What AI Taught Me About Teaching:

Class Activities in the First-Year Composition Classroom

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It was about two-thirds of the way through the semester at the United States Air Force Academy. I was excited to test drive a game I'd developed—with a little help from GenAI—for my English class, an introductory composition course. The goal of the game was to help students play with summary and synthesis before having to demonstrate both types of writing in their upcoming researched analysis essays. Unexpectedly, this game wound up teaching me too—particularly in how I understand my role as a writer, educator, and partner in AI-mediated classrooms.

For those unfamiliar with the terms, we English composition professors tend to think of summary as "restating the main ideas of a text in your own words, in a much shorter form" (Purdue Online Writing Lab). It's a useful skill for showing understanding or for describing information, but it often stops short of interpretation. Synthesis, by contrast, "involves combining ideas and allowing an evolving understanding of those ideas to influence your own thinking" (Purdue Online Writing Lab). It requires writers to go beyond restatement—to draw connections between ideas and position them in service of their own claim. The ability to do this necessitates a solid grasp of argument and context, as well as a clear sense of purpose. Doing so allows writers to take part in a "conversation" with other thinkers and, most importantly, to add something new to that conversation. This, in turn, means writers must perform the cognitively demanding processes of reading, note-taking, writing, and revising (Luo and Kiewra, 2019). In other words, summary looks back at what a source says; synthesis looks forward to something new. And that's very hard to learn.

It's also very hard to teach. Part of my personal difficulty is that synthesis is subtle—writers have to imagine a conversation between sources, situated within the context of their own act of writing. That's a complex act, even for experienced writers. It's also hard to model. Unlike summary or analysis, synthesis often hides in polished academic prose, so students rarely encounter clear examples in their prior reading. Further complicating things, many college freshmen have been taught

to report what others say, not to intervene. And without seeing themselves as participants in a scholarly conversation, they often don't understand why synthesis matters. Like many writing instructors, I've thrown matrices, Gaipa's metaphors, and rhetorical verbs at the problem. Still, students often stop at summary.

Wanting to help students grasp synthesis as something doable—not just abstract theory—I turned to GenAI as a creative partner. I used it in three ways: to brainstorm activity formats, to draft sample passages, and to refine the tone and difficulty of the activity. The result was a four-part classroom sequence, and it began with a scenario: What if Abby Smith Rumsey, author of the essay "Architectures of Memory, Past, and Future," and Scott Russell Sanders, who delivered the lecture "The Geography of Somewhere," were in the room together, debating the role of memory and place in shaping identity? Teams were first asked to brainstorm two or three points on which these two authors might agree or disagree. Then came the game itself: each team had 30 seconds to analyze a short passage (created with the help of GenAI) that either summarized "Architectures of Memory" and "The Geography of Somewhere," or synthesized the two. Students were tasked with deciding whether the passage I showed them represented summary or synthesis—and if they chose synthesis, to name its rhetorical function (e.g., to contextualize, to complicate). The stakes? First pick of Essay 2 presentation slots—an upcoming assignment where students would give a "status check" on their research projects. Unsurprisingly, most students want the last slot, making competition fierce.

There was also a final phase after the game, designed to give students an opportunity to engage in metacognition, which Todd D. Zakrajsek describes in *The New Science of Learning* as "the process of thinking about one's thinking in relation to self, including the influence of culture and others" (2023, p. 95). First, my students completed a synthesis matrix I developed for them using Excel, listing sources under the subclaims they planned to use in their essays and illustrating each source's relationship to the others using verbs drawn from Mark Gaipa's "Breaking Into the Conversation." I then asked them to tag each source's role—e.g., "challenges," "extends," "adds context"—and reflect in writing: What source was easiest to synthesize? What new connections emerged through this process?

So there I was, on the day we'd play the game. I reviewed the rules with students. I answered questions. I even drew a chart on the dry erase board. But by the third passage of *Summary or Synthesis?*, I realized I'd made the easiest game ever. All the "synthesis" examples ended with giveaway lines like "the synthesis of these ideas…" or included verbs like "complicate" that telegraphed the rhetorical move. Cue my facepalm here. The problem was that the unexamined GenAI-generated content had flattened the very nuance I was trying to teach, making synthesis too easy to spot and turning complex decision-making into a game of keyword bingo.

In their reflections, students confirmed as much. Most could identify synthesis when it was served to them. They could even organize subclaims clearly. But few connected sources to each other or used Gaipa's rhetorical strategies without prompting. They were beginning to learn to perform

synthesis, but they hadn't yet internalized the why. Nor did they recognize synthesis as a flexible tool they could deploy with purpose. In hindsight, I'd taught them to spot a move, but not to make one.

And yet… and yet… Students were engaged. They laughed, they argued, and yes, some people got their ideal presentation slots. In reflecting on what went wrong—and what went right—I began to see that my experiment wasn't just about student writing. It was about my own intellectual habits and how I model them for students. I walked away with not one, but three unexpected takeaways—one about time, one about control, and one about partnership.

The first takeaway is that GenAI doesn't necessarily save you time.

Sorry for the bad news, overworked teachers. Contrary to common beliefs about GenAI ("it does things faster!"), I literally spent hours designing the prompt for this activity and then refining the output. But I actually find this use of time productive, and not too different from the amount of time I would ordinarily spend designing a new class activity. What *is* different is how I use my time, shifting it away from activities I find difficult and draining—brainstorming, reviewing scholarship, drafting and revising examples—and towards refining prompts, adjusting output, and shaping materials with GenAI's help. What's fascinating to me is that these interactions mimic the feel of a conversation—one that becomes a dialogic process, helping me clarify my own thinking about pedagogical goals. So, basically, I now get to spend more time clarifying and meeting my goals rather than spending it fumbling for ideas.

The second takeaway is that I confronted my longtime frenemy: a quiet, persistent anxiety about authority and control.

Despite my convictions about not being "the sage on the stage," I still feel a tug toward control—and toward being seen by students as an expert. That belief shaped my choices: I worried that telling students I'd used GenAI to generate passages and to shape other parts of the activity would make me seem less like an expert. Consequently, I didn't share that I consider GenAI an idea-generating conversation partner or explain that those passages were co-written with GenAI. In hindsight, that silence was a mistake. It wasn't just about transparency—it was about modeling. I missed a chance to show that teaching, like writing, is a recursive, collaborative process. Paulo Freire argues that authentic authority emerges through dialogue; students don't need us to perform perfection. They need to see how we think, revise, and adapt in real time.

The third takeaway is that partnering with AI—to borrow from Bowen and Watson's book, Teaching with AI—*means bringing your own expertise to the table*.

I had hoped GenAI could help me design a game that supported learning goals around synthesis and summary—and in many ways, it delivered. It was fast, flexible, and full of ideas. But I made the mistake of treating its output as "good enough," without interrogating the passages or revising them. In so doing, I trusted the tool more than I should have. That's where the illusion of AI-

as-expert crept in—an illusion my students are likely wrestling with, too.

If I want students to treat GenAI as a partner, I have to show them what that actually looks like. That means modeling curiosity, critique, and revision—not just of student work, but of machine-generated content. As Freire reminds us: education must resist the "banking model," where learners passively absorb knowledge. GenAI challenges us to double down on that resistance. Students don't just need to learn how to use AI; they need to see themselves as active agents—deciding what to accept, what to question, and when to reject the output altogether.

Conclusion

I used GenAI to help me design a game to teach synthesis. But in the end, it ended up teaching me—about time, control, and partnership. My initial use GenAI to create a class activity forced me to confront what I ask of students but hadn't yet practiced myself: openness in how we approach a text—or a GenAI tool—with curiosity, skepticism, and a willingness to revise. bell hooks tells us that students "do want knowledge that is meaningful" (hooks, 1994, p. 19). Not perfect. Not pre-processed. They want to see how thinking happens—and how it sometimes fails. If anything, GenAI has become one of the generative themes in my own teaching—a partner that doesn't give me perfect answers, but helps me ask better questions. And that, for now, feels like a good way to use this tool.

References

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