
It's About Who Built it - And Who Didn't

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I've spent nearly two decades trying to build technology that changes the game for education. I've watched wave after wave crash and recede; each one launched with the language of transformation, while most quietly fizzled.

In early 2025, I found myself in a familiar setting: a hot, crowded classroom in Rwanda, watching a teacher named Jean-Luc hover his phone over a student's exam script. We were prototyping LearnLens, our new AI-powered assessment grading tool (Rising Academies, 2025). 'How long will this take?' he asked sceptically, clearly wanting to get back to his students. When the class' results popped up in his WhatsApp chat in seconds, his eyebrows shot up. 'Is that really it!?' That's usually the part in the story where someone wants me to say, 'See? The tech works!'. But here's the thing: it's not about the *tech*. It never was.

Jean-Luc wasn't just a user. He was part of the reason LearnLens exists in the first place. His and his colleagues' frustration about assessment marking tedium, their WhatsApp voicenotes on feature requests and language support, their insistence that if something didn't save them time, they weren't touching it (which I loved) - that's what shaped this tool. Jean-Luc didn't 'adopt' our solution. He built it with us.

This is the only real inflection point we're standing on in 2025. Not the AI. Not the large language models. Not the imminent promises of scale and cost efficacy and AGI. But this: the

realization that anything built for communities without being built *with* them will either fail, or worse - leave deep wounds.

We've done the 'Here's your shiny tool, now off you go!' routine so many times before. We've paraded into schools with tablets and dashboards and overconfidence. We've learned the hard way that technology doesn't empower people. *People empower technology.* And if the people at the center - teachers, students, caregivers, school leaders - aren't part of the act of creation, the tool will eventually gather dust, or quietly erode the very trust and value it was supposed to build.

We're definitely not fully there yet. There's still a lot of saviourism, a lot of packaging of 'agency' as a feature instead of a process. But this time, I think we have a shot. If we stay honest, if we stay humble, and if we build with - not just *for* - the people we claim to serve, we might just avoid making the same mistakes again.
