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Ctrl+AI+Learn
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Article abstract

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Article

Ctrl+AI+Learn: Contextualizing Generative AI Policies for Incoming University Students

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Abstract

This teaching report describes a workshop delivered at the University of Toronto Mississauga as a part of the Robert Gillespie Academic Skills Centre's (RGASC) Head Start program, which introduces incoming students to their new academic environment. The workshop was premised on two guiding ideas: (1) since the University of Toronto maintains flexible guidelines regarding generative AI policies across courses, undergraduate students benefit from participation in candid discussions of the contextual nature of shifting technological values and (2) first-year university students are in the unique position of *also* needing to contextualize the shift from high school to university learning contexts, so they are in particular need of opportunities to discuss the diversity of perspectives surrounding the permissibility of genAI use in higher education. The workshop led students through noticing the differences between high school and university learning expectations; applying socially oriented theories of communication; contextualizing "local" genAI syllabus policies; and crafting a personal theory of acceptable genAI use. This report is a collaboration between an undergraduate student (Enaya) and a writing professor (Seeley). To support educators in replicating or adapting this exercise within their own local contexts, workshop materials are appended.

Introduction

In what follows, we describe a workshop delivered at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM) as a part of the Robert Gillespie Academic Skills Centre's (RGASC) Head Start program. This program is meant to introduce incoming students to university-level expectations and share resources. Several

students working at the RGASC have been participating in research on and otherwise studying generative AI technologies (genAI hereafter), and they were vocal about the value of including a genAI session in the 2024 Head Start schedule. The session described below came out of that need and it was premised on two guiding ideas: (1) since UTM maintains flexible guidelines regarding genAI policies across courses, undergraduate students benefit from participation in candid discussions of the contextual nature of technological values and (2) first-year university students are in the unique position of *also* needing to contextualize the shift from high school to university learning contexts, so they are in particular need of opportunities to discuss the diversity of perspectives surrounding the permissibility of genAI use in higher education.

The 75-minute workshop led students through the following activities: noticing the differences between high school and university learning expectations; applying socially oriented theories of communication; contextualizing "local" genAI syllabus policies; and crafting a personal theory of acceptable genAI use. This workshop had four learning outcomes. Following the session, learners should have been able to (1) notice differences between high school and university learning expectations, (2) begin applying discourse community theory to understand their educational surroundings, (3) contextualize genAI syllabus policies, and (4) make more purposeful decisions about if and when to use genAI tools.

Primer: Comparing Learning Environments and Understanding Written Communication in Social Terms

We began the workshop with the dual purpose of building rapport and co-constructing a baseline of educational experience. To do this, we posed a cluster of open-ended questions for participants' reflection: What kinds of tasks were you assigned in high school? Were people using genAI tools? For what purpose? These questions helped with building rapport because the first one is value free and the second two are disconnected from the self in that they ask participants to describe their peers' actions, not necessarily their own. This allowed us to generate conversation and create a basis for comparing how university-level values and expectations differ from those of high school.

Moving forward, student contributions provided a framing for a mini-lecture on John Swales's discourse community framework (developed 1990; elaborated 2017). We selected this theoretical framework in lieu of others (e.g., communities of practice or activity theory) because most students on our particular campus enrol in a first-year writing class wherein they craft a discourse community

analysis. As such, this seemed like a good opportunity to build synergy between the Head Start program and the curricular experiences its participants were soon to encounter. That said, any of these theories could serve the same purpose. The workshop offered a mini-lecture focusing on Swales's suggestion that a discourse community (DC) can be understood in terms of eight criteria, which we paraphrase here (2017, para. 19, "Reconsidering DC criteria"):

(1) general goals

(2) means for intercommunication

(3) various participatory structures

(4) communicative genres

(5) specific vocabulary

(6) a core group of experienced members

(7) a sense that certain things can be left unsaid

(8) social rhythms, histories, and values

Swales's ideas provided a framing for the following observations: communication practices always change as we move between social contexts (e.g., work vs. school); frames like discourse community theory are tools for understanding new contexts (e.g., university); expectations, goals, and values, will change and, in so doing, cause "ripple effects" (e.g., current and emergent responses to genAI); large scale changes take time to "settle," and this is an unsettled historical moment. Finally, we observed that the foregoing phenomena are typically negotiated dialogically—and it's weird when they're not! This is to say that, the proliferation of genAI tools has not only made the contemporary moment feel "unsettled," but this unsettled feeling is particularly weird because there is so much silence around it. Increased discussion of technopedagogical values may not "settle" things, but increased dialogic negotiation amongst learners and educators may ease the weirdness.

This mini-lecture primed students to begin to imagine university as a set of overlapping disciplinary discourse communities with their own unique expectations, issues, debates, uses of language, and, most importantly, technological values. It also opened the door to imagining genAI use in higher education as a dynamic phenomenon with its own evolution and contextual histories, and it foregrounded the need for candid and sustained conversations around this topic.

Group Activity: Discussing Conflicting GenAI Policies

Following the mini-lecture, we engaged students in a group activity. In preparation for the workshop, we conducted a search for genAI policies within UTM's syllabus archive and analyzed 80 syllabi across 30 departments from Fall 2024. We tracked whether each document contained a genAI policy and whether the use of genAI was deemed permissible (see Section 5 below for additional details and discussion). This exercise illustrated how much inconsistency exists within the syllabus archive, which is not surprising given the relative newness and continuous evolution of genAI as well as instructors' various social and disciplinary responses to these technologies. This inconsistency is surely not unique to a single institutional context, and it highlights the need for communication and transparency between students and instructors regarding the use of genAI.

The activity asked students to form small groups and skim a handout listing 15 syllabus policies from classes across the disciplines. From there, the groups were asked to identify 1-2 policies from disciplines of interest to them *and* 1-2 statements from totally different kinds of disciplines. From there, the groups were asked to engage with these questions:

- Are all the statements clear? Are there points of confusion?

- What social values are the statements based on? Is it clear? Unclear?

- How could you use genAI tools in the context of these specific classes?

- Do permissible uses mesh with your educational goals and values?

Given the large format of this workshop (50-70 students in attendance), most of the conversation needed to occur within the small groups, not across the group as a whole. Nevertheless, we will now convey a few (paraphrased) observations that came from this portion of the exercise.

One group discussed the fact that policies may apply to other, less commonly known or understood AI tools (e.g., tools beyond ChatGPT may be banned; Grammarly may be included explicitly in this ban). While discussing a policy from a course with a strict ban, another group agreed that genAI use in this class wouldn't be consistent with their values or goals because they'd want to master the subject matter themselves[1]. Some students noted how they appreciated policies that offered examples of when genAI use is—and is not—permissible. They found this to be transparent and realistic. They generally wished there was more specificity and clarity across the 15 sample

policies examined. One student noted a policy that struck them as "sensible." They discussed how the class allowed for the use of genAI to help with understanding the course material, but not with the completion of course assessments. This is where many students described "drawing the line" in their own technological practices. We will turn to the issue of how students may develop such personal discernments and ethical stances in the next section.

Independent Writing: Crafting a Theory of Acceptable GenAI Use

The final component of this workshop gave students space for independent writing. Again, thinking of the fact that many of the workshop attendees would soon enrol in our first-year writing course, the reflective writing component we're about to describe mirrors an assignment from that class. Here, we asked students to build on all the ideas we'd been discussing in order to start articulating a theory of acceptable genAI use. The students were reminded that theories explain and predict the world, and they are constantly evolving. As such, they were instructed to keep in mind that the "theory" they started developing that day would—and MUST—evolve as they experienced new university contexts and gained new knowledge. Within this context the students were asked to draft a statement that accounted for anticipated genAI use in terms of their personal goals, disciplinary values, and their understandings of academic integrity. Please see Appendix 1 for a complete prompt.

Discussion: The Archived Syllabi

While some syllabi list policies that go in depth about the impacts of misusing genAI, others omit the mention of genAI altogether Of the thirty programs whose syllabi we sampled, only one maintained a consistent policy, with identical wording and permissibility. In contrast, of those same 30 programs, two had no mention of AI in their documents. Nevertheless, students' use of genAI in university is inevitable, and we suggest that guidelines must be explicitly (and regularly) addressed by professors to ensure responsible and effective usage.

In our analysis, we also tracked methods of assessment. However, we found no correlation between the method of assessment and the question of genAI permissibility. For instance, two syllabi from the same program prohibited the use of genAI despite having contrasting methods of assessment. One of these courses assessed students through tests and exams, while the other used essays, projects, and presentations. Syllabi from other programs that assessed students in similar ways also revealed no correlation between the form of assessment and the permissibility of genAI. This lack of cohesion was observable within programs, between professors, and even across courses

with the same professor. For instance, one program offers a first-year course with a genAI policy, yet the syllabus for a second-year course taught by the same professor has no mention of genAI, despite both courses being mounted in the same department and assessing students through similar means.

Syllabi from six programs included detailed policies with clear guidelines and realistic expectations. We describe the policies as clear and realistic because they include specific examples of prompts and scenarios that model appropriate genAI use within the specific course context. Additionally, the policies explain how using genAI unethically can negatively impact students' learning. For example, one syllabus describes how the course is structured to help students build strong research and writing capabilities, which involves prioritizing originality and creativity. It goes on to discuss originality in terms of mistakes and discoveries. It closes by noting that genAI use forecloses on this kind of processual intellectual development.

In contrast, some instructors have begun integrating genAI into their existing assignments for their 2024-2025 courses. For instance, one course asks students to prompt ChatGPT to formulate an essay, analyze its biases, and then form their own essay that exceeds the quality of the AI-generated version. This activity encourages critical reflection on the quality and reliability of genAI outputs, while also ensuring that submitted work cannot be identical to a genAI response. We also noticed that in courses where genAI *is* permitted, students are often required to include additional citations or metacognitive reports explaining how and why they used the technology. A few policies also discussed alternative sources for "help" beyond genAI, including office hours and campus resources, such as the RGASC. We suggest that each of these approaches offer nice models and/or starting points for using the syllabus as a space for setting realistic expectations and fostering a communicative classroom environment.

Impressions & Conclusions

We've described here a workshop offered as a part of the Head Start program at UTM which introduces incoming students to their new academic environment. Because we're reporting on one-shot instruction, we cannot, for example, comment on students' learning in or experience of the session. That said, we envision this set of activities as adaptable and replicable across classroom contexts, wherein educators would have access to more specific details and feedback regarding student learning.

Whether it takes place in a one-off workshop or across a series of class meetings within a course, there is value in the transparent discussions of genAI any educational context. As we seek to help

students progress in their academic and professional careers, learning how to effectively utilize genAI tools can be greatly beneficial. This is especially true in first-year contexts, since genAI tools are an emergent part of an educational landscape that is itself new for incoming and first-year students. These inconsistencies can cause high stakes confusion for students, and they signal the need for open, sustained conversations between students, TAs, professors, departments, and administrators. Additionally, strictly prohibiting the use of genAI might prompt students to seek loopholes and resort to unethical practices, rather than openly developing new skills in collaboration with their instructors. Experimenting with genAI tools encourages students to enhance valuable skills, including evaluative judgement and rhetorical load sharing. Fostering an open and communicative environment is a significant step in encouraging students to share their experiences as we learn to navigate significant, emerging technologies.

Endnotes

1. Please note the selection bias here. The Head Start program often draws keen students, and this is an anecdotal report of a group conversation led by a professor, so there is a likelihood of students engaging in "teacher pleasing."

References

Swales, John M. (2017). "The concept of discourse community: Some recent personal history." *Composition Forum*, *37*, https://compositionforum.com/issue/37/swales-retrospective.php

Swales, John M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge University Press.

Appendix 1

"Crafting a Theory of Acceptable GenAI Use" (a student-facing prompt)

Theories explain and predict the world, and they are constantly evolving and changing. The "theory" you start developing today will—and MUST—change as your university context grows, as you have time to experience new things and gain new knowledge.

Your theory of acceptable genAI use should first account for your **personal goals**. What do you want out of university? What kind of knowledge do you hope to gain? What goals will this degree

help you achieve? Where do you see yourself having moments of struggle in achieving these goals? (It happens for everyone!)

It should also account for **disciplinary values**. You are only just starting the process of becoming a professional in your field, so your knowledge here is limited. But what values do you see reflected in the syllabus statements we reviewed? Does your intended field seem to embrace genAI tools? Can you tell why/not based on the syllabus statement? What more do you need to learn in this regard?

Finally, your theory should demonstrate a strong understanding of **academic integrity** expectations. Sometimes the use of genAI tools is permissible from an academic integrity standpoint, but does that mean you think it's ethical and/or good for your learning process? In other cases, genAI tools are banned altogether, which means you may need to change your workflow from class-to-class. How do you plan to deal with these shifting expectations?