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The use of generative AI tools in the reading-into-writing process: gains, losses and recommendations

Peter Puxon
University College London, UK

Jessica Brook
University College London, UK

Ayanna Prevatt-Goldstein
University College London, UK

Abstract

Using generative artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools has recently been deemed acceptable in some university policies, but how does this impact on students' writing processes? How can we ensure that using GenAI in the writing process does not detract from learning outcomes? In our conference session, we reported on a collaborative project between the Academic Communication Centre at University College London (UCL) and three students (studying BSc Bioscience, BSc Linguistics, and MSc International Planning), which explored what was gained and what was lost when incorporating GenAI-driven tools in the reading-into-writing process. We asked students to complete a written assignment from their course using GenAI tools. The project consisted of three stages: 1) a pre-task reflection on writing processes and learning outcomes; 2) completion of an assignment using GenAI tools and ongoing diary entries; 3) interviews exploring the students' feelings towards GenAI tools and their gains and losses experienced during the writing process.

On balance, students had negative feelings towards GenAI tools, which they said led to missed learning opportunities, were time-consuming to use, and produced unreliable information. Importantly, using these tools substituted for their own processes, shifting their role from that of active 'reader and writer' to that of 'editor and fact-checker'. However, there was positivity towards the potential of GenAI to support inclusive and individualised learning, and to help with certain aspects of the writing process. We
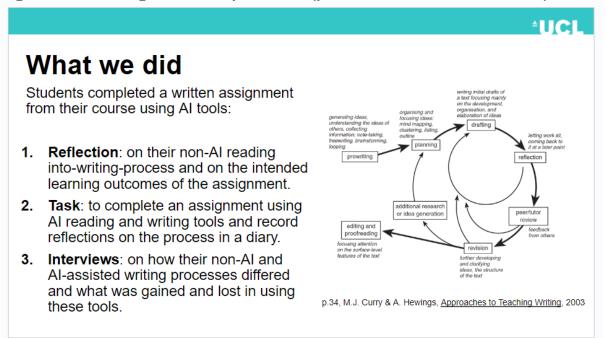
recommend centring discussion of GenAI around learning outcomes and stages of the writing process as we believe it is fundamentally important to help students assess whether these tools may help or hinder learning. With the use of GenAI tools becoming increasingly widespread, our findings and recommendations can help educators, learning developers and students discuss the benefits and drawbacks of GenAI in written assignments.

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence (GenAI); assessment; technology; student support.

Community response

This presentation addressed two hot topics in Learning Development at the moment: student co-creation and generative AI (GenAI). The student reflections proved incredibly thought provoking, not only on the specific challenges and opportunities posed by engagement with these technologies, but also on the broader topic of student perceptions around learning. Attendees at the presentation were very interested in how they might adopt similar processes in their own practice and reflect further on reconciling student needs with employer expectations.

Figure 1. Gathering student experiences (presentation slide screenshot).

Community members appreciated the timeliness of this research. We need to use this work to better understand the ways our students engage with these tools and what they feel is beneficial:

> In contrast to mainstream panic [around] academic integrity, your students seemed to engage at [a] sophisticated, critically reflective level. [I was] struck by their sense of "loss" - that even outsourcing summarising articles to GenAI (something that is being widely promoted as a legitimately useful employment of GenAI) felt like a loss of something significant in the learning process for them (Georgia Koromila, University of Reading).

When given the opportunity to experiment with GenAI, it is noteworthy that students arrived at balanced and thoughtful conclusions that mirrored colleagues' personal experiences of trialling different GenAI options. The question of what has value among the different tasks involved in the process of researching, reading, note-making and writing up is a pertinent one, as is the trade off in the value of learning versus productivity gains. It was also interesting to consider the role of identity and ownership, with GenAI use shifting the role of the student from an informed author to a curator and editor.

The need expressed by presenters to create 'an experimentation space, not a solutions space' to allow students to explore GenAI tools was warmly received and encouraged, with colleagues feeling inspired to bring this idea to their teams for experimentation space/workshop /retreat activities.

Figure 2. Key findings (presentation slide screenshot).

Next steps and additional questions

The students' reflections on engaging with GenAI tools provoked colleagues to consider their own practices. The fast pace of change means that staff and students are encountering these new tools simultaneously, and for reflective practitioners, this presents a comparatively rare opportunity to explore genuine co-creation opportunities where the whole community can learn together. This can disrupt traditional power dynamics between tutors and students, perhaps democratising the classroom somewhat. There are several directions suggested by the community response, including:

- What do we know collectively about student experiences of GenAI?
- How do we build experimental spaces within existing curricula and policy structures?
- How might we reconcile student needs as deep learners with the expectation that students will be prepared to use GenAI tools as 'editors' in the workplace?

Authors' reflections

The students working on our project were recruited through an institutional student-staff co-creation initiative. They were not necessarily representative of the student body, nor were they facing the pressures of summative assessment. Nonetheless, their critical reflection on the trade-offs inherent in using these tools echoes findings from wider student focus groups at our institution. The idea of breaking down the writing process and considering use of generative AI tools in the context of learning at each stage is very simple but powerful, and as Georgia Koromila comments, moves us beyond panic about academic integrity. Moreover, as we shift in our university towards assessment *for* learning instead of assessment *of* learning, there is increased opportunity for the kind of discussion and experimentation that we trialled in our project.

In subsequent research, we have found that GenAI is embedded throughout many of our students' writing processes and that they are 'patch writing' with these tools in interactive ways, for example, crafting prompts, borrowing words and polishing and personalising output. These processes challenge our mechanisms for understanding academic integrity and may redefine how we understand learning. But, as in our project, open discussion with

students about learning objectives and trade-offs (alongside other aspects of good assessment design) can help them make decisions about when to put more of themselves into their writing and encourage them to do so.

It will be interesting to see how students' views about GenAI usage evolve over the coming years, especially as apps such as Copilot become embedded within the institutional suite of programmes offered to students for use when studying and writing assignments. In our 'GenAI and academic writing workshops' that we designed and delivered at UCL after the project, we have seen an encouraging willingness on behalf of students to engage with broader issues of GenAI-usage (e.g., issues around data privacy and ethical standards). But will these wider concerns be neglected as GenAI becomes more seamlessly integrated into academic workflow? And how will a more integrated GenAI software such as Copilot further change our students' writing processes? It will also be interesting to see whether the potential for GenAI to improve aspects of accessibility will be realised, for example, by providing novel ways for neurodivergent learners to engage with the reading-into-writing process and learning more broadly as one of our student collaborators hoped.

Similarly, it remains to be seen how staff attitudes towards GenAI tools might evolve, relative to students' usage. Our recommendations to UCL staff encouraged open dialogue with students, and subsequent workshops offered a 'safe and experimental space' to explore these issues outside students' courses. Will this willingness to discuss what constitutes permitted and appropriate use in assessed writing genuinely be mirrored in student and staff discussions on courses and within departments/faculties? What further support might staff need to feel confident in engaging in these discussions with students in such a dynamic environment?

Ultimately, we hope that the increasing use of GenAI will lead to positive staff-student discussions around academic writing and provoke a rethink of how and why we assess student work.

Acknowledgements

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Author details

Peter Puxon is an associate lecturer and member of the teaching team at the UCL Academic Communication Centre. He works primarily with the Faculty of Mathematical and Physical Sciences to develop the academic communication of students and embed academic literacy development in course programmes. He is particularly interested in exploring ways of collaborating with subject lecturers to improve students' academic reading practices and scientific writing skills.

Jessica Brook is an associate lecturer and member of the teaching team at the UCL Academic Communication Centre. Jessica works with subject lecturers and course leads to design and deliver a range of provision to support students' academic communication, predominantly within the Faculty of Population Health Sciences. She has a particular interest in inclusive practice and supporting neurodivergent students in higher education.

Ayanna Prevatt-Goldstein is Head of the UCL Academic Communication Centre at the Centre for Languages & International Education. Her research focus is how academic writing intersects with higher education policy and relates to standardisation, power and

difference. She also runs a public seminar series on academic writing and contributes to UCL developments in areas such as academic integrity, widening participation, language and assessment, as well as guidance and resources on the use of generative AI in higher education.

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