CASE STUDY

Designing an AI policy: An experiment in co-creation

***Molly Chehak**, Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship, ***Maggie Debelius**, Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship, **Jake Holtschlag**, School of Business, **Grace Kim**, College of Arts and Sciences, **Kenny Le,** College of Arts and Sciences, **Sarah Lyons**, School of Foreign Service, **Hugo Nutting**, College of Arts and Sciences, and **Sophia Oh**, College of Arts and Sciences, Georgetown University, USA.*

Contact: debelium@georgetown.edu

ABSTRACT

We present a case study of co-creating a policy for the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in a writing course at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. Students and faculty in two sections of a required 1st-year writing course worked to draft and respond to a policy about AI and then reflected on the experience. Student reflections suggested that the experience not only engaged students in a meaningful inquiry into AI, but also introduced them to key threshold concepts in both student partnership work and writing studies.

KEYWORDS

artificial intelligence (AI), writing studies, threshold concepts

A syllabus policy about the use of generative AI can represent a teaching approach and set the overall tone of a course. Developing a policy with instead of for students can lead to deeper learning, while also shifting from a culture of policing to one of inquiry. Additionally, partnering with students during transitional periods may help us build a more thoughtful and durable collective knowledge base about artificial intelligence in education.

What follows is a case study of co-creating a policy for the use of generative AI in a writing course at Georgetown University, a highly selective, private institution in Washington, DC. AI is an evolving set of technologies that have been around since the 1950s, but meteoric advances in a subset of tools known as generative AI in the past 2 years meant that students and faculty learned together on this project. Since October 2022, academia has been exploring if and how AI can foster skill development, critical and ethical thinking, and interdisciplinary learning (as well as problematize all three) (Mollick, 2024, Dobrin, 2024). We put faculty and students in partnership to craft a policy, upending some traditional notions of expertise in the classroom. This process not only allowed for the kind of meaningful student engagement that other partnership projects have achieved, but also introduced key threshold concepts in both partnerships and writing. Threshold concepts are concepts in a discipline that, once understood,

CC-BY Licence 4.0 This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons – Attribution License 4.0 International (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly attributed.

change how a person thinks in the field, and it is clear that those of us involved in the project have been changed by it (Meyer and Land 2003).

Georgetown students take a required 1st-year writing course (WRIT 1150) designed to introduce writing as a social, rhetorical, and iterative process. In an activity drawing on the Harvard AI Pedagogy Project, we designed a case study involving students from two course sections taught by different professors (Yousufi 2024). Students in the first section worked in groups to consider approaches to the adoption of generative AI, particularly large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT, Claude, and others. Because the course focuses on writing, our policy development focused on textual generators, though some of the concerns about LLM usage could extend to other categories of AI tools. One group developed a course policy that banned AI use, another developed a policy that allowed its use under certain circumstances, and a third group allowed free and open use. Students considered the benefits and drawbacks of multiple approaches, who each approach might impact, and then collaborated on a single policy that incorporated ideas from all groups. They shared the policy with students in a second section of the course who responded to the draft based on their own experiences, as well as class discussions and readings on the promise and pitfalls of large language models.

Partnering to write this case study involved three steps during the Spring 2024 semester:

1. Policy drafting: Drafting the original course policy in one section and responding in another section involved 25 students (15 enrolled in the first section taught by Maggie Debelius, 10 enrolled in the second taught by Molly Chehak) and their professors.
2. Reflecting and researching: After the policy exercise, Debelius and Chehak issued an open invitation to students from both sections to collaborate on this case study. Three students from each section accepted. The first section was represented by Kenny Le, an economics major; Sophia Oh, an economics and computer science major; and Sarah Lyons, a regional and comparative studies major. The second section was represented by Grace Kim, an international studies major; Hugo Nutting, an economics and philosophy major; and Jake Holtschlag from the Business School.
3. Case study: Professors reviewed the reflections, noting trends and evidence of emerging understandings of key concepts. They assembled the analysis into a draft study, which they shared with the student partners for feedback and revision.

Here is the policy developed by students in Debelius's section:

> We believe that AI should be used as a tool to help us write, not to replace our writing. In this class we consider acceptable uses of AI to include brainstorming, outlining, and simple editing. Direct quoting from an AI program is not allowed. When we do use AI, we will cite where it was used in our writing process to foster the environment of trust and transparency that we seek to build. Additionally, we will conduct due diligence in understanding implicit and explicit biases of AI programs in the process of our writing and brainstorming. As writers we are responsible for the accuracy of the information we present.

> We will not use AI in creative writing or personal reflections for this course. Our professor will make any additional AI policies clear to us in the interest of trust and transparency.

Students in Chehak's section who were tasked with responding to the policy developed by Debelius' section had mixed reactions; some responded positively while others had concerns. They found the policy to "be somewhat vague" and expressed particular concern about the requirement for "due diligence." They acknowledged that "AI has predominantly been developed with limited, biased data, and that our individual engagements with AI depend on its design" but some feared "this policy appears to discourage writers from using AI."

The responding students also reflected on the purpose of a 1st-year writing seminar:

> While such caution may be warranted in a writing class, WRIT 1150 is designed to guide students through processes that result in good writing, which should include our current context. Partnering with AI, as we do in our class, can maximize both the benefits and the quality of the product. . . . We, too, don't want to lose opportunities for learning and improvement.

This co-creation activity yielded unanticipated results. We expected a high degree of engagement and, for the most part, achieved it. Lyons, co-author of this case study and a student from the first section responsible for drafting the policy, explained that "crafting this AI policy fostered an environment of student engagement and personal responsibility towards one's learning." What surprised the instructors was the way the exercise engaged students not only with AI but also with threshold concepts in both student partnerships and writing studies, deepening learning in both.

Meyer and Land (2003) first introduced "threshold concepts," which they defined as "conceptual gateways" that "lead to a transformed view of something" over 20 years ago (p. 1). As economists, they applied this idea to concepts such as supply and demand. Threshold concepts are those that must be understood for students to progress beyond a superficial understanding of the discipline. The authors describe the discomfort of liminality in which students may feel insecure as they are challenged by new ideas. Rapid advances in AI have caused discomfort for both students and instructors, which became an important area of focus in our partnership.

THRESHOLD CONCEPTS IN PARTNERSHIPS

Since Meyer and Land (2003) published their seminal work, scholars have identified student-faculty pedagogical partnership as a threshold concept (Cook-Sather et al, 2014; Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015). Seeing faculty and students as colleagues in teaching and learning can be transformative for all parties. Under the larger umbrella threshold concept of student-faculty partnerships, scholars have identified particular threshold concepts of partnerships (Cook-Sather et al., 2019), including the concept that students have valuable knowledge of and important perspectives on teaching and learning and that student partners are not subject-matter experts.

Students have valuable knowledge of and important perspectives on teaching and learning

Student contributions were key to developing a policy that students found meaningful and, therefore, more likely to abide by. Kim, a co-author of this case study, offered the important perspective that "if students have a say, they have more sense of responsibility." In addition, the students said they were more likely to integrate a range of considerations about AI into their writing after participating in the articulation of these considerations.

Being asked to craft a course policy was an unfamiliar experience for several students, however, especially in their first year of college. Oh, co-author of this case study, explained "My experience drafting an AI policy was confusing, tentative, and unsure." Not only was syllabus policy-making new, but also making ethical choices about an evolving technology was a challenge. Threshold concepts are by nature troublesome, so these challenges are an integral part of the process.

Student partners are not subject-matter experts

Faculty have advanced degrees and expertise in a field, making it hard for some to see students as equal partners. Thinking about AI, however, upended some notions of expertise. As Le, co-author of this case study, explained,

> Traditional hierarchies where instructors make decisions as the more informed and experienced group no longer apply—we are all equally investigating the limits of AI. I cannot tell you the amount of times instructors have asked me about what AI can and can't do. In this sense, students— as not only a key stakeholder but also the generation most exposed to social media, the only platform able to match the pace of AI development—are arguably in an even better position than instructors to make informed decisions about AI policy. The instructor's experience matters too, of course, but the fundamental shift that AI caused in the way society works cannot be addressed on experience alone; the younger generation's relatively higher familiarity with AI is just as important.

Le and other students helped shape the curricular approach to AI in both sections by introducing new tools and ideas. Although he and others brought significant technical expertise, the final responsibility for course policies remained with the two professors who are subject-matter experts in writing studies. The students, however, wrote that responsibility into the policy ("Our professor will make any additional AI policies clear to us") in a way that honors the expertise of all parties. This statement also requires faculty to maintain awareness about developments in AI, which reasonably mirrors the responsibility placed on students to follow individual AI policies in their courses.

THRESHOLD CONCEPTS IN WRITING

In addition to introducing students to pedagogical partnerships, the policy assignment touched on concepts in writing studies that inform the course goals of framing writing as a rhetorical, social, iterative, and reflective process. In Adler-Kassner and Wardle's 2016 *Naming What We Know, Classroom Edition: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, scholars describe 37 threshold

concepts from writing studies.[1] Students articulated versions of these threshold understandings (without naming them as such) when reflecting on the policy generation, including the concept that writing is a social and rhetorical activity, that writing is a knowledge-making activity, and writing addresses, invokes, or creates an audience.

Writing is a social and rhetorical activity

Kevin Roozen identifies the first threshold concept in the collection that writers make "meaning for particular audiences and purposes, and writers are always connected to other people" (Roozen, 2016, Concept 1, p. 17). Many students come into first-year writing seeing writing as "the act of a single writer inscribing a text," he explains (p. 17). The AI exercise asked students to see writing as a collaborative activity from the outset by having them work in groups and consider the impact of policy on particular populations (including non-native speakers, students with disabilities, and those from underrepresented groups who might experience the bias of AI in particular ways). Lyons, co-author of this case study, saw the exercise as an opportunity for "collaboration among people of diverse backgrounds," which was an important step toward building trust in the course.

Of course, many writing courses treat writing as a social activity by asking students to post to a discussion board or engage in peer review. But responding to a course policy rather than another student's work added a level of investment not usually seen in discussion responses.

Writing is a knowledge-making activity

Heidi Estrem explains the second threshold concept that "writing is often defined by what it is: a text, a product; less visible is what it can *do*: generate new thinking"(Estrem, 2016, Concept 1.1, p. 19). Many students who used writing to work through their mixed feelings about AI expressed concern that new thinking might be lost in the process of using AI. They were interested in becoming more efficient writers but hesitant to lose their creativity. As Oh, co-author of this case study, explained:

> In many ways, AI has helped me learn by providing me with personalized guidance, maximizing my studying and reading efficiency, and cutting out the "busy work" in many writing and reading assignments. However, in doing so, AI has also made me lazier and reduced my reliance on my own critical thinking skills. If a class reading is over a page long, I will not hesitate to ChatGPT it.

Or as Kim, co-author of this case study, posited,

> one of the most important aspects of a writing class is to develop one's *voice.* Because generating written work with AI hinders this development, I think the use of AI in writing classes should be strictly restricted to *reviewing* work at the *sentence* level.

Indeed, many students in both sections showed more interest in voice in Spring 2024 than students have shown in previous semesters of the course.

Grappling with a very real problem allowed students to see that "we don't simply think first and then write. We write to think" (Estrem, 2016, Concept 1.1, p. 19). While losing touch

with this opportunity to "write to think" is one of the very things that students and faculty in the class see as under threat from generative AI, some scholars see the problem differently. In order to hold onto our ability to be creative and assess humanness, we shouldn't "increase rules and enforcements. It is time to use this advancement to facilitate learning and knowledge, thus stressing the value of independent thinking" (Dwivedi et al., 2023).

Writing addresses, invokes, or creates an audience

Andrea Lunsford reminds us of the way in which "writing is both relational and responsive, always in some way part of an ongoing conversation with others" (Lunsford, 2016, Concept 1.2 , p. 20). This exercise introduced students to multiple levels of audience. Not only did they draft policy for their own sections, but they were also conscious of responding to a policy from another section. Getting the sections together for an in-person discussion after sharing the policy draft enhanced their understanding of writing as a social activity and also prepared them for later assignments in which they were asked to address authentic audiences.

The two sections wrestled with how to communicate around divergent views, for instance when co-author of this study Kim explained, "As a respondent to the draft of the AI policy, I was overall concerned that the policy allowed AI to take away students' learning opportunities such as brainstorming, creative thinking, and editing/reviewing written work." In light of this tension, they also talked about what it meant to respond to someone else's work in an honest but constructive way.

Knowing that they were students writing to other students influenced the first section to make particular stylistic choices. Rather than a more distant administrative voice characteristic of many syllabus policies, they chose first-person plural pronouns (e.g., "**We** believe that AI should be used as a tool to help **us** write").

Similarly, when responding to the draft policy, the second section exhibited a consciousness and solicitude for their audience. They wanted to avoid overly dogmatic stances, so they included such phrases as "We can all agree," "May be warranted," "we too" and the ending note: "Overall, this discussion prompted us to ponder the ultimate purpose of education. We are grateful to have the opportunity to talk about this topic."

IMPLICATIONS

Other themes emerged from the reflections, including frustration with the lack of a university policy. Co-author of this study Le noted,

> Lack of uniformity of AI policy creates a confusing landscape for students, . . . which rather than aiding learning, results in students having to learn how to use AI to aid their writing for the sake of their careers while simultaneously restricting themselves from AI in order to follow certain teacher's preferences.

But he added that, "At the same time, an inflexible AI policy at the university level or even department level can make it unnecessarily difficult for students and teachers to find that optimal learning environment that is so key to educational success." His complex reflection illustrates

how he has begun to understand the threshold concept of writing as a knowledge-making activity.

Our students realize that AI is radically changing the nature of work and education. Co-authors of this study Nutting and Holtschlag wrote,

> Some of the more AI flexible professors in our other classes have acknowledged that AI will play a central role in our future, as a tool. They acknowledge that we will most likely rely on AI in some capacity during our work lives, and therefore allow students to use it with documentation and rigid guidelines.

Oh, another co-author, went further to note that "not acknowledging AI's rise within the world would place students behind the changing times, not adequately preparing them for the real world." As co-authors Nutting and Holtschlag concluded,

> Some teachers view AI as an integral part of our futures, others view it as cheating. Students are then subject to the teacher's guidance. That's why the process of collaboration between students and faculty during the policy creation is effective.

These thoughtful responses provide further evidence of significant student engagement.

Involving students as partners and other forms of engaged learning are the best response to concerns about AI taking away students' opportunities to think critically. Co-author Kim argued that

> the biggest downside of AI is that it steals the students' learning opportunities. For instance, if a student uses AI to generate an essay, the student just lost their chance to do research, formulate original ideas, and have agency over the format, structure, and word choice.

Assigning students an essay without engaging them in the larger question of why they should care about it makes the temptation to use AI much greater. Giving students the opportunity to shape assignments and invest in the process through pedagogical partnerships improves the experience. Moreover, exploring the capabilities of large language models as producers of writing offers a unique opportunity to consider the function of academic writing itself.

Not only does this activity give students the chance to think critically about their education, it also offers an opportunity for faculty interested in but hesitant about partnership work. The work required two class periods, time spent reviewing reflections, emails, and two additional out-of-class meetings for the writing team. Many writing faculty are contingent laborers unable to engage in extensive partnerships, but this exercise allowed for experimentation without excessive uncompensated labor. Just as it is important to make partnership activities inclusive for students, we need to make them accessible for faculty of differing affiliations.

If we were to repeat the experiment, instructors and co-authors of this study Chehak and Debelius would require all of their students to reflect on the experience rather than only those who collaborated on this article. The final threshold concept in *Naming What We Know* states

that "Reflection is Critical for Writer's Development" (Taczak, 2016, Concept 5.4, p. 78). That reflecting on the policy deepened learning for the student partners suggests that all students might benefit from metacognition. And although we issued an open invitation for students to collaborate on this article, there may have been unseen barriers that prevented some students from volunteering, so we would also rethink this approach using more transparency as described by Bovill et. al. (2016).

Co-author Chehak suggests introducing an added benefit by having the respondent group draft their own initial policy and invite the drafting group to go through the experience of responding. Many students, like professors, find it easier to respond to existing ideas rather than originate new ones, a tendency that resonates with AI-assisted writing. Generative tools supply content for refinement or critique, favoring reaction over creation and shifting the writer's role toward that of an editor or evaluator.

Policy drafting started the course with an atmosphere of presumed trust and mutual responsibility rather than enforced surveillance. It also helped students cross a threshold into taking responsibility for their own learning. Co-author Oh described the disorienting experience of moving from daily high school classes to 1st-year college courses that meet only twice a week:

> I became less engaged in my classes and began looking towards the newest website that everyone had been raving about to make my life easier: ChatGPT. I began to use AI more and more as a crutch when I realized it could be used to finish assignments for me.

But working on the course AI policy was a turning point for her:

> Relying on AI left me feeling restless and unchallenged, and the opportunity to discuss AI policy with students and professors was a deeply reflective experience that helped me become more in tune with my own education, forcing me to confront what I actually want to gain from my classes. After the experience of designing an AI policy alongside my peers and professor, I began to re-evaluate what it was I seek to gain from an education.

Even more than co-creating a syllabus policy, giving students the chance to re-evaluate what they wanted for their own education made this partnership worthwhile. As Cook-Sather and Luz (2015) describe, crossing the partnership threshold "foster(ed) in students greater engagement in, and responsibility for, learning" (p. 1097).

NOTES

1. Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2020) continued to question the threshold concept framework for writing studies in *(Re)Considering What We Know: Learning Thresholds in Writing, Composition, Rhetoric, and Literacy*, but we find the 2016 formulation useful for this case study.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Molly Chehak *is the Director of Digital Learning at the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship and an instructor in the Writing Program at Georgetown University.*

Maggie Debelius *is the Senior Director of Faculty Initiatives at the Center for New Designs in Learning Scholarship and a professor in both English and Learning, Design, and Technology at Georgetown University.*

Jake Holtschlag *is an undergraduate in the McDonough School of Business at Georgetown University.*

Grace Kim *is an undergraduate in the College of Arts and Sciences at Georgetown University.*

Kenny Le *is an undergraduate in the College of Arts and Sciences at Georgetown University.*

Sarah Lyons *is an undergraduate in the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University*

Hugo Nutting *is an undergraduate in the College of Arts and Sciences at Georgetown University*

Sophia Oh *is an undergraduate in the College of Arts and Sciences at Georgetown University,*

REFERENCES

Adler-Kassner, L., & Wardle, E. (Eds.). (2016). *Naming what we know, classroom edition: Threshold concepts of writing studies*. Utah State University Press.

Adler-Kassner, L., & Wardle, E. (Eds.). (2020). *(Re)considering what we know: Learning thresholds in writing, composition, rhetoric, and literacy*. Utah State University Press.

Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., Felten, P., Millard, L., & Moore-Cherry, N. (2016). "Addressing potential challenges in co-creating learning and teaching: Overcoming resistance, navigating institutional norms and ensuring inclusivity in student–staff partnerships." *Higher Education, 71*(2), 195–208. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9896-4

Cook-Sather, A., Bahti, M., & Ntem, A. (2019). *Pedagogical Partnerships: A How-to Guide for Faculty, Students, and Academic Developers in Higher Education*. Elon University Center for Engaged Learning. https://doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa1

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: A guide for faculty*. Wiley.

Cook-Sather, A., & Luz, A. (2015). Greater engagement in and responsibility for learning: What happens when students cross the threshold of student–faculty partnership. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *34*(6), 1097–1109. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2014.911263

Dobrin, S. (2024). *AI and Writing*. Broadview Press.

Dwivedi Y. K., Kshetri, N., Hughes, L., Slade, E. L., Jeyaraj, A., Kar, A. K., Baabdullah, A. M., Koohang, A., Raghavan, V., Ahuja, M., Albanna, H., Albashrawi, M. A., Al-Busaidi, A. S., Balakrishnan, J., Barlette, Y., Basu, S., Bose, I., Brooks, L., Buhalis, D., … & Wright, R. (2023). Opinion Paper: "So what if ChatGPT wrote it?" Multidisciplinary perspectives on opportunities, challenges, and implications of generative conversational AI for research, practice, and policy. *International Journal of Information Management, 71*, 102642. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2023.102642

Estrem, H. (2016). *Naming what we know, classroom edition: Threshold concepts of writing studies*. (L. Adler-Kassner and E. Wardle, Eds.) Utah State University Press.

Lunsford, A. (2016). *Naming what we know, classroom edition: Threshold concepts of writing studies*. (L. Adler-Kassner and E. Wardle, Eds.) Utah State University Press.

Meyer, J. H. F., & Land, R. (2003). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: Linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines. In *ISL10 Improving Student Learning: Theory and Practice Ten Years On* (pp. 412-424). Oxford Brookes University.

Mollick, E. (2024). *Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI*. Portfolio.

OpenAI. (2023). ChatGPT 4 (May 2024 version) [Large language model]. https://chat.openai.com/chat

Roozen, K. (2016). *Naming what we know, classroom edition: Threshold concepts of writing studies*. (L. Adler-Kassner and E. Wardle, Eds.) Utah State University Press.

Taczak, K. (2016). *Naming what we know, classroom edition: Threshold concepts of writing studies*. (L. Adler-Kassner and E. Wardle, Eds.) Utah State University Press.

Yousufi, M. (2024). Debating the Ethics of Generative AI. *Harvard AI pedagogy project*. https://aipedagogy.org/assignment/debating-the-ethics-of-generative-ai/