

SUBSCRIBER-ONLY NEWSLETTER**On Tech: A.I.***How teachers and students feel about A.I.*

As the school year begins, their thinking has evolved.

By Natasha Singer

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You're reading the On Tech: A.I. newsletter, for Times subscribers only. Stay ahead of the curve on artificial intelligence, how it works, and how you can use it.

I sat in on a ChatGPT workshop this month for teachers at Walla Walla High School, about 270 miles southeast of Seattle. As a reporter who covers education technology, I have closely followed how generative artificial intelligence has upended education.

Now that the first full school year of the A.I. chatbot era is beginning, I wanted to ask administrators and educators how their thinking had evolved since last spring. Walla Walla, a district that serves some 5,500 students, seemed like a timely location to begin the conversation. After blocking student access to ChatGPT in February, Walla Walla administrators told me they unblocked it last month and are now embracing A.I. tools.

So I jumped at the chance to learn more about how teachers there are planning to use chatbots with their students this academic year. You can read more in my story today about how school districts across the country are repealing their ChatGPT bans.

My colleague Kevin Roose has some great suggestions in his column today on how schools can survive, “and maybe even thrive,” with A.I. tools this fall. Step one, Kevin says: “Assume all students are going to use the technology.”

We recently asked educators, professors, and high school and college students to tell us about their experiences using A.I. chatbots for teaching and learning. We got a massive response — more than 350 submissions. Here are some highlights:

Teaching with A.I.

I love A.I. chatbots! I use them to make variations on quiz questions. I have them check my instructions for clarity. I have them brainstorm activity and assignment ideas. I've tried using them to evaluate student essays, but it isn't great at that.

— Katy Pearce, associate professor, University of Washington

Before they even use ChatGPT, I help students discern what is worth knowing, figuring out how to look it up, and what information or research is worth “outsourcing” to A.I. I also teach students how to think critically about the data collected from the chatbot — what might be missing, what can be improved and how they can expand the “conversation” to get richer feedback.

— Nicole Haddad, Southern Methodist University

Studying with A.I. tools

I used ChatGPT and a math plug-in to help prepare me in geometry for next year. That was very helpful for me because you can ask it a million questions and it never gets tired. It was like my personalized tutor in math.

— Amedeo Bettauer, age 13, rising ninth grader, Brookline High School

A.I. chatbots are making it a lot easier for students to understand difficult concepts in a simple way. The tailored responses one can obtain through specific prompts are incredible. It can provide students with endless examples of how to outline essays, business plans and emails. It's a real time saver.

— Sam Avery, recent graduate, University of Iowa

A.I. chatbots can give students an out. You don't have to think about a text deeply or write about a connection that you had to find, you can simply just ask a robot to analyze a quote and it will do it in a matter of seconds. I don't know the effects that A.I. will have on students in the long run but I just don't want it to make students lazy, as the joy of learning is that “AHA!” moment that comes from figuring something out yourself.

— Emma Nazario, first-year student, Wheaton College

Drawbacks

They have industrialized and automated plagiarism.

— Travis Huckell, associate professor, MacEwan University

I think that the very best students will be fine. At less resourced universities than my own, I foresee an ever yawning gap between the privileged and everyone else, between those who know how to use A.I. as a tool and those who don't know that there is anything to know.

— Ricardo Galliano Court, assistant dean for academic integrity and undergraduate research, Northwestern University

A lesson plan for the A.I. era

Some readers told us they would love to see the federal government develop strict rules for the educational uses of A.I. to protect student privacy and intellectual property. And they urged their universities and districts to provide more guidelines and recommendations for innovative uses of A.I. tools.

For educators looking for inspiration, Ethan Mollick, an associate professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania who thinks a lot about generative A.I. in the classroom, has some great suggestions. (He also has a newsletter about A.I., and it's covered how to make ChatGPT an expert tutor.)

On Kevin's "Hard Fork" podcast, Ethan talked about how teachers and students might use the tools in the coming school year. Here are a few snippets of the conversation, condensed and edited.

Can schools stop students from cheating with A.I. chatbots?

"The short answer is no. The long answer is A.I. use is undetectable. You can't ask A.I. to detect A.I. It's just going to lie to you. Every instinct we have about how to stop plagiarism doesn't work.

You can change how you teach. You could have people do oral exams. But the old homework assignment is basically cracked by A.I."

How can teachers adapt?

"You may have to hold people accountable with in-class exams, with having the Wi-Fi turned off, your Chromebook in demo mode. There are ways of solving this problem in the short term.

I think the bigger, longer-term problem is what does this all mean? What does this change about education?"

How should students approach generative A.I.?

"I would demand clarity. Does this mean that I'm allowed to use A.I. to generate ideas? Could A.I. come with an outline that I work on? Can I ask for feedback from A.I. in my work? Am I allowed to use A.I. as a teammate? Can I ask the A.I. advice for something? Can

I ask to explain why I got a question right or wrong?

I think you are allowed as a student to ask for what does this mean, while being patient with your teachers that they haven't figured it out either. Nobody knows the answer."

One educator's view

Jennifer Parnell, a history teacher at the Lawrenceville School, an independent school in Lawrenceville, N.J., was an early classroom adopter of ChatGPT. She began trying out A.I. chatbots in December and immediately incorporated the tools into her honors U.S. history and environmental science courses.

"I'm fascinated by the potential of this technology, albeit a little bit terrified," she wrote in response to our reader callout.

I called her on Wednesday to learn more about the ways she's been using the A.I. tools with her high school students.

For a final exam in U.S. history, for instance, she used ChatGPT to manufacture an essay and then asked her students to analyze the A.I.-generated text for errors and rewrite it. Students also fed their own essays into the A.I. tool and asked it for feedback on the quality of their sources.

Parnell said she still has concerns about the use of A.I. tools in schools, including issues of bias, privacy and academic honesty. But she believed the potential benefits outweighed the downsides.

"A.I. has pushed teachers to think more intentionally about the purpose of education and specifically assessment," she said. "As a teacher, if I'm asking questions that are easily answered by A.I., am I asking the best questions?"

Natasha Singer writes about technology, business and society. She is currently reporting on the far-reaching ways that tech companies and their tools are reshaping public schools, higher education and job opportunities. More about Natasha Singer