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Impact of Generative AI on student engagement in diverse groups

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Presentation abstract

Generative AI (GenAI) is penetrating all areas of life, including higher education, where teachers and examiners are debating how to respond. While there are legitimate concerns about its potential negative impact on academic integrity, there are also learning and efficiency benefits that this technological advancement brings (Crompton and Burke, 2023; Abdaljaleel et al., 2024; Bond et al., 2024). We must develop a workforce that can confidently, effectively, efficiently, and responsibly use technological advancements, including GenAI.

Our study relates to a GenAI-related activity in a postgraduate Finance course. It explored the role GenAI played when students worked in groups and how it affected their interaction, engagement, learning, efficiency, and confidence. Does GenAI enhance or hinder group work, which is an essential graduate skill? Moreover, how do students perceive the role of GenAI in enabling them to engage with the task, complete it better, and interact with group members? While the ability to use GenAI effectively might be an important graduate skill, it is crucial to train students to become responsible citizens who use this technology ethically.

In our presentation, we described how the activity was conducted and shared our findings, including how many students used GenAI when allowed, what they used it for, the types of GenAI used, how effectively prompts were used, what students learnt, and how GenAI affected their interaction and engagement in the task. Some insights about the benefits and challenges of GenAI would be obtained from this study.

The design of our practical study in the classroom and the students' experiences and perceptions about GenAI will be useful to the teaching community and policy makers in higher education. Moreover, the insight into the use of GenAI in the classroom will also be useful. Such an activity can be replicated and tailored to suit different classes.

Keywords: GenAI; artificial intelligence; group work.

Community response

Refreshingly and unusually, this session explored the emerging intersection between generative AI and collaborative learning in higher education. Rather than focusing on the capabilities of the technology itself, the presentation emphasised the importance of human agency in learning exchanges and activities, highlighting the potentially supplementary, facilitatory role of AI in the negotiation of meaningful learning.

Discussion challenged prevailing narratives that have dominated institutional responses to AI since its rapid rise in 2024, including concerns around academic integrity and the future of writing as a pedagogical tool. One participant described their observation of how education as a sector has been encouraged to:

> Flex, adapt, and rethink how we teach and how students learn in direct response to the technology, with institutions writing policies and fretting about integrity and even sounding the death knell for writing as a learning activity.

But what if we were to put the person in the centre and ask what those teaching and learning activities were for? How do they serve us as people – not just for some employability metric? By taking a student-centred (and curated) approach, the session advocated for a shift away from techno-centric thinking and toward practices that nurture curiosity, embrace uncertainty, and foster authentic peer interaction.

A participant commented:

> As long as we remain focused on the technology and what it does or does not allow, we remain – at least, I think – in the thrall of global corporations who have no interest in the learning process itself, only in how it can be harnessed, circumvented, or even replaced. Instead, we should be helping our students to understand that learning is sometimes uncomfortable, that not-knowing is an exciting starting point, and that technology will never replace curiosity or, as here, effective interactions with our peers.

The session encouraged a renewed perspective on how generative AI might be integrated into collaborative and group work, not as a threat to traditional learning, but as a catalyst for deeper engagement, reflection, and continued criticality in assessment design.

Authors' reflection

We shared the design of an online class activity with around 100 students to explore how they perceived the impact of generative AI on group work.

In a post-class survey, many students reported that AI tools helped them generate ideas and build confidence, particularly before participating in group discussions. Figure 1 captures their thoughts in a word cloud.

Figure 1. Word cloud of student comments.

Of the respondents, 79% identified themselves as having English as a second language, which led us to ask: to what extent does AI contribute to levelling the playing field by

supporting language development and fostering participation, and to what extent does it risk isolating students and reducing peer interaction?

While many students acknowledged the usefulness of AI, an audience member challenged whether it encourages a mindset of ‘gain without pain.’ This prompted us to reflect more deeply on how technology shapes student interactions and re-examine our data more critically. Interestingly, students did express concerns about the risks of AI, showing a balanced awareness of its limitations. The drawbacks of using GenAI identified by students include: it can dampen creativity and individual brainstorming; its outputs are often too general or unclear; making it understand specific needs can be difficult and time-consuming (i.e., prompt engineering); and it may generate errors or fabricated information (i.e., hallucination). Going forward, we will analyse the data in more depth and provide more insights about this issue.

Audience members also suggested conducting a quantitative analysis to compare responses between students who used AI and those who did not. We plan to carry out a rigorous econometric analysis, using the non-AI users as a control group. The community responses affirmed the value of exploring how GenAI shapes learning and teaching practices, which has encouraged us to continue this research. They also reminded us of the importance of keeping students, rather than technology, as the focus of our study: what matters the most is not what AI can do, but how its presence reshapes curiosity, uncertainty, peer interaction, and collaboration.

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The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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