

## Examining Graduate Students' Opinions About the Impact of AI on Their Teaching

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### Abstract

The importance of artificial intelligence (AI) in today's schools is ever-changing with a need to study how faculty, as well as emerging faculty, believe AI will shape their teaching philosophies. Therefore, this case study research examines written reflections of four doctoral students from the southern United States and their thoughts on the impact of AI on their current and future teaching. More specifically, the researchers wanted to know how graduate students involved in an online mentoring program focused on leadership development believe that AI will impact their future teaching. Each of the four participants were enrolled in a two-year graduate leadership program where students had dedicated faculty mentors, chosen by the mentees, who worked with them weekly, as well as two program directors who met quarterly with the mentees about their research projects. All of the graduate students had taught or were currently teaching at either a university or community college and had varying degrees of experience using AI in their own learning and teaching. Data for this study consisted of three months of written reflections with a focus on AI. The researchers coded the data using open and axial coding. Four main themes about how AI would influence the participants' teaching emerged from the reflection data: *Better Assignments*, *Ethical Concerns*, *Instructor Concerns*, and *Student Expectations*. The reflections revealed pros and cons of the use of AI in teaching and demonstrated evolving participant thoughts about its use. Implications for teaching and future research will also be discussed.

*Keywords:* artificial intelligence, graduate education, teaching

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## Introduction

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) encompasses vast areas of today's educational settings. Even though there are potential benefits to the use of AI in education like personalized feedback, increased student motivation in learning (Vera, 2023), as well as instant grading and creating lesson plans (Bodinga, 2025), faculty are also skeptical. Iqbal et al. (2022) conducted a study in Pakistan of 20 faculty about the use of ChatGPT in the classroom, where concern was raised about its use, such as students developing plagiarism practices that would be detrimental to their learning. In addition, Iqbal et al. noted that most of their participants felt they needed help in understanding how to use the AI technology effectively in the classroom. Interestingly, Galindo-Domínguez et al. (2024) found in their study with 445 elementary through university teachers that "regardless of certain personal variables age, sex, educational stage, or field of knowledge, higher level of digital competence is associated with higher attitudes towards AI in Education" (p. 9).

With these ideas in mind, we decided to examine how AI has impacted graduate students who had been or were currently teaching in our research grant program. Would they be interested in using AI in their courses? Would they see strengths and/or weaknesses regarding the use of AI in teaching? More specifically, we were interested in answering the following research question: How do graduate students involved in an online mentoring program focused on leadership development believe that AI will impact their future in teaching in higher education?

## Methodology

The participants in our study included four graduate students located in the United States who were accepted into the second cohort of a two-year graduate-focused research grant that emphasized leadership and a mentoring model where each graduate student was paired with a mentor of their choosing. The mentor was either a faculty member at the graduate student's institution or was a current faculty member of another institution of higher education in the United States. Graduate students were selected based on their research proposal for the grant program, which included majors from diverse backgrounds: Dance, Counseling Psychology, Rhetoric, and Sociology. Surprisingly, each participant was interested in becoming a professor, so we focused this research study on how the participants felt that AI might impact them in their future classrooms.

As part of the grant, graduate students completed weekly (10-hour or 20-hour) research with their respective mentors, as well as wrote monthly reflections about leadership-based podcasts, attended quarterly Zoom update meetings with their cohort and project directors, presented each semester about their research, and completed semesterly Google Form updates to their project directors. At the end of the program, each mentee also submitted a manuscript for publication. For this research, the data used came from the fall 2024 and summer 2025 written reflections about AI. (Note: Initially, the grant work included five graduate students, but one student did not complete the program, so her data was removed from the research.)

The two project directors gathered the data from the three sets of reflections from the fall 2024 and summer 2025 and compiled it into a Google Document for coding purposes. Open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) techniques were utilized to arrive at four main themes in the data. In the Findings section, we will discuss these themes, as well as provide participant quotes.

## Findings

In the coding, we examined reflections to see ways in which the graduate students felt AI influences their teaching and/or future teaching. We compiled the codes related to teaching from the reflections into four main themes: *Better Assignments*, *Ethical Concerns*, *Instructor Concerns*, and *Student Expectations* (see Table 1 for a breakdown of codes and themes). Pseudonyms were utilized for each graduate student.

**Table 1**  
*Thoughts on AI as a Teacher*

| Themes               | Codes (with B = Bri, C = Charlee, K = Kirsten, and H = Harper)   |
|----------------------|--|
| Better Assignments   | be more creative with assignments (B, C), include new ideas for in-class presentations (H), improve student learning outcomes(H), carefully design assignments (K),                          |
| Ethical Concerns     | environmental concerns (B, H), plagiarism (K), detect cheating (H), plagiarism checker (K), student voice and invention (K)  |
| Instructor Concerns  | giving AI control for presentation creation (B), be more knowledgeable about AI (B), overuse of AI (H), inaccurate and misleading information (K)  |
| Student Expectations | be clearer to students about assignment expectations (B), standardize and communicate expectations to students (H), explicitly state AI class policies (K), grammar and language support (K) |

As can be seen from the above table, all participants felt that AI can help instructors to create better assignments due to the power that AI can have over the educational process. A student can input various simple prompts into generative AI models and obtain instant feedback on a myriad of topics. Thus, the participants saw the need for better prompts and new ways to present class content.

With the other three main themes, three of the four participants discussed these concerns and expectations in their reflections. To better examine these themes, we will detail each student's thoughts about AI from a teacher's perspective in the following paragraphs. Let us start with Bri's reflections.

### Bri

During the second year of the grant, Bri, a Sociology major, was teaching a university course in her discipline. In her monthly reflections, she described the influence of AI on her as a teacher and student. She discussed the lengths of time she spent trying to craft a well-thought-out AI policy in her syllabus, as well as assignments for her course. In the below quote, she described her detailed thought processes behind classroom assignments like presentations and writing assignments.

If I offered my students an assignment that included a presentation, I would evaluate them on the quality and design of their slides, but it would be a small part of the overall grade because there are so many tools that can help to create beautiful slide decks from

just an outline. Similarly, I grade students on their use of professional and academic language in their writing, but this is not a significant portion of the grade because there are many tools to help them do this.

Bri understood the power of AI and wanted to make sure that students were not just cheating their way through her course. She further elaborated on how she emphasized her desire to “hear” the students’ own voice in her assignments to help curb the over-reliance of students’ use of AI.

I ask them [students] to create writing that reflects their personal experiences and how that connects to the sociological themes we are studying. I know that AI can generate a reflection. Still, over the semester, I have become familiar with their writing styles and histories, and I know their opinions about various topics...I focused my comments [in class] on how much I love to hear their voices in their work, and AI tends to take that away. I told them it was my pleasure to know them through their writing and that I lost out when they use AI.

Bri was intentional on how she crafted better assignments and set student expectations to be able to try to address her concerns about AI use in the classroom, as well as ethical issues she had with student cheating with AI.

### **Charlee**

Like Bri, Charlee, a Dance major, was balancing being a doctoral student and instructor. She was new to using AI in the classroom and did not speak much about its use for her teaching. Through her reflection work, Charlee discussed her reservations about AI and how best to utilize it in her classes.

I have mixed feelings about the use of AI in education. I have been experimenting with how to incorporate it into my courses. In one of my dance history classes this semester, I am asking the students to use ChatGPT to write a narrative about some historical figure in dance and then write a counternarrative by themselves. Though we haven’t gotten to this assignment yet, I am hoping it will help them see that all history is narrativized and we have to critically think about how these stories are crafted and what implicit and explicit biases are embedded within them.

In her reflection about AI, Charlee discusses how she plans to use it in her course to make a better assignment but not how she has actually used it yet, which might explain why she did not discuss this aspect of AI use much in her reflections.

### **Harper**

Unlike Bri and Charlee, Harper, a Counseling Psychology major, was not currently teaching but had taught in the past and aspired to be a professor. In her reflection writing, she focused on the plagiarism tool Turnitin, an ethical concern of hers, and its usefulness in the classroom:

I was grateful for Turnitin’s AI-detection feature, as it allowed me to see, more often than not, where AI might have been used in students’ essays...

Another major theme that Harper mentioned in her reflections about teaching was the overuse of AI, an instructor concern. In her reflections, she clarifies her statements by discussing her fear of relying too heavily on AI:

I understand that one of the common pitfalls of utilizing AI tools is the potential for over-utilization. As a future educator, I hope to impress upon my students that while AI is capable of generation, there are human skills necessary to facilitate their learning. I think it is important to note that while AI increases convenience, it does not replace the process of obtaining an education.

Harper goes on to discuss how AI does not show emotion or creative skills that a human can produce with replication and summarizing being AI's main functions. She also feels that teachers need to "standardize and communicate expectations to students," which are expectations the students should meet in her classroom.

### **Kirsten**

Lastly, Kirsten, a graduate student majoring in Rhetoric, discussed the usefulness of AI tools like Turnitin to detect plagiarism, an ethical concern, in student work, as well as how these programs have helped students be more cautious of overreliance on AI, an instructor concern, in their writing:

By opening this line of conversation with students that are suspected of, or openly admit to using AI, students can learn to be more critical of their AI use in academic contexts, and consider the possibilities and limitations of this work. AI also has implications for student voice and invention, two major rhetorical concerns that guide writing literacy.

Even though Kirsten acknowledged the benefits of AI in education, she does see ethical dilemmas in its use with "a fine line between using AI for sentence stems or transitional phrases, and plagiarizing ideas for exposition." Kirsten goes on to discuss how AI can also provide inaccurate summaries of articles and incorrect citations. She even gives examples of assignments that might be nice alternatives, better assignments, to combat AI tools, including self-made podcasts:

I think it could be helpful if instructors carefully designed assignments in a way that would make it more difficult to use AI, since it is not necessary for every assignment. Or, instructors could explicitly state which assignments can or cannot utilize AI when designing these prompts. For example, my Composition II students create a podcast project which captures their authentic reactions, ideas, and voices in real time. It will be interesting to see what some others have come up with when using AI for their own research projects and goals.

### **Conclusion and Future Work**

As can be seen from the graduate students' reflections, there exists various benefits and challenges with AI use in education, which is similar to findings from other researchers (Iqbal et al., 2022; Vera, 2023). In our work, these areas manifested as our four main themes: *Better Assignments*, *Ethical Concerns*, *Instructor Concerns*, and *Student Expectations*. Even though students can become too reliant on its output that they might lose sight of how to critically evaluate its answers and become lazy in their studies, instructors could become more creative

in their assignments, which could lead to better assignments and deeper learning. AI is here to stay, and we need to continue to study its uses in education and ways in which our current and future educators are redefining learning for future generations.

For future work, we are interested in how educators grow over time in their use (or lack thereof) of using AI in their teaching in higher education. This new generation of teachers has grown up being exposed to AI in their own studies and seen the pros and cons of its use. Will they be more likely to evolve their teaching philosophy to adopt AI or will they be more likely to be wary of its use and seek other resources for themselves and/or for their students to utilize for learning. Time will only tell.

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### **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors. Further, the authors declare that databases and ChatGPT were used to help with putting references in APA format.

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