Teaching and Educational Commentary

Engaging Students in Open Dialogue about Use of AI Tools in Economics Courses

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of artificial intelligence (AI) tools is a scary prospect for many of us in college teaching roles. But these tools are here to stay. After my own initial resistance to AI tools in the classroom, I decided to engage each of my classes in conversation about them. In this commentary, I describe my experience with engaging my undergraduate classes in open dialogue about the use of AI and developing a collective agreement about how AI tools can be used in the classroom. While some faculty may not be ready to use AI tools themselves for assignments and classroom activities, facilitating conversations with students about these tools is an easy and low-cost way to explore the use of AI tools in the classroom and develop reasonable, fair, and clear policies for classroom use. Working collaboratively with our students to determine the best use of AI, as these tools evolve, is vital to ensuring these tools enhance rather than detract from students' educational experience, as well as contribute to a culture of trust and respect that students value.

1 Introduction

"*Technology is anything that was invented after you were born*." –Alan Kay[1]

New technology is scary. Once upon a time, the pencil was scary. So was the calculator. Then it was the internet. Then it was the little internet-connected computer that we have attached to us at all times (e.g., a smartphone or smart watch). Artificial intelligence (AI), specifically generative AI, is the next frontier in technological advances. All of us are sitting around our conference room tables hemming and hawing—what will we do? Will *this* mark the end of higher education?

History suggests … probably not. But as with every new technology, education will change. And as we dive into these conversations about what that change will look like, it is important to remember that we have a very valuable resource at our disposal—students! And guess what … they are worried about AI, too! They are also confused and scared about AI, and they are unsure about what it will mean for their futures. They are also deciding when and how to engage with it. We are in this *together*. As James Lang writes in his book, *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty,* "We have to give the students opportunities to respond in authentic ways over which they have some control" (Lang 2013, p. 65).[2] To that end, in this commentary, I discuss the process I have used in setting AI policies in the economics classroom together *with* students.

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[1] This quote is widely attributed to computer pioneer Alan Kay, although from what I can find it does not appear directly in any written record. I first encountered it in Kevin Kelly's book, *What Technology Wants* (2010, p. 235). I try to reflect on it whenever I am feeling grouchy about something new in the world.

[2] This book significantly influenced my approach to course design and teaching when I first read it, and I have retained many of the approaches in my teaching. I highly recommend it for anyone interested in thinking about how to design courses so that students are less likely to feel they want or need to cheat to succeed in class (regardless of the technology available).

But let me back up for a moment. My introduction to AI in the classroom was not pleasant. In early 2023, just a few months after ChatGPT was released, I received a homework submission from a student that was AI-generated. My first reaction upon seeing this assignment was … *This is not okay. This is cheating.* And I acted accordingly with our institutional process. I try to make it very clear to all students that if they are under stress or need support, they should come to me. The student who submitted this assignment did not and instead turned to what I considered cheating.

But as I got a little distance from the incident, I started to think … *Was I too harsh?* I knew I needed a policy to make it clear what was and was not allowed, so that I do not have to resort to the university policies for accountability and adjudication, which are also in flux when it comes to AI. But AI is still a bit overwhelming, at least for me (as of this writing, I am not ready to use it myself for tasks—maybe I will be soon). One thing I realized from the academic honesty process (and one thing I dislike about it generally) is that it puts us in opposition to students. Rather than working *with*, we are working *against.* As I reflected on this process, I realized I wanted to be working *with*. I asked myself, what does it look like to work *with* students when it comes to AI?

The first step, I figured, was a conversation. But to be honest, I was scared. One of the reasons I think many faculty are so comfortable with the lecture style of teaching (chalk and talk, sage on the stage, death by PowerPoint, etc.) is that it is *safe.* We have planned what we are going to say ahead of time. We have years' worth of notes. Conversations, on the other hand, can be scary. We do not know where they will lead. Students may ask us questions we are unable to answer, at least in the moment. Constructive dialogue with students requires vulnerability and humility. As bell hooks notes in her timeless book of essays on pedagogy, *Teaching to Transgress*, "any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks" (hooks 1994, p. 21).

2 Having the AI Conversation

Before I get to the AI conversation with my students, I set the tone. It is important for students to know their perspectives and experiences are truly valued. I set this tone on the first day of class by asking students to write name cards with prompts for factoids in each corner. In one of the corners, I ask them to put something "they know a lot about." I find this exercise valuable for a few reasons. It reveals how confident (or not) students are, it reveals what they are passionate about, and most importantly, it provides a lead-in to a conversation about respect. I acknowledge that students know a lot about things that I probably do not know about. And I know a lot about some things (namely Economics) that they do not know much about. We each bring our specific experience and sets of expertise into the classroom, and it is sharing those experiences together that generate our unique learning environment and experience for that class in that term.

I have "the conversation" about AI on the first or second day of class *after* setting the tone for the course as noted above. It comes *after* discussing the outline of the course and reviewing the syllabus and course webpage in our learning management system so students know what kinds of work the course will require.

Here are the questions I pose to the whole class for open discussion and some accompanying explanation for the reader's benefit:

1. *Have you used ChatGPT or other AI chatbots?*
   It is important to understand the level of knowledge students have. If we have created a welcoming and respectful classroom environment, students will indicate they have used these tools, but in my experience (so far), their use is less common among students than the media hype would have us believe.

2. *Do you think they could be a useful tool in this course? If so, how?*
    It is important that this is presented *after* the presentation to students about what kinds of assessments and assignments will be used during the term. Then students can think about the use of AI *specifically* in the context of this course.
3. *In what aspects of class do you think the use of ChatGPT and other AI chatbots should be acceptable?*
4. *In what aspects of class do you think the use of ChatGPT and other AI chatbots should not be acceptable?*
    The last two questions are where we narrow down the specific agreements we want to have about when and how it is appropriate (or not) to use AI, and I write them on the board in an "acceptable" and "not acceptable" list. The goal with this part of the conversation is to try to come to some agreement about what is or is not okay so that everyone can buy into it. In addition, I encourage dissenting voices to speak up, asking "Is there anyone who has a different opinion? I expect and welcome other perspectives." I also share which elements I have concerns with and explain the nature of those concerns.
5. *Does everyone feel comfortable with the acceptable and unacceptable uses of AI I have written here?*
    In the end, my goal is for everyone (both me and the students) to buy into the AI policies for the course, and to feel the policies are reasonable, fair, and clear.

Within a few days of the conversation, I follow up with the class, adding language to the syllabus based on what we discussed and letting students know the language is there. Here is the language I added to the syllabus for one section of my Introduction to Microeconomics class in the 2022–2023 academic year. The language makes specific reference to the types of at-home assignments for the class (issue briefs and problem sets) and gives examples of the types of activities that are and are not allowed in the context of these assignments.

> ### *Use of ChatGPT and Other AI Chatbots*
> *Per our class discussion on the first day, use of AI chatbots, including but not limited to ChatGPT, is allowed in this course as a study tool. For example, looking up terms and concepts that you are confused about is an acceptable use of AI chatbots in this course. Use of AI chatbots, including but not limited to ChatGPT, is not allowed in this course to solve or prepare homework answers. For example, asking an AI chatbot to summarize an article for which you are preparing an issue brief, write parts of an issue brief, or answer a question on a problem set are not acceptable. If you are ever in doubt about whether or not use of an AI chatbot is acceptable, please ask! Also, if you have suggestions for changes to this policy as we all figure out how AI chatbots can be used in our work, please let me know.*

Adding this language gives me a point of reference and my own policy so that I am not left trying to figure out whether use of AI is a violation of the broader academic honesty policy of the university. Additionally, since my colleagues and I may not all have the same policy, it attempts to make very clear what is allowable *in a particular class*. Other classes may be different, and it is important that we impart this to the students we engage with.

3 Reflections

Finally, I want to share a couple of observations from the conversations I have had with my classes (eight so far) and my experience dealing with suspected violations of the class-generated AI policies.

We as faculty may all have this impression that students are out there just throwing everything into ChatGPT, but I have been surprised by how few students have indicated they use AI tools. It is of course possible some do not admit to using them, but my sense is that many students have had similar

trepidations to me. This will certainly change over time, but it is important to recognize the media and tech world hype around AI may not reflect most students' experiences. I have also appreciated that this process yields different results depending on the class and on the quarter. In the four quarters I have had these conversations, they have changed, with students in the most recent quarters considering AI to be more acceptable than prior quarters, and more students indicating they have used AI than in the past. This has been important for me, helping me keep abreast of the rapid changes in this technology and its uses, and ensuring my policy remains reasonable, fair, and justified in light of these changes. Finally, the conversations have given me considerable peace of mind. They remind me that students are also anxious about these things and that many value learning and fairness in the classroom, things I also value.

That said, this approach is far from perfect, and I cannot at this time prove its efficacy; to do this I would need to run an experiment of some kind, and that is not on my agenda for the near future. Others are doing this type of experimental work in the classroom and beyond (e.g., Shear et al. 2023), and I read this work with great interest. My hypothesis is that the approach and framing I use around AI sets the tone for things to come, creating a respectful learning environment where students may be less likely to use AI in ways the class deems unacceptable. Student evaluations from my courses provide some support for this idea, highlighting the vibrant learning environment in the classroom as well as the focus on learning and critical thinking rather than grades within the classes I teach. However, because I have not received any specific feedback around the AI conversations in these evaluations, this feedback may have to do with broader aspects of class culture (of which the AI conversation is merely one aspect). Some students have also told me (unasked) when they have used AI to do certain things which are permitted under the policy. Unfortunately, I do still at times receive student work that appears to violate the AI course policies created with students. I believe it is my duty as the course instructor to enforce course policies, and so when I do suspect a student has violated the class AI policy, I address it. I do not currently have language on how the policy is enforced in the syllabus and have so far addressed it on a case-by-case basis, but I may add a question about appropriate enforcement to my conversation about AI policy with students next term.[3] I do find enforcement is easier for me and feels fairer when I have a class-level AI policy in place, as it gives me an easy reference in dealing with any suspected violations. I am sure I am not alone in finding it difficult to prove that AI has been used if students do not admit to it, so when I do suspect a violation, I ask the student who submitted the work outright if they have used AI, remind them of the course policy around AI, and give them the opportunity to redo the work on their own if they admit to using AI. In this interaction, I emphasize that in my experience, AI-related course violations are often driven by stress about grades or other things happening in life, and I want to support the student in dealing with that stress, but I need their help in upholding course policies. This is again in the spirit of working *with* and not *against* students, and as with all aspects of this approach, my enforcement methods are a work in progress.

AI is here. It is not going away. If we ignore it in our classes, some portion of our students will be taking advantage of it, with possible implications for equity and fairness. Addressing AI in the classroom does not require becoming AI experts overnight or becoming the AI police. To begin, it just requires a simple conversation.

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[3] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to reflect on this point.

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