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Ethical and effortful: workshopping human and generative AI academic writing collaborations

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Abstract

The launch of Open AI's ChatGPT in 2022 caused a furore within higher education. While initial reactions were negative – educators imagined the end of the undergraduate essay and an acceleration in academic integrity departures – more recent conversations have emphasised how these tools might enhance teaching and learning experiences. This paper explores one possibility for approaching student use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools, by considering their use in relation to academic skill development. It focuses on a set of workshops conducted within a graduate professional development course at Queen's University (Canada) in early 2024. The first workshop examined commonalities in Western, English academic writing structures; identified how demystifying these structures supports academic writing and reading practices; and considered how GenAI tools that utilise large language models (LLMs) mimic these structures to enhance students' awareness of GenAI's potential applications and limitations, and to identify the processes inherent in academic work. In the second workshop, students critiqued discipline-specific examples of AI-generated academic assignments. By exploring the qualities of academic writing alongside GenAI outputs, the workshop series invited students to explore the possibilities of what might be achieved through human-AI collaboration and to articulate what can never be replicated by a tool without embodied knowledge. This paper presented this set of workshops as a possible model for discussing GenAI tools with students—a model that demonstrates how GenAI tools might be integrated into students' academic practices in ways that are ethical and effortful and which support, rather than stifle, student creativity.

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence; GenAI; academic writing; collaboration.

Community response

Thank you for such an insightful session on emerging AI pedagogies and practices; I found a number of your teaching strategies very appealing, and I intend to apply them in my own practice. One was the idea of developing a series of AI literacy workshops in collaboration with discipline lecturers. This approach seemed particularly empowering for both students and learning developers, as it recognises the role of the subject expertise in the creation of knowledge, while at the same time acknowledging the expertise of learning/writing developers in providing strategies to critically and systematically scrutinise the ways in which this knowledge is expressed in a textual format.

Another interesting idea was to develop a prompt for GenAI on the basis of an assignment brief that learners have already submitted. This approach starts by acknowledging – rather than simply ignoring – unethical practices around GenAI use, which students may have contemplated or already adopted themselves. However, by prompting students to collaboratively evaluate the GenAI output, the session then moves on to build confidence in not only their critical competencies and disciplinary knowledge but also their ability to generate superior outcomes.

Editorial comment

This session generated interest in a range of issues relevant to learning development. The commentary above outlines some standout points of the session, including ideas for GenAI literacy workshops and practical means of encouraging students to explore the ethical dimensions of engaging with GenAI in connection with assessment.

Next steps and additional questions

Should GenAI be discussed as an innovation in its own right, or is it best addressed in relation to existing practices such as academic integrity? Do we focus on it as an individual element, or do we integrate it into what we already do?

Author's reflection

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) technologies are advancing so rapidly that even in the time between submitting the abstract for this paper in January and delivering it in June, there were elements of the workshop series I described in the presentation that already felt out of date. If we were to conduct the same set of workshops today using Google's Gemini or ChatGPT Omni, I wonder whether the student critique of the outputs would be as fulsome as what we found when using ChatGPT 4.0. I am similarly curious about the extent to which the success of this workshop series relied on our engagement with graduate students – students who have had greater opportunity to develop disciplinary knowledge, academic writing abilities, and critical capacities when compared to their undergraduate peers. Nevertheless, the papers and conversation in this session highlighted the benefits of engaging in open conversations around GenAI use – of treating students as learning partners in a territory that is new to students, faculty, and learning developers alike – rather than focusing exclusively on the academic integrity implications of GenAI, which can only drive students to secrecy. Despite the extraordinary power of GenAI tools, they remain simply that: tools. Lacking any intention of their own, they can only ever support students in what they desire to achieve. As this session showed, the real work of research, learning, and communication remains a uniquely human endeavour.

Acknowledgements

Author details

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Queen's and a founding member of Open Art Histories, a working group committed to developing and sharing pedagogical strategies for inclusive art histories. Her approach to teaching is rooted in student-centred, skills-based, and alternative pedagogies, and she has a particular interest in linguistic justice and anti-racist approaches to writing instruction.

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