When the Paper Writes Itself: Rediscovering the Value

of the Writing Process in First-Year Writing Courses

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When I first learned of ChatGPT in late 2022, I'll admit, I was excited. I tend to be an early adopter of technology, and I am also attracted to technologies that offer a way to make my life easier. So, despite being a college professor who teaches humanities and communications courses, my first experiences with ChatGPT were personal uses, filled with wonder and play. I used ChatGPT to plan trips, to create meal plans, and to otherwise automate tasks that I knew I *could* do, but didn't necessarily want to spend time doing.

I didn't really think about how this technology would impact my pedagogy until I used ChatGPT for an extended personal use: planning a month-long trip to London. This use resulted in my first extended "conversation" with an LLM. While I was amazed with what ChatGPT *could* do, I was similarly frustrated by what it *couldn't* do at that time, such as accessing current and correct information about public transportation. But, despite my frustrations, ChatGPT helped me to drastically minimize the time I spent researching and planning the trip.

Testing the Tool: Experimenting with Pedagogical Tasks

Around the same time, I started experimenting with ChatGPT on my own pedagogical materials in the following ways:

- Reviewing existing assignment/project overviews to verify they allowed students to achieve the learning outcomes and to identify potential areas of confusion for students
- Generating quizzes and discussion questions based on assigned readings or lecture material
- Drafting textbook style readings to elucidate concepts introduced in lecture

Again, like in my personal use, these were all tasks that I know how to do and have lots of experience doing, but they are also tasks that I find tedious and unenjoyable. Nevertheless, I was experienced and knowledgeable enough to check the LLM's output quickly and adjust prompts efficiently to get high-quality results.

An Uneasy Realization: Student Submissions and LLM Overreliance

This is also around the time when I started receiving (or at least started noticing) my first ChatGPT-driven student submissions. And while my concerns about how, when, and why students are using ChatGPT are growing almost daily, I'll admit that, in those early days, I was almost giddy at the thought of never having to read another incomplete sentence or correct another comma splice. However, I soon realized that when students, especially novice students who were still developing the skillsets of strong and effective communicators, encountered a task that ChatGPT *couldn't* perform effectively, they struggled to recognize the shortcomings or improve the resulting product.

My initial excitement reflected how I *hoped* students would use ChatGPT, rather than the reality of their use. In my ideal world, students were thoughtfully responding to the prompt, using their own ideas and research, and only using ChatGPT to check grammar. But, it soon became apparent that I was living in a fantasy world, and that while *some* students might have been using the technology in a copyediting capacity, the vast majority of them seemed to be relying on LLMs to do their work for them. In fact, many students seemed to be using ChatGPT at every stage of the writing process, from brainstorming to drafting to editing.

This realization that students weren't using ChatGPT the way I was using it, to streamline tasks they already understood, but instead were outsourcing the very skills they were supposed to be building, was a turning point. While I had hoped AI would be a scaffolding tool, I began to see it functioning more like a crutch. Student submissions started to show a strange hollowness. On the surface, the work was clean and grammatically precise, but the ideas were underdeveloped, the voice generic, and the engagement with course content superficial at best. I recognized that students weren't just bypassing the labor of writing; they were bypassing the intellectual struggle that produces learning. And worse, they didn't seem to know they were doing it. In many cases, they lacked the critical framework to evaluate what ChatGPT was giving them. If the output looked "correct," it was assumed to be *good*. That disconnect felt dangerous.

I also started becoming suspicious of *any* work that seemed *too* grammatically correct! How the tides had turned – when ChatGPT hit the market, I was so excited to *not* have to correct mistakes in grammar and sentence construction, and now I long for a poorly constructed sentence with a comma splice and a misplaced comma. At this point, I knew I needed to come up with a way to convince students that not only could they produce more thoughtful work than ChatGPT, but also that by farming out this labor to ChatGPT, they were cheating themselves out of the process of building the very critical thinking skills that would enable them to effectively make use of these and similar technologies in their professional and personal lives.

A Pedagogical Pivot: Centering the Writing Process in the Classroom

The most significant impact on my pedagogy in the first-year writing classroom is that now, I spend much more time asking students to engage in the writing process while in the classroom. Previously, class time would have consisted of short lectures, discussions about the readings, and strategies for

approaching assignments, while the labor of doing the assignments would typically take place outside of the classroom. Now, though, my hope is that by asking students to perform the labor of thinking, brainstorming, and drafting in the classroom, they will be less motivated to use AI tools to complete this work. Of course, this is not foolproof (some students skip class, or even use ChatGPT in class), but I do think that it is an effective first step in demotivating students to rely on AI. Additionally, my goal here is not to prohibit the use of AI tools, but to encourage students to do the hard work of developing these skillsets without the use of AI so that they can apply these skills in other situations and, when or if they *do* choose to use AI to assist with these tasks in other contexts, they have the ability to critically evaluate and revise the output.

A Reflective Assignment: Comparing Human and Machine

In response, I designed a low-stakes, in-class assignment meant to slow students down and help them reflect critically on the generative process—both theirs and the LLMs. First, I asked students to respond to a simple prompt on their own: brainstorm ideas, generate a rough paragraph, and identify any questions or uncertainties they had. Then, using the same prompt, I asked them to generate a version using ChatGPT. They were not allowed to revise or refine the prompt—just a single query and its unedited response.

Next, students were asked to compare the two versions side by side. Which one had a clearer voice? Which one demonstrated more original thinking? Which one showed a stronger grasp of course concepts? After that, we moved into small group comparisons. Students shared their human-generated work with each other, then shared their ChatGPT outputs, and evaluated which versions seemed most thoughtful, most distinctive, or most convincing.

The conversations that followed were some of the most engaged I've seen in a writing class. Students noticed how similar many of the ChatGPT outputs were to one another—technically fluent but often bland, repetitive, and oddly vague. They noticed that while their own ideas felt riskier or less polished, they were more specific and individual. And most importantly, they began to articulate the limits of AI: it can mimic form, but not necessarily insight. They weren't just told why over-relying on AI could be a problem—they experienced it firsthand.

What Worked and What Comes Next

This assignment, and the shift to more in-class writing, has reshaped my teaching. It wasn't just asking students to write during class time that worked but also prompting them to *evaluate* the writing process itself and their role in it. By requiring side-by-side comparisons, students could more clearly see their own value in the process. Many admitted that their own writing had a clearer voice, more specificity, and, most importantly, resulted in more learning.

Moving forward, I plan to make this kind of reflective comparison a regular feature in my classes, not only for writing but also for activities like reading comprehension and research. I'll continue refining

the prompts I give students and provide more scaffolding on how to interact with AI productively rather than passively. I am also transparent with students about when and how I use AI to assist in the production of teaching materials, which helps them to see the need for both expertise and revision when evaluating AI outputs. While I don't believe AI is going away, I do believe we can teach students to use it as a tool rather than a shortcut. That means re-centering the process of thinking, not just the product. And for now, that process belongs squarely in the classroom.