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Schlagworte: composition; (dis)orientation; generative AI; ethics; first-year writing

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Exploring Generative AI in the Writing Classroom and the Writing Center

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Abstract

This article offers a case study on including generative artificial intelligence in the undergraduate writing classroom as the thematic topic of a first-year writing course at a tertiary institution outside of the US where the language of instruction is English. Drawing on the informational articles and opinion pieces available in the public press in 2023, I learned about how generative AI works and the ethics of its use alongside my students. This experience offers a model for writing instructors and writing center administrators to build on in classroom and workshop spaces.

Ultimately, I think the use of generative AI in writing studies and writing practice will become like the use of calculators in math classrooms and research. The current conversation about generative AI—including topics related to the ethics of use, its impact on learners, and its potential to change users' relationship to the content—all remind me of my middle and high school years when there was conversation on similar topics related to the use of calculators in math and science classrooms. When it came time to buy graphing calculators for trigonometry and calculus classes, our parents talked about how they had had to use slide rules and reference tables to do the same work. In reality, though, the work was not the same. As graphing calculators became a normal tool in secondary classrooms, textbooks changed to include instructions in their use, to take advantage of the affordances they offered, and to challenge students to work different kinds of problems than our parents had. In the long run, I expect that a similar thing will happen in language, writing, and composition classrooms as well as in writing centers at the secondary and tertiary levels. In time, we will integrate this new technology into our textbooks, our assignments, and our tutoring practices just as my generation's math teachers integrated calculators into their curricula, and also in the same way that my colleagues and I have integrated computer labs, laptops, tablets, and smartphones into our composition classrooms and writing center work over the course of my career in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Generative AI feels like a radical revolution, and it may prove to be, but it is also merely the next step in the evolution of the field of writing studies that occurs in tandem with technology.

The particular challenge of this current moment (at the time of writing in early 2024) is that as this new technology has arrived unexpectedly to many of us, writing faculty have been caught unawares. Our textbooks and curricula have not yet been modified to account for this nascent technology that our students have freely accessible at their fingertips. Many

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university and program policies about plagiarism and cheating do not address generative AI at all, and the bureaucratic processes for updating these policies move slowly, glacially slowly in comparison with the development of this technology over the past year.

Aside from the grinding of bureaucratic wheels, the situation is further complicated by the fact that not all faculty agree on what the new policies should even be. In conversations among my faculty colleagues at the New Economic School, it has become clear that some faculty object to the use of generative AI on general ethical grounds, some are uninterested in learning to use a new technology, and some are eager adopters of generative AI tools in their own research, coding, and writing processes.

Personally, my perspective is one of objection on ethical grounds. Generative AI tools like Open AI's ChatGPT, GPT4, and its subsequent releases or image generators like Mid-Journey and DALL-E are built on libraries of materials that exploit the work of human beings without permission or credit (Gapper 2023; George 2023). In addition, the workers who feed and train the large language model are woefully underpaid (Williams/Miceli/Gebru 2023), and the server capacity to run this kind of software consumes significant energy on this rapidly warming planet (Dhar 2020; de Vries 2023). (The sources cited here are representative, not comprehensive. For an overview of AI ethics, see Furze 2023.) My objections do not apply to some more focused forms of generative AI like Reword (What Is Reword), which users train on their own writing, or the animation support tools developed in-house by the animators at Dreamworks. In the abstract, I would disallow the use of generative AI based on Large Language Models (LLM) in my classroom on these ethical grounds. However, my classroom does not stand alone or exist in the abstract.

As a writing center director and professor who teaches EFL and writing classes in a Department of Humanities and Languages at a tertiary institution focused on the fields of economics and finance, I am deeply aware of my status as a member of a service department. The purpose of both my writing center and my courses is to prepare the students to speak and write in English in the content courses of their program of study, in the broader academic world, and in industry. In this context, my personal ethical principles are insufficient justification for a blanket prohibition on the use of generative AI. Such a stance would put my classroom at odds with the attitudes toward this technology that the students will meet in their content classes and in their careers beyond this program.

For the fall semester of 2023, I decided to adopt generative AI as the theme for my first-year undergraduate composition course. Alongside the readings from Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say, I Say*, my students and I read and discussed articles in the public press, blog posts, and industry websites that offered a variety of perspectives on generative AI. To revamp the course for the current moment, I drew heavily on the Quick Start Guide resource list from the MLA and CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI and the work of Brent Anders. In addition to choosing reading on generative AI writing, I added course objectives related to generative AI use to my syllabus and folded this new technology into the aspects of the course that focus on information literacy. To return to the calculator analogy, under-

standing how to choose and when to use technological tools in research and writing is a critical skill that students will need to have mastery of going forward.

In a presentation to the European Writing Centers Summer Institute in May of 2023, Anders argued for nuance in our approach to generative AI in the classroom. Often, the conversation that makes headlines is a yes–no conversation—either we allow AI or we don't; generative AI destroys student learning or it is necessary to the future. The materials that Anders has developed since the public launch of ChatGPT invite classroom stakeholders to see the inclusion of generative AI on a spectrum (Anders 2023). While the ends of the spectrum are, of course, those firm positions represented by the binary conversation—total ban and full inclusion—the intermediate points along this spectrum offer instructors ways to think about integrating this new shiny technology that many students want to use in ways that support learning rather than interfere with it.

In our first class meeting in August of 2023, when I presented this course theme to students, they had mixed responses. Some students were already keen users of generative AI tools like ChatGPT and image generators and were happy to see these things included in their compulsory course, some students took the position that such technology should be banned in classrooms, and some students had never explored this technology and were unaware of the general cultural debate. In our synchronous conversations during course meetings and in our asynchronous conversations in Perusall, a social annotation application, all of the students, regardless of where they were on day one of the course, offered thoughtful comments on what we were learning about the science of generative AI and the ethics of its use, asked good questions of the texts and of each other, and applied this material to their own decision-making about the work in my course and in their other courses.

One common thread among student comments was surprise at the limits of LLM chatbots' effectiveness at the kinds of tasks students are asked to do in their humanities courses. Early in the semester, my students were excited about using ChatGPT to find sources for their research papers and to make bibliographic citations for these sources. They thought this new, more technologically advanced tool would make this process faster and easier for them than a regular Google search or a query of the university library's article databases. My students were surprised to realize that the sources offered by the AI chatbot did not actually exist because ChatGPT is not a search engine. The mismatch of my students' expectations and the capabilities of the tool stems from a misunderstanding, or general lack of knowledge, about how these chatbots work. Open-AI's ChatGPT and GPT4, Sber's GigaChat, and Microsoft's Bing AI are the flashy new toys of artificial intelligence. These chatbots based on LLMs represent a huge advancement in artificial intelligence technology. The chat-based interface allows users to interact with these powerful statistical models using natural language or everyday speech (as opposed to feeding the bot code), and the responses arrive in similar natural language that is exceedingly human-like. This cozy chatting experience makes it easy for even knowing users to overlook the statistical models at work and fools naive users into a kind of parasocial relationship with the bot.

One important thing writing instructors can do in classrooms is to help students understand how these LLM-based chatbots are creating text. They are not actually thinking about what the human user is typing, and they are not analyzing a text the user gives them. LLM-based chatbots are sounds-like machines. They work by predicting the next most likely word in a sentence. Students tend to perceive the answers a chatbot provides as authoritative in part because of their own insecurity and in part because the answers are presented authoritatively, much like Google search results or a Wikipedia entry, which students also tend to trust. However, as Mark Riedl asserts in his “A Very Gentle Introduction to Large Language Models without the Hype,”

Large Language Models, do not have any sense of truth or right and wrong. There are things that we hold to be facts, like the Earth being round. An LLM will tend to say that. But if the context right, it will also say the opposite because the internet does have text about the Earth being flat. There is no guarantee that an LLM will provide the truth. There may be a tendency to guess words that we agree are true, but that is the closest we might get to making any claims about what an LLM ‘knows’ about truth or right and wrong (Riedl 2023).

In other words, Riedl is saying that LLM-based chatbots are not programmed to check their statements for fact or for correspondence with reality. Predicting the next most likely word in the sentence or the conversation is the only thing they are programmed to do. If a user asks, “What color is the sky?” an LLM chatbot will say that it is blue not because the bot looked out the window (which it can’t do) or even checked the weather forecast, (which AI could be programmed to do) but because blue is the most likely word to come after “The color of the sky is”. Understanding this functionality of LLMs soured some of my students on these chatbots in general. “Why,” they ask, “bother using the chatbot if I have to take the extra step of checking everything it says?” This, to be honest, is a question I share.

The challenge for language and writing faculty is that most of us are not ourselves statisticians or computer programmers, and trying to teach students about the technology underlying generative AI may feel like the naive leading the naive. This lack of specialized technical knowledge is a powerful opportunity to model a cooperative community of learners. Language and writing faculty are experts at finding informative sources, choosing texts to read, evaluating their reliability, and synthesizing information. We can lead our students through the process of learning about LLM-based generative AI and educate ourselves in the process.

Beyond students’ understanding of how these new technologies work, there is a deeper issue to explore. My ongoing research in writing studies and composition pedagogy is related to the disorientation that students feel as they enter the university in general and their majors specifically. In his germinal article “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae started to theorize this experience, and philosopher Walter Stegmaier’s theory of orientation helps to describe the lived experience of what students are asked to do in both general

writing courses and in discipline-specific writing courses (Bartholomae 1986; Stegmaier 2019).

Bartholomae asserts that students are asked, from the moment of their arrival in classes, “to try on a variety of voices” (1986: 4). These different voices range across the fields of study represented in the general curriculum and the major field of study and incorporate a multitude of genres like lab reports, personal reflections, analysis papers, and research studies, each of which has its own set of norms and expectations. He writes,

What our beginning students need to learn is to extend themselves into the common-places, set phrases, rituals, gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions, and necessary connections that determine the ‘what might be said’ and constitute knowledge within the various branches of our academic community (Bartholomae 1986: 11).

These norms of the variety of discourse communities are rarely, even now decades after Bartholomae wrote this article, taught overtly to students, who are, instead, expected to notice and imitate what they encounter in their textbooks and course readings.

In order to be accepted into their program of study in higher education, students have to become experts at doing school and performing on standardized tests in a particular way. In both the US and the RF, the contexts where I have taught, university-bound high school students become experts in one-and-done essays that are not revised because they are produced in time-limited exam situations. These essay prompts tend to solicit a mix of personal experience and personal opinion about common situations or world events with little reference to sources, or only reference to sources provided within the exam. These student-experts have oriented their writing praxis within the set of norms that helped them to be successful in secondary education and in the standardized testing regime on the path to higher education.

Once students arrive in higher ed, however, the expectations change, and my conversations with them over the last decade have made it clear to me that they experience this shift in the required type of writing as a disorientation. In this new environment, students are required to produce written work that is more grounded in sources, most of which they need to be able to find on their own. While in some places source-based, revised writing is taught at the secondary level, of course, it’s not the kind of writing that is valued in standardized assessment or in the higher-education admissions process. As they realize that the skills they have trained with do not match the skills required for success in course tasks, many students have a crisis of confidence, especially in the early years of their university study. When one has achieved mastery, it can be incredibly difficult to become a beginner again, and from this place of uncomfortable disorientation, many students reach for easy fixes. Among students who are studying in a foreign language, the potential for disempowering disorientation is even greater because they come to the classroom with different sets of expectations around writing, asking questions, and general classroom behavior than the

expectations with which their faculty approach the classroom. Language learners, a group in which I include myself, are accustomed to relying on online dictionaries and translators as reference tools, and they are primed to extend their existing trust to the new tools offered by generative AI platforms. All students—understandably—want to get back to the confidence they had when they received their acceptance letter to the program of study! The generative AI LLM chatbots that have appeared in phones and laptops since December of 2022 are a seductive option for students who are feeling disorientation and lacking confidence in their own authority as writers and members of the scholarly community in their field of study.

Understanding the basics of the science behind LLM chatbots and interacting with them sufficiently to see the shortfalls in their performance on the tasks of the course can help students realize that these tools are not a solution to the discomfort of the disorientation they are experiencing. For example, after we read Ethan Mollick's post "In Praise of Boring AI," which gives a frank assessment of which tasks LLM-based chatbots can do well, and which they can't (Mollick 2023), I invited my students to experiment and see for themselves. The students worked in groups to run a variety of citation machines and chatbots through the paces of producing Chicago Manual of Style bibliographic entries for our course readings, and their overwhelming response was frustration at how much handholding both the specialized tools and the general chatbots needed. Since the students still had to identify the type of source, find all of the pertinent metadata, and match each item of metadata with its category to feed it into the tool themselves, the citation machines and chatbots were not adding much value and consuming more time than if the students had just created the citations manually. Again, they asked, "What's the point of the AI tool if I have to do all the work anyway?"

Once students understand how generative AI tools work, they are ready to participate in a conversation about how best to use them, both from the perspective of ethics and from the perspective of which tools are suited to which tasks. Of these, ethics is, of course, the more complicated question. With my students this semester, I've been honest about the disagreement among faculty (at my university and more generally) about the ethics of AI use qua academic honesty and plagiarism. It has been my policy that any AI use should be acknowledged either in a submission comment in the LMS or in an acknowledgement footnote that comes early in the text. I have also encouraged students to ask questions of their faculty as a general practice. If their professor has not indicated whether or not AI use is okay, they should ask rather than assume either way. Students have, like me, made the comparison between generative AI tools and calculators, and I've pointed out that when cheap, handheld calculators were new, there was also debate about using them in classrooms.

The ethical issues related to generative AI are more broad than just academic honesty. LLMs and image generators consume inordinate amounts of energy, have been trained on texts and images that have been scraped from the web without the permission from or compensation of authors and artists, and are fed and maintained by grossly underpaid human workers who have to view offensive, violent, and dehumanizing material in order to main-

tain the standards the AI companies have established. The ecological, labor, and human rights concerns are my biggest reason not to move toward greater use of generative AI myself.

Students who do still wish to use generative AI, which is many of them, are drawn to ChatGPT and, in the Russian Federation, GigaChat because these are the big, famous ones with name recognition. But there are other tools out there that use the power of AI and are also designed for academic work. In our experimentation this semester, my students and I found that ChatGPT was able to create CMOS-style bibliographic entries when given all of the correctly labeled metadata for each source.

When approaching a new task and deciding whether to use generative AI tools, I encourage students to ask themselves a series of questions:

1. What is this assignment asking me to do? On what am I being evaluated?
2. What is the professor's policy about generative AI? If not stated, what is the school/program's policy?
3. Which form of AI is the right tool to help me with this work? (citation machine, grammar checker, database search tool, or chatbot)
4. How can I acknowledge the use of general or generative AI in a way that is logical for the assignment?

It would, of course, be naive of me to think that this algorithm and our focus on generative AI as a course theme has inoculated me against having students use these tools inappropriately. I'm sure there are some students who are using them without the acknowledgement I have asked for, just as there have always been some students who pay someone else to write their essays and some students who engage in patch writing and copy-paste plagiarism. Nonetheless, I am also sure that fewer students are choosing this path than would have if we had not talked through all of these issues and experimented with the tools together.

By demystifying how generative AI tools work and showcasing both their limitations and their affordances, instructors can help students to see through the shiny packaging of a new and popular technology so that they are empowered to make choices that support their learning instead of interfering with it. Building on the model from my first-year writing course in Fall 2023, my writing center staff and I will include workshop programming on the limitations and affordances of generative AI on our calendar for Spring 2024 and continue our conversation with colleagues teaching courses across the curriculum to ensure that we are all preparing students to make the most appropriate use of technology they can in the world we live in.

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