

From Awareness to Engagement: Online Discussion Assignments in Psychology and Student Use of AI Tools

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I remember a time when students submitted their written assignments on paper—does that tell you how long I've been teaching? I also recall when most of our course assignments were conducted face-to-face in the classroom. Times have certainly changed, and as educators, we adapt along with them. One of the most significant changes in recent years has been the rapid rise of generative AI tools. This rise has transformed not only how we engage with technology but also how students approach academic tasks, especially in writing skills. While the growth of generative AI brings with it the good, the bad, and the ugly, it has reshaped the educational landscape.

As someone who enjoys using technology in my field, I recognize the importance of understanding these tools and using them thoughtfully. The quick growth of OpenAI's ChatGPT has created questions about how it might be used by students. Research has shown that when used effectively, technology can enhance students' writing processes, for example, by improving organization and grammar (Cotton, et al., 2024). However, challenges remain. Many students struggle to use these tools efficiently and responsibly, raising concerns about overreliance, academic integrity, and reduced critical thinking skills (Fajt, et al., 2025; Playfoot, et al., 2024). While this has affected students' writing skills, it has also introduced a new challenge for educators. As an educator, I have observed the growing presence of AI in student assignments, which prompted me to adapt my teaching methods to account for this influence.

Adapting to AI in Student Work

When I first noticed the influence of generative AI on student assignments, I realized the need to modify my teaching approach. I created online discussion questions to encourage students to engage with the course material and express their thoughts. The directions for these discussions were specific to ensure clarity and depth in their responses. I wanted to make sure that I included specific details related to the assignment, examples of the initial post and reply, and tips for success. Below is an example of how I structured the online discussions in my course.

Directions for Online Discussions

1. Initial Post

- Write and number each question before providing your answers.
- Answer the questions in order.
- Each response must include at least three sentences.

Initial Post Questions

1. Identify a topic in this chapter that was easy to understand.
2. Describe a topic that you found new or interesting.
3. Describe what was difficult to understand in this chapter (there will always be something).

Initial Post Example

1. Identify a topic in this chapter that was easy to understand.

Understanding the parts and functions of the neuron was easier than I thought it would be. The visuals we used in class helped me see how each part connects. The dendrites receive messages and then send to the axon that starts an electrical signal. I liked how each part of the neuron had a specific job and once it the electrical signal started it would not stop until the end.

2. Describe a topic that you found new or interesting.

Learning about the different types of neurotransmitters was one of the most interesting parts of this topic. I didn't realize there were so many, like dopamine, serotonin, and GABA, and how each one affects things like mood, movement, and alertness. It was cool to learn that small chemical changes can have such a big impact on how we think and feel. This made the brain seem even more complex and fascinating to me.

3. Describe what was difficult to understand in this chapter (there will always be something).

I found EPSPs and IPSPs a little confusing. It was hard to keep track of how one makes a neuron more likely to fire (EPSP) and the other makes it less likely (IPSP). The part that made it difficult was understanding how small changes in ion flow, like sodium entering the cell, could change the overall activity of the neuron. It was also hard to remember which type of potential did what, since they sound kind of similar and both happen after the synapse.

2. Reply

- Respond to at least one classmate's post, focusing on their answer to "Describe what was difficult to understand in this chapter."
- Your reply must be at least three sentences long.

- Note: General comments like “Hi, Isabella,” “I found this difficult too,” or “Thank you for sharing your thoughts” do not count toward the required three sentences, though you may include them as part of your response.

Reply Example

Student Post (What was difficult to understand):

“I got a bit confused while reading chapter two because of all the definitions and the many neurotransmitters. I think the most confusing part would be memorizing the definitions and all the roles that play a part in the human nervous system. I think after studying the flashcards and reading the chapter again will help.”

Your Reply:

“I understand how challenging it can be to memorize all the neurotransmitters and their roles. One method that worked for me was creating a spreadsheet with each neurotransmitter listed in one column and its functions in another. Hiding the functions and trying to recall them helped me identify which ones I needed to review more. Additionally, the professor’s video on study techniques was helpful.”

Tips for Success

- Be specific and detailed in your responses to ensure depth and engagement.
- Write in your own words. Do not use generative AI such as ChatGPT or any other AI tools to write your responses.
- Manage your time to meet the deadlines for both your initial post and your reply.

Observations and Challenges

While the majority of the students followed the detailed directions, there were still incidents where generative AI might have been used. Despite the clear directions, I observed that some students still relied on generative AI to complete their assignments. This was clear from the use of advanced words and sentence structures that didn’t match their usual writing style. To further investigate, I compared the writing styles in the discussion board posts with the open-ended questions on web-cam exams. The differences in grammar and expression were noticeable, suggesting that some students were using generative AI for their written assignments but not for the web-cam exams. To address the potential use of generative AI in the discussions, I provided feedback reminding students to use their own words and avoid AI-generated content. However, some students continued to use generative AI.

Reflections on What Worked

The introduction of online discussion questions was a positive change, as it encouraged students to engage more deeply with the course material. The specific directions helped students un-

derstand the expectations and structure their responses accordingly. The requirement for replies to classmates' posts fostered a sense of community and collaboration among students. The feedback provided to students about avoiding AI-generated content was also beneficial. It raised awareness about the importance of academic integrity and the value of expressing their own thoughts. Some students responded positively to the feedback and made efforts to write in their own words.

Challenges and Areas for Improvement

One of the main challenges was the persistent use of AI by some students, despite the clear directions and feedback. This highlighted the need for more effective strategies to discourage AI use and promote authentic student work. Additionally, the comparison between discussion posts and exam responses revealed inconsistencies in writing styles, indicating that some students were not using the guidelines.

Future Plans

Moving forward, I plan to continue using this template for online chapter discussion, but I will modify some aspects to assist to improve students understanding of the assignments and writing skills. I will add an additional lecture at the beginning of the semester that provides an overview on how to avoid the use of generative AI and the importance of academic integrity. I will also include the benefits of using their own thoughts and ideas that could enhance their critical thinking and communication skills. Finally, I will share examples of high-quality student work that demonstrates originality and depth. To ensure that students understand this material I will assess their understanding using a low-based quiz.

Conclusion

Accounting for the use of generative AI in student work, these experiences have been a new adventure in my teaching practice. By continuing to refine my strategies and provide support, I aim to continue to create a learning environment that values authenticity and fosters the development of critical thinking and communication skills. This journey of integrating generative AI awareness in teaching is ongoing, and I am committed to adapting and improving my practices to better support student learning.

References

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