Navigating Generative AI in Honors

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Generative AI became a household concept when OpenAI launched ChatGPT on November 30, 2022. Now, few weeks go by without new developments in the technology, usages, and institutional responses or training. Its broad impacts across academia are covered by news outlets and scholarly journals. Generative AI has become so ubiquitous that its presence leaves few scholars and administrators of institutions of higher education indifferent or unaffected. Responses to the tool span a broad spectrum of emotions from fear to excitement, and institutional and individual responses to it are equally widespread.

ChatGPT introduced a revolutionary point of access to generative AI technology. Its release immediately prompted think-pieces like Stephen Marshe's "The College Essay Is Dead" in *The Atlantic*, which argued that the era of asking students to demonstrate their learning through writing is behind us because generative AI would certainly render the need to write–or the ability to distinguish student writing from AI-generated writing–obsolete. *The Economist* chose an even more dramatic route in "Yuval Noak Harari Argues that AI has Hacked the Operating System of Human Civilisation," in which, predictably, the historian stokes the fear of a revolution that "is bringing us face to face with Descartes' demon, with Plato's cave, with the Maya" (Haari).

With roots in the liberal arts, honors programs and colleges are steeped in writing intensive course requirements, theses, and other extensive written output. Because honors classes are often smaller, honors educators often pride themselves in knowing students well and in being in a better position to distinguish student writing from AI-generated text. But are we really as well poised as we think? If we are, do we stay the course and continue business as usual regarding assessing student learning? And if we're not, might the generative AI crisis be seen as an opportunity for honors educators to take the lead in creating new pathways for teaching and learning?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While the introduction of generative AI may feel like an entirely unprecedented moment, we could, instead, choose to view it as another step in higher education's and honors education's long history of adaptation to new technologies. Since 1088, when the first universities opened their doors in Bologna and Paris, higher education has changed under the influence of two main factors: technology and social norms. In turn, universities contribute new ideas and technological advances, thus partaking in the world's revolutions, or catching up with them by altering curricula and adapting to important societal changes and the need to prepare students to respond to new environments. The history of higher education in the United States offers great insights into the conversation between town and gown and the mutual growth each experienced in the process.

A source of change that spans centuries with earth-shattering implications is the printing press introduced by Johannes Guttenberg in 1450, which also drove increasing access to paper. Early Mediaeval universities had primarily relied on oral communication and disputation to test students, but the increasing ubiquity of paper in the late fifteenth century impacted the nature of testing for centuries to come. The delivery of information was altered by the chalkboard in the mid-1800s, by instructional films and television a century later, and by a number of electronic technologies in the past twenty years–from the advent of the internet, to the gradual ubiquity of learning management systems (like Blackboard or Canvas), to open-source learning platforms (like Moodle or EdX). That's to say nothing of the impact of the microchip in 1958, or of more advanced calculators on mathematics instruction in the 1960s, or the impact of Wikipedia on how we teach research and documentation in the twenty-first century. While the government's response to technological advances has been the creation of committees such as The National Commission on Technology, Automation, and Economic Progress in 1964 to assess its potential for military and industrial purposes, higher education has always adapted to new technologies in creative ways.

Honors education is itself an illustration of such responsiveness of higher education. Indeed, in their history of honors programs and colleges, Patricia Smith and Rick Scott identify the major waves of development of honors education and credit the resurgence of interest in honors to the 1983 NCEE report: "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative of Educational Reform" (Smith and Scott 27). Not only have honors programs and colleges been contributing to broader campus efforts to respond to societal needs and technological pressures, but they have been bolstered by governmental and private funding over the course of the past century or so in order to contribute to critical improvements in higher education.

In 2021, Arthur Levine and Scott Van Pelt announced the demise of higher education as we know it in *The Great Upheaval: Higher Education's Past, Present, and Uncertain Future*. Even without considering generative AI, these scholars foreshadowed major changes in the higher education landscape on the basis of broad access to information and the technology allowing for that access; they also predicted that curricula would be ill-adapted to respond to ever-accelerating societal and technological changes. Educators have thought many times: "This is it. It's over." However, institutions of higher education adapt and respond to societal needs by incorporating new technologies and ideas, thereby promoting more creativity in the process and further fueling the economy of change. From the first to the second industrial revolution, to World War II, and eventually through the quickening pace of electronic advances, higher education has had to reinvent itself by adjusting curricula, increasing access, diversifying demographically, and reinventing pedagogies to adapt to new technologies and new needs. Honors educators have done this many times.

LEARNING AND CHEATING

The introduction of generative AI is one of several technological advancements that challenge the way we teach. While responses to generative AI are diverse, people generally agree that AI will alter teaching processes and learning. Fear, frustration, and other emotions

have driven many to focus exclusively on nefarious uses of the new tool, but ChatGPT did not invent cheating. Perhaps, its dramatic introduction to the public has merely placed cheating in the limelight. Indeed, "since the beginning of formalized education, student cheating has been a challenge for educators" (Arnold et al. 2). It may be only an assumption that the easy access point to generative AI and the accessible and free use chat-style interface by which we interact with the technology would cause instances of academic dishonesty to skyrocket.

Scholars such as James M. Lang do not necessarily see a correlation between such technological advances as generative AI and an increase in cheating. While his book, *Cheating Lessons,* was published in 2013 and therefore does not address generative AI specifically, it offers a clear and useful examination of academic dishonesty. Lang's primary concern is to reposition our thinking about cheating as "an inappropriate response to a learning environment that wasn't working for the student," not to relieve students of their responsibility but to give faculty some autonomy "to respond more effectively to academic dishonesty by modifying the learning environments they constructed" (2). In short, he argues that academic dishonesty "can help us learn how to become better teachers" (3). His research relies on scholars who have studied the history of cheating in higher education through various methods including survey data and analysis of historical documents. In doing so, he argues that "cheating" is a vague and "unscientific term" that could cover a multitude of actions–all of which are dependent on context, learning objectives, student understanding of the term, and instructor expectations (10)–standards we can take forward into our development of policies and practices around the use of generative AI in our courses.

Further, survey data from the 1970s, 1990s, and 2000s present some relatively consistent evidence that cheating rates are 1) higher than faculty in higher education would like for them to be and 2) impossible to report with a satisfactory degree of reliability. Lang points out that "cheating self-reports rely upon the students having a clear understanding of what constitutes cheating–and an understanding that correlates with the survey administrator's understanding" (14). Coupled with snippets of language that vary widely from honor codes at several universities, Lang illustrates that our definition of "cheating" is porous and context-dependent, and perhaps because of such differences, students often flounder in knowing just what constitutes cheating in a given situation. As a result, his book's overarching focus on shifting the reader's attention "away from the *dispositional factors* that influence cheating" or the kind of student who might cheat, toward a focus on "the *contextual factors* that influence cheating" or the makeup of the learning environment in question (16).

Using ChatGPT to brainstorm and ideate may be appropriate in one class but not another; it may also be incorporated in assignments in one class but not in others. Parsing honest and dishonest use of generative AI depends heavily on context and relies on a level of literacy of the technology that most people–faculty and students alike–simply do not possess. Although generative AI detectors became available shortly after the release of ChatGPT, most purport to identify text generated by AI, but they only make an educated guess at best. They are much better at identifying writing generated by the free ChatGPT service but not at all adept at identifying text generated by the fee-based GPT-4 service. Tools such as Undetectable remove all markers of generative AI cadence and structure, thereby making the generated text more likely to be missed by a detector.

Generative AI has changed the playing field for both students and faculty in higher education generally and in honors more particularly. If unethical behavior must be monitored, clarifying what we consider to be ethical and conveying this clearly to students are as important as policing behaviors–perhaps even more so. Does it make more sense for administrators and faculty to devise strategies that help all students succeed in college without the temptation of cheating by focusing energy and resources on the causes leading students who may be ill-equipped or desperate to cheat rather than seeking to use imperfect tools to catch them? Are we police aiming to catch and punish wrongdoing, or are we guides intent on helping students learn with us and develop new skills as we navigate a changing educational landscape?

HONORS IN THE AGE OF GENERATIVE AI

Each year at the National Collegiate Honors Council conference, the Teaching and Learning Committee hosts a student fishbowl session where students discuss among themselves why they joined honors, what has made honors worthwhile for them, and how honors could be improved. At the 2023 conference, one student spoke of a "deep desire to be known and to be seen" as a reason to join and stay involved in her honors college. Her statement received emphatic nods from the other students in the fishbowl and hums of understanding from the audience who had gathered to learn from the participating students. This point of view is not a revelation. If students' use of generative AI is driven by a desire to be seen and to feel that they matter, would a strict investment in policing not short-circuit our ability to deliver on our students' need for connection and belonging in our honors programs and colleges? Rather than spending time checking students' writing for AI misuse, would our time in honors (and beyond) be better spent fostering trust and ensuring that our students feel seen and heard while knowing that they belong? On the other hand, do we have a responsibility to teach our students to use generative AI in an ethical manner?

As of the publishing of this Forum essay, there is still no reliable data to show that cheating rates have actually increased. However, we have all observed that the time we (and our colleagues) spend checking students' writing for cheating has increased. AI detectors cannot be the answer when they are imperfect and tend to target and stigmatize non-native speakers and lower-income students at the very time when research shows that fostering all our students' sense of belonging is essential to their retention, completion, and success in college and beyond (Cohen 7). Instead of investing resources and time in fruitless policing, might our efforts be better spent considering who will support faculty in learning how to use AI well? Could honors education lead the way by creating models that may be replicated on a larger scale? How can faculty best be supported in approaching AI tools creatively to formulate assignments and assessments that go to the core of students' learning, whether or not they may have used generative AI to elevate their language? Might faculty need to think more productively about the teaching of foundational skills (summarizing, synthesizing) in the face of generative AI? How should we teach students to use generative AI so they are prepared to use it ethically in the workplace?

In his *T&L WebSource* newsletter for the NCHC Teaching and Learning Committee in January of 2023, John Zubizarreta asks: "Can we help our honors students (and others) to recognize how, when, why, or whether to use AI to enhance learning, as opposed to circumventing and thus diminishing their learning through simple, passive capitulation of their individuality and integrity as learners?" If our students graduate from our institutions with honors diplomas from our honors colleges or honors programs and go on the job market having only heard that using generative AI is dishonest and disingenuous, what opportunities will they lose in the marketplace or in graduate programs to candidates who have a solid working understanding of how to utilize this technology? Does this moment call us to rethink the objectives of honors education? Or is it possible that honors education is already well-positioned to respond to this moment because of our interdisciplinarity and our focus on student-driven learning?

On the other hand, incorporating AI-related tools in our instruction and creating AI-informed assignments raise ethical concerns. Whatever our level of comfort with the technology, simply jumping into assignments that require students to use ChatGPT might be foolhardy at best. Those of us who do not study generative AI specifically, or computer science more broadly, often do not fully understand how this technology works, and companies like OpenAI, which owns and operates ChatGPT, are not currently required to disclose how they use the information fed into their systems. Moreover, this practice often leads to other ethical concerns: for instance, when reviewers of unpublished works submit this material to a large language model (Lee). Questions of ethics clearly extend to what professors and mentors in higher education choose to do with AI. How do we navigate the world of faulty detectors that cannot do what they claim to do? What do we do if our alternative assessments for gauging student learning, such as requiring that essays be handwritten or conducting oral exams instead of written exams, create accessibility issues in the classroom? And what do we do if our students refuse to use this technology on any number of ethical grounds?

Even those among us who are excited about these changes and the possibilities for exploration within this new frontier will have needs that may be difficult to meet. We may need to invest in access to these new technologies in order to fully understand their functionality. We may need time to hone our teaching skills and refine our practice. Surely, we will need space to grieve the loss of our tried-and-true ways of teaching. Honors educators are distinctively positioned as they contribute to these efforts not only in their disciplines but also within the unique environment of honors education. This expansive perspective has the potential to entice new generations of educators to join these forward-thinking efforts.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

As we suggest, generative AI creates more questions than solutions. We are intrigued by the possibilities offered by the tools but cautious in our implementation of the new technologies. We are curious to read responses pondering the impacts of AI in honors, as well as detailed and discrete instances of productive use of generative AI in diverse learning environments. We do not anticipate many educators being indifferent to this conversation, and we hope for a productive exchange. In the whirlwind of quick developments and

innovation, higher education rarely gives its practitioners time or space to mourn. We hope that this Forum might be one of these spaces where authors are welcome to share their anger, dismay, and trepidation while also planning for the future by exploring the potential of new technologies. Considering the nature of the work we do, the investment we make in our students' future, how do we position ourselves in regard to generative AI? Do we embrace our fears and reject AI, or do we lean in and learn to integrate it in our classrooms to prepare students for the ubiquity of this technology in tomorrow's world?

The following questions are other possible avenues for pondering and conversation:

- Knowing how complex generative AI learning tools are, how do we guide our students in using this technology to enhance their learning rather than circumvent their learning? Is there room for AI literacy in honors curricula? Have other technologies had a similar impact on the ways we teach and learn in honors?
- Particular disciplines are more eager for this technology to be integrated in the classroom and for our students to be trained in smart ways to use them. What training or knowledge will we need to insert AI in our classes well? How will honors education distinguish itself in the process?
- Can generative AI level inequitable playing fields? How do we avoid generative AI creating more inequity among our students? What model might honors offer for centering relationships, trust, belonging, and humanity in education as we weather this revolutionary moment?
- If policing our students' work to identify the presence or influence of generative AI is a losing battle, what should be done? What would that more complicated understanding change about how we design assignments or curricula, how we prepare students for the work we ask them to do, and how we react when academic dishonesty occurs? What is academic dishonesty in this evolving landscape? How are responsible adaptations to the new tool going to impact our pedagogical and assessment models?
- If, as Richard Badenhausen suggested in his presidential address in 2019, honors is the place for pedagogical troublemaking, then how much good trouble can AI help us generate?
- Is the centrality of AI to many conversations about cheating in higher education really about teaching? Is this tool threatening our understanding of higher education and its mission? Does this tool fundamentally change how we teach writing, reasoning, and critical thinking? Is ChatGPT an ontological threat to the university?
- Are ChatGPT and similar generative AI tools leading to increased freedom and creativity or leading to intellectual laziness and breeding totalitarian linguistic oversimplifications?
- If "the design of many GPT detectors inherently discriminates against non-native authors" (Matthewson), how can faculty interested in using detectors still support the aspirations of inclusive excellence expressed in NCHC's "Shared Principles and Practices in Honors Education"?

CONCLUSION

Answering these questions about teaching in an AI-informed way is complex. It requires that we embrace what we ask daily of our students by being curious and willing to take risks and be vulnerable so that we can model this behavior for our students. We need to help them gain the knowledge they will need, and we must stay committed to equity by keeping our eye on issues of access and accessibility and by reminding our students and ourselves of what is at stake ethically in the decisions all of us make. Generative AI might be a unique opportunity to embrace honors as a radical practice, as Richard Badenhausen asked us to in his 2019 Presidential Address at the National Collegiate Honors Council conference: "Why do we not foreground honors as a site of deeply radical practices? And what would it look like if we intentionally owned our position as academic and pedagogical troublemakers and even extended that radical viewpoint to our practices beyond the classroom?" (5). Honors learning environments give us the opportunity to challenge the norm and make some trouble. By embracing age-old traditions in honors education to foster curiosity and collegiality, we have a chance to generate productive, and perhaps even transgressive, ideas contributing to the impact generative AI has on the future of honors education and higher education.

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