AI in the Classroom: A Tool for Learning or a Shortcut to Superficiality?

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Artificial intelligence, specifically generative AI, has taken centre stage, forcing universities to rethink learning, assessment, and academic integrity. At a recent panel discussion, academics and students grappled with a key question: Does GenAI enhance education or encourage intellectual shortcuts?

Once upon a time, the great debate in education was whether students should be allowed to use calculators. Today, the conversation has shifted to generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) – an even more transformative tool, challenging traditional teaching, assessment, and learning methods.

At a recent panel discussion, educators pondered whether GenAI – such as ChatGPT, Copilot, or DeepSeek – is an enabler of deeper intellectual engagement or whether it fosters a generation of students who outsource their thinking. As universities scramble to adapt, the debate rages on. Should AI be embraced, restricted, or fundamentally redefined in academic settings?

THOUGHTFUL DISTINCTIONS

Introducing the panel discussion, the organiser, Dr John Ebejer, took the floor to clarify an important distinction. 'When discussing AI and GenAI, we must be clear about the difference between the two. GenAI scrapes data from the internet, using Large Language Models (LLM) to generate text. AI, on the other hand, refers to software that facilitates specific complex tasks such as computation, drawing, and data processing. Some professions, such as engineering and architecture, have been using AI for decades. The use of AI is overwhelmingly beneficial. GenAI, however, requires careful oversight in student use to maximise learning.'

Prof. Matthew Montebello opened the panel discussion with a firm opinion. He believes AI empowers students and educators, but must be used wisely. 'In early 2023, I brought students before the disciplinary board for submitting AI-generated work they couldn't explain. It was an experience that highlighted the risks of blind reliance on GenAI. It is just a tool, not a sentient entity. When

misused, it bypasses learning rather than enhancing it. True education requires critical thinking, and GenAI should support, not replace, that process,' Montebello said.

Prof. Lidija Petrić, who has extensive experience in teaching and research, said that although the University of Split, Croatia, is still in the early stages of discussing the implications of generative AI both for students and professors, they are beginning to see cases where students use AI to generate assignments in a way that borders on academic dishonesty.

'We are still figuring out how to address these challenges, but it's clear that GenAI is reshaping the academic landscape, and we must find the right balance between embracing innovation and maintaining academic integrity,' Petrić said.

Student Michael Awanah offered a foundationally different point of view: 'In Ghana, where I attended high school, we often faced challenges accessing quality education. Sometimes, we had to wait for delayed or absent teachers, and we didn't have textbooks. If we'd had AI-driven learning tools, students could have engaged in self-directed study instead of waiting passively. In this sense, GenAI has the potential to bridge educational gaps and make learning more accessible.'

Using GenAI, however, requires careful attention. Ease and convenience may put students at risk of over-relying on the technology without grasping the reasoning behind their work. A balanced approach maximises GenAI's benefits while ensuring genuine learning. Education systems must guide responsible AI use, emphasising human responsibility over mere capability. The goal is not to replace intelligence, but to enhance it in the pursuit of meaningful progress.

'As an educator and researcher, I see AI as a permanent fixture in our lives, enhancing efficiency in transportation, communication, and marketing. It also fosters

collaboration by bridging disciplines and perspectives,' Dr Karen Mugliett said.

However, responsible AI use is crucial. Digital literacy is essential for educators and students, ensuring informed engagement in a rapidly evolving landscape.

'Ideally, generative AI should serve as a tool for discussion, creativity, and intellectual exploration. AI plays a role in brainstorming, refining ideas, and improving one's work. Researchers and students have been using it, and there's no reason to be ashamed. AI has even helped me improve my English, and I'm proud of the high-quality texts it has enabled me to produce,' said student Lola Mindt.

TRANSFORMING PEDAGOGY

The gradual integration of GenAI into everyday life represents a broader trend in education: the use of technology to facilitate learning. AI has the potential to be a game-changer in higher education, transforming traditional models of teaching, learning, and assessment.

Higher education has long relied on lectures as the primary method of knowledge dissemination. However, lectures often involve minimal student interaction, especially in large groups. GenAI offers an opportunity to engage students more actively in the learning process. Educators adopting a constructivist approach can use GenAI to promote critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving. When used effectively, GenAI can enhance the learning experience rather than serve solely as a passive tool for information delivery.

If used effectively, GenAI can enhance students' cognitive processes and critical thinking skills. However, this requires proper training for educators, supported by systemic changes and both methodological and technological support. Panel participants posed the question: are we adequately prepared to integrate GenAI into our teaching methods? Do we have the necessary skills to guide students in using GenAI responsibly? These questions remain open, but they must continue to be asked if the education system is to evolve for the benefit of the students and society at large.

AI is a disruptive innovation in education, much like previous technological advancements. The challenge lies in ensuring that educators receive proper training and continuous professional development to maximise the use of these tools, the panellists discussed. In many universities, a Ph.D. is enough to qualify someone to teach, but effective teaching demands a distinct skill set – one that AI can support. Rather than resisting GenAI, the focus should

Tertiary Teaching and Learning: The Challenges and Opportunities of GenAI was the focus of a roundtable discussion held at the University of Malta on 11 February 2025. The panel brought together academics from the University of Malta, the University of Split, and Nord University, along with student representatives. The discussion featured the following panellists:

- **Prof. Matthew Montebello, specialising in Artificial Intelligence at the Faculty of Information and Communication Technology (University of Malta)**
- **Prof. Lidija Petrić, Full-time Professor at the Faculty of Economics, Business, and Tourism (University of Split)**
- **Prof. Albina Pashkevich, Associate Professor in Tourism Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences, History, Geography and International Relations (Nord University)**
- **Michael Awanah, student of Artificial Intelligence (University of Malta)**
- **Dr Karen Mugliett, Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Education (University of Malta)**
- **Lola Mindt, student of the Department of Tourism Management (University of Malta)**
- **Dr John Ebejer, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Tourism Management (University of Malta), with a career spanning academia, consultancy, and urban planning**

Photo by James Moffett

be on harnessing its potential to benefit students and educators alike.

Panel participants agreed that, at university level, the focus must remain on teaching – on direct communication and the encouragement of critical thinking – regardless of whether GenAI is used. Educators must adapt, but not at the expense of the pedagogical fundamentals. Teaching students how to research effectively has, and always will be, crucial. It is not just about Googling for answers; it requires an understanding of what constitutes credible academic sources, how to analyse information, and how to distinguish reliable research from misleading content. Proper referencing is one area where GenAI presents challenges. 'I have encountered several students submitting references that do not exist,' Ebejer noted.

Representing their academic institutions, the panel participants agreed that educators are responsible for ensuring that learning remains rigorous. 'We need to rethink how we design assessments and assignments. We must ensure that students engage deeply with their work rather than passively rely on AI-generated material. This is an issue we need to address proactively,' Montebello concluded.

ETHICAL EVOLUTION

Discussions around GenAI are polarising. Some people fully embrace it, while others completely reject it. However, GenAI should be approached with a balanced perspective rather than reacting with fear or resistance.

Before the spread of technology, knowledge was exclusive to universities. Professors and lecturers were the beacons of knowledge. Students went to university to hear lectures and to the library to access information. That was where knowledge lived.

Knowledge is no longer confined to universities, as smart devices and e-book readers have democratised access, breaking down barriers that once excluded many. That said, access to knowledge remains expensive for many, and the technological divide still exists.

This shift redefines the role of educators, not just as sources of knowledge, but as guardians of academic integrity – a vital and demanding responsibility. Every field has both ethical and unethical players. "Free riders" have always existed, and educators, now more than ever, must hold them accountable.

AI is neither a threat nor a shortcut. It is a tool, and its impact depends on how it is used and regulated. The challenge for educators is not to resist change but to guide students in using AI responsibly, ensuring that learning remains deep, critical, and meaningful.