy. Generative conversational systems have reduced the cost of creating text, images, audio and code to almost zero, and as a result, their application in the commercial sector of academia, media and public administration has been developing at a rapid pace (Dwivedi et al., 2023). The speed and scale of this change are new; new business models are emerging faster than we can learn about their social effects or regulate them.

Improving the operational efficiency and expanding the market of AI in the digital era have created new moral problems that

traditional ethics and laws have not addressed. Algorithmic management may result in the differential treatment of platform staff; AI-generated content and images are not covered by the copyright system; predictive profiling enables discrimination and violates privacy rights; and automated curation cannot distinguish between lawful expression, objectionable content and freedom of speech (Zuboff, 2019). These are not minor technical issues; rather, they are problems in the economic system of platform-based AI. Crawford (2021) thinks that AI systems are not abstract algorithms but physical infrastructures that need to be built and run by people in the supply chain, so most typical representations of "smart systems" do not reflect this reality. Therefore, the moral and legal conflicts resulting from the above mechanisms cannot be studied in isolation from the economic system in which they take place.

These changes have put new demands on the teaching of ethics and law at all levels in schools. Such lessons can help students form normative awareness by making them aware of ethical norms, identifying their legal rights and other values in daily life, etc. Modern university students are no longer just the outsiders observing the AI digital market; they are also participants. They are organised by algorithms, subject to automated credit and admission assessments, contribute digital data used for training, and regularly encounter machine-generated content. Their sense of ethics and legal consciousness is being formed through interaction, and they are often unaware of it (O'Neil, 2016). A moral and rule-of-law syllabus that ignores these lived economic experiences will lose one of its good teaching materials and may be seen by students as far removed from reality.

Although the traditional mode of teaching is still widely used, it generally involves presenting legal requirements and basic moral rules, then presenting idealised, isolated situations and having students solve them according to the intended educational objectives. Although the above framework can help to spread the original rules, it is not suitable for dealing with problems that have multiple legitimate reasons, and therefore it does not provide a "correct" answer (Pasquale, 2015). As regulation and technology have developed, the gap between the controlled environment of standard textbook content and the actual problems in the AI marketplace has been growing.

Research on AI and educational pedagogy so far has been divided into two main types. The first is to use AI as a general-purpose teaching tool; therefore, teachers can use all kinds of AI-powered systems to improve teaching quality and expand the diversity of teaching materials. Another group of scholars has listed the moral hazards of AI and put forward all-encompassing values for digital civic education (Floridi & Cowls, 2019). Both views are needed, but they have an obvious limitation: there has been little study on the AI economic area to determine how changes in the workforce structure, distribution mode and incentive system will impact the goals of ethical and legal education.

This paper will address the above problem. The first is that moral and regulatory conflicts in the AI digital marketplace can be posed as situated inquiry problems, and these problems should be used to inspire pedagogical innovation rather than being seen merely as mere illustrative cases. The three core questions are:

1. What are the particular moral and regulatory problems in the AI digital marketplace that are not covered by the general ethical-legal theory?
2. Can such conflicts be turned into situated inquiry tasks, not merely appended as illustrative examples?
3. What modifications are needed in the goals, teaching strategies and evaluation of the situation-based inquiry model in actual teaching?

The first part is to introduce the relevant theories of digital labour and situated inquiry learning. In the third chapter, we will introduce the structural defects of the traditional normative pedagogical model and distinguish between content expansion and paradigm shift. The fourth section will present the whole situated inquiry framework, some example task questions, teaching steps and assessment standards. The fifth section is the implementation conditions and operating risks, such as the problem of excessive relativism and the high costs of inquiry-based classrooms. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the results and puts forward some directions for future, more practical studies.

2. Theoretical Foundation

The two bases of this system are the analysis of the political economy of digital platforms and educational theory of situated inquiry.

2.1 Critical Political Economy of the AI Digital Economy

Research by scholars on critical platform economies shows that AI conflicts are the result of the economic system and not due to inborn moral deficiencies. Srnicek (2017) thinks that platform capitalism is a kind of development based on the continuous collection of data, computation and externalisation of risks for consumers and temporary workers. Labor is gradually being dismantled in the AI digital economy system. Platform staff have task-oriented jobs and weak bargaining power; innovative contributors provide free training materials, and finally, consumers voluntarily share their behaviour data or do so for a small fee.

Wood et al. (2019), drawing on 107 interviews and a 679-respondent survey across six countries, show in detail how algorithmic management operates at the heart of online labor platforms. Their study reveals a paradox familiar to platform workers: algorithms offer flexibility and task variety, yet simultaneously produce low pay, social isolation, irregular working hours, overwork, and exhaustion. Crucially, algorithmic control is not a neutral technical feature; it redistributes bargaining power away from workers, who cannot see the criteria by which they are ranked, dispatched, or deactivated (Wood et al., 2019, pp. 56–61). From this perspective, debates over AI copyright, algorithmic fairness, and data privacy cannot be separated from questions about who captures value and who absorbs costs.

Zuboff (2019) also adds that behavioural surplus should be considered; that is, the power of large platforms to predict and modify people's behaviour stems from the continuous collection of naturally occurring behaviour data generated by individuals. Crawford (2021) thinks that artificial intelligence is a kind of material object and is not simple to build; many material resources, energy, rare-earth elements and the unpaid labour of annotators who label data and moderate content are needed to build data centres and power these systems. For moral and legal education, the need is urgent; the ethics of AI cannot be confined to theoretical "machine ethics" but must also address the economic environment in which AI frameworks are applied. This is the pedagogical foundation of this study in ideological and political education: Ethical and legal analysis will not be separate but will be grounded in the economic system that governs AI.

2.2 Situated Inquiry and Ill-structured Problems

The basis of instruction for the above change is inquiry theory. Therefore, it is no longer assumed that students learn general rules first and then apply them in daily life. Good reasons will appear when students face open-ended problems in real life, collect related information, present different views, and improve their own thinking through discussion (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger's first study of mentoring has shown that cognition works better when it is acquired through participation in the routines of a group rather than in isolation. In light of the above, teachers will no longer provide direct answers but instead guide students to find answers through group discussion and think critically on their own.

The idea of ill-structured problems informs this design. Well-defined problems have one true answer and a clear way to find it; ill-structured problems have reasonable positions and lack a definitive solution. Most of the normative conflicts in the AI digital economy are not well-defined problems; for example, whether generative frameworks applied to protected works fall under fair use, whether computational oversight constitutes a labour contract, and whether forecasting methods violate the principle of equality are all such cases, and authorities, tribunals and ethicists have different views on these issues (Floridi & Cowls, 2019).

It is necessary to distinguish this way of teaching from traditional case-based instruction in law schools or corporate ethics classes. Many case-based scenarios still have a simple story and direct learners to a single correct answer. The situations in the exercises here are still open-ended and genuine examples of economic regulation problems. The purpose is not for the students to have the problems solved by AI assistance, but rather to help them recognise conflicts of interest among different groups, identify distribution effects, and provide their own normative justifications for the evaluation. The goal of learning is to develop deliberative ability, not memorising laws.

3. Structural Limitations of Traditional Moral-Legal Education

To confirm that this is a real reform, we need to know why only adding AI-related materials to traditional classes is not a paradigm shift.

3.1 Goal-Oriented Transmission

The first purpose of traditional teaching is to have students learn and remember certain laws and moral norms. Precise

recitation of rules is prioritised. Sections of textbooks on particular moral-legal issues present a collection of ideas that need to be recalled, and teaching time is generally used to clarify and reinforce these ideas. When a teacher uses AI copyright tales in this way, they only serve to present the rules already mentioned. If the situation is uncertain, the teacher will generally keep the first resolution of the problem. The goal of learning is still to memorize; the economic conflict will be presented as a case study and will not disrupt the existing order. As a result, the students in the classroom believe that all moral-legal inquiries have fixed answers; this is the opposite of the epistemic view required in a rapidly changing technological era (Pasquale, 2015).

3.2 Fixed Activity Sequence: Theory First, Application Second

Another is a fixed order of the instruction sequence. Normative standards are presented before the students are given conflicting situations. Learners know in advance which framework will be introduced and are thus not in epistemic uncertainty about their studies. Many problems in the AI digital economy have not been addressed by current regulations. Legal institutions, authorities and ethicists have been in disagreement about how to handle the serious problems; this division may be due to their lack of competence or also reflects the open-ended nature of the economic change (Floridi & Cowls, 2019). A classroom that overlooks this misunderstands the actual environment students will be in as professionals, buyers and subjects. Moreover, the prescribed order promotes a passive epistemic attitude; that is, students are expected to receive knowledge passively and do not learn how to build, defend and refine their own views in the face of problems.

3.3 Narrow Assessment of Doctrinal Recall

The third constraint is how the evaluations are formulated. The first type of assessment is a multiple-choice question; the second is a short answer; the third is a fixed-format essay. These methods rarely evaluate the depth of deliberation; that is, whether one can perceive all parties' interests, distinguish between facts and norms, be aware of trade-offs, and recognise that rational people will reach different results under legal constraints. As O'Neil (2016) points out in his work on algorithmic scoring, the problem is not in the measurement itself but rather that a limited, easily quantifiable index is used to represent an abstract idea. A similar change has occurred in the moral-legal evaluation; the ability to learn the designated rules is now regarded as proof that one can examine justice, fairness and rights in the face of unexpected economic problems. The two are not the same, and the difference between them is significant when students face economic problems not covered in the textbooks.

The three above will form a good study area. Replacing old cases with new AI examples maintains the continuity of the system: the goals, order and evaluation are the same, and only the content is new. Therefore, the "AI + teaching" programme that only updates the case database will not be effective in actual operation. All three levels of our restructuring are affected: the goals will be deliberation literacy; the flow of activities will focus on the difficult economic situation; and the evaluation indicators will favour good situated-reasoning over rote memorisation of doctrine.

4. Design of the Situated Inquiry Teaching Model

The four steps of the framework for a single teaching module are: (1) Present platform-economic conflicts; (2) Collect evidence and identify stakeholders; (3) Conduct a group discussion; (4) Have the teacher lead the students' reflection and integration.

4.1 Resetting Learning Objectives

Updated Goals are as follows:

• Students can differentiate between factual questions on how an AI framework works and moral problems about what it ought to do.

• Students will learn about the diverse effects (who gets rich and who bears the risk) of AI within the platform economy.

• Students will make reasonable assessments of the conflicts among all legitimate interests, such as technological development, protection of workers, confidentiality and open communication.

• Students will present the limits of statutory supervision and the different functions of ethical accountability for corporations, programmers and individual consumers.

• Students will recognise legitimate differences but uphold law and morals.

The goal is not for all students to reach the same conclusion; rather, it requires clear and open explanations.

4.2 Phase One: Presenting the Situated Tension

Every module starts with a short, somewhat messy case study of the AI market. The first three are representative cases.

Situation A (creative works and intellectual property). A freelance artist discovers that a generative AI system has been trained on thousands of works from public galleries; the company then sells AI products publicly and does not pay the original creators. The student groups should determine whether the way of the platform is reasonable, what artists would reasonably demand, and who, if anyone, should supervise the data-training market.

Situation B (Algorithmic Management and Temporary Workforce). Transport staff are part of a system that sets routes and efficiency goals, and they will be fined for delays; employees do not have the right to appeal the algorithmic results, and they are classified as independent contractors without standard employment benefits. Learners need to balance freedom and responsibility, and be able to manage themselves and be accountable.

Situation C (Predictive Assessment and Equity). Although the scholarship office has created an automatic assessment model based on the data of past applicants, it still ignores geographic background and funding-related circumstances. Assess whether the efficiency of the system is worth the harm to society and determine what legal and ethical responsibilities the company has towards the affected applicants.

First, the teacher gives a question that does not mention the subject as “Is AI good or bad?”. Instead, they ask, “What are the opposing ethical and regulatory demands, and who will bear the costs and benefits in this commercial environment?”. Thus, the problem is immediately placed in the field of economic relations rather than abstract digital morality.

4.3 Phase Two: Evidence Collection and Stakeholder Mapping

Together with others, make a map of stakeholders. The participants are: Platform developers, Data source providers, End users, Regulators, Underrepresented groups and Future leaders. All of the above refer to actual circumstances in life or the operation of a system. Identify the relevant laws and regulations in force for the company, such as copyright laws, data security regulations, standards for employee classification, etc., as well as any new regulatory requirements. At this time, the role of the teacher is to organise research materials and provide some study notes from economic and jurisprudential sources to help students focus on the main content of the research and avoid making unfounded speculations. The Mapping exercise is to have participants present the data-driven basis for the conflict before we move on to discussion.

4.4 Phase three: Organised Discussion

A good framework will help to organise the flow of this talk. All teams must issue an official position paper that includes: (a) the empirical economic reasons for this imbalance; (b) the two conflicting normative standards; (c) a recommended judgment; and (d) a clear statement of the costs or trade-offs to be borne in this resolution. An objection should be based on flaws in logic or evidence; it should not merely present the opposing view. The teacher continues to enforce this rule and shows students how to form opinions and how to change it based on new reasons. This is the difference from informal discussion: the way of learning requires applying logic to share one’s thoughts strictly, and repeated application under guidance of this method is necessary to develop deliberative skills (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

4.5 Phase Four: Instructor Anchoring and Reflective Synthesis

After discussion, the teacher gives some rules. Rather than immediately giving the correct answer, the teacher will point out the current legal constraints, mention the general ethical basis of the profession, and link this conflict to broader ideas of fairness, respect for workers, and collective responsibility. For example, in Scenario B, the teacher may explain that although there are some advantages to the mobility of platforms, the legal system is gradually recognising that reliance on algorithms also gives rise to obligations of disclosure, recourse and public safeguarding (Wood et al., 2019). The teacher will also specify which queries are genuinely disputed in the actual regulatory environment so as not to exceed the boundaries of the established norm. Students will write a short reflection and inquiry memo to submit as their main work.

4.6 Assessment Redesign

The following four aspects will be taken into account in the assessment:

1. Economic Framework: Specify relevant structural pressures (e.g., mandatory information disclosure, algorithmic

oversight).

2. Empirical-normative distinction: Separate particular statements on the operation of the system from ideal-functioning values.

3. Resource Equity: Include the views of all parties, even those opposed by the students.

4. Justified Judgment: Explain why the student behaved reasonably in this way and note any unavoidable trade-offs.

All the indicators will have explanations and performance standards, so students know what kind of excellent thinking is expected before they begin writing. Grading is changing; now, logic should be used rather than rote learning of rules. As this evaluation is in advance announced and uniformly applied to all modules, students have begun to study in preparation for the discussion rather than for rote memorisation.

4.7 Sequencing and Integration in the Whole Course

The Situation Inquiry Framework does not need to be used at all times. It is a special section that will be organised at suitable times in the school's timetable, usually two or three times per semester, and each will last for two classes plus some self-study. The fixed lecture period will still provide the general direction of the course; at this time, students could explore the issues on their own. This arrangement ensures that the concepts taught can be applied flexibly in real life and are not simply recited word-for-word.

5. Implementation Conditions and Practical Risks

5.1 Conditions for Good Implementation

The above are the operating conditions. First, the teachers need training. Motivating investigative learning requires teachers to have extensive knowledge of the business structure of the platform, relevant laws and regulations, academic discussions, and also to be able to accept the unavoidable uncertainty of unknown "correct answers" in advance. Pedagogical instruction and a communal scenario database can solve the problems mentioned above; therefore, a professional network for lecturers should be built first and foremost, not added on later. Second, instructional materials need to be continuously updated because there have been changes in platform behaviour and legal regulations; old cases will no longer be relevant to students. Third, the size and distribution of the class are too large; it is difficult to get the attention of the entire class and engage them in conversation. Fourth, this approach should be uniform across the institution; if other departments continue to focus only on simple recall, students will naturally lose interest in learning and think that inquiry hours are unnecessary.

5.2 The Risk of Normative Relativism

The first teaching problem is normative relativism: students may believe that "all perspectives are the same" because the teacher has not presented a single correct answer. The problem will be addressed in the anchoring stage. The teacher should inform students that certain places do not meet the requirements for good behaviour or respect. Relativism will not be avoided by suppressing disagreement, but by distinguishing between debates on true values and fixed legal and moral norms. This division between the open area of rational discussion and the closed area of established basic rules is also an essential educational outcome of this course.

5.3 Resource Costs and Student Readiness

A further challenge concerns resource constraints. Research time needs to be added to the school timetable, detailed situations should be created, and strong teacher guidance should replace traditional classes. These demands do not need to replace all the teaching materials; therefore, the modular structure introduced in Section 4.7 is still necessary. Student maturity also varies. People used to the lecture-and-test mode may not be used to open-ended questions initially; they lack a definite answer key. Training will help some people better understand how it works and what they will learn. The above are typical problems that should be corrected in any new educational model; we are aware of these deficiencies.

6. Conclusion

Given that there are now more ethical and legal problems with AI, we need to improve teaching materials. The above problems are also reasons to reconsider the basic system of moral and legal education for ideological and political education subjects. The change put forward in this paper is not the old way of "AI-enhanced teaching", which simply adds new

materials to an established delivery mode. Rather, it considers the economic pressure as the first cause of the situation, so learners face the controversial market environment first, collect data, discuss in an organised manner, and finally obtain normative guidance. This paper has two kinds of contributions. First, integrate the political economy of platforms with normative pedagogy to show how AI economic systems and AI platforms are changing educational needs. Second, it revises learning objectives, teaching procedures and assessment rubrics to distinguish this paradigm from superficial case-based activities and support evidence-based evaluation of teaching outcomes. Future research can collect pre- and post-lecture reasoning data from various groups and compare the results with those obtained under the old form of teaching according to the four rubric dimensions. Some more questions can be added to cover the overlap of problems in the modern economy, such as biometric surveillance, artist remuneration systems and automated social equity governance. The original idea is to develop the rules of conduct in schools according to what is happening in society.

Funding

This paper is funded by the undergraduate teaching reform project at Taizhou University, titled “Research on AI-Enabled Immersive Practical Teaching in Ideological and Political Courses”.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Reference

[1] Crawford, K. (2021). Atlas of AI: Power, politics, and the planetary costs of artificial intelligence. Yale University Press.

[2] Dwivedi, Y. K., Kshetri, N., Hughes, L., Slade, E. L., Jeyaraj, A., Kar, A. K., … Wright, R. (2023). “So what if ChatGPT wrote it?” Multidisciplinary perspectives on opportunities, challenges and implications of generative conversational AI for research, practice and policy. International Journal of Information Management, 71, Article 102642. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2023.102642

[3] Floridi, L., & Cowls, J. (2019). A unified framework of five principles for AI in society. Harvard Data Science Review, 1(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1162/99608f92.8cd550db

[4] Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation. Cambridge University Press.

[5] O’Neil, C. (2016). Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Amplifies Inequality and Endangers Democracy. Crown Publishing Group.

[6] Pasquale, F. (2015). The black box society: The secret algorithms that control money and information. Harvard University Press.

[7] Srnicek, N. (2017). Platform Capitalism. Polity Press.

[8] Wood, A. J., Graham, M., Lehdonvirta, V., & Hjorth, I. (2019). Good gig, bad gig: Autonomy and algorithmic control in the global gig economy. Work, Employment and Society, 33(1), 56–75. https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017018785616.

[9] Zuboff, S. (2019). The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power. PublicAffairs, https://search.worldcat.org/title/1141860372.