

Unlikely allies: ChatGPT and higher education assessment

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Abstract

The emergence and spread of generative AI, including Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT is raising uncomfortable questions about the nature of assessment in higher education. Learners placed on the right side of the 'technology divide' can produce rapid essays and reports, formatted to any given specification and written with native fluency. Non-traditional learners can overcome the hurdle of academic writing, without recourse to pernicious 'essay mills'. ChatGPT can ease the anxiety of assessment 'bottlenecks', during periods where students need to complete multiple submissions over a short period of time. So, does the increasing presence of generative AI in higher education, indicate assessments becoming a 'vestigial' formality? Do AI shortcuts signal the need to roll back time and, returning to on campus exams, once again test students' recollection, rather than learning? In this opinion piece we reflect on our experience as higher education lecturers and suggest ways in which generative AI can become an assessment ally in the name of impactful learning.

Keywords: generative AI; assessment design; learning; intertextuality; knowledge.

Endings

In November 2022, ChatGPT was made available to the public and quickly became a household name, emerging as the fastest-growing application up to that time (Hu, 2023). It was the first widely available chatbot able to provide detailed and human-like responses to a variety of prompts (Saetra, 2023). Yet, despite its more advanced machine learning capabilities and its uniquely intuitive user interface (Elbanna and Armstrong, 2023), ChatGPT is only the beginning. Since its inception, OpenAI have produced a similar generative AI model working with images in DALL-E, while Google have released Bard, their own dialogue-based AI (Pichai, 2023). Other tech companies including DeepMind and Meta are also developing applications that can produce realistic, complex, and coherent text-based outputs (Saetra, 2023). Amid growing debate and expanding literature on the use and place of ChatGPT in higher education (Pradana and Elisa, 2023), one thing seems clear – generative AI is here to stay, and, for some, this is starting to signal the beginning of the end for written assessment (Lim et al., 2021).

Beginnings

There is already a sizeable literature on the opportunities, challenges, and limitations ChatGPT offers higher education (Adeshola and Adepoju, 2023). Here, studies offer tentative hope on account of ChatGPT's ability to make suggestions, facilitate collaboration, and act like a 'virtual tutor' (Lo, 2023). However, this is balanced with issues around bias, accessibility, and proneness to make mistakes (Dempere et al., 2023). Linguist and theorist Noam Chomsky goes even further, dubbing the use of ChatGPT 'high-tech plagiarism' (Open Culture, 2023). Concerned with its ability to side-step even complex algorithm-based, anti-plagiarism software, Chomsky sees ChatGPT as a 'way of avoiding learning', and seemingly a herald to a dystopian future, as far as education is concerned (Open Culture, 2023).

Such paradoxical differences in opinion seem vast, yet they remind us of earlier debates on intertextuality, familiar at least since the 1970s. Debates, requiring us to acknowledge the conditions and extent of our embeddedness in texts, and how we deal with this collectively, as educators. Intertextuality explores the links, connections, indeed, echoes between texts

(Mason, 2019). For Julia Kristeva (1986), texts are 'Mosaics' that consist of pieces of other texts that consist of pieces of other texts brought together, intentionally or unintentionally, by those who create and receive them. This implies that texts do not belong absolutely or unproblematically to their stated authors. Nor do they have universally clear, consistent, or unambiguous meanings, each dependent on the intertextual spheres of reference of both their author(s) and recipient(s). Large parts of the New Testament refer to Old Testament books for example, and James Joyce's *Ulysses* references Homer's *Odyssey*. Texts are dialogues with other texts that evade total comprehension and are open to diverse interpretations based on prior knowledge, consciously or otherwise.

Thus, if ChatGPT causes educators to voice concerns with the originality of student-produced work, or its use of 'samples' from articles and book chapters, it must be placed in a longer historical context and dealt with constructively. At the time of writing, an emerging consensus in the literature seems to support this conclusion. For example, Lo's (2023) rapid review of the literature suggests that researchers are moving away from questioning the place of ChatGPT in higher education, and instead, highlighting the need to offer lecturers and instructors training in how to use generative AI. We feel that a particularly important type of use is the creation of assessments to support impactful learning. It is in the spirit of continued dialogue and knowledge-sharing on this topic that we reflect on practices we have implemented with our own students.

Continuities

First, we believe that the *responsibility and ethical accountability* is shared by students, academics and professional services and continues to apply to all aspects of learning. As a result, we directly address the use of generative AI in the learning outcomes and marking criteria on our taught modules. We use our assessment briefs to make suggestions on how to use ChatGPT and similar LLMs, and how to evidence the extent of their use without detriment to student grades. In doing this, we seek to provide an 'amnesty' for ChatGPT use and encourage students to work with us (and with LLMs), in preparation for what they will encounter at the workplace.

Second, we have *adjusted our assessment design* to reflect the limitations of indiscriminate generative AI use. Those include, but are not limited to 'outdated knowledge', lack of balance in recommended content close to the user's own beliefs and tendency to overgeneralise (Ray, 2023). Thus, we try and update assessments to incorporate real-life case studies based on recent organisational developments and changes. We ask students to evaluate those developments using different perspectives, applying them to the given organisation context, rather than just describing what it is happening.

Third, we have *diversified the mode of assessment* on our modules to move beyond written submissions. We try to focus on employability skills and competencies such as collaboration, creativity and thus utilise oral and recorded presentations, group work assessments, elevator pitches, reports on briefs offered by external partners (Manolchev, Alexander, and Cherrington, 2022), and so on. This can be extended to develop critical thinking skills by allowing students to mark generative AI-written assessments or show how they have improved an initially proposed ChatGPT outline.

The above measures are not fail-safe. Students have diverse backgrounds, needs, complex challenges, and responsibilities, all of which can make it necessary to resort to shortcuts at one time or another. We try to remind ourselves that we should not take such behaviours personally, nor consider them an intentional slight to our specialist subject or pedagogy. We also try to bear in mind that those are times where we should move our focus on assessments outcomes to the background, and instead focus on compassion for individual circumstances. We hold on to the humanity of our practice in our digitally-mediated environment with the full understanding that it may not be appreciated immediately, nor necessarily lead to better module evaluations!

Conclusions

When we asked ChatGPT how we can design assessments, which prevent students from using it, we received ten options ranging from assessments which focus on problem solving and critical thinking, to practical and interactive assessments aligned with individual student interests. Although ChatGPT lacks it, context is important, and we know that what is possible

for a module with 50 students, may not be possible for one with 500. LLMs like ChatGPT offer quick answers, but no easy implementations. This continues to be our responsibility as practitioners and this is why sharing practices and mistakes helps to open and maintain a safe space of dialogue on the shifting terrain of higher education assessment. A space where we can interact, ask, and reassure each other (and ourselves). A space where we can feed our professional curiosity. Isn't this, after all, the purpose of education?

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