Adapting to AI: Transforming Assignment Design and Assessment Practices in Political Science General Education

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By the time we got to Fall 2024, ChatGPT was all the rage. It was beating chess champions; it was passing bar exams, and it was even creating outputs that were making people wonder what the purpose of education was. It was like the masses had been given access to alien technology, and they were realizing nothing would ever be the same again.

For those of us, the professors and instructors, who were about to embark on yet another Fall semester, Chat GPT caught us off guard. I don't mean that in the sense that we were stunned that something like this existed, we just did not realize how rampant the use was going to be. Not only was the use rampant, but it was also just done horrendously. The best way I can explain it is this: imagine using an iPhone to hammer a nail. That is how AI was being used in classes. And of course, it triggered a panic – not in the sense that everyone was flustered and feeling inadequate, but in terms of how one is supposed to protect the academic endeavor, achieve student learning outcomes and do teaching when this tool was simply guiding our students down a path of least effort. Amid these seismic changes, I was going through a transitionary period – I was teaching my last full semester as a professor because I had just accepted a position of the inaugural Director of our university's Center for Teaching and Learning. So, all this really hit home hard for me because my job was about to become helping our faculty deal with AI in the classroom while I, myself, was dealing with blatantly bad AI use in the classroom.

This situation allowed me to have a unique perspective into how AI impacted our classrooms. As I now reflect over the last academic year, I want to share a few instances that sum up the experiences and talk about what the future has in store for us. I want to start by talking about general education classes I was teaching during Fall semester. I had two sections of Intro to World Politics, a general education class that averages about 25 students in person each semester. I was teaching a section in person and one online. I had about 50 students in total in these classes, and as is the case, most were non majors. The first couple of assignments went well. However, in all my years of teaching, I had never felt as low as I did five weeks into the semester. I had seven submissions that basically read the

same, which was the sheer blatantly bad use of AI. I felt hurt, disrespected, and disappointed. Then came the midterm which was as expected. And that threw me off. My class average was like previous semesters, and the grade spread was similar.

So, what was happening exactly? I had no idea, so I asked my students point blank in class. I asked them, how are you using AI and how has your experience been. I did not accuse them, I did not punish them, and I did not badmouth it; I simply wanted to understand. My students explained to me that they were primarily using AI for "boring" stuff in classes where they felt their time was being wasted. On further prodding, I was informed that students view non-major classes as a money and time suck; they do not understand what the purpose is and are simply trying to get through as easily as possible. Exams were different though, they had to do good in them, so they prepared for those. I also sought their feedback on how others were dealing with it, and I was told some professors were being unreasonable and unrealistic with their expectations. Students did not understand why everyone was up in arms, and it was just extra help to get things done faster.

These interactions were beyond illuminating for me. To start with, our students genuinely did not understand the point of general education classes. Forget AI; this is a bigger issue we need to address in academia. Students must take anywhere between 36 to 42 general education credits depending on the institution and the state, and if they do not understand the purpose or need of doing so, no wonder higher education is under attack. Moreover, with regards to AI use, the students genuinely did not understand how to effectively use it. They were going by whatever TikTok was telling them, because that is the new google (i.e. you just TikTok it, instead of googling something). This is problematic because a lot of advice they were getting was not helpful. In fact, it was sponsored content that they were consuming. I also reached out to our academic integrity office to discuss with them what the process for reporting AI use was. Given that early on in Fall 2024, we did not have a comprehensive AI policy in place, any student being reported for AI use was going to go through a mountain of paperwork, but nothing would really happen. What I also realized was the burden of proof. Whether AI was conclusively used would fall on to the faculty member and proving it was next to impossible.

Equipped with this knowledge, I changed my approach midway through Fall 2024 semester and embraced AI use in class. Instead of fighting it, I spent two class sessions showing my students how to use AI, and what kind of large language models were out there. I answered student questions; we explored how to write prompts, what the limitations of AI were and what it could help with. I introduced them to Claude, Notebook LM as well as AI-driven presentation platforms. As for the class I was teaching, I worked with my students to develop assignments that mainstreamed AI use. For instance, instead of written submissions, I pivoted to presentations and more group work in class. For my online section, I focused on my students' making videos in response to their assignments. Additionally, I started posting AI output from Chat GPT, Google Gemini and Claude for each assignment while stating that if a submission is similar to the outputs, it will be graded as a C. Any student wishing to dispute

the C was encouraged to visit during office hours and present their argument with evidence as to why this was worth more. They were also encouraged to file a grade dispute formally. What this did was to eliminate any discussion on whether AI was used or not. If as a professor I suspected AI use, I would give a C with the option of a grade change as a real possibility. This way, the burden of proof is no longer on me, and I can focus on teaching rather than dealing with academic integrity paperwork.

So, by the time Spring 2025 came around, my established approach was to give a blanket grade of C in general education classes and a D for upper-level classes, for any submission that was clearly AI generated with the option of grade dispute. I focused exclusively on group work for my upper-level classes utilizing AI driven team management software like Monday to keep a check on the flow of work. I focused more on presentations and in-class exams rather than online quizzes. For the online sections, the focus moved to creating videos and audio as submissions. For online exams, I moved away from multiple choice questions and focused on short answer questions. These minor changes shifted some of my workload, but frankly there was not much of a difference as opposed to how it was. The difference for me was that as a professor I was no longer frustrated or disappointed. I was in my class to teach and not try to catch my students doing something wrong. AI is here to stay, I embraced it, and it made a difference for my students. The two class sessions I spent with my students running this AI mini workshop in Fall, eventually culminated into an extended faculty workshop that I conducted for the Center for Teaching and Learning.

The reality is our students will use AI; we need to embrace it and adapt to it because employers need our students to be able to do these things when they hit the job market. Think of this as a program review and update exercise rather than an existential threat. Moving forward, my approach is mainstream AI in class as much as possible, so my students know how to use it effectively and in a sensible manner. I am not going to waste my time playing the game where all I fixate on is trying to catch them; instead, I need them to learn this skill and then use it in an intellectual manner that helps their knowledge development.