Teaching at the Speed of Change: A Communication Instructor's Journey into AI Literacy and Ethical Pedagogy

Tiffany A. Petricini
Pennsylvania State University, Behrend

The first time I caught a student submitting an AI-generated essay, I didn't feel anger. I felt uncertainty about what to do next. At first, like many instructors, I tried to create AI-proof assignments by scaffolding them. I thought boundaries and rules would guide students through the ethical use of these tools. But as AI-generated submissions trickled in, I realized I wasn't a step ahead of my students. I was barely keeping pace. Without deepening my understanding of these systems, I couldn't teach them well.

I often explain it this way: I wouldn't just hand my son a smartphone and walk away. I need to teach him the invisible rules that govern its use. Some examples include: why we don't video chat from the bathroom, why privacy matters, why algorithms decide what he sees. The same is true for generative AI. These tools are not neutral. They are built on infrastructures and assumptions that shape the information we consume and create. Students don't just need to know *how* to use AI — they need to understand *what* it is, *how* it works, and *why* it matters.

Yet becoming a student again in this new terrain wasn't simple. The world was flooded with AI "experts," "coaches," and "consultants" offering quick tips and prompting tricks. But I needed more than hacks to redesign my courses. I needed durable, lasting knowledge that would outlast the next update or trend. I needed to understand the deeper structures: the systems, the biases, the ethics. I needed to know what I didn't know.

More importantly, opting out of AI wasn't a neutral choice. My earlier work on information inequity had shown how uneven access to tools and knowledge deepens divides (Zipf et al., 2025). The same was happening with AI. If one student encountered instructors who taught them to engage critically with these technologies, and another encountered only bans and silence, we would create new inequities within institutions, among students sitting side by side.

This essay traces my journey from trying to control AI's influence through rules to embracing the more difficult task of teaching students durable, critical habits of mind and becoming a student myself along the way.

Rules Aren't Enough

In those early months, I focused on creating firm boundaries. Like many instructors, I wrote syllabus policies about acceptable AI use. Students were required to disclose when they used AI tools, cite them properly, and ensure any AI use supplemented, not replaced, original thinking. These policies gave me a sense of control in an uncertain environment, and I developed my thoughts through an ethical analysis (Petricini, 2024).

I quickly realized the limits. AI technologies evolved faster than my policies. More troubling, rules alone don't teach students how to think. Compliance is not the same as understanding. Restrictive approaches might prevent immediate misuse, but they didn't help students navigate the deeper forces shaping the tools they increasingly relied upon.

Research I conducted with colleagues (Petricini et al., 2025) revealed that most instructors emphasized punitive, restrictive policies. The dominant approach was control, not education.

While many instructors, myself included, initially focused on restricting AI use through policies, it became increasingly clear that students, despite their fears and uncertainties surrounding AI, were eager to learn and engage thoughtfully with these systems when given the opportunity (Petricini et al., 2024). This reinforced the need to move beyond enforcement and toward fostering durable, critical literacy.

If I focused only on enforcement, I wasn't preparing students for a world where AI would be ever-present. They needed more than rules. They needed lasting frameworks that could guide them long after they left my classroom. And to provide that, I had to expand my own understanding.

Becoming a Student Again

Recognizing the need for deeper engagement was one thing. Figuring out where to learn was another. The world seemed flooded overnight with AI "experts" offering toolkits and webinars promising to revolutionize teaching with "50 AI prompts" or "5 hacks to redesign your syllabus." I attended hundreds. The allure of quick solutions was strong, but I needed more than tips and tricks. I needed to understand the systems behind these tools: how they worked, who built them, what biases they encoded, and how they shaped the information landscape.

I sought out mentors and thinkers who approached AI with nuance and depth. Scholars like Jordan Mroziak, Tim Dasey, and Joseph Yun challenged me to think beyond immediate classroom applications and toward broader cognitive and social implications. I joined a community of educators committed not just to using AI, but to understanding it. We read works that confronted AI's hidden architectures: *Co-Intelligence* by Mollick, *Teaching with AI* by Bowen and Watson, and *Artificial Intelligence: A Guide for Thinking Humans* by Mitchell.

I also turned to scholars outside of education. Crawford's *Atlas of AI* revealed the hidden labor and resource extraction behind machine learning systems. Zuboff's *Surveillance Capitalism* traced the entanglement of datafication and AI, showing how technological systems extend far beyond the classroom. Larson's *The Myth of Artificial Intelligence* exposed the gap between AI's marketing narratives and its real limitations. Dreyfus' *What Computers Still Can't Do* reminded me that our fascination with machines has long overshadowed the messier realities of human judgment.

Buolamwini's *Unmasking AI* (2023) exposes how facial recognition technologies disproportionately misidentify women and people of color, introducing the concept of the "coded gaze." Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018) demonstrates how search engines reinforce racial and gender hierarchies. O'Neil's *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2016) extends these critiques, illustrating how opaque algorithms in education, employment, and justice systems entrench systemic inequality.

These readings reshaped my view. AI is not just a tool but a complex, contested space of human-machine interactions, filled with assumptions about knowledge, labor, creativity, and power. Teaching AI literacy isn't about keeping up with the latest app or prompt. It is about fostering critical habits of mind that students can carry with them throughout their lives.

Closing Reflection: Lasting Knowledge in a Changing World

Armed with a deeper understanding of AI's complexities, I knew I couldn't return to business as usual. My goal was no longer to manage or shield students from AI, but to equip them with durable knowledge: critical thinking skills, ethical frameworks, and the ability to interrogate the invisible architectures behind the technologies they would encounter.

I redesigned my assignments. Instead of asking whether students used AI, I asked them to examine the tools themselves. Class discussions shifted from "Can I use AI to write my paper?" to "What assumptions are embedded in AI-generated content?" and "Whose labor and knowledge make AI possible?" Students debated data extraction ethics and explored the geopolitical implications of AI development. They came to see generative AI not as a magical black box but as a system built by people that is filled with complexity, imperfection, and moral ambiguity.

I can't predict what AI tools my students will encounter five years or even five months from now. I can't promise that what they learned will apply neatly to every new platform. But I can hope they carry forward a mindset: one that prizes critical inquiry over convenience, ethical reflection over blind adoption, durable frameworks over fleeting trends.

Teaching AI literacy isn't about mastering a specific technology. It's about cultivating habits of mind that endure beyond any one tool or technological moment. It's about helping students understand that systems are shaped by human choices and that they, too, have choices to make.

In the end, I'm still learning alongside them, still questioning what I don't yet know, and still wrestling with the contradictions of teaching a technology I both respect and fear. But I'm more certain than ever that this discomfort isn't a flaw — it's a feature. It reminds me that teaching, at its best, isn't about delivering answers. It's about inviting students into the long, difficult work of asking better questions

References

Buolamwini, J. (2023). *Unmasking AI: My mission to protect what is human in a world of machines*. Random House.

Crawford, K. (2021). *Atlas of AI: Power, politics, and the planetary costs of artificial intelligence*. Yale University Press.

Dreyfus, H. L. (1992). *What computers still can't do: A critique of artificial reason* (Rev. ed.). MIT Press.

Larson, E. (2021). *The myth of artificial intelligence: Why computers can't think the way we do*. Harvard University Press.

Mitchell, M. (2019). *Artificial intelligence: A guide for thinking humans*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Mollick, E. (2023). *Co-intelligence: Living and working with AI*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. NYU Press.

O'Neil, C. (2016). *Weapons of math destruction: How big data increases inequality and threatens democracy*. Crown.

Petricini, T. (2024). What would Aristotle do? Navigating generative artificial intelligence in higher education. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 6(2), 439-445.

Petricini, T., Zipf, S., & Wu, C. (2025). AI: Communicating academic honesty: teacher messages and student perceptions about generative AI. *Frontiers in Communication*, 10, 1544430.

Petricini, T., Zipf, S., & Wu, C. (2024). Perceptions about generative AI and ChatGPT use by faculty and students. *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching and Learning Journal*, 17(2).

Watson, C., & Bowen, J. A. (2023). *Teaching with AI: A practical guide to a new era of human learning*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffairs.