

A Teaching and Learning Perspective on the Emergence of Generative AI in Higher Education

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Abstract

Winter 2023 was a scary time for educators being confronted with generative AI for the first time. The launch of ChatGPT caused nothing less than a seismic shift in the field of higher education. Amidst calls to ban it from schools and decrying the end of entire disciplines, there was also a great surge of enthusiasm and optimism as faculty and students alike contended with how this will shape their educational experience going forward. This paper reflects on this time and on the then-emerging issue of how to respond to generative AI in higher education from the perspective of a teaching and learning centre. These centres occupy a middle space for educators between the administration making decisions for institutions and the faculty members responding to generative AI in their classrooms. Teaching and learning centres can provide resources, strategize, and centralize the distribution of information, resources, and supports from across institutions and between institutions.

Keywords: generative AI, ChatGPT, higher education, writing, change



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Introduction

Winter 2023 was a scary time for educators. The launch of ChatGPT has caused seismic shift in the field of higher education. Amidst calls to ban it from schools and decrying the end of entire disciplines (Herman, 2022; Stokel-Walker, 2022; Thomas, 2023; Vincent, 2023,), there were also great surges of enthusiasm and optimism as faculty and students alike contend with how this will shape their educational experience going forward. The current crisis caused by generative artificial intelligence was primarily pedagogical: how did this tool change how we approach teaching and learning?

Institutional Responses to Generative AI

OpenAI's ChatGPT launched in November 2022; it reached 100 million users just two months after launching (Milmo, 2023). Academia, which is well known as a place for painfully slow change, was entirely unprepared for a coherent and fast response. For many months, most institutions had no formal policies around generative AI use, and many folks had no real idea what it was, or how it performed the near magic of instant text generation. All of a sudden, students could ask ChatGPT to provide an instant response to an assignment that looked and sounded more-or-less as it should.

Across Canada, institutional leaders were trying to make difficult decisions around policy, particularly regarding how this impacted academic integrity. Polls from May, one full term into ChatGPT's launch, revealed that 39% of faculty had encountered students using AI technologies inappropriately in their classes, while 18% of faculty permitted use of the tool without restrictions, and 37% with restrictions (Academica, 2023). ChatGPT was pervasive and faculty largely were making individual decisions about how to respond to its use.

At the same time, Usher (2023) presented findings on a prior survey during a Higher Education Strategy Associates roundtable session about how Canadian institutions were responding. The Higher Education Associates team found that the conversations were either being led by teaching and learning centres or through the Provost's office (Usher, 2023). Of the 232 responses, the highest responses overall were teaching and learning centres, with 68 responses. It was clear, even at this initial stage, that the teaching and learning centre would serve as a central place for discussion and engagement with generative AI and its impact on the education sector.

Role of the Teaching and Learning Centre: Middle Ground

With a mission to support faculty across multiple disciplines engaged in assessment and feedback, it is the job (and our pleasure!) of professionals working in teaching and learning centres to help source solutions for common teaching problems. In the case of generative AI, however, targeted evidence-based strategies have yet to be developed. At the same time, the conversations about the tool were highly charged and fuelled by intensive media coverage of varying quality, all produced extremely quickly and often written to be highly inflammatory and fearmongering. Within the teaching and learning centre context, this means that in addition to providing accurate and useful information, we also needed to work to decode and determine disinformation.

The teaching and learning centre is positioned in the middle of these conversations. While not the centre of power, like the university administration, the centre functions as a common middle ground between leadership and faculty. It is a place for expertise that is somewhat distinct from both groups. Besides the Director, most centre professionals are not executives, policy makers, faculty members, or enforcers of policy. Instead, the centre professionals serve as support. We document and collect responses, sharing resources inter-institutionally, and curate those resources for our university's use. We teach folks how to use or design responses to these tools, as well as serve as educational technology support when it isn't clear how they should be used. We also function as confessors for all sides—faculty come to us to describe their challenges and uses of generative AI in their own teaching, and administration as well may come to use when navigating roadblocks and challenges in the path to policy.

Discussions Around Generative AI

In Winter 2023, centres were engaged in two sets of discussions. The most prominent were around policy, processes, and teaching responses. This could take the form of faculty development workshops or committee working groups. Academic integrity was often primary on people's minds, while the most difficult issue to resolve seemed to be around adjusting assessment design. While the idea of "detection" often began conversations, it was the idea of curricular change, assessment change, or policy change that often was taken away.

There was also a secondary, and more muffled, set of conversations taking place. These conversations were often emotional, around how to navigate fear and ignorance on this topic. Questions about privacy and data were often balanced around conversations around accessibility, inclusion, and sustainability. Generative AI was not intentionally designed for the use of educators, but we still all needed to contend with it as an educational technology.

Initial Responses to Generative AI Use in Higher Education

Seemingly overnight, the tireless work of centre professionals, faculty, librarians, and scholars of many stripes, have worked to compile resources and even counter-technologies to help us better understand and evaluate how to use this technology for learning. Santa Fe Community College's Library Guide on ChatGPT (2023) is an exemplary compilation of these efforts. Further, the thoughtful and expansive Creative Commons resource developed by Anna Mills and Lauren M.E. Goodlad (2023) distill some of the key and emergent issues for a higher education context and provide updated recommendations alongside even more important not-recommendations to help counter the panic that has led some institutions to ban the technology, return to handwritten assignments, and consider more invasive and costly proctoring software. Given how quickly this change occurred, centres found ourselves looking in novel places for teaching insights including in social media spaces like the Higher Ed Learning Collective, Pandemic Pedagogy, Higher Ed Discussion of AI Writing, and within the tool itself.

By the end of Winter 2023, many centres had developed a repository of resources and policies from across the country. These may have been formal or informal in their presentations. While many institutions may have not produced their own resources or policies at this point, most centres could at least point to and explain what was going on elsewhere. This was perhaps our biggest asset to our institutions; we could serve as that middle space where folks could come together, share, and recoup together.

Conclusions and Takeaways

In conclusion, teaching and learning centres were central to universities' initial responses to generative AI, offering a first line of support after the emergency of ChatGPT in the context of higher education. While these centres are rarely the centres of power and decision making on emerging teaching and learning issues, they are in the middle of these discussions, offering a way to communicate productively between educators on the ground and leadership making tough decisions. The centre's role continues to be to help apply the existing scholarship of teaching and learning to this new and novel problem. It is also its role to listen and disseminate the lived experience of faculty and students engaged with this work. Further, it is its role to be co-creators of this new knowledge as centres work alongside our faculty peers to help, through trial and error, navigate this new educational landscape we find ourselves in.

Author's Contributions

EB completed all research and writing for this proceeding.

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Conflict of Interest

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Data Availability Statement

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