

Taking the Edge Off: Letting Go of AI Fears to Support Teacher Education Students and Myself

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Is this really their words or did they just rely on the Internet? How do I know if they put their personal creativity and effort into this assignment? Did they cheat? These are questions that I - and I would guess countless other educators - ponder while grading assessments different than traditional pencil-paper exams administered in person. When the work occurs outside the classroom, it is impossible to know whether students are cheating or if the product is truly theirs. We hope they give these tasks an honest attempt and the outcome will be original and thoughtfully constructed, but that is not certain and usually difficult to control. With the recent popularity of AI, many university instructors are likely wondering how to either prevent and punish the use of AI for course assignments or instead find ways to encourage students to use it well (Overono & Ditta, 2023).

While I occasionally require assessments such as quizzes or formal essays, I believe in allowing for other opportunities where university students demonstrate their knowledge and insight. For example, many of my students hope to become educators for learners as young as toddlers up to the middle school level. Presently, I teach two courses: one that supports teachers-to-be in their understanding of and sensitivity to child development and another about foundational reading skills and knowledge for young children.

I had not previously allowed for moments when students could use AI. In fact, I used to give a message that AI was not allowed for any assignments, and I do appreciate how futile it is to simply tell students not to use AI and then assume they will not do so. Being able to control for this, especially in online courses, is impossible. On top of that, addressing suspicions of AI usage is sometimes easier said than done.

A course assignment in Child Development that I particularly treasure is a written and illustrated children's story that reflects specific features of physical, intellectual, and moral development noticed in children. This is a method for students in this course to show their understanding of child development and to imagine how they will present information in a colorful and entertaining manner to young learners in their future classrooms.

To some students, the children's story is a refreshing enterprise, more fun and engaging than the usual assessments expected in some courses. These students prefer the openness of this task and the freedom to create what they wish. To others, composing a children's story with hand drawn illustrations (not always a firm requirement, but handmade illustrations is what many students do) is a dreaded endeavor. Reasons are mostly because they worry about their creative abilities, feel their writing is lackluster, and would prefer something with more concrete structure like a writing a lesson plan or a taking a multiple-choice test. Previous students have likely used AI to help with their children's stories for various reasons. Instead of me hoping they not use AI, why not let all students know that using AI to put together a great children's story is acceptable and even encouraged, as long as they are ready to talk about how they used AI in this process?

I also teach an online course, Foundations of Reading. Students in this course respect the urgency of providing effective reading instruction to all children but also perceive this as a high-pressure undertaking with numerous rules and recommendations to remember and follow. These future teachers want access to practical teaching ideas that will help them encourage children's language skills, phonemic awareness, decoding, and vocabulary learning with care and accuracy. Why not have them use AI to find teaching ideas that will make their first year as an educator less stressful and let them feel a little more prepared to provide quality literacy experiences?

Upon realizing that K-12 educators likely use AI in various ways (Diliberti et al., 2024; Langreo, 2025) and that children and adolescents must learn how to use AI appropriately for their own futures (Ottenbreit-Leftwich et al., 2022), I decided that my university students must embrace AI, but do so thoughtfully. I chose to allow AI use as they put together their children's stories in the Child Development course, and I created a new task in Foundations of Reading where students submitted an AI-generated teaching tool that would assist them when they taught young children how to read. This tool could be anything that related to course content, including lesson plans for explicit instruction and fun literacy practice.

Going into this work, students were to report how they approached the assignments (with AI in mind) and how they added their own personal touches because AI might not do things perfectly, and students still had to see that their assignment truly met expectations. Ultimately, they had to adjust anything AI gave them so that it aligned with the course objectives and to ensure a high-quality product that they were proud of and would willingly share with others. With the children's story, students were also required to describe how the story and illustrations reflected key developmental traits of children. For the AI-generated teaching tool assignment, students had to analyze and explain the extent to which AI gave them something that appropriately reflected what they had learned about supporting young readers.

As I reviewed my students' assignments, I nearly forgot that I was ever worried about inviting them to use AI. I focused more of my attention on students' understanding of what they submitted rather than just what AI generated. I still looked for quality and effort, as I had done previously, but my suspicions of cheating or how much they simply took from AI disappeared. It helped take the edge off my grading stress and removed at least one thing from an already full plate of faculty teaching, service, and research expectations.

Allowing for AI was also positive for my students. They commented that they liked using AI and appreciated how quickly it generated worthwhile items. However, some students stated that they were not fully satisfied with what AI offered. A few reported that AI is "cool and helpful, but it really cannot replace your own mind". It is still up to everyone to use his or her own wisdom and opinions to determine if the AI-generated item meets the needs of a given situation or goal.

Several students expressed thanks about being able to use AI without any pressure of judgement from me. Perhaps being allowed to use AI took the edge off for them also - they could worry less and use AI to help with parts of their children's stories that they found stressful, such as settling on ideas, checking that their writing was clear, and even help with illustrations and images. In the Foundations of Reading course, future teachers could experience using AI to find literacy teaching ideas that will come in handy very soon, and they were glad to know that effective K-12 teachers must look closely at what AI generates before passing it onto learners.

Another advantage of college students using AI for some course tasks is that they might be confident to approach AI in their own careers. For new teachers this is particularly important, as they might be expected to instruct children and adolescents about AI and provide guidance in proper AI habits (Ottenbreit-Leftwich et al., 2022). In addition, because many K-12 teachers rely on AI now and then to help plan instruction (Diliberti, 2024), it makes sense to let prospective teachers use AI responsibly and with intention.

My teaching has shifted because I now openly tell students that they may use AI, *sometimes*. When I introduce certain projects, no longer is there the pleading of "Please don't AI this!". I have realized that a seemingly reasonable request from me to be taken with fidelity is unrealistic. There are occasions where AI still is not permitted. Nevertheless, there is now a balance of when students can and cannot use it.

I will continue to allow my students to use AI as they complete specific assignments moving forward, and I hope they will value the chance to see how AI is advantageous but cannot replace their own thinking. This is a tremendously valuable lesson for anyone, but for new teachers, it is necessary to understand the rewards and difficulties of AI. In their classrooms, they must evaluate all tasks and items they present to their learners, always conscientious of quality and appropriateness. My stu-

dents used AI in the direction they will in their occupations. I am also pleased that they could have a less stressful experience as they completed assignments. And as an instructor, I have a new awareness that, for certain things, AI can be a helpful companion rather than an enemy I always must be wary of stopping.

References

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