Pedagogical uses of AI tools: reflection on a case study

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Presentation abstract

Academic writing is central to assessment in UK universities (Goodfellow, 2005). The emergence of easily accessible generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools took the sector by storm, with some voices raising critical concerns about academic integrity and the de-skilling of writing, while others pointed to the developmental and time-saving opportunities these tools can offer (OpenAI, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). This presentation reflected on the author's experience of designing and delivering a workshop on 'Introduction to proofreading techniques using AI tools'. The workshop was developed as part of a broader Academic Innovation Project designed to support the developmental and ethical use of GenAI tools by student writers at one institution in line with internal and emerging sector policies (such as Russell Group, 2023).

The presentation outlined the workshop plan, including learning outcomes and sample activities, alongside highlighting some of the challenges experienced during the design process. It also offered critical insights into the delivery and impact on student learning, with reference to the author's reflections as well as student engagement and feedback. A major challenge that can be transferable to other pedagogical uses of GenAI tools was the difficulty in navigating the thin line between, on the one hand, encouraging workshop participants to experiment with a range of tools in a safe learning space and, on the other hand, raising their awareness of the ethical implications and potential risks that over-reliance on such tools may pose to their learning, particularly the development of their academic writing.

Keywords: GenAI; academic writing; ethical implications; proofreading.

Introduction

Collins Dictionary's 'word of the year' for 2023 was 'AI'. The ubiquity of the term has been driven by a massive increase in the public's awareness of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools over the last year, including OpenAI's ChatGPT, Google's Gemini (previously Bard), and Microsoft's Copilot. These large language models use patterns from existing data to create entirely new text, audio, and images. Although AI tools have powered the systems we use every day for years (including Microsoft Office and search engines), GenAI has been seen as 'a major step towards artificial general intelligence … where its capabilities match or exceed those of the best human operators' (Hartley et al., 2024, p.1). Predictions for the future use of GenAI are polarised, encompassing 'the elimination of humanity and collapse of society to liberation from drudgery and enhanced creativity' (Hartley et al., 2024, p.2).

Whatever the future holds, the higher education sector will be required to navigate a path through the use of GenAI. This will include decisions about how academic curricula may be shaped by GenAI to prepare students for an uncertain future (Huxley-Binns et al., 2023). In doing so, Fengchung and Holmes (2023) emphasise that the sector holds a responsibility to ensure GenAI is used for the common good. But how – as Learning Developers – can we ensure this happens in practice?

Given this wider context, it is no surprise that Cirstea's session provoked much interest and engagement from the Learning Development community. Some participants in the session suggested that many institutions were not yet ready to tackle the challenges GenAI posed. Certain institutions are avoiding the topic of AI writing tools altogether. Participants suggested this approach does not stop students' use of these tools, instead it drives their use 'underground'. This could have serious implications for students, with participants sharing examples of students facing academic misconduct proceedings due to their use of GenAI.

Other institutions have adopted a middle way approach where there is no centralised GenAI usage policy offered to students or staff. Instead, individual faculties are developing their own policies, with some being quite open and others being rather restrictive about its use. This leads to a lot of vague responses and caveats to 'check your module handbook', which often hinders what Learning Developers can recommend to students. Whether

trying to ignore GenAI or avoiding institutional-wide approaches, participants argued that this resistance disadvantages specific demographics, including neurodivergent students, international students, and learners with vocational qualifications. For example, for some neurodivergent students, access to the latest AI-enabled proofreading software would represent a reasonable adjustment, but in the absence of clear policies, such students may abstain from using any form of AI-enabled software to avoid accusations of academic misconduct.

Figure 1. An overview of the suite of AI-related workshops developed by Cirstea and her colleagues as presented at ALDCon 2024.

Participants felt that Cirstea's presentation offered a template for workshop design that encourages transparency and the ethical use of GenAI tools (see Figure 1). In particular, they suggested that her emphasis on teaching students how these tools can be used to enhance their personal writing styles was key to developing learners' GenAI literacy skills. Cirstea's workshop foregrounded this approach through the careful sequencing of activities. Her workshop started with an activity focusing on human proofreading, then considered AI proofreading, before providing an opportunity for participants to critically compare the outputs. This activity provided an effective way to highlight the tools that are available to support students in refining their academic writing. At the same – and perhaps more importantly – the approach reinforced the importance of critical engagement with GenAI tools. There are times when the AI editor was more efficient, but there were also times when the human editor was more effective. Comparing the outputs in this way helps

students to reflect on their role as authors and how they can maintain their voice within their work.

The workshop provided the community with an opportunity to reflect on how they had started to use GenAI in their work over the last year. One participant emphasised that the focus on seeing GenAI and human outputs as complementary was new to them. They had previously only asked students to examine AI output. In their future work, they intend to adopt Cirstea's approach and thread together the use of GenAI and human outputs to help students in developing their critical GenAI literacy skills. Such an approach was seen as a way to empower students, while reinforcing the importance of critical engagement with the output as a key thing we can be doing as Learning Developers. In this way, participants left the workshop with a positive view of GenAI, emphasising that it should not – nor cannot – be shied away from. Whatever the future holds, integrating GenAI into education will be the way forward.

Next steps and additional questions

The community felt that Cirstea's workshop emphasised GenAI tools as having the potential to be a 'force for good', in keeping with Fengchung and Holmes's (2023) plea for how the tools should be engaged with across the higher education sector more broadly. Participants suggested that key to this approach was a focus on the developmental use of GenAI tools in a way that increased understanding and skills, rather than focus on the passive and overuse of GenAI tools. With this in mind, participants emphasised that how we share AI tools is as, or arguably more, important as to what we share. How do we get the balance right? How do we forge a path that does not ignore the rise of GenAI but equally does not promote its use simply for the sake of it?

These are broad questions. We can perhaps start to untangle them through an emphasis on the emotional dimension of using GenAI. Participants questioned what the effects of workshops would be on students' confidence with the use of GenAI tools. We might assume that exposure would help to increase students' confidence, but, depending on the framing, there is perhaps the possibility that they would be more scared to use it afterwards. In developing our workshops, do we need to make sure there is time for this emotional engagement? In other words, how do we ensure that we are teaching not just

what GenAI can do on a practical level but also thinking about the implications of its use on an emotional level as well?

Author's reflection

I have found the experience of sharing my reflections on the development of this session, as well as reading through the thoughtful audience comments, extremely valuable and validating for me as an educator. Navigating the complex landscape of AI pedagogies has proven quite challenging, and it is reassuring to see colleagues across institutions resonating with some of these challenges.

One of the themes that comes out quite strongly from these discussions is that many Learning Developers have taken the lead in embracing the potential of GenAI tools for Learning Development. This in fact responds to generic policy and guidance across the HE sector (Russell Group, 2023) that universities should aim to support students and staff in developing AI literacy.

Another equally powerful theme is the concern for the impact of GenAI on academic integrity, raising intricate questions about authorship and the ethics of co-authoring, assisted writing, and potentially text ownership. Although dilemmas in tracing authorship and intertextuality have dominated textual studies since their inception – long before Barthes (1997) proclaimed the 'death of the author' – establishing text ownership remains pertinent in the context of student learning and assessment. This will be an important challenge for both learners and academic educators in the years to come, and one that we as Learning Developers can help address through the creative design of pedagogical interventions aimed to develop critical AI literacies.

Acknowledgements

University; Erin Conlon, University of Leeds; Sarah Hack, University of Surrey; Chad McDonald, Manchester Metropolitan University; and Laura Dyer, University of Leeds.

The authors and contributors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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