2025, Volume 10, Issue 2

Aligning Pedagogy with Purpose: Preparing Students for Ethical AI Engagement in Behavioral Health

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The advent of AI presents an opportunity to rethink how we design the learning endeavor for our students. Guiding students' use of AI in a creative and constructive experience, rather than attempting to ban its use (despite knowing students will use it anyway) or - worse - failing to adapt to its emergence at all, provides new avenues for growth and development in the classroom. In Summer 2023, Boston University's Inclusive Pedagogy Institute presented ideas ranging from the granular experiences of diverse learners to epistemological considerations in curricular design. After the workshops, we were challenged to integrate the learning into our approach to teaching. I emerged with two considerations: (1) how can we know what students are learning, and does our design account for barriers to learning outcomes; (2) do students and faculty share learning goals? As I began redesigning the syllabus for Orientation to Ethics and Professional Counseling, I knew I wanted to integrate the reality of AI into the course projects. In my efforts, I needed to reconsider the intended learning goals, how to align the task with those goals, and how to usefully assess students' learning.

As an ongoing project throughout the semester, students were required to learn about a particular treatment modality. The goal was to have students learn about the mental health field, discovering different programs and services where they could work and gain experience. This is important information for students entering a particular field to know: without a basic understanding, they won't know what questions to ask. They also don't have a basis to determine whether the information they find is accurate or not. A challenge I foresaw in my preparations was, what would prevent students from just gathering the first results provided by an AI-generated summary and transcribing them into the form of a report? If that is all that was asked of them, it would be the failure of the educational design, not the students.

As it turned out (and as I think it will turn out for most educators), integrating the challenge presented by AI into the design itself offered new ways to think about – and design – this project. I needed to explore what bothered me about students gathering those AI-generated results in the first place. It led to some more questions: how will they know if the results are accurate? What if there are small pieces of misinformation? What if the information is wholly accurate but the students don't have to engage with the material and ultimately gain very little from the project? Questioning led to a better understanding of what, ultimately, I thought students could get from the experience, what I hoped for

them in terms of learning goals. And those goals changed as I thought about my reasons for having to reassess in the first place, leading to even further questions.

Could students learn about treatment modalities in the field while *also* learning about AI tools, and gain a better understanding of the considerations I'd want them to have when engaging with AI-generated sources of information? How could I build this project in a way for students to engage with the content enough that they developed a knowledge base for both the field itself and using AI in their professional lives?

Ultimately, the final project design shifted significantly away from a focus on content. Student groups were assigned a treatment modality, and challenged to develop an AI tool which would serve as a tutor or guide to that type of service in the community. I provided them with materials about AI tool design, access to an AI tool, and an environment prioritizing iteration. They would not be assessed on their end product (they aren't AI tool specialists, after all), but on the process by which they engaged with the challenge using a rubric focused on their demonstration of critical thinking, ethical use, and theory of mind (of the AI tool's user).

Designing the project isn't the only step, however. How we implement the learning endeavor with students is also extremely significant. If students are unaware of the learning objectives, they have less opportunity to join in the collaborative pursuit: these goals should be explicit, not hidden. I was transparent with students from the beginning about the goals of the project. I let them know how I hoped they made use of this learning opportunity, and that I hoped it would connect with their own goals to enter this field of practice. I also let them know that I hoped it gave them an opportunity to notice more about AI tools, and to pay attention when they weren't getting what they wanted from their own projects. I also let them know it was a new approach to the project and gave them information about why I had chosen to do it differently. We were trying something different together, and I intended that we all learn something from the experience.

When students are reaching out to access AI tools, they are not being tricky. Rather, they're using the tools available to them, just as pre-AI students might use Wikipedia, or a librarian. What are we afraid of? Skewed grade point averages, or missed opportunities for learning? Some educators worry students may not fully appreciate the shortcoming or risks associated with these nascent tools. Learning to blindly trust generative information without provenance or clear sources *is* problematic. The ease of access to information or misinformation can be risky if we don't learn how to assess the information and its source. But typical examination or project design, focused primarily on accumulation and demonstration of knowledge, doesn't create an opportunity for students to develop the skills necessary to think critically about these concerns. Arguably, the challenge presented by the advent of AI in education is to the status quo, not to the enterprise of education itself.

The project did not go as smoothly as I would have liked. There aren't many AI services which have a space in which a group can simultaneously create *and* test their own tool. When I lost access

to my initial choice, we had to adapt to a different service which was arguably more unwieldy for our purposes (a pleasant surprise of a frustrating experience, though, was getting to invite the students to consider the different capabilities and designs of different AI services out there). Students shared they were uncomfortable with a project in which they would *not* be assessed on their product, sharing they had little or no experience outside of knowledge-based assessment. So, we took time to discuss the rubric and how their logs of testing, reflections on their process, and their iterations could evidence their learning. And students shared their frustrations with their own tools. Tools were *not* giving the results they wanted, were giving the wrong information, were veering off into topics or responses which they didn't want, despite their ongoing work to improve the knowledge base and guide the tool with better design (I was thrilled, of course, that they were getting a firsthand experience with these problems). Implementing this project required my continued engagement and support as a teacher throughout, and needing to explore ways to empower students was all the more rewarding. With my own iteration over time, some of these problems (but not the instructive ones, of course!) can be minimized and the project improved.

Do we want to produce students who can rattle off a list of factoids which could be found in a reference or (careful) internet search? Or do we want to produce students who know how to think, to question, to guide their own learning even after they leave our classrooms? In a world of easy access to information *and* misinformation, which of these students is more prepared and more valuable for the community?

If we've been testing students for knowledge accumulation, and feel stymied by the advent of AI tools, it seems like the right time to reconsider whether our pedagogical design has been aligned with what we intend to accomplish in our classes. Do the projects and examinations in the course truly align with the learning goals? Are the learning goals aligning with the broader reason why someone would actually need this course in the first place? It isn't difficult to get students to engage in the spirit of the project when the spirit of the project aligns with their own goals and intentions. In their final reflections for my class project, most students shared a deeper understanding of both the limitations and capabilities of AI tools, and their own ethical perspectives on appropriate and safe use. Their initial self-assessments demonstrated extremes of high or low confidence when it came to working with AI tools, and their final self-assessment demonstrated, in general, a moderation toward cautious confidence in their level of preparation. When it comes to a rapidly-changing and burgeoning AI field, expanding quickly into the community and career space, such a judicious and analytical perspective may be an optimal educational outcome.