

Transcript

Intro

MUSIC

AMY:

Hello and welcome to The New, part of the New Media Writing & Rhetoric *podcast team*.

ROSEE:

Hi there, I'm Rosee,

Amy:

I'm Amy. We're your hosts for today's episode, "AI in the UAH classroom."

Bump:

Amy:

Today the topic is AI technology and how it's affecting the college classroom. It's been hard to miss the steady influx of AI tools over the past few years that can assist with anything from art to science to writing.

Rosee:

This influx is changing the way we as students learn and function in the college classroom. But is it good or bad? How should we as students use it in the classroom? We spoke to professors across campus who have some good ideas.

Amy:

So, the faculty we spoke with comes from across the UAH campus from the sciences to the humanities. They shared their thoughts, opinions, experiences, and insight into how AI has affected their approach to teaching, and how their students learn.

Body:

Rosee:

I spoke with Dr. Ryan Weber. He heads the Technical Communications program here at UAH and teaches a number of writing and usability courses. Let's listen to that discussion.

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Rosee:

All right. Well, thank you for being here. Dr Weber. Um, I'll just ask you a few questions and we'll get started.

Um, so what have you noticed about how your students are using AI for their coursework?

Ryan:

So again, when we have students have assignments that incorporate and kind of ask them to test the tools and see what the tools are like, they tend to find that AI is okay to pretty good. So like it kind of, it'll get them halfway there, or it will give them something that's pretty good to work with. Students in general seem to be a little bit underwhelmed with AI based on, kind of how it's been sold in the last couple years. Like, "oh it's gonna do everything," you know? And everybody has, like, an AI part of their, you know, technology now. Some students, a few students are, like, vehemently against it on sort of ideological grounds as a writer. Which I understand! And a lot of students kind of fall in the middle of like: I could see where this would be helpful for particular things. And there are, I'm sure there are students, and I know there are students that are just, like, generating everything with AI. I think most of my classes are writing students, so they tend to want to write more, I assume. Uh, and I'm guessing that, you know, students who hate writing and you know, don't want to do it, are probably leaning much more on these tools. In the same way that students who hate math when the calculator came out were like, "Oh, thank God," right? "Like, I can, I don't have to do this anymore, right?" So I do understand why some students would gravitate towards it a lot.

Rosee:

Yeah. Well, as a student in your classes, I think I... I know what you mean when you say some students are underwhelmed. You had us use it to make a cover letter and go through that process, and remember having some trouble with it.

Ryan:

Uh huh. Right? It's not like, magical, you know if use it in the right way. And actually, one of the ways that I have wanted to use it is you will, you'll remember this same editing class, right? There are, like, very formulaic documents where I have to go through and grade 20 things where it's like, did they change "shall" to "will," like, in this, I like, it's super straightforward. And I would love to get an AI that, like, goes through does all that for me, and I can't figure out how to do it. Right? And I think that there's a lot of people who are like "this is going to do everything for me." And then when you use it, it's like, it's okay. You know, it's kind of impressive sometimes, and sometimes it's not very smart.

Rosee:

Right. Well, what impacts - if any - have you noticed, kind of, overall, on undergraduate education?

Ryan:

So I think that we're going to see a lot of impacts. And there has been, like, massive freak out, Rosee. Like I cannot overstate the amount of freak out amongst the writing-teacher community. Like it's all anybody wants to talk about, to the point where it's like, all right, let's maybe talk about something else for a while. But I think it's going to have tremendous impacts. I think sort of the best case scenario is that people really learn to use and incorporate it as a tool as part of

their writing process, right? So, you know, second language students who struggle kind of really getting their language to sound natural, AI helps with that. Or at our Advisory Board meeting the other day, a tech writer in town was talking about how he uses AI because the engineers tend to write a lot of passive voice sentences, and they're like, it'll switch it around to active voice really easily, right? So incorporating it for that kind of thing, or students using it for kind of brainstorming, I've heard that suggested a lot. Though, AI doesn't come up with new ideas, so it's not a great tool for that. That's one of the big problems with AI. So I - best case scenario is people learn how to use it well. I also hope that it leads to the creation of more meaningful assignments, because I think the nightmare scenario is that students generate a paper with AI and then the professor grades it with AI. And it's like, why are we doing this? Like, we might as well do something else if that's what we're gonna do, right? Like, this whole thing is pointless, and let's have people write something different and evaluate it differently. I think the other thing that I'm concerned about, that I haven't heard people talk about a lot is there's a lot of evidence about how sort of the act of writing is really important for learning, right? So if I assign you to write three paragraphs about the causes of the Civil War or whatever, like, the act of you writing that out helps you learn. And we - if that gets outsourced to AI, I think that students learning is going to be different, right? Because the act of writing is part of learning, and I don't think we've talked about that enough in terms of kind of the importance of writing yourself as part of processing information.

Rosee:

That's, yeah. That's a really good point. Do you have any advice for incoming students at UA H about how they should use AI or shouldn't use AI?

Ryan:

I think talk to your professor about kind of what their expectations are for AI, because people are kind of wildly different about AI, and then I think find ways to sort of productively bring it into your work, but also to not get over reliant on it. Because that's one of the other things, is, I worry that people are going to get super reliant on, you know, AI spitting out some text for them, and then someday they have to write a wedding toast, or a, you know, a letter that's meaningful, or whatever, and just those muscles have atrophied, right? And so making sure that they can still sometimes write things on their own, just so that they have that skill at the ready, cause AI isn't always going to be there for them.

Rosee:

Right. Well, thank you. Dr Weber, that was really interesting. Thanks for doing this.

Ryan:

No problem. Thanks for having me.

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Rosee:

Our next interview is with a faculty member on the science side of campus, Professor Bradley Kramer from Biology. He teaches some cool classes on cell biology, neurobiology and runs a large lab on campus. Here's what he had to say about AI in the classroom.

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Bradley:

Yeah. So a few different pieces of advice. So, I think AI systems are going to become increasingly prevalent, and I think we should embrace the technology. But, um, but we should learn how to use this technology in the best way. It's important to resist the temptation to use it to solve problems, and instead, I think it can be much more powerful if we if we try to, you know, answer problems independently, and then use AI to supplement our knowledge or to try to think about what we're doing from a different angle. It's also really important during this kind of transition period that incoming students are really careful to communicate with their professors about what the professor's expectations are with AI technology. Because every professor is going to have a completely different view on sort of the pros and cons of the technology and how it aligns with their learning objectives for the course. But I think if it's used in a, uh, you know, not in a generative - not for the initial generation of ideas, but rather as a way to sort of polish and refine ideas that the student independently develops, it can be really powerful. And an example that I like to give students, you know, to kind of think about is, you know, if they were to ask a professor to write a letter of recommendation, how would they feel about if you know the two different scenarios. So one is, if that professor used AI to generate that letter of recommendation from the ground up, right? Do they feel that it would be a very strong letter that really accurately reflects who they are as a student? And probably most of us would be concerned in that situation, that the letter might be generic, you know, that it would lack depth about who that student is, and it wouldn't come across as very original. However, if you know, a professor were to write independently a letter that they think really well describes, you know, the student and their, you know, their strengths, you know, for the particular career objectives. But then kind of putting you know, data concerns aside, which could be a whole different, you know, discussion and of itself, then put that into an AI system and asked for kind of polishing and revision and evaluated what the AI system did to decide, is this, you know, a better way to kind of phrase this, or get my idea that I have initially developed, but is this a better way to convey that idea and get it across? How would they feel about the strength in that letter, right? And so, in the same way that if a professor were to use AI to sort of refine what they already independently developed, that it can actually be a positive tool, similarly, for students, if they use AI to, you know, if they still kind of do the initial original learning and development of ideas, and they use AI to then test their understanding, to refine their understanding, I think that's where they're going to really see the benefit of the technology.

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Amy:

The next faculty member we should chat about today is Jennifer Staton. Now she's an interesting faculty member to hear from because she's an English Department faculty, teaches for the Honors College, and advises Honors students here at UAH. Let me play that conversation for you.

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Even though I do offer writing intensive courses, my situation is quite different than, I would say, a traditional professor who is dealing with a lot of like composition courses, right? I'm dealing with upper level courses for the main part, for the proposal writing part, and then I'm dealing with a seminar based course with honors, 201, which there are very few students, like four or five students, basically, who take that class every semester. So, and the interesting thing about personal statements in particular is that it can be a little bit, just a tiny bit harder, to successfully use something like chat GPT in the personal thing. Because it's a personal story. It's something that the student really has to think about in terms of their own backstory, and that kind of makes it a little bit harder for them to successfully use AI, if that makes sense. Does that answer your question?

Amy:

It does. Thank you.

Jennifer:

Okay.

Amy:

No, I appreciate that. What do you see as some of the impacts of AI in undergraduate education,

Jennifer:

Absolutely, generally? Yeah, I can say generally, and then, because fellowship advising is probably somewhat different from the rest of the people that you'll be kind of interviewing for this, I can also kind of set the scene for what that is looking like in that kind of realm as well. In undergraduate education in general, I think that there is a big impact, I would say, with AI. It is a tool that I think that we need to know how to use. We need to actually kind of be able to know its use, know the benefits, and also maybe use it to a very limited extent in the writing process, right? So do I believe that we should be using AI to generate full essays, fully written essays, and claim it as our own? Absolutely not. I don't believe in that. I do like how other English faculty have been integrating it into the classroom to kind of use it to tell students like "this is kind of how you use it for a certain way." And so using it as a brainstorm tool, I think, is a great way to kind of utilize this tool in a limited capacity, if that makes sense. And so I think that in that way, especially for students who tend to struggle with essay writing, I think that that is - if they don't have access to, like, one on one with an advisor, or, you know, they can't make it fit into their schedule to attend office hours maybe - that can be a tool that can be used to help generate a structure to an essay that they then write. If that makes sense.

Amy:
Yeah.

Jennifer:
So, yeah.

Amy:
So with all that being said, what advice do you have about AI for incoming students?

Jennifer:
Okay, incoming undergraduates, right? So I would not use AI as a cheating tool, right? You know, I think that professors are smarter, maybe than you give them credit for. And I think that it is definitely easier than students think it is for faculty to read an essay, an AI generated essay, and be like “this was not written by you, and I know that the telltale signs,” right? And I think that incoming students really should be aware of that, and to make an effort more on your own. Even if you don't think it's well written, even if you don't think that it is, you know, as organized as it could be, give it a shot on your own before utilizing AI tools. That being said, it's not going away, right? Learn how to use it, but learn how to use it in productive ways. And your faculty can sometimes help you with that. So that is my overall advice.

Amy:
That makes a lot of sense. I can remember myself, I definitely second that advice,

Jennifer:
Yes.

Amy:
So..

Jennifer:
We can tell.

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Discussion/Outro:

Rosee:
Well, as we've heard, AI has been changing things for both students and teachers here at UAH. Amy, what stood out to you in these interviews?

Amy: What's interesting to me is that the advice they give applies to all disciplines. That and don't trust AI to write your papers or do you Chem labs! What stood out to you?

Rosee:

Well in my interview with Dr. Weber, he talks about how the task of writing itself promotes learning. And I do feel like if students use AI to compose reports where it's supposed to be a learning exercise that helps them learn the material, they're able to just bypass that whole process.

Amy: Yes, you may have picked up in my tone that I'm very skeptical about AI. I think I was swayed by the idea that it should only be used for part of the process, and to be mindful that it's not entirely reliable. I think I'll remember Dr. Kramer's recommendation letter analogy for sure and keep that in mind.

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Amy:

Thank you for listening to a New Media Writing & Rhetoric *podcast*. We're The New, Amy and Rosee!

Rosee:

This podcast was brought to you by the students of English Professor Dr. Joseph Robertshaw.

Amy:

While we have no sponsors, but would like to thank UAH Faculty Dr. Ryan Weber and Dr. Bradley Kraemer and Jennifer Staton from the Honor's College for taking the time to contribute to this discussion.

Rosee:

Hope this was helpful UAH! Bye!

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