“I prefer my own writing”: Engaging First-Year Writers' Agency with Generative AI

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of ChatGPT as an educational tool to teach writing and revision in a first-semester writing course in Fall 2023 at a regional university. The course used ChatGPT as a classroom model to show students how to ethically use generative AI as part of their writing and revision process. One-on-one conferences about student writing showed marked improvement to students engaging their writer agency when discussing their own writing and in-class activities showed students aware of best practices for using generative AI as part of their writing process.

Keywords*: agency, ChatGPT, first-year, generative AI, revision, patchwriting, writing*

Introduction

In 1983, Hugh Burns encouraged composition instructors to “use the emerging research in artificial intelligence to define the best features of a writer's consciousness and to design quality computer-assisted instruction—and other writing instruction—accordingly.” (p.4) At the time, Burns was working with natural language processing and applied AI as a writing invention tool and already recognized that AI could have “both good and bad consequences” (p.3) for writing instruction. In 2024, Burns' words remain true as educators and scholars confront new challenges and seize opportunities to engage students with a significantly advanced form of generative AI. Generative AI can better engage students with critical thinking and encourage them to engage their own student agency in writing assignments when taught in conjunction with conversations with students about their individual writing and, when modeled ethically in class discussions, about writing assignments.

Educational Context

Lamar University is a regional university in Southeast Texas, an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution, and largely a commuter school. In Fall 2023, Lamar saw record enrollment with 17,000 students, with a first-year class of 1764; 60% of those were first generations students. This paper focuses specifically on one section of a core course in Fall 2023. The student demographics for the 23 students enrolled in that section included 18 first-semester traditional students: 16 from Southeast Texas, 1 from Houston, and 1 out-of-state student. There were 5 non-traditional students enrolled in the course with time between high school and college ranging from 2-20 years. These students also fit other notable demographics that further diversify the student population—7 stu-

dent athletes from 5 sports, 2 international students, 1 deaf student, and 5 ESL students with varying backgrounds of English education. The diversity of this section's student population is common in our first-year courses.

Educational Frameworks

I teach from a feminist and Socratic pedagogical approach where course instruction is highly influenced by both departmental learning outcomes and by students' current educational needs rather than by preset consistent content. This approach allows for more student-led conversations and discussions while ensuring that necessary writing instruction is included in the course. My pedagogy gives students opportunities to develop their critical thinking skills as part of a learning community dedicated to extensive conversation and peer feedback. Additionally, this pedagogical approach combined with writing conferences allows students to learn to enact their agency and voice in their writing by empowering their ownership of writing through consistent reflection.

Writer agency is a writer's ability to own their writing and make thoughtful decisions about content and purpose. Writer agency is most visible when students are presented with feedback for revisions and choose to reject some of that feedback based on their own understanding of their writing purpose. In my teaching experience, students often struggle with engaging their writer agency in revisions to an essay. Students will often outright reject peer feedback if they perceive the peer to be less competent at writing but also accept all feedback from peers who they perceive to be better writers than they are. This acceptance or rejection can occur even when students have not read anything of the peer's writing but are working only from comments the student made during class discussions. Writer agency can be further complicated when the feedback comes from the instructor who will grade the essay because students can view this feedback as necessary changes for an improved grade.

Writing is a skill that requires more individual support than a standard lecture course allows, thus writing conferences are at the core of my pedagogy. I require first-year students to attend two 30-minute writing conferences during the semester, and they are encouraged to drop-in for a writing consultation when they need help outside the classroom. Writing conferences can provide more targeted, one-on-one conversations between faculty and students to both address student writing and the role generative AI can take in improving student writing. Studies show that one-to-one conferences improve students' cognitive and critical thinking skills (Bowen, 1993; Freedman, 1981; Freedman & Calfee, 1984; Freedman & Sperling, 1985; Graves, 1983; Harris, 1986, Jacobs & Kaliner, 1977; Newkirk, 1995). The research focuses on first-year composition courses and remedial writing instruction; however, the findings from the research offers strategies that can apply to any course that includes a writing assignment when faculty allow students to share in the direction of the conference and incorporate authentic questions about the students writing process as well as their writing product (Freedman, 1982; Graves, 1983; Haneda, 2004; Harris, 1986; Jacobs & Karliner, 1977; Murray, 1986; Newkirk, 1995; Nystrand, 1997; Sperling, 1990). When students have opportunities to talk about their writing struggles and successes, they gain confidence in their writing and improve critical thinking and metacognitive skills. Therefore, I encourage students to seek peer tutoring from their classmates and from trained consultants in the university Writing Center, emphasizing the importance of receiving feedback from a variety of readers.

There is an emerging refusal to use generative AI in the classroom that centers around the arguments that writing faculty know the importance of teaching language and writing for broad

purposes beyond the classroom and, until the path for generative AI and its future is clearer, we should refuse to engage with the technology in our classrooms (Sano-Franchini et al., 2024). This argument is not without merit, and the need for larger conversations, not just about the impact on writing but on labor practices, linguistic freedoms, and the ethics of AI-generated content are conversations that must happen. However, refusing to use the technology in the classroom does not prevent students from using AI, especially when they know that their use cannot be proven. Instead, a refusal for AI in this situation simultaneously encourages more rigid preventative measures from faculty, which can lead to further surveillance of student writing. Sano-Franchini et al. (2004) assert that "radically revising and restructuring our discipline around generative AI is premature at this time," (Premise 10) dissuading faculty from incorporating generative AI; however, overly-cautious faculty might still radically revise their courses to prevent student-AI use, shifting writing to an in-class, heavily surveilled activity with less opportunity to fully engage in writing processes and critical thinking that improve their abilities to engage their writer agency in their work. For these reasons, I opted to incorporate the use of ChatGPT in my first-year writing course, keeping the basic structure of my course and using ChatGPT as a supplement at targeted points in the course.

The Course

My university requires four significant writing assignments in Composition I, though these writing assignments may include extensive revision to an essay, an essay portfolio, or a reflection assignment. Composition I emphasizes writing *process* over writing *product*, so I emphasize process through process workshops, drafts, and conferences. I designed the course to include:

- a writing portfolio that includes all student invention workshop materials, writing drafts, and a short (3-5 page) essay on a topic the student can write about without needing research (submitted in Week 3)
- a writing portfolio that includes all student invention materials, draft workshop materials, and a short essay on their first week of college (submitted in Week 4)
- a writing portfolio that includes all revision workshop materials from weeks seven through ten, and a significant revision to one of the first two essays (submitted in Week 11)
- an optional second revision to the revised essay following the student's grading conference (submitted in Week 15)
- an argument assignment from one the two options selected by the class (submitted in Week 15)

I encourage students to use their agency throughout this process, choosing the essay they revise following a preliminary conference discussing both essays, choosing whether they want to re-revise their essay for a better grade, and, as a class, choosing the two options for the argumentative essay from a selection of topics, and giving the students individual choice from the final options.

Students must meet with me for a 15-minute conference in Week 6 where we discuss the submitted essays. During the first conference, I aim to help students see the strengths in their writing. We discuss the student's individual writing process, what they perceive as their strengths and weaknesses in the essays, and what I view as strengths and weaknesses. I connect their weaknesses to the upcoming workshops to encourage them to pay close attention in that workshop, but I focus

my conversation on their strengths and the unique perspective they bring to the essays. We discuss the benefits of revising each of the essays, and students leave that conference with homework to think over the two essays and return to class the following week with a decision about which essay they will revise.

The next four weeks of class are dedicated to writing workshops, each day covering a different writing skill. Workshops are structured to begin with no more than twenty minutes of instruction and application where students apply what I taught them to a whole-class example before we transition to their individual application to the essay they are revising. While students are working in class, I spend time in one-on-one conversations with them about their individual work, coaching them in their efforts and building rapport. I strive to meet with each student at least once per workshop, though some students need more coaching and some are resistant to coaching, so I make certain to accommodate these needs as they are part of the student's writing process.

Students attend a second required conference in Week 11, after submitting the conference draft of their revised essay. This conference follows the same model as the first conference, with focus on strengths and weaknesses; however, this conference focuses specifically on areas that were covered in the workshops so that students can see where their work has improved from the workshops and where they still need to concentrate their efforts. The conference draft is worth ten points on a rubric that focuses exclusively on the workshop content, and I grade this draft at the conclusion of the student's conference, going through each rating in detail with the students, reinforcing our conversation about the draft. Students leave this conference with an opportunity to revise their weak areas for an improved grade or to roll the conference grade to an equivalent grade for the final 100-point grade where, for example, a 7 for a conference grade becomes a 70 for the final grade.

Weeks 12and 13 are then dedicated to the final essay, an argument on the student's choice of topics. In Fall 2023, the final student selections for their topics were:

- persuade an audience to purchase a useless product. You may create your own product or use an existing product. If you use an existing product, you must make clear who sells the product.
- convince your friends to agree with your choice to bring of one of the following people on a boat to a deserted island to escape a zombie apocalypse: a personal injury lawyer, a video game streamer, a jazz musician, a personal trainer, or a vegan chef.

Week 12 is devoted to introducing the key components of a persuasive essay, and week 13 is dedicated to group invention discussions where students worked to craft ideas for their paper. We break for Thanksgiving during Week 14, and students meet for their last class, a Q&A about their essay, the Monday we return from Thanksgiving break. Finals begin on Wednesday, and the final version of their essay is due at the start of the final exam period. Thus, students were working on this essay without the benefit of workshops, giving them the opportunity to demonstrate their individual writing skills.

ChatGPT in a First-Year Writing Course

In the three offerings prior to 2023, student agency was a struggle among all the students. Students were reluctant to discuss writing in any form, especially when their own opinion is asked of writing they perceive as better than their own. Asking students to critique published writings

was a struggle in even the honors class, with students offering little critique of the work, often defending their choice with the belief that if it was good enough to be published in their textbook it must be good enough overall, and they could not critique it. In instances where I offered a prior student's work for critique, students wanted to know the grade before offering critique, and if I did not offer that information, assumed that the work was A-quality and did not need improvement. In my second iteration of this sequence, I began writing my own essay for the assignments as part of the workshop content during essay one. In these semesters, students largely clung to the idea that since I was their professor, clearly my writing was perfect, even though they saw my messy process as an example in class.[1] In other words, because they were students, they had no agency in offering criticism on work they deemed better than theirs.

This lack of agency transferred to their own writing as well. When the students attended the preliminary conference, they listened intently but offered little dialogue about their own writing, though they would consistently ask what I wanted them to do in their revisions. In their revision conference, I often saw work that incorporated revisions I had suggested but no additional content. Students did not defend their writing during the grading portion of the conference, and those students who opted for the additional revision opportunity made only the changes discussed in their grading conference.

Pedagogical Foundation

When I began considering pedagogical approaches to generative AI in the classroom, I was not thinking about student agency because the larger conversation about ChatGPT focused on plagiarism, not student agency. I returned to the early work of Rebecca Moore Howard on patchwriting and plagiarism which emphasizes that patchwriting occurs when students attempt paraphrasing but come too close to source material to be their own work, thus putting students at risk for plagiarism. Howard (1992) argues that patchwriting "may signal neither a willing violation of academic ethics nor ignorance of them, but rather a healthy effort to gain membership in a new culture" (p. 236). She argues for a distinction of patchwriting as separate from plagiarism because the students are not intentionally violating academic rules but struggling to understand the academy's conventions. Howard raises a significant question in her work: "how much more difficult a task do undergraduate students face as they are presented with a bewildering array of discourses, none of which resonates with the languages of their homes and secondary schools" (p. 239), asserting that these instances of patchwriting are, in fact, opportunities for individualized, one-on-one lessons. These one-on-one lessons offer further insight into how students are patchwriting and can offer the same insight for students using generative AI in their writing. More recent writing scholars in composition studies also emphasize the separation of generative AI in writing classrooms from discussions about plagiarism. Jamieson (2022) emphasizes the need to focus on AI as a tool that "writers can use or misuse" (p. 154). She reiterates the reality that focusing on AI as cheating creates an environment of mistrust where students are policed and know they are being policed, which is precisely the opposite of the welcoming environment where writing instruction should take place. She charges the discipline with considering "how we can work with AI just as we learned to work with computers when they entered the classroom" (p. 156). This sentiment con-

1. Students do not know this, but I submit a very rough first draft of an essay so that I have plenty to work with during the revision unit. I allow myself only three hours to work on the essay so it resembles an essay more like what I anticipate from the students.

tinues in the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force's first AI Working Paper (2023) where cheating detection methods are listed as a risk to students that may cause "an increased sense of alienation and mistrust" if papers are surveilled for AI use (p.7). Dobrin (2023) further echoes this caution, emphasizing that "the question of how we can prevent students from using GenAI to cheat is a question of surveillance and policing, not of education. It is not the question educators should be asking." (p. 12). Dobrin recommends educating students to be transparent with their use of AI and teaching students to understand flaws in generated content and the risks to using generated content, the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force encourages AI as a tool for "enhancing students' rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, and knowledge of conventions" (p.9). These attitudes toward generative AI in writing classrooms reflect related questions about more traditional plagiarism explored extensively in Howard's other research advocating for a distinction between plagiarism and patchwriting (Howard, 1992, 1995, 2016; Howard et. al., 2010). With this guidance, I opted to bring ChatGPT into my first-year writing course in Fall 2023 with the anticipation that the technology could help students struggling to find their voice and agency in the bewildering new world of academia.

My own conversations with writing students, especially my first-year students, supported this diagnosis, and I suspected that students might turn to generative AI for similar reasons. Therefore, I chose to strategically embed generative AI into my Composition I course to see what risk generative AI posed in a course that consistently engaged students with their own writing through extensive revision and conferences.

The First Conversation

I did not mention ChatGPT prior to week four, when we turned to the second writing portfolio. Students had submitted their first writing portfolio, which gave me a baseline for each student's writing abilities, which I believed would make it easier to determine where students might become overly reliant on a generative AI. I continued my strategy of writing my own assignment in class as part of the workshops for the first essay, so I also had my own material to use as examples as we moved into conversations about ChatGPT and writing.

The conversation about ChatGPT was part of a larger conversation about cheating, plagiarism, and ChatGPT. I started the discussion with a broad approach to cheating in college, and we talked about the university's definition of cheating, ethical considerations of cheating, and how cheating might put others at risk in the future. Because I wanted students to consider cheating in all their classes, I used an example of nursing students cheating on their dosage exams and what that might mean if any of us were a patient of that student after they earn their degree. I also used recent news about lawyers sanctioned for submitting a legal brief generated by AI that included fake legal citations. The students engaged well in this portion of the discussion and asked questions about cheating that indicated that, much like Howard (1992) suggests, students are not always clear on the nuances of their new academic culture. I then turned the conversation to ChatGPT, and we discussed the ethical considerations of using AI to complete assignments. I told students that we would spend time with ChatGPT throughout the semester so that students could understand how generative AI could aid their writing and serve as a writing tool when used ethically. I made it clear to students that I did not consider appropriate use of generative AI to be plagiarism or cheating; however, I was also clear that students who copied and pasted directly from an AI would be penalized for unethical use.

This discussion came after a day of invention work toward essay two, and I used the remaining time in class to show students ChatGPT and the type of output they could find if they used the technology for their own invention on the current essay. I asked students what they would ask ChatGPT if they needed guidance on what to include, and the students opted for "questions to ask about college," a phrase taken directly from the assignment sheet. The students were unhappy with the results because ChatGPT's output focused more on questions to ask when choosing a college. The students tentatively asked if they could see what an essay ChatGPT would write for their assignment looked like, and they prompted it for a 500-word essay about the college experience, again drawing their prompt directly from the assignment sheet. Students were again disappointed with the results because the results didn't fit the assignment, so they changed the prompt to a 500-word essay about *my* college experience. Once more, the results did not give them an essay fit for the assignment, and they were irritated that the results assumed they had *completed* their first year.[2] We returned to the idea of ChatGPT as a tool that can assist with their writing, but as our class examples demonstrated, ChatGPT was not the solution to essay writing. I permitted them to use ChatGPT as they wrote their second essay, and I set clear boundaries for this use. Students were allowed to brainstorm with ChatGPT as an aid to generating ideas and starting points for topics, replicating what we did in class, and I told them they could use no more than three consecutive words from a ChatGPT response in their paper drafts. I made clear that these guidelines meant that they could not ask ChatGPT to write the essay and then submit that response as their work, but I did not state a penalty that would be imposed. As I dismissed class, one student remarked that it appeared ChatGPT would just be a waste of time that could be spent writing the essay on their own. Other students agreed. Our work with ChatGPT would not continue again until after the students' first conferences, when we began the revision unit.

The Revision Unit

The revision workshops focused on key writing skills first-year students need to develop before moving into upper-division coursework; organization and topic sentences, adding details, rewriting paragraphs, purpose and thesis, introductions and conclusions, and rhetorical appeals. We used ChatGPT frequently for this work, asking ChatGPT to complete the assigned writing task, using my draft as the example We then discussed my draft, ChatGPT's revisions, and the students' own suggestions for the essay before I decided on the final content for my essay.

The first time we returned to the ChatGPT generated revisions was during the second workshop when we were working on topic sentences. Overall, the students found the topic sentences ChatGPT generated for my essay to be fine, but they also found no necessary revisions to the original topic sentences. They were correct in this assessment overall; the topic sentences had minimal changes between my original and ChatGPT's revision. However, our previous workshop on organization focused on both ordering of content and keywords, and ChatGPT's results gave me an opportunity to reinforce this important concern in one of the generated topic sentences. In the original essay, my topic sentence read "Being a goalkeeper also requires a person to be mentally fit, "which ChatGPT changed to "being a goalkeeper necessitates mental fortitude" (OpenAI, 2023b). My students saw no problem with the use of the word fortitude here, deciding, after looking up the definition, that the word might be a better choice. I objected, returning to our keyword

2. The full transcript of this ChatGPT session can be viewed here: https://chatgpt.com/share/a49ded73-b793-4a3f-8272-349aba08747c

discussion from the previous day—both the original thesis and the ChatGPT revised thesis statement used the term mental fitness and even the ChatGPT heading was labeled Mental Fitness. Further, the next ChatGPT topic sentence referred to mental strength. Students agreed that the term should be consistent, to give the reader a keyword to assist in mental organization. When two of the students agreed that fortitude was a better word, because it sounded smarter, I raised the question of how this changed the flow of either of the thesis statements, and students discussed that briefly before deciding I should keep the mental fitness.

As we progressed through the workshops, we returned to ChatGPT's revised essay frequently, but we also began looking at other examples as students became more willing to experiment with ChatGPT and their own writing. Students would ask me to input their work into ChatGPT and the class would discuss the output and offer their own feedback. In early instances of this, students would come up with something the student found better than their original, and the writer would agree and make note of what was said; however, the more we analyzed and critiqued the output from ChatGPT, the more students began to analyze their peers' suggestions and re-revise from that feedback. I updated their ChatGPT usage guidelines at this point to encourage more critical thinking about ChatGPT output for revised sentence requests, instructing students to synthesize a revised sentence from ChatGPT with the original sentence and ensure the version in their paper was still their own, and I reminded them of the three consecutive word allowance for ChatGPT content.

ChatGPT played a significant role in the rhetorical appeals workshop, specifically in discussing the *ethos* ChatGPT removed from my introduction. Again, my students initially decided that my essay had enough *ethos*, or credibility to prove that I knew about the topic, and ChatGPT did not change that. However, I drew their attention to a sentence in my introduction that ChatGPT significantly revised and, as the writer, I objected to the change. The original sentence read: "Goalkeepers are often considered the forgotten soccer players, unless they rise to the popularity of Hope Solo, Sari van Veenendaal, Lydia Williams or Sarah Bouhaddi." but ChatGPT saw no purpose to the list of names I included, and revised the sentence to read: "Goalkeepers, often regarded as the unsung heroes of soccer, shine as the last line of defense on the pitch" (OpenAI, 2023b). My students argued that I had enough *ethos* in my essay that I did not need to name drop, a statement that gave me the opportunity to address agency once again. I explained in detail my decision to include these specific names and my decision to only include notable female goalkeepers. One student remarked that it was rude of ChatGPT to remove the names, given the additional details, and I reminded students that ChatGPT doesn't know my personal purpose to the inclusion which made it necessary to use my agency in the final product of my revisions. This discussion would pay off significantly, but I would not see this until the next set of required student conferences.

Revision Conferences

During their revision conferences, students were free to discuss their revision process and the role of ChatGPT in that revision conference, and they often did, even if only a single remark that let me know they had used ChatGPT as a writing aid. After discussing the revised essay, students participated in its grading, something I had not done frequently in the past. I was beginning to see improvement in student agency during these conferences, and I was curious how students would self-assess after weeks of working to improve the essay and their agency as writers. I was surprised to find students often rating areas of the essay accurately and willing to discuss areas

where we disagreed on the grade. Of the 19 students who participated in revision conferences, 12 of these students opted to revise.

The Persuasive Essay

Early in the persuasive unit, I found students openly using ChatGPT in class. They would have the site open on their laptop when I walked by and make no move to minimize or hide the browser, and they were having audible conversations about the output. They asked ChatGPT to pitch them useless products as they worked to find the right product to sell while their group members browsed Amazon and Google for existing useless products. ChatGPT offered feedback on how a jazz musician and a personal injury attorney could be useful in escaping the zombie apocalypse. My students were not happy when ChatGPT recommended the lawyer because they could sue after the apocalypse, an output that led to a conversation about the chances of there being somebody to sue when the danger was gone. In the end, the students relied more on peer feedback, but they did draw some insight from ChatGPT suggestions early in the process.

When students completed their invention and turned to writing, ChatGPT continued to be a tool in the writing process, though my observations showed that this occurred more frequently as advice on revising a single sentence or a paragraph, a method we first discussed during the revision unit. Students who did use ChatGPT to generate writing turned also to other tools from the workshops and focused their final product on writing that maintained their own voice and agency.

Impact of Chat GPT on First-Year Writer's Agency

As the semester progressed, my Fall 2023 cohort were more active in class discussion, and they demonstrated better critical thinking skills than students in previous semesters of my first-year writing courses. I hypothesize that ChatGPT played a role in these improvements, offering students lower-risk opportunities to critique writing samples. Students in prior semesters were resistant to providing feedback to published essays, peer essays, or my own admittedly rushed writing. This was not the case in Fall 2023 when a significant portion of our writing analysis came from ChatGPT generated materials, materials students knew were machine-generated. Overall, the students were more engaged with output from ChatGPT, keen to seek out and point out the paragraphs that said nothing, the awkward or overly-sophisticated word choice, and to hypothesize that ChatGPT, like many college students, was just struggling to meet a word count. Students were being told constantly that ChatGPT and other GenAI technologies were risky, often "hallucinated" responses, and could not be trusted, and I believe this played a more significant role in their willingness to analyze and engage with these writings because of the rhetoric surrounding GenAI in their classes and in the media. In class and in conferences, students would remark on ChatGPT's failures, referring to the output as “word salad” or remarking that if they ever used a specific word in their writing it would clearly come from ChatGPT, yet these same students were reticent to offer any similar critique of published works or even my own rushed writing when presented with the same task. This course was not taught in anticipation of my research, so there is no formal study of the impact of ChatGPT's impact; however, my observations show that ChatGPT can improve writer agency among first-year students by allowing opportunities for students to engage in low-risk critical thinking about writing and gain confidence to apply this critical thinking as they become confident in their writer's agency.

Revision conferences gave me the opportunity to speak with students individually about their work with ChatGPT, and these conversations were the times where students identified places where their own decisions were influenced by their growing writer agency. In prior semesters, these conferences did include students justifying their reasons for accepting or rejecting my feedback or peer feedback; however, these students typically justified these decisions with more surface-level decisions. A peer would be right or wrong about placement of a sentence, word choice, or some other revision feedback, but when pushed, students were either reluctant to give deeper thought to why that change was "better" or they would explain that the person providing feedback was simply right about their "mistakes" in writing. In a typical class, I might have one student who could speak to revision changes made with deep consideration and awareness of their writer agency. In Fall 2023, students were more specific about the reasons for accepting or rejecting peer feedback, noting that while a peer might suggest removing some detail, the student opted to leave that detail because it contributed to the sense of frustration they felt in the moment, for example. I still wanted students to dig deeper into the reason for that feedback, but this was a sophisticated area of revision there was not time to develop in this semester.

Engaging Writer Agency with ChatGPT

In Fall 2023, ChatGPT became a conversation point in conferences with several students who were open about their experiments with ChatGPT in their writing and revisions. Students discussed using ChatGPT as an aid to invention early in the semester, but this use waned as we moved into the revision unit and students sought ChatGPT for more specific revision assistance. Students tended to use ChatGPT during the revisions in ways that duplicated our in-class use. Students would either ask ChatGPT to write a new paragraph for their paper or to rewrite their existing work. In some instances, students would return to their own original work and make their own revisions to the work because they "preferred their own writing" to ChatGPT's output.[3] When pushed to explain what made their writing better, they were able to articulate more sophisticated decisions about their writing. In some cases, ChatGPT output had good ideas but did not match the writer's voice, articulated by students as output that did not "sound like anything I would write." In other cases, the students found the output "didn't really say anything" while their own writing did. In these statements, students begin to articulate their writer agency in revisions as they chose their own writing over that of ChatGPT, trusting themselves to know their topic better than the technology.

Students also opted to use ChatGPT for clarification or to support their own decisions in their writing, gaining confidence in their writer agency through conversations with the technology. For example, in one preliminary conference, I inquired about a student's decision to use cheer and cheerleading interchangeably in their essay. I explained that I had no background with the community, so I was uncertain if this was correct, but I pointed out that in academic writing, readers anticipate a consistency in the language. This student previously approached me multiple times about how to earn an A in the course, looking for extra credit opportunities or forgiveness on a daily assignment submitted late, so I anticipated this question would lead to a simple find and replace in the revised essay. However, the student surprised me during the revision conference, showing me a conversation with ChatGPT where they began by asking for clarification on whether

3. Only one student specifically said they "preferred their own writing;" however, the sentiment was expressed by many students in their conferences with similar word choice such as "my writing is better" or "I like my wording better."

cheer and cheerleading meant the same thing. The student disclosed that before ChatGPT, they tried using Google to get this answer, but none of their search terms returned a clear answer. ChatGPT assured them that the two terms were interchangeable, but cheer was a more informal term typically used in conversations. The student had the answer they needed, and this answer supported their own belief. I was prepared to accept this answer and discuss the distinction between casual usage and academic writing, but the student was not finished. Their next entry in ChatGPT showed a clear engagement with the response framed by class conversations about the flaws of ChatGPT, and the writer's deeper critical thinking about such a small change to the paper. The student's next inquiries to ChatGPT challenged the results as they asked, "how do you know?" before asking ChatGPT to "prove it." The output offered strong support for the distinction between the two terms, including dictionary definitions, and while there was enough to convince the student to make the change to their paper, the final paper continued to use cheerleading and cheer interchangeably. The student supported this decision with their own distinction between the informal assignment to write about something they could discuss without research and what the student considered academic writing – formal essays that required research. I allowed this inconsistency because I could see the student pushing back on my suggestion and ChatGPT by engaging their writer agency in the decision. The student's focus here was on improving their writing, a drastic change from the early-semester attitude of doing what they needed to do to earn an A in the course. Typically, students would make the change I suggested anticipating a better grade, and I anticipated this student doing the same with their ChatGPT output, ignoring the often-misinformed responses we discussed in class. However, the student did not take ChatGPT at their word but instead used ChatGPT as an opportunity to think through the suggestion and make their own decision. This was, by far, the most nuanced use of ChatGPT by students, and while I might disagree with the student's final decision, the conversation with ChatGPT itself supports the role generative AI can take in teaching students to engage with their writer agency and think critically about their own writing.

Engaging Writer Agency Without ChatGPT

There may have been other students who opted to experiment with ChatGPT but were reluctant to discuss these experiments in conferences. All the students who did engage in conversations about their ChatGPT use were average and above-average students. Since I allowed students to disclose their ChatGPT use, I am not surprised that this population was more willing to discuss their use of ChatGPT. I do not believe that ChatGPT went unused by weaker writers in the class, and I would suspect that these students may have not disclosed their use because of the larger academic climate regarding ChatGPT at the time, and admitting use of ChatGPT could put students at risk of being considered cheaters.

If these below-average writers were using ChatGPT for assistance with their writing, they likely engaged their own writer agency in this use, opting to not simply paste output from ChatGPT in their papers. Many of my colleagues were reporting blatant student use of ChatGPT in submitted papers, arguing that students were taking the easy way out because they knew we could not prove they were using ChatGPT. I knew my students were aware of our inability to prove they used ChatGPT; we discussed this several times in class. Still, none of my students submitted work that contained blatant ChatGPT generated content. Even the below-average writers who did not discuss ChatGPT in their conferences submitted work that was consistently their voice, their writing, their characteristic writing errors.

I attribute this lack of ChatGPT-generated content, in part, to the students' knowledge of my AI literacy, but I think this knowledge was less influential than the writing conferences. The students learned, at their first conference, that I expected them to come prepared to talk about their paper. In the first conference, students were asked to talk in detail about their writing process for the papers and their own beliefs of the paper's strengths and weaknesses in a conversation that required them to take ownership of their writing. Throughout their revision workshops, I had mini in-class conferences with students where I used the same conversation style, and by the time the students were attending their revision conferences, they knew that talking in detail about their writing was the core of the conference and show their agency as writers. Students in this semester showed more agency in their writing than any prior semester, and as much as using ChatGPT in class improved their agency, I believe this need to discuss their work and their agency reduced the overuse of ChatGPT for their assignments.

Guidance and Recommendations

The course detailed in this paper is specific to a core writing course, and while the structure and generative AI integration can be duplicated in a similar course, the full structure may not translate to other disciplines or upper-division courses that are not writing-intensive. However, there are takeaways from this course that can benefit any course where the instructor allows generative AI as a tool to aid students in writing assignments, and these recommendations are provided with that broader purpose in mind. These recommendations should accompany discussion of generative AI as a tool with flaws, modeling of acceptable use for the specific course, and clear guidelines for student use of generative AI with writing assignments.

1. **Writing conferences** offer students an opportunity to discuss their writing and to have honest conversations about their use of generative AI in their writing process when in a low-stakes environment that allows a dialogue between the faculty who created the assignment and the student tasked with writing. Early process or revision conferences offer students the low stakes environment needed to have more genuine conversations because grades and concerns about cheating are of lower concern. These conferences need to be required, and students should be held accountable for attending the conference.

2. **Essay commentary** can also encourage students to use generative AI ethically in their writing. In hindsight, this is the most notable change I would make to my use of generative AI in my classes. Asking students to add comments directly to their paper or to include a commentary/reflective component with the paper that addresses when and how they used generative AI in their paper can benefit both students and faculty. Students would need to think more critically about their use of generative AI to create this commentary, and faculty would have a better understanding of the ways students engage their writer agency in using generative AI. Paired with writing conferences, essay commentary could allow for more nuanced conversations about writing, writer agency, and discipline requirements.

3. **Understanding patchwriting nuances** aids faculty in instructing students who are trying to write to their discipline and not paraphrasing effectively. The distinction

between willing plagiarism, which can include direct copy from generative AI, and the work of a novice writer to meet the requirements of a new academic discipline must be recognized in student writing to recognize when further instruction is needed. Rebecca Moore Howard's (1992) "A plagiarism pentimento" is must-read in this understanding. In addition, any of Howard's other works, the work of Sandra Jamieson, and their collaborative work on The Citation Project offers more insight into plagiarism and patchwriting. See:

- Howard, R.M. (1993). "A plagiarism pentimento." *Journal of Teaching Writing 11* (3), pp. 233-246.
- Howard, R.M. (1995). "Plagiarisms, authorships, and the academic death penalty." *College English 57* (7) pp. 708-736.
- Howard, R.M. (2016). "Plagiarism in higher education: An academic literacies issue?" Bretag, T. (Ed.) *The Handbook of Academic Integrity.* Singapore: Springer, pp. 499-501.
- Howard, R.M., Rodrigue, T.K., & Serviss, T.C. (2010). "Writing from sources, writing from sentences." *Writing and Pedagogy 2* (2) pp. 177-192.
- Jamieson, S. (2016). "Is it plagiarism or patchwriting? Toward a nuanced definition." *The Handbook of Academic Integrity.* Singapore: Springer, pp.503-518.
- Jamieson, S. & Howard, R.M. (2019). "Rethinking the relationship between plagiarism and academic integrity" *International Journal of Technologies in Higher Education 16* (2), 69.
- Jamieson, S. & Howard, R.M. (2013). "Sentence-mining: Uncovering the amount of reading and reading comprehension in college writers' researched writing." *The New Digital Scholar: Exploring and Enriching the Research and Writing Practices of NextGen Students.* McClure, R. & Purdy, J.P. Medford, NJ: American Society for Information Science and Technology, pp. 111-133.

4. **Including generative AI in class conversations** can help students think more critically about the output of generative AI and the nuances of that output, including the scope of information and the reliability of sourcing generative AI. Examining responses to the same prompt across multiple generative AI sources[4] can further students' critical thinking about course content as well as their use of generative AI in their writing. Activities such as analyzing a generative AI output for the writing assignment can help students better understand the assignment and faculty expectations while also thinking more critically about the content for their own essay. My colleagues have seen successful conversations about generative AI through a single class activity that uses a ChatGPT generated response to the prompt as the focus of a class discussion about the ways ChatGPT does and does not meet that specific assignment's requirements.

4. Faculty need to keep in mind privacy concerns if asking students to create accounts for non-university sponsored generative AI platforms. Both ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot continue to allow use without a login; however, other platforms, such as Claude, Gemini, and Oracle require accounts.

5. **Keeping current with changes to generative AI** is crucial to using the technology in class. Generative AI continues to evolve, and faculty who incorporate the technology in their classes and allow student use must know the current state of the technology and prepare to adapt mid-semester if necessary. For instance, I considered requiring students to include transcripts of their generative AI conversations for my upcoming composition course; however, my university now encourages Microsoft Copilot over other generative AIs. Copilot does not store transcripts of chats in a manner accessible to faculty and students, and requiring students to use Copilot means I must consider how students will generate these transcripts to meet the requirement and what role penalizing a student who forgot to generate the transcript might play in their willingness to experiment with the technology.

Conclusion

Generative AI technology offers many opportunities to further teaching of writing across disciplines in higher education and when used with student conferences, class activities, and ethical modeling can help students to recognize and embrace their own writer agency. Generative AI is not a drag-and-drop curative for improving student writing, but faculty who engage students in conversations about course writing assignments offer opportunities to teach students *how* to use generative AI in meaningful and ethical ways. Allowing students to experiment with AI with their own writing and to engage in low-risk conversations about these experiments with their professors, whether through commentary to their essay submissions or through individual writing conferences can significantly improve student awareness of their own writing skills. However, for generative AI to be truly effective in student writing, faculty must stay up to date on the nuances of the technology and the specific generative AI they recommend and model for students. The beginning conversations about generative AI made us keenly aware of the drawbacks and risks of the technology, but we can only begin to understand the possibilities when we take the risk of including the technology with our writing assignments and model ethical and critical use of generative AI output.

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