# Teaching on Shifting Ground: A Self-Study of AI Policy, Practice, and Online Graduate Education

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## Abstract

This paper reports on a Self-Study of Teacher Educator Practices (S-STEP) examining how rapidly evolving institutional policies and guidelines for generative artificial intelligence (AI) have influenced my teaching and assessment practices in online, asynchronous, graduate level courses with standardized, pre-developed curricula across multiple institutions in three Canadian institutions. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How has the development of policy around AI use in academic courses impacted my practice of teaching and assessment? Findings indicate that (1) policy ambiguity has operated as a productive catalyst for reflective pedagogical change; (2) policy discourse has reoriented assessment away from product-focused evaluation toward process-oriented design foregrounding transparency and student voice; (3) policy evolution has legitimated deliberate, ethical educator use of AI for planning and formative learning support; and (4) policy gaps have expanded the educator's role as an ethical guide and designer of AI-integrated learning environments. The study draws on institutional documents, course artifacts, reflexive journaling, and critical-friend dialogue, analyzed through iterative thematic coding and triangulation. The findings suggest that policy acts less as prescriptive instruction and more as a stimulus for inquiry-led redesign, leaving substantial interpretive responsibility at the instructor level. Implications include the need to embed AI literacy, articulate course-level AI permissions and disclosure expectations, protect student data privacy by prohibiting uploads to public large language models, and align assessment with authentic processes in asynchronous, pre-developed curriculum contexts. The paper concludes with next steps for deepening the S-STEP, attending to socio-cultural considerations (including Indigenous education and international student experiences), and monitoring policy developments that shape faculty autonomy and ethical practice.

*Keywords*: generative AI, academic integrity, institutional policy, teacher educator practice

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## Introduction

Over the past two years, generative AI has become a pervasive presence in higher education, reshaping how students write, study, and demonstrate learning, and how educators plan, assess, and provide feedback. As an educator teaching online, asynchronous, graduate level courses with standardized, pre-developed curricula across multiple institutions, I have encountered both excitement and uncertainty as institutional policy frameworks have attempted to catch up with practice. While much scholarly and practitioner attention has focused on academic integrity and student use, there remains comparatively less inquiry into how faculty practice is transformed by policy signals that are still in flux. This paper responds to that gap through a self-study of practice (S-STEP), asking: How has the development of policy around AI use in academic courses impacted my practice of teaching and assessment?

My context comprises teaching roles at two mid-sized universities and one college. Across these settings, I teach in asynchronous formats, where course shells are pre-configured and faculty enactment occurs primarily through facilitation, feedback, and assessment within established curricular constraints. In such environments, academic integrity concerns surface acutely, and institutional guidance tends to be absorbed into course-level expectations, rubrics, and communications. The study thus situates policy as a lived, interpretive phenomenon rather than a static compliance checklist.

Methodologically, the self-study integrated iterative journal reflections, evolving policy and guideline of GenAI and academic integrity analysis, and critical-friend dialogue to trace how policy statements, updates, and institutional communications translated into changes in my day-to-day decisions about assignment design, communication with students, and personal use of AI for planning and feedback. The aim of this study was to surface principles and practical strategies that can inform teacher educators navigating similar constraints in online, asynchronous graduate education.

### Institutional Policies/Guidelines

Across the three institutions examined, policies and guidelines vary in explicitness, scope, and tone of enforcement, yet they converge on several themes: transparency, respect for academic integrity, instructor modeling of responsible use, and strong prohibitions on uploading student work to public AI systems. The tabled summary in the original presentation highlighted these convergences and divergences, which I narratively synthesize here. Note: policies and guidelines may have changed since this research was completed.

The College frames faculty use of generative AI as permissible when purposeful, aligned to learning outcomes, and transparently communicated to students. Course-level clarity is central: instructors are expected to specify whether student AI use is permitted, restricted, or prohibited, and to include expectations in course outlines and assignment instructions. Importantly, faculty are cautioned not to rely solely on AI-detection tools when addressing potential misuse, instead following established academic integrity procedures. This guidance balances educative intent with procedural clarity, situating discretion at the course level while discouraging overreliance on imperfect detection technologies.

University 1 emphasizes academic integrity and transparent use. Students may use generative AI only if they clearly identify and properly cite AI-generated contributions (e.g., in APA style). Faculty are expected to model responsible use, integrate AI literacy into courses where

appropriate, and, critically, must not upload any student work to any large language model including any academic check tools, a measure designed to safeguard student privacy and data sovereignty. While detection mechanisms are not specified, the thrust is preventive: normalize responsible use and disclosure, prohibit misrepresentation, and protect student data.

University 2 does not (at the time of data collection) maintain a policy; instead, AI guidance is embedded in the academic integrity framework. Notably, the institution amended procedures in November 2024 (effective May 5, 2025) to classify unauthorized AI use as fabrication. As with University 1, University 2 explicitly prohibits uploading student work to generative AI tools. The overall tone is procedural and formal, codifying enforcement through integrity processes while leaving course-level enactment to faculty and instructional designers who align design and delivery with integrity principles in online settings.

The institutional landscape pushes toward transparent disclosure, course-level clarity about permitted AI use, protection of student data, and assessment approaches that do not depend on unreliable detection tools. Yet there is uneven specificity: some policies provide operational guidance (e.g., explicit prohibitions and disclosure expectations), while others articulate high-level principles that invite instructor interpretation. This unevenness is consequential: it shapes how instructors redesign assessments, communicate expectations, and model AI use in their own practice.

## Literature Review

The rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence has prompted higher education institutions to develop policies aimed at safeguarding academic integrity while supporting pedagogical innovation. Early scholarship emphasizes that institutional AI policies have often emerged reactively, prioritizing concerns about misconduct, plagiarism, and misrepresentation, while offering limited guidance for instructional practice (Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025; Perkins, 2023). As a result, faculty frequently navigate ambiguous expectations, interpreting policy language in ways that directly shape assessment design and teaching strategies. Several studies document how policy ambiguity influences instructor practice. Alsharefeen and Al Sayari (2025) found that faculty often view AI-related integrity policies as insufficiently operationalized, leading to inconsistent enforcement and pedagogical uncertainty. Gonsalves (2025) similarly reported that unclear AI disclosure requirements complicate assessment design and contribute to both student non-compliance and educator hesitation. These findings suggest that institutional policy does not function solely as a regulatory mechanism but actively mediates instructor decision-making around assessment transparency and instructional communication.

Research also indicates that AI policy discourse has accelerated a shift away from product-focused assessment toward process-oriented evaluation. Perkins (2023) and Bittle and El-Gayar (2025) argued that traditional assessments emphasizing final outputs are increasingly unreliable in AI-enabled environments, necessitating assessment redesign that foregrounds learning processes, reflection, and authenticity. Faculty survey research supports this shift: Bower et al. (2024) and Kim et al. (2025) reported that instructors are modifying rubrics, incorporating reflective components, and experimenting with staged submissions in response to generative AI and accompanying institutional guidance.

Beyond assessment, evolving policy has influenced educators' professional adoption of AI tools. Studies consistently show that faculty are more likely to use generative AI for planning,

feedback scaffolding, and administrative support when institutional policies move from prohibition toward conditional acceptance and ethical framing (Kim et al., 2025; Marshik et al., 2025). Chan (2023) and Lin (2025) further argued that faculty-centered policy frameworks can empower educators to integrate AI intentionally, positioning them as ethical models and designers of AI-informed learning environments rather than compliance enforcers. However, systematic reviews caution that policy development remains uneven and under-theorized (Liang et al., 2025; Qian, 2025). Much of the literature focuses on student behavior, with limited attention to how policy reshapes instructor identity, responsibility, and pedagogical agency. This gap underscores the need for self-study research examining how educators interpret and enact AI policy in context, particularly in online and asynchronous graduate education.

## Methodology

The study employs a Self-Study of Teacher Educator Practices (S-STEP) design to investigate how policy developments influenced my pedagogical decisions. S-STEP is appropriate where the researcher is simultaneously the practitioner whose situated knowledge is being examined. Data sources included: (a) institutional AI policies and related integrity procedures; (b) course artifacts such as syllabi, assignment prompts, and rubrics; (c) reflective journals and analytic memos documenting teaching decisions across terms; and (d) dialogues with a critical friend to test interpretations and surface blind spots. Data collection unfolded in iterative cycles of documentation and reflection aligned with policy updates and teaching milestones. Analysis proceeded through thematic coding of journals and critical-friend transcripts, triangulated with artifacts and policy texts. Validity strategies included triangulation across sources and reflexive transparency about my positionality and decision-making. The intended outputs were a policy-to-practice mapping, principles for ethical AI integration, and practical tools for assessment redesign in online, asynchronous contexts.

## Findings

### Finding 1: Policy Ambiguity Functioned as a Prompt for Reflective Pedagogical Change

Early and transitional AI policies tended to be high-level, emphasizing integrity and transparency while leaving operational specifics to instructors. Instead of prescribing concrete strategies, these policies triggered sustained reflection about how to interpret “acceptable AI use” in different assessment contexts. The absence of granular direction prompted me to interrogate long-held routines: Which learning outcomes genuinely require unaided writing? Where might AI-assisted brainstorming be ethical and productive? How should I communicate permissions and boundaries without stigmatizing help-seeking? The reflective stance was catalyzed by policy ambiguity rather than by definitive rules.

The journals include questions such as, “If ChatGPT can write essays and explain complex theories, how do I ensure academic integrity in my classroom?” Rather than producing paralysis, such questions led to intentional inquiry: conducting pilots of process-embedded tasks, experimenting with staged submissions, and adding self-commentary prompts requiring students to explicate their approach and cite any AI assistance. These moves were borne not of policy mandates, but of the need to harmonize institutional principles with course realities.

**Finding 2: Policy Discourse Reoriented Assessment From Product-Based Evaluation to Process-Oriented Design**

In parallel with policy evolution, I observed shifts in student work, more polished, formal, and sometimes "oddly generic," that signaled possible AI involvement. This spurred a reorientation of assessment away from product-only evaluation toward designs that make thinking visible. Concretely, I began to (a) emphasize iterative drafts with feedback checkpoints; (b) require reflective annotations in which students describe their process, including any tools (AI or otherwise) consulted; (c) incorporate oral or synchronous micro-presentations for high-stakes tasks where feasible; and (d) recalibrate rubrics to value planning, critique, and revision, not just final quality. The goal was to foreground authenticity and learning processes, aligning with institutional expectations for transparency and integrity without relying on detection tools as proof of misconduct.

This reorientation also required more explicit communication. Assignment prompts now include a course-level AI statement, permitted/restricted/prohibited, and disclosure guidance (e.g., where to describe AI use and how to cite it). Rubrics contain criteria for "Methodological Transparency" and "Reflective Rationale," clarifying how students earn credit for metacognitive work. These adjustments shifted effort toward the how and *why* of knowledge construction, making misrepresentation less attractive and responsible AI use more straightforward.

**Finding 3: Policy Evolution Legitimated AI as a Pedagogical and Professional Resource**

As institutional documents moved from prohibition-centric language to conditional acceptance and literacy, I increasingly regarded AI as a legitimate support, particularly for educator-facing tasks. In my practice this included drafting lesson-plan outlines, generating quiz item prototypes to be vetted and revised, summarizing readings to preview for students, and composing preliminary phrasing for recommendation letters that I then personalized and validated. I adhered to policies forbidding the upload of student work to AI tools and limited AI use to materials I authored or public-domain resources. This stance, permission with guardrails, was fostered by institutional emphasis on modeling responsible use and protecting student data.

The legitimization effect mattered in two ways. First, it reduced stigma around discussing AI with students, allowing me to openly teach how to use AI tools critically (e.g., prompt literacy, bias checks, citation of AI contributions) when permitted. Second, it improved my workflow, freeing time for deeper feedback and community-building in asynchronous forums. Rather than a binary of "ban versus allow," policy cues helped me frame AI as a tool whose value and risks depend on purpose, context, and safeguards.

**Finding 4: Policy Gaps Expanded the Educator's Role as Ethical Guide and Designer of Learning**

In places where policy remained general, I assumed an expanded role as ethical guide: articulating what responsible AI assistance looks like, designing assessments that make student voice audible, and fostering a climate where disclosure is normalized rather than penalized. My communications stressed that the aim is not to resist change but to guide it—prioritizing authentic learning and protecting privacy while equipping students with AI literacy skills for professional practice. I found that centering student agency (e.g., inviting students to explain

their workflow and decision-making) both supports integrity and honors diverse pathways to mastery, particularly in international and professional programs where linguistic and cultural diversity are strengths.

## Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the findings suggest that institutional AI policies and guidelines operate primarily as catalysts rather than scripts. Their most significant impact in my context has been to spur reflective practice, accelerate assessment redesign, legitimize ethical educator use with strong data protections, and enlarge the moral and pedagogical leadership expected of instructors. In asynchronous, pre-created course environments, where the curriculum is relatively fixed, the locus of agency shifts to *how* we frame expectations, scaffold processes, and evaluate learning. Policy can set boundaries, such as prohibiting uploads of student work to public models and insisting on disclosure, but the practical architecture of authenticity is designed at the course level.

This synthesis also underscores tensions. First, ambiguity can be productive for innovation but burdensome for consistency: instructors may interpret disclosures, permissions, and assessment redesign differently across sections or programs. Second, integrity enforcement that relies on detection technologies risks false accusations; thus, institutional cautions against sole reliance on detectors push us toward pedagogy-first solutions that embed process evidence and reflective rationales. Third, legitimizing educator use raises equity considerations: if AI accelerates some tasks, do we reallocate the recovered time to higher-touch feedback and community-building? The answer in my experience is yes—but only if such reallocation is designed into workload expectations and supported by professional development.

Finally, the synthesis highlights a throughline Transparent course-level statements about AI permissions, transparent rubrics that reward process, and transparent educator modeling of ethical AI use collectively cultivate a culture where disclosure is expected and safe. This cultural work is especially crucial in graduate online settings, where asynchronous modalities can obscure process and make product-only assessments vulnerable to misrepresentation.

## Next Steps

Building on these insights, my immediate and medium-term priorities include four strands of work:

1. Sustain the S-STEP with Critical-Friend Dialogue. I will continue cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, supplemented by critical-friend reviews of artifacts and coded reflections. This will help test emerging principles against new cohorts, policy updates, and course contexts, ensuring that practice evolves with evidence rather than anecdote.
2. Attend to Socio-Cultural Dimensions, Including Indigenous Education and International Student Experiences**.** I will examine how AI permissions and literacies intersect with Indigenous pedagogies, cultural protocols, and community accountability, resisting a one-size-fits-all frame. For international students, I will consider language support, genre expectations, and cross-cultural understandings of authorship, designing disclosures and reflection prompts that invite culturally responsive articulation of process and collaboration.
3. Advance Applications for Asynchronous, Fixed-Curriculum Courses. Within the constraints of pre-built shells, I will develop: (a) staged assignments with reflective

checkpoints; (b) optional oral defenses or mini-presentations for capstone tasks; (c) formative AI-literacy micro-activities (e.g., bias audits, prompt revision exercises) when permitted; and (d) feedback templates that encourage students to respond and iterate, keeping the instructor's human presence salient in self-paced environments.

4. Monitor and Map Policy Developments to Course-Level Guidance. I will track institutional and external AI guidelines and translate updates into concise course statements and rubrics. I will also maintain a living repository of disclosure exemplars and citation practices (e.g., where to acknowledge AI assistance in APA style), revising as standards evolve. Particular attention will remain on data privacy: never uploading student work to AI systems, even for formative purposes, and providing safe alternatives for skill-building.

## Conclusion

In rapidly evolving AI-mediated educational contexts, institutional policy does not dictate practice so much as provoke reflective inquiry and ethical decision-making at the instructor level. This self-study demonstrates that when educators engage policy critically, they can redesign assessment, model transparency, and integrate generative AI in ways that foreground authentic learning rather than procedural compliance. As AI continues to reshape graduate education, sustained practitioner reflection and context-sensitive interpretation of policy will remain essential to preserving academic integrity, equity, and educator agency.

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

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in a limited and transparent manner in the development of this manuscript. AI-assisted writing tools (including Microsoft Copilot) were used to support early drafting and language refinement of selected sections based on researcher-provided prompts. Generative AI tools (including Claude AI) were used to assist with preliminary qualitative coding and thematic organization of reflective journals and critical friend dialogue transcripts; all coding and interpretations were subsequently reviewed, refined, and validated by the researcher. AI-supported tools were also used to facilitate the identification of relevant peer-reviewed literature, with all sources independently verified through academic databases and publisher websites prior to inclusion. No student work or confidential data were uploaded to any AI system. All AI-generated content was critically evaluated, edited, and integrated by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the analysis, interpretations, and final manuscript.

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