Artificial Intelligence in Online Graduate Professional Education: Integration, Resistance, and Reconciliation of AI Podcasts and Tutor Chatbots

Christopher Richmann
Baylor University

I tell my students that I'm not afraid of generative artificial intelligence (genAI). I don't think it is inherently unethical—or at least, I don't think genAI is more ethically problematic than other common tools and technologies. Ethical use of genAI has everything to do with context.

Some learning objectives, however, require the use of human intellect unaided by machines that compute or mimic human communication. Our society has determined that a certain level of numeracy is valuable. So, my seven-year-old daughter is appropriately learning how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide without the help of a calculator. In a seminary course on Christian history, one learning objective is, "Communicate in your own words the historical issues and theological concerns of various Christian leaders and movements." This objective is aligned with "understanding" in Bloom's taxonomy. Another objective is, "Integrate relevant text (aka "quotes") from historical documents to support historical claims," which aligns with "application" on the taxonomy. Students cannot demonstrate these objectives with work that is in part or wholly the product of genAI.

But that does not mean that some of the learning *activities* that help students develop these abilities shouldn't incorporate genAI. In fact, in our AI-conscious educational landscape, all higher education should consider the full range of options related to genAI. A total prohibition on student use of AI may be prudent in some cases, but in many (maybe *most*) cases, an assignment- and activity-specific approach allows for the nuance needed to shun genAI when it presents an obstacle to learning yet embrace it in ways that aid learning (Perkins et al., 2024)and the use of these technologies is likely to become a defining feature of education in coming decades. GenAI offers transformative pedagogical opportunities, while simultaneously posing ethical and academic challenges. Against this backdrop, we outline a practical, simple, and sufficiently comprehensive tool to allow for the integration of GenAI tools into educational assessment: the AI Assessment Scale (AIAS.

This is what I attempted in a masters-level course titled, "History of Christianity II," which surveys the fourteenth century to the present. Fully online and asynchronous, the course is taught

in a 10-week term and is a requirement for most enrolled students. The section had 30 students. I prohibited use of genAI on all student-submitted written work, but this did not amount to a total genAI ban. This was my first time teaching a fully asynchronous course, so especially in the interest of crafting alternatives for synchronous discussion, I enlisted AI tools to create two recurring learning activities.

First, I required students to listen to AI-generated podcasts produced with Notebook LM. The platform generates this "audio overview" based on the documents ("sources") you upload. I uploaded one document per each "Notebook." Users can "customize" the audio overview, prompting it to focus on certain themes of the source (or sources), or target a specific audience, etc. The generated audio consists of two AI-generated voices (one seemingly male and one seemingly female) discussing the text. The default tone is generally serious but also fairly casual, for instance, using exclamations like "wow!" and "right?". I vetted the podcasts to ensure accuracy of information and appropriateness of focus and tone of the conversation. I edited a few of the files, but only lightly; the tool never produced blatantly inaccurate information. More often, I deleted parts of conversations that were repetitive or, because of language choices, could be misleading. I then downloaded the podcasts and made them available to students via a cloud link. Each week included one to three such podcasts (each ranging from about 8 to 18 minutes long), depending on the number of primary historical texts assigned.

The other recurring learning activity was "AI Conversations." For each week (module) students read one to three primary source documents. For each document, they were required to use an AI chatbot of their choice to engage the chatbot as a tutor. To facilitate this (and to help ensure a similar experience across students), I advised students to use this prompt:

> "I want you to act as my tutor. Ask me questions about the attached document, one at a time. Start with basic fact questions. If I am consistently answering correctly and have covered most of the important information, move on to understanding level questions. If I answer incorrectly, don't give me the correct answer."

I required students to interact with the chatbot for at least 15 minutes, actively seeking to enhance their understanding by referring to the document as needed. As verification, students submitted a screen shot of some point of the conversation that exhibited their understanding of the document. This was graded as a completion grade worth 5 points (out of a course total 320 points).

In an introductory video, I sought to clarify my perspective on AI and guide students' expectations. I explained that I had controlled the podcasts through prompting and editing. But I further noted that students may not always agree with the "take" of these conversations, and their purpose is not to deliver factual information but to help students see how the historical document raises questions for interpreting and applying history to Christian thought and practice today. I encouraged students to imagine they were listening to a conversation with peers; they may not get everything

"right," but one learns more deeply by thinking through how others make meaning of material. For the AI conversations, I reminded students that AI is not totally accurate or unbiased. The point is not that the tool would give or reinforce precisely accurate information but that it would prompt them to engage with the document, think more deeply, and check their understanding.

I encountered some difficulties. Using genAI with primary source documents required finding copyright free versions and creating "clean" PDFs. This was time consuming. A frequent technical difficulty students reported was limitations on functionality with free AI chatbots. When using an uploaded document, the tools would often halt conversation, telling the user to start again after a certain time had passed (or upgrade to a paid version).

More fundamental difficulties lay in students' disposition toward genAI. In some cases, their ignorance about the tools or my pedagogical purposes led to confusion. For instance, several weeks into the course, a student asked, "who is the gal on the podcasts with you?" Another student noted with frustration that the genAI didn't seem to help with the weekly fact-based quizzes.

A more prominent theme was student apprehension about AI (Avcı, 2024). In their introductory videos, several students noted concerns. One student asked if the course would "require a lot of AI." When I confirmed this, the student dropped the course. Another student dropped the course in week three, citing being "weirded out" by AI. For some, resistance or technical concerns were too great an obstacle to participation. Others persisted through apprehensions, with one reporting mid-semester that it was "slightly off-putting to listen to so much non-human audio content."

On the other hand, students who were resistant generally grew in their appreciation for genAI as it was used in the course. According to surveys, 35% of students initially reported being extremely uncomfortable with genAI, which decreased to 5% by mid-term. Overall discomfort levels dropped from 60% to 20%. In the words of one student, "I really resisted [AI] at first, but now I really like it."

Beyond growing comfort levels, students also noted that genAI deepened their engagement and understanding. As one student reported:

> The format of this course initially gave me pause. Hmm a requirement to interact with AI. I am finding each week this is precisely what I look forward to. The tutoring is very helpful in the self-assessment of my understanding of the historical documents…I enjoyed the back and forth "chat" and relaxed into it…and I appreciated the double-check of the understanding of the document.

Another student reflected on how genAI affected their own learning process:

> The AI assignments have been different from what I normally do yet help me process the primary source readings better than if I just read them and moved on.

Implementation of genAI in this course was at times bumpy. In future iterations of the course, I will proactively give more technical instructions about AI tools and communicate more repeatedly and emphatically the nature of genAI and its intended role in student learning. But I found that, in line with prior research, experience can significantly reduce student apprehension (Strzelecki, 2024), and genAI podcasts and tutoring conversations may meet some of the pedagogical objectives of real-time discussions that are not possible in asynchronous courses.

References

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