Let's ChatGPT: Facilitating Dialogue on AI in Outdoor Recreation Management Classes

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In March of 2023, the same month that ChatGPT-4 was released, I finished teaching my last class of the academic year before taking a sabbatical. I would not teach again until Fall of 2024. During my sabbatical, as I shifted my focus to research and catching up on publications, I was vaguely aware of the conversations surrounding generative AI that were happening at my institution and elsewhere. But I did not devote too much attention or energy to these conversations, thinking that the "Post-sabbatical" version of me (who was hopefully refreshed and imbued with enthusiasm anew) could figure out how to address generative AI in teaching later.

Later came, and as I started preparing my syllabus for the Fall Term of 2024, I felt incredibly uninformed about how students were using generative AI, unaware of the best pedagogical practices related to AI, and even unclear of my own perspective and values on the subject. Burying my head in the sand regarding generative AI during my sabbatical did not serve me well. Luckily, Oregon State University's Center for Teaching and Learning leads numerous Faculty Learning Communities (FLC) focused on topics relevant to teaching faculty (Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.). The FLCs, comprising 5 to 12 instructors, meet in a hybrid format across our university's 10-week term. The theme for the Fall 2024 FLC was "Teaching and Artificial Intelligence," so I eagerly applied, was accepted, and began to educate myself more intentionally and thoughtfully about generative AI.

I came to the FLC unsure about the ethics and implications of generative AI. I was also a novice AI user myself, having only used generative AI a handful of times to help me understand coding errors. Over the 10 weeks, we explored the concept of generative AI, its inherent biases, and the social and ecological implications of its use. We discussed our role in developing (or not) AI literacy among our students. We engaged in generative AI tools ourselves and adjusted our syllabi and assignments based on what we learned in the FLC. Overall, by the end of the 10 weeks, although I still had a somewhat unclear view of my own perspectives on generative AI, I had gained a better understanding of how

to integrate AI into my teaching and help my students navigate its use. One idea that was discussed during the FLC was the possibility of collaborating with students on generative AI policies, philosophy, and approaches. This idea of having transparent discussions with students about course policies and teaching approaches aligns with my inclusive teaching pedagogy, so I decided to try this approach in my courses. Such discussions can foster trust, clarify course expectations, and acknowledge and value diverse experiences and perspectives of students. And I hoped that by including students in such discussions and providing insight into the "whys" of my AI policy, students would have greater buy-in and alignment with these policies.

In my Winter Term classes of 2025, on the first day of class and before introducing the syllabus, I facilitated a discussion about students' use and perspectives on generative AI. During the Winter Term, I teach two courses in the Tourism, Recreation, and Adventure Leadership program, including a 300-level recreation management class with 25 students and a capstone outdoor recreation planning course with 15 students. My approach to this discussion was interactive and anonymous. I used Mentimeter to create both open-ended and scaled questions that students could respond to anonymously (Mentimeter, 2024). Below, I reflect on what I learned from my students, combining key takeaways from both class discussions. I share points from our discussion in general terms, rather than specific "results" (i.e., exact numbers or frequencies). This was not a scientific study, and the questions asked were designed to prompt critical thinking in my students, rather than making generalizations about how all students view AI. However, I think the questions I used and the approach I took to the discussion could be useful to others in their courses.

First, I started out the discussion with a humorous icebreaker question, featuring a grid of photos of funny cats, and asked, "What cat are you today?" This allowed students to practice using Mentimeter and relax a bit before our discussion on generative AI. Then I asked students to respond anonymously and optionally whether they had used generative AI on assignments in past classes. The majority said: "Yes, even if it wasn't required on the assignment" (other options included "No" and "Yes, but only when required per assignment instructions"). Then, I asked students to submit one word that described their feelings about generative AI (see the word cloud in Figure 1). Like me, most students were unsure but also felt it was helpful.

Figure 1

Word cloud from prompt, "How would you describe your feelings about generative AI in one word?"

After reflecting on the open-ended responses, I then shared the course AI policy, examples of what assignment-level AI guidance looks like in the class, and provided some insight into my philosophy and perspective on AI use. And since I teach in an environmentally focused field, I also discussed some of the water and energy-related implications of generative AI (Zewe, 2025).

Finally, we returned to the Mentimeter, and I asked students to respond to three questions on a Likert-type scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). When asked, "I feel confident I can use AI ethically in this class," the majority of students agreed with this statement. When asked, "I am concerned about the environmental consequences of AI," most students in my outdoor recreation-focused classes agreed with this statement. When asked, "I am concerned about privacy issues related to AI", students were generally neutral. I gave students time to reflect on the responses from their classmates and opened the classroom up to questions and general discussion.

Potentially more insightful than the student responses to the Mentimeter prompts in class was the feedback I received after class. After all my class sessions, students submit a short "5 minute reflection" where they write for 5 full minutes about their key takeaways from the class that day, relate the specific class session material to the larger learning outcomes of the course, share any questions or "muddy" points, and then (optionally) share a piece of gratitude. I did not specifically prompt students to share their thoughts on the generative AI discussion, but several students did. Many responses were students expressing appreciation for the conversation and clearly outlined generative AI policies on the class syllabus. Below is an excerpt of one student's 5-minute reflection:

> Today's biggest takeaway for me was your discussion on AI. I think a lot of professors skim over their own personal opinions and takes on generative AI which can make it hard to know what they expect from us as students. I really appreciated that you touched on the environmental impacts of AI. I personally know students who use it for every class and every essay and to me that is really scary. I think we are so unaware of the bigger impact of using it and the kind of impacts it has on us in terms of the environment and as a society.

Since engaging in the FLC, I have incorporated AI into a subset of assignments and have clearly outlined permissible uses of AI in my classes assignment-by-assignment. I have come to view part of my role as an educator as helping students develop AI literacy, especially in our field of study. And part of that AI literacy is being able to discuss the opportunities, limitations, and implications of generative AI in learning and for the environment. So far, my generative AI policies and approaches have been successful. I attribute some of that success to establishing an open and transparent learning environment for discussions about AI from the very beginning. I plan to continue having these discussions early on in my future courses and sharing my perspectives on the use of generative AI with my students. I look forward to seeing how our views change and evolve over time.

Note

ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) came up with the title for me with the prompt "Write me a witty title about having conversations with students about AI".

References

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