Teaching Without All the Answers:
Using AI to Foster Critical Thinking and Collaboration in Digital Marketing

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When Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT began gaining traction, I felt a sense of uncertainty. I had not been formally trained in this technology, yet I knew it was becoming increasingly relevant to the world my students were preparing to enter. As someone committed to helping students apply classroom learning to real-world situations, I recognized that I could not ignore AI; I had to engage with it.

This narrative reflects on how I began integrating AI into a Digital Marketing course, not only to explore emerging tools, but also to reinforce the skills I believe are essential for success: adaptability, collaboration, and critical thinking. What followed was a shift in both course content and classroom dynamics. I moved away from traditional lectures and exams toward hands-on projects, professional certifications, and open conversations about how to use AI effectively and ethically. In the process, I found new ways to connect with students and support their learning in meaningful, future-focused ways.

Preparing Students for the Future

Preparing students their future careers is important to me. Throughout the semester, I consistently encourage students to apply what they learn in class to real-world situations. And now I had to not only teach students course content, but also what AI is, and how to use it. I also had to help them apply it to their future careers, even though we do not know where the technology might be by the time they graduate. That thought initially brought fear. But I quickly realized that to be a relevant and impactful educator, it was my responsibility to learn about the technology from experts, colleagues, and students. That is when my AI strategy for the classroom began to take shape.

I began integrating AI into my teaching as early as Spring 2023, starting with one of my courses as a pilot to observe, adapt, and learn alongside students. The course, Digital Marketing, typically enrolls upper-level undergraduate students, primarily juniors and seniors, who have already completed foundational business and marketing coursework. Many of them had already secured job offers and were focused on gaining additional, practical skills to prepare for future careers. The 16-week synchronous course covers all aspects of digital marketing, with key deliverables including

building a website, managing social media, search engine optimization, search engine marketing, and more.

It is important to me that when students graduate, they not only possess the necessary knowledge but also the practical skills to apply that knowledge effectively. My teaching philosophy is grounded in the belief that I cannot possibly teach my students all the facts or knowledge they will need for their future careers, but what I can do is teach them how to think outside of the box, how to find answers to their questions, and how to communicate and collaborate with others to be successful.

With the introduction of AI, I might even argue that educators no longer need to focus solely on teaching facts, because AI can provide the facts. However, this does not mean factual knowledge is no longer relevant; in fact, on the contrary, the more students know, the better they will be at using AI tools effectively and efficiently. It is now our responsibility to teach students not just what they need to know, but how to apply what they learn, think creatively, adapt, and, just as importantly, how to verify the information they encounter and think critically about its accuracy and relevance. This realization led to a significant shift in how I approached my teaching.

How Teaching the Course Has Changed

Before AI tools became widespread, a typical class session consisted of lectures focused on key definitions and theoretical content, followed by collaborative exercises that allowed students to apply what they had learned and develop teamwork skills. These skills, especially collaboration, are essential in marketing careers. After incorporating AI, my classroom structure shifted. I now spend less time lecturing and more time exploring AI tools with my students. We experiment with ways to use AI for creating digital marketing materials and streamlining marketing processes, again, all skills directly tied to real-world success.

I also placed greater emphasis on assignments that reflect real-world skills. While I still include some traditional assessments, I have shifted the focus toward deliverables like professional certificates (including one in AI for marketing) and a group project in which students develop a digital marketing plan and incorporate AI tools to create marketing materials. The project is twofold: it helps students learn how to collaborate and produce high-quality work as a team, and it provides them with tangible examples of AI-integrated work to show in job interviews, helping them stand out as more competitive candidates. These changes also led me to place greater weight on grading group projects and certifications rather than traditional tests. My goal is to prioritize long-term success skills over rote memorization.

Another major change in my course is the integration of open, honest discussions about AI. I talk with my students about the importance of ethical and responsible use of these tools. I tell them directly: some students are going to cheat, no matter what, and that will only hurt them in the long run. If they rely on AI to do their work for them, they will not gain the skills they need. But if they use

AI as an aid, just as we use calculators or grammar checkers, it becomes a powerful tool for learning and growth.

These conversations help students learn how to use new technology in a safe, supportive environment. They do not have to fear losing a job or failing publicly if something does not work. There are no established best practices yet, so we work together to discover what works, what does not, and what responsible usage looks like. This transparency helps students build confidence and trust, and helps me stay grounded as a learner alongside them.

What Worked Well and How AI is Shaping My Teaching Practice

When introducing each AI tool in the classroom, I followed a simple but highly effective process. First, I demo the tool. Then, I give my students time to work in groups and test the tool on their own. Afterward, we regroup as a class and discuss what went well, what did not, and what they created. I encouraged each group to try out different tools but use similar prompts so we could compare results across platforms. This sparked insightful discussion about each tool's strengths and weaknesses.

One example that stood out was when we used an AI website builder to create a mock company website. I walked through the process live with the class, and we talked through what needed to be included on a basic business website. After the demo, students broke into groups and built their own sites. This process, working together as a class first, then exploring in groups, created a shared foundation and fostered creativity.

Using AI in my teaching has made it even clearer that I do not need to have all the answers, and that is okay. I am open with my students about that, and when we explore new tools like AI together, it reinforces the idea that learning is a shared process. This approach builds trust, encourages curiosity, and helps students see that success is not about knowing everything; it is about knowing how to figure things out, especially in a world where technology is constantly evolving. By encouraging open dialogue and shared exploration, students not only learn about AI but also gain confidence in navigating uncertainty, an essential skill in both today's and tomorrow's workplaces.

Using AI tools in class was not without challenges. The main challenge I faced was how quickly AI tools changed. I would take time to learn a tool before class, only to find it had updated, or was no longer free, by the time I introduced it to my students. To reduce access barriers, I only used tools that were free, as I did not want students to need to pay for multiple subscriptions. While this was sometimes frustrating, it reminded me of a bigger lesson: I'm not just teaching students how to use specific tools, I'm teaching them how to learn. That skill, more than mastering any single platform, is what they will carry with them into their future careers.

Final Thoughts

Bringing AI into my teaching has not just changed how I design my courses; it has also helped me connect with students on a deeper level. It has reminded me how important it is to stay flexible, be honest, and keep things grounded in the real world. Learning alongside my students, making mistakes, and celebrating the little wins has made the classroom feel more engaging and forward-thinking. As technology keeps changing, my teaching will, too. But one thing will not change: I will always focus on helping students build the skills, mindset, and confidence they need to succeed.