

# Framing the Discussion

Stephen Downes

June 17, 2026

## **Here's what I want to say**

A personal learning environment in the age of AI should be an architecture of agency.

It should be a learner-defined environment in which people choose and connect their sources, tools, identities, storage, publishing destinations, collaborators.

The role of AI is to help individuals and institutions overcome the barriers to personal learning that have led to disappointing technology choices in the past.

## An architecture of agency

An architecture of agency defines the interfaces between the elements of a learning environment so people can select, replace, combine, or reject components.

It should allow different learners to build different environments based on their own needs, values, culture and commitments.

There's a parallel with the open web here:

- Open protocols
- Interoperability
- Permissionless innovation
- User agency and portability
- Decentralization

Center for Democracy and Technology  
<https://cdt.org/insights/preserving-the-open-internet-through-interoperability/>

Michael Nolan  
<https://spectrum.ieee.org/doctorow-interoperability>

# An architecture of agency

means the learner has meaningful control over:

- Identity - Who am I across systems?
- Sources - What do I read, watch, follow, or subscribe to?
- Annotation - How do I respond while reading?
- Memory / storage - Where are my notes, credentials, drafts, and records?
- Composition - How do I synthesize, reflect, argue, and create?
- AI services - Which models or agents do I use, and for what?
- Publishing - Where does my work go?
- Social feedback - Who can reply, annotate, remix, or build on it?
- Governance - Who sets the rules, permissions, and defaults?

An architecture of agency doesn't just define mechanisms of choice for each of these, it provides viable *access* to them – to create them, manage them, connect them through common interfaces