Episode: How Can Making Artificial Intelligence-Proof Assignments Improve Your Class?
Series: AI in the Classroom
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Ioana Literat:
In changing my assignments to make them more ChatGPT proof, I actually made my courses better.

[short electronic musical sting]

I was really interested in the summer of 2022 when these visual generative AI tools started becoming more prominent, like DALL-E, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion and they were doing some of the same things that I was interested in my dissertation eight years prior, which were leveling the field in certain ways, leveling the creative field, putting creative tools in the hands of the people for better or for worse, and really making us think in a new way and hopefully in a deeper way, about artistic hierarchies, about crediting and authorship, about ethics, and when it comes to creativity more broadly.

The first moment that I had to sit back and think about it more deeply in the way that I wanted to think about it was, I guess after the spring semester in May. That was the first opportunity that I had to be like, "Okay, I need to think about this more deeply. I need an AI policy. I need an assignment audit to think about what works and what doesn't," and to be honest, I was kind of dreading it because when your classes are going well, you don't really want to change things, but actually, I can say this now that it really made my classes better and stronger and more relevant, AI or not.

So what an audit meant in my case was taking a look at all my assignments, primarily in the class and thinking about whether they still

work in the ChatGPT era or the generative AI era and I found that some do and some don't. One type of project that I asked for in pretty much every class that I teach is the final research project and I feel that that's a project that really still works in the post AI era because it requires them, one, to collect their own data, design their own studies, analyze the data they collected.

It's very much based in originality, originality in design, originality in data collection, originality in thinking, and it's also scaffolded. So at every step they have to tell me what their research questions are, tell me what their research design is, tell me what their sources of data and their sampling strategy are, tell me how they're approaching the data and giving me insights into their data analysis project. So I actually see these projects develop step-by-step, and that makes them pretty AI proof.

The other type of AI proof assignment that I had in my classes was Perusall. Engagement on Perusall, which is a social reading and annotation platform. I upload my readings to Perusall and then I ask them to comment in line. So it's very, very specific. You don't comment on the whole reading. You comment on this sentence, this paragraph, this word sometimes, and they can also comment in multimodal ways.

So not just text, but they can highlight a word and respond with a meme, highlight a word and link to a video or an audio clip or an image or a link. I loved Perusall before, but I love Perusall even more in the post AI era because it requires that very specific engagement with readings. It requires a lot of interaction among peers in a classroom. So that also makes it a pretty ChatGPT proof because it's very different from here's the reading, now come up with a one paragraph response to it. The parts that I felt were not AI proof and were not really even fulfilling the learning goals I had for the courses were these reflection posts at the end of each unit. So I still kept reflection questions, but I rethought them in a way to make them more personal, more relevant, more applied, more specific, and sometimes to also allow for non-text responses.

So make a meme as a response to these readings, link to your favorite TikTok video and analyze it in this way. So really just allowing different entry points into the material that were more creative and more personal and hopefully more relevant. For my Technology and Culture class, a reflection question for the week on activism could be, what are the opportunities and challenges when it comes to new media in activism? You can just put that question in ChatGPT, and you're going to get a fine enough answer, but now I've revamped that question to still get at what I'm trying to get at, but to make it more specific and more applied.

So now that question is, think of a political campaign or activist cause or movement in the past year. Link to it, provide context about it and analyze their social media strategy or the hashtag or whatever it might be, and then tell us how that reflects the opportunities and the challenges. So it's still about that general point, but it's tying it to a specific moment, event, example, in a way that makes them think about it in a more applied sense.

I was actually dreading rethinking my courses and changing things around in the post AI era, but now that I've had a minute to think about it and to actually do it, I firmly believe that it made my courses better because I had to look at each of my assignments and think about what kind of learning goals it's really fulfilling and whether it's fulfilling them or not, and in changing my assignments to make them more ChatGPT proof, I actually made my courses better. I made my courses more applied, more specific, more creative, more personal and I think that students are taking more out of my courses because these assignments are tapping into these values of relevance and of applied knowledge in a way that they weren't necessarily before my AI audit.

As an individual instructor, I have a policy, and also at the program level, we had some really rich discussions about that too, so that we have a policy that is more or less consistent across the different courses. In my courses my AI policy, which is now included in the syllabus, right underneath my assignments, starts with my stance, which is a stance of general openness and curiosity. I think that's important for the students to

know that my stance is, yeah, just one of, I want to know more about this, a cautious optimism.

Then I can get into the nitty gritty about what's allowed and what's not allowed. And if I were to summarize it, everything is allowed except for asking, let's say ChatGPT to do the writing for you, and then submitting that as your own writing, but I'm totally fine with using it for explaining challenging material, challenging parts, answering questions, really dispelling confusion.

Also totally okay with using it for clarifying your own thinking, for improving the writing, like editing and style. That really levels the playing field, especially for instance, for non-native English speakers. So totally okay with all of these uses, even coming up with an outline that then you can build on, but just not asking it to draft the writing and then just copy pasting it and uploading it as your own. I also recognize that sometimes it is interesting to copy paste what ChatGPT says and upload it somewhere, but in that case, you need to cite it as if it were a source, which it is. And then I provide the link to the APA guidance around citing ChatGPT.

At the end of the policy I also say that when in doubt, disclose it, and again, I reassert my stance of openness and say that seriously, I'm curious. So if you've used it in an interesting way, in a productive way, or sometimes if you've used it in a non-productive way and got some really interesting results, tell me about it, share it with your classmates, because we can all learn from it, because we're still in the experimentation stage.