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Framing of Generative AI in first-year writing course syllabus: A call for attitudinal shift

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Abstract

As generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) or AI becomes ubiquitous, writing instructors and researchers face unique challenges in designing and formulating policies around AI in first-year writing classes. By analyzing syllabuses and assignment prompts of first-year composition classes in three US colleges, this essay investigates how writing instructors in the study frame GenAI in their official communications with students and the implications for transparency and adoption of AI for first-year writing. The study shows that policies around AI are generally weak or vague, reinforcing a gap in knowledge about AI literacy. Drawing inferences from existing AI awareness and writing scholarship, this essay recommends a combination of attitudinal shift and curricular revision to promote understanding and ethical use of AI in first-year composition courses.

Keywords: AI Framing; AI Perception; First-Year Writing; Composition Pedagogy; AI Policy

1. Introduction

In this paper, I examine how instructors of three first-year writing classes in three US universities frame generative artificial intelligence (AI), such as GPT, in first-year composition syllabuses and assignment prompts. I argue that how instructors frame AI in their syllabuses indicates their perception of AI and has implications for trust and accountability when students use AI for writing. When an instructor criminalizes AI and frames it as destructive to academic integrity or students' ability to think independently, it creates an atmosphere of distrust for AI and reluctance on the part of students to admit they use AI.

In their paper, "Communicating the Limitations of AI: The Effect of Message Framing and Ownership on Trust in Artificial Intelligence," Taenyun Kim and Hayeon Song hypothesize that positive framing, compared to negative framing, allows a more favorable perception of AI in terms of "cognitive and behavioral trust" (7). Framing of AI in syllabuses is rarely neutral. They contain moral judgment about practices that are acceptable and unacceptable in how students interact with AI. This paper seeks to answer the question, how does the framing of generative AI in first-year writing courses influence students' attitudes and how they use AI for writing assignments?

I started thinking about how metaphorical framing affects the perception of AI in the writing classroom during one of my classes in graduate school. The professor asked the class to mention words or phrases to describe generative AI. Everyone, including the professor, produced a range of phrases such as a "library," a "writing tool," a "support system," and so on. Although casual and facetious, I discovered that our answers reflected deep-seated biases we had toward AIs and the positions we think they occupy in writing classes. For example, someone who describes AI as a writing assistant recognizes an important role that a specific AI software plays in the writing process, such as how it can make brainstorming fast and efficient by providing helpful content. In other words, phrases or metaphors that individuals or institutions choose to describe AI are rarely neutral as they reflect biases that shape what they think of AI and how they

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talk about it. Framing reflects biases, which in turn form and shape the attitudes the instructor invites their students to embody.

At present, many institutions of higher education in the country have in place antagonistic policies toward the use of generative AI for students' coursework. The few ones that are accepting of the technology are either vague about the extent to which a student may use AI or load their policies with a long list of conditions and frames that are as good as saying, "You see, you can use AI, but avoid it!" But whether writing faculty or GTAs like it or not, AI has come to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. With each passing day, we can see how these technologies continue to grow in complexity and sophistication. Instead of maintaining a paranoid stance against these technologies, institutions should start reexamining the morality or ethical foundation that underpins their attitudes towards generative AI. In my research paper, I will explore some of the ethical basis and epistemological assumptions that inform negative attitudes toward generative AI and argue for a shift from a paranoid framing to a positive framing that recognizes the functional benefits of AI in the writing process.

2. Literature Review

Research on generative AIs and their implications for writing classrooms has continued to proliferate computer and writing scholarship. As large language models such as ChatGPT become increasingly sophisticated and more accessible to students, many writing teachers worry that students will rely on this technology to write essays, thereby upsetting the traditional conception of writing as a process. Meanwhile, there is a growing body of literature that projects a more positive view of AI, arguing that thoughtful and strategic integration of AI in classrooms can help rather than hinder the effective teaching and learning of writing.

Our perception of generative AIs shapes how we engage or choose not to engage with them. Much of our perceptions are shaped by the metaphors we use to describe technology. Anderson Sampson explores the limitations of "tool and collaborator" metaphors that are dominant in writing studies and the implications for students (Anderson 1). Anderson recommends an expansion in ChatGPT framing as a critical way of scaffolding students' critical digital literacy of the technology. This expansion includes using medical and surgical metaphors in which AIs are reconceptualized as acting to extend human capabilities into the environment. This view, however, implies technological determinism of AI which Anderson argues writing teachers can confront by engaging the students to critique the "ethical ambiguity and risks" of using AI in their writing assignments (Anderson 11).

Further, Courtney Stanton has advanced a more liberal perspective on chatbots and their place in today's writing class. Envisioning a world dominated by AI, Stanton challenges the skepticism arising from the belief that the use of AI compromises "academic integrity" (183) and encourages writing teachers to redefine tropes they have built around their beliefs and assumptions about writing. This position aligns with Johnson Gavin's argument against what he calls "policing" in academia. Johnson notes that some teachers "seem eager to discipline and punish" to prevent plagiarism (172). He further interrogates the ideology that underpins the "continued deployment of the discourse of crisis" (Johnson 169) in academia, questioning the prevalence of surveillance culture in writing classrooms, and advocating a more accepting attitude toward AI.

In its July 2023 working paper, the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI describes generative AI technologies as "writing aids" that can be beneficial to the teaching and learning of writing. They maintain that the "primary work of educators is to support students' intellectual and social development and to foster exploration and creativity rather than to surveil, discipline, or punish students" (Byrd et al, 3). The conception of AI as a writing aid is interesting. The paper compares AI to earlier technologies of writing such as clay, word processors with autocorrect, and research citations. In other words, AI is a form of writing assistance that students can use to make writing more efficient and effective. Writing has always interacted and evolved with new technologies. And like other technologies that precede it, AI is a writing technology that is reshaping conceptions of writing. The extent to which AI impacts the teaching and learning of writing is an area that needs to be further studied by writing scholars.

In a survey of 399 undergraduate and postgraduate students from various disciplines in Hong Kong, Cecilia Chan and Wunjie Hu found that students expressed positive attitudes toward AI and recommended teachers to scaffold their students' writing by developing their critical thinking skills and rhetorical awareness that prioritize "transparency, accuracy, and privacy" (Chan and Hu 15). A 2023 survey conducted by Best Colleges, an online college and university ranking website, shows that 56% of college students have used AI on an assignment or Exam (Nam). Similarly, a study sponsored by Turnitin surveyed 1,600 students and 1,000 faculty members in the fall of 2023 and found that nearly half of college students are using AI tools, outnumbering only a quarter or 22% of faculty members who use them (Coffey). With the explosion of AI tools that are available to our students at no cost, it will be ironic to assume that students are

not already using them. Many of our students have become so adept at using these AIs that exposing AI-generated content in their work becomes almost impossible. If they are already using this technology, the right thing to do is to build an environment where teachers and students can have a conversation about the use of AI.

In their contribution to *TextGenEd: Teaching with Text Generation Technologies*, an edited collection of scholarship on AI uses in writing classrooms, Laquintano et al. submit that "fostering student understanding of them [AI technologies] is important" (Laquintano et al). They further argue that "instructional experimentation will collectively put us in a much better position to determine, to the extent that we are able, how these tools should be adopted, and how we might resist them when necessary." Critical AI literacy could help address ethical and societal implications that may arise from the use of AI in writing/language classrooms. The authors argue that these efforts must start from and reflect in policymaking and curriculum design.

A thoughtful and comprehensive AI policy takes the perspectives of both the teachers and their students into consideration. "By understanding students' perceptions and addressing their concerns, policymakers can create well-informed guidelines and strategies for the responsible and effective implementation of GenAI tools," Chan and Hu argue (1). However, it can be argued that many classroom policies about AI are formulated without considering what the students think about this technology. Administrators, faculty, and sometimes graduate students create these policies and hand them down to students. This lack of avenue for joint decision-making can lead to mutual distrust between students and teachers (a situation where students do not open up about their use of AI and teachers surveil their students' work through various means, including using AI detector tools). Creating a more democratic, partnership-based classroom can offer an opportunity for teachers and students to negotiate boundaries, limitations, and expectations.

At present, many institutions of higher education in the country have in place antagonistic policies toward the use of generative AI for students' coursework. The few ones that are accepting of the technology are either vague about the extent to which a student may use AI or load their policies with a long list of conditions and frames that are as good as saying, "You see, you can use AI, but don't use it!" But whether writing faculty or GTAs like it or not, AI has come to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. With each passing day, we can see how these technologies continue to grow in complexity and sophistication. Instead of maintaining a paranoid stance against these technologies, institutions should start reexamining the morality or ethical foundation that underpins their attitudes towards generative AI. In the section that follows, I will explore some of the ethical basis and epistemological assumptions that inform negative attitudes toward generative AI and argue for a shift from a paranoid framing to a positive framing that recognizes the functional benefits of AI in the writing process.

3. Research Context

This paper contributes to John Trimbur's argument against the notion of crisis discourses that pervade composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies. In his much-cited paper, Trimbur, as far back as 32 years ago, decries the danger of evoking the notion of crisis when technologies alter traditional views of writing. From the 870s shock that followed the results of Harvard's entrance exams to the "Why Johnny Can't Read" crisis of the 1970s, anxieties over education have persisted through time. Unfortunately, these crisis tropes have been reinvented and become more prevalent with the emergence of advanced technologies, such as new digital media, and new information economies, such as AI and the Large Language Model (LLM). It is not uncommon to hear folks in composition and literacy studies, GTAs and faculty alike, argue that ChatGPT will hurt students' writing and communication skills. And now that more and more college students are using AI for their assignments, many think learning has ceased and the school system is on the cusp of collapse.

Trimbur argues that literacy crisis discourses are "always strategic" and demonstrates how it has normalized the "meritocratic educational order" (285-286). Williams Browny views the crisis rhetoric through a Marxist lens, arguing that the belief that students are not learning as much as they should learn is sustained by the middle class to maintain "status and privilege." He further asserts that the "Bourgeois fears that without the proper literacy and linguistic markers, they will lose the cultural capital to ensure their identities (Williams 179-180 qtd in Alexander 41). This paper will interrogate how the notion of literacy crisis may have shaped AI policies in first-year composition classes. Common crisis tropes such as plagiarism, obsession for academic integrity, and the ever-present crisis of basic writing are briefly explored.

4. Data Collection

I collected and reviewed the AI policy sections of the first-year composition class syllabuses of three US universities. I have named these schools A, B, and C for the sake of anonymity. Since the AI policies are generally short, I present the policies in the table below.

Table 1 Excerpts of AI policies

School	AI Policy
A	I expect that the papers you submit to me will represent your own thinking and your own writing and not the work of AI tools. Because your process is important in this course, I will always expect you to be able to explain and defend the choices you have made in your writing. If your instructor approves the use of an AI tool as part of your writing for an assignment (e.g., as a way to brainstorm or as a way to refine a research question), you should be able to cite the tool used and explain how and why you used the tool in the reflective writing you submit with your final-for-now drafts and with your end-of-semester portfolio. Failure to do so is an academic integrity violation.
B	The use of AI will not be tolerated for any coursework, including essays and discussion posts. Comp I is about finding and fostering your unique voice, and there is no way to rely on non-feeling technology to do that. This includes having your essays or sentences rewritten or redesigned by tools like Grammarly or QuillBot. If this policy is breached, we will discuss appropriate measures one-on-one outside of class.
C	The use of text-generating AI should always be openly discussed with your instructor prior to the submission of any work.

School A is a land-grant public university located in the southeastern region of the United States. The school records an average of 4,000 first-year students across over 130 majors, most of whom would go on to take at least one first-year English composition class at some point in their academic journey. Like the rest of the schools I surveyed for this project, School A relies heavily on the graduate students in their department of English to teach first-year English composition under the close supervision of experienced professors. The first-year English course syllabus reviewed in this paper is a general course that aims to help students become "thoughtful participants in a democratic society." At the end of the course, students are expected to have achieved the intellectual integration and awareness they will need to "adapt to change and meet challenges in their personal, social, and professional lives." This class encourages students to be the authentic authors of their work but still gives room for negotiation. For example, students may use AI technology in the writing process, but they have to cite and discuss the choices they make.

School B is also a land-grant public university. It is located in the southwest region of the country and boasts an average first-year enrollment of 4500 students every session, spread across over 100 majors. The first-year composition syllabus I surveyed is titled Composition 1: Gaming as Expression, which is a general course and is designed to prepare students to "tackle college-level challenges like analytical writing and developing unique and powerful arguments." Based on this reason, students are encouraged to work collaboratively to foster their voice as writers and grow their writing skills. This class expresses zero tolerance for the use of AI in student writing. According to the policy on AI, essays and discussion posts are to be completed unaided by the students, and breaching that rule would attract some consequences that are stated in the document.

School C is a land-grant public university located in the southeastern region of the state. It is by far the biggest university in the state where it is and boasts a yearly enrollment of over 3,00 students spread over one hundred undergraduate majors. Most of these students are required to take one or two first-year English composition classes. The class syllabus analyzed in this paper is the sequel of the first part first-year composition class offered in the fall of every year. The course is designed to help students develop a repertoire of diverse rhetorical strategies that will enable them to assess and appropriately respond to each assignment student's genre, audience, and purpose. Students are also expected to develop critical thinking skills and demonstrate the same in writing. The particular syllabus quoted in this paper may not represent the AI policy position of the department, as each instructor is permitted to shape the policy however they like it. The policy neither encourages nor discourages the use of AI. Instead, the instructor simply invites the students to an open conversation about the use of AI in their work.

5. Data Analysis/Discussion

From the samples of AI policies quoted in this paper, one thing is clear: each class seems to place a high priority on students' ability to think critically and communicate thoughts, feelings, and findings in their voices. For example, School A clearly states that students should strive to "represent their thinking and writing and not the work of AI tools." From the aforementioned statement, one can infer that the authors assume that using AI in writing is at odds with writing to reflect one's thinking due to differences in voice and language. School B describes AI as non-feeling technology, and thus incapable of replicating human feelings.

In linguistics, scholars have demonstrated renewed interest in research aimed at understanding similarities and differences between human language and machine language. While pro-machine language scholars have consistently dismissed the artificiality of machine language, many, including Jurafsky and Martin, acknowledge that human and machine processing of language acknowledges differences (2). One of the commonly cited differences is how humans and machines ground language. While humans are grounded in "real-world interactions," LLMs have no such grounding (Anderson 3). This reason partly explains why many writing teachers, scholars, and researchers believe that AIs are deficient in reflecting or representing human thinking.

It is also important to pay attention to how Schools A and B place emphasis on original work. In the academe, academic integrity is a common trope that faculty and administrators evoke to ensure compliance with fundamental moral codes or ethical policy. These generally involve complying with clearly defined standards of attribution, citations, references, data integrity, etc. There is a widespread belief that AI encourages students to cheat on writing assignments. While academic integrity is designed to elicit accountability, it is increasingly being used as a tool for policing and surveilling student work. Gavin argues that "much discourse centered on plagiarism and academic integrity positions student writers as purposely deceitful and mercilessly unethical" (172). MLA and CCCC have warned that "students may experience an increased sense of alienation and mistrust if surveillance and detection approaches meant to ensure academic integrity are undertaken" (MLA-CCCC Statement 10).

Arguments about the originality of AI have proven nothing but inconclusive. Some language scholars agree that the text a model generates is "original in the sense that it represents combinations of letters and words that generally have no exact match in the training documents" (MLA-CCCC Statement 6). However, a counterargument for the unoriginality of AI text since the content it generates is determined by patterns in its training data. That said, a similar language model "may generate a variety of different sequences in response to the same input prompt (MLA-CCCC Statement 6).

6. Recommendation and Conclusion

A review and analysis of the AI policies in the syllabuses of three first-year composition classes in three public universities only provides a narrow insight into the position of faculty and GTAs about AI in first-year English composition classes. However, they reflect the practices of some instructors. From the policies, it is clear that instructors were wary of AI in first-year English composition classes that encourage student voice and original thinking. But instead of simply framing AI as deleterious to student writing or voice, composition teachers may be able to help their students reap the benefits of the vast library and encyclopedic knowledge that AI possesses by promoting more flexible AI policies. A more flexible AI policy can be deliberated, drafted, and enforced by both the teachers and their students. This approach involves an open conversation about the benefits, risks, and ethical use of AI.

The first time I relied entirely on AI to create an essay (for an upper-level graduate seminar on AI pedagogy), I was astounded by how fast it generated the prose in around 90 seconds. It would probably take me a few days or weeks to write an essay of 5000 words, depending on my schedule. Such a technological capability threatens to disrupt the order we value in the writing process, such as brainstorming, drafting, peer-review, and editing. In addition, the AI-generated essay demonstrates advanced vocabulary, structural brilliance, and intellectual engagement with ongoing conversations in the field of composition. This implies that surface-level features such as grammatical correctness or syntactical sophistication can no longer be a reliable way to assess writing. The tendency to mask weakness by relying on AI complicates the learning process as it may be difficult for instructors to know where an individual needs support. As a writing instructor, I am challenged to reexamine my assessment practices to avoid rewarding students who cheat with AI while "punishing" students who actually do the work, even if their writing is rustic or falls below what we might describe as "quality work". Further, this awareness presents an opportunity for me to reevaluate my teaching practices to prioritize lessons, activities, and assignments that prioritize learning the art and science of writing, itself. As Stanton noted, "A chatbot, by spitting out an essay, may help an overworked student to stay afloat in a class, but it does not teach them about writing" (184). I think some of the ways to teach knowledge associated with writing may include prioritizing

more and more in-class writing, public writing that addresses issues of local and global concerns, multimodal composition, collaborative storytelling projects, ekphrasis (writing about physical objects or artwork), and polyglossia. I think each of these teaching or assignment focuses has the potential to disincentivize overreliance on AI while helping students to learn critical thinking, metacognitive, and critical reflective skills.

Source evaluation is a critical component in the composition process. While AI like ChatGPT and Claud try to mimic "academic language" in the content they generate, the lack of accurate attribution and citation persists throughout their outputs, raising concerns about accountability. For example, Claud cited a few notable writing scholars in the essay that were never included in the "works cited" section of the way and one cannot be sure they made claims attributed to them unless one does further research. Such sloppiness is rarely tolerated in academic writing—and could easily be fixed by a human writer during a peer review or editing phase. Hallucination is one of the limitations associated with most of the AI tools that are currently on the market, and this often leads to the generation of content that contains harmful stereotypes, unfounded claims, and wrong attribution (Byrd 139). Based on this observation, writing scholars and writers can reimage an AI literacy-informed pedagogy that emphasizes the ethical importance of using relevant outside sources and referencing them correctly. By critically evaluating sources, students can develop critical thinking and sound judgment. Thus, annotated bibliographies remain one of the most important relics of the traditional composition pedagogy that can help ensure that students carefully research and select sources that are relevant to their claims, and also use them correctly in their writing.

In addition, this paper recommends a syllabus that includes a few class sessions about the use of AI where instructors and students can have open conversations about AI, and its potentials and limitations. When such open discussion is encouraged, students gain more understanding of the impact, benefits and drawbacks of AI on their writing. As Kim and Song argue, a critical understanding of AI communication may affect users' perceptions and decision-making behavior (20). Class sessions dedicated to teaching and learning the functionality, limitations, and ethics of AI, for example, may help students decide whether they want to use it and how they choose to use it in their writing. Instructors may also teach critical AI literacy skills such as prompt engineering, using prompting frameworks like RTFS (Role, Task, Format, and Style) or RODES (Role, Objectives, Details, Examples, and Sense Check)Current and emerging knowledge in rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies has shown that students can benefit from AIs in tremendous ways. MLA and CCCC maintain that "students can use LLMs to help stimulate thought and develop drafts that are still the student's work and to overcome psychological obstacles to tackling invention and revision" (MLA-CCCC Statement 9). Further, the use of AIs has proven to be effective in helping students to produce creative materials when developing multimodal projects as I have witnessed in my students' works. These points, put together, suggest that AIs have the potential to act as literacy sponsors to young academic writers

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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