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Teaching Challenges, Ethical Considerations, and Equity Issues:

Navigating Gen AI Use in Northeastern University's EdD Program

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ABSTRACT

Generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI) is significantly transforming teaching and learning globally, presenting both challenges and opportunities within higher education. As faculty members in the Doctor of Education at Northeastern University, this essay reflects on our collaborative efforts to incorporate generative AI tools into our program. Initial faculty engagement sessions highlighted disparities in Gen AI access and explored individual faculty members' perceptions and preparedness for incorporating these tools in graduate education programs. Key outcomes emphasized the need for consistent exposure to Gen AI across curricula, addressing ethical considerations, and fostering critical thinking skills essential for effective AI use.

KEYWORDS

generative AI, EdD programs, equitable access, scholar-practitioners, faculty engagement

Generative artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) is disrupting teaching and learning worldwide. When harnessed effectively, Gen AI can enhance the skills necessary for improved learning, leading to better academic achievement and enhanced life-long learning. References to the potential uses for Gen AI stretch back to the 1990s (Nwana, 1990). The recent attention to Gen AI results from its accessibility to users – no longer do you need advanced computer science knowledge to harness its power. The near-universal access has created consternation, hand-wringing, and great excitement. In higher education, Gen AI has been heralded as both the advent of a new era as well as the harbinger of the end of traditional education. Harnessed properly, Gen AI will improve the skills and abilities needed to learn better. These improvements will not only help increase academic achievement and persistence but may also lead to better life-long learning and potentially improve workforce capability (Xia et al., 2024).

UNDERSTANDING GEN AI IN EDUCATION

Access to Gen AI tools is not equally available to all segments of society (Cardona et al., 2023). Increasing concern around equitable use of Gen AI, copyright, integrity, and the factors which influence Gen AI use continues to build. As faculty in the EdD program at Northeastern University, we became deeply concerned about the use of Gen AI tools in the preparation of the next generation of scholar-practitioners, specifically around issues of equitable use.

Our research was driven by a fundamental concern: How can we harness the power of Generative AI to foster fairness, inclusivity, and equal opportunities for all students? This overarching question guided our exploration into the role of Gen AI in doctoral education, particularly in the context of preparing scholar-practitioners.

To address this concern, we delved into several key areas. First, we sought to deepen our understanding of Gen AI as a teaching and learning tool, examining its potential benefits and challenges in the educational landscape. We then turned our attention to faculty awareness and individual philosophies regarding the use of Gen AI in doctoral education. This investigation aimed to uncover the diverse perspectives and approaches within our academic community.

Finally, we identified critical touchpoints within our program where Gen AI could be meaningfully integrated. This process involved a thorough examination of our curriculum, teaching methodologies, and assessment practices to determine where Gen AI could enhance learning outcomes and prepare students for the evolving demands of their future careers.

Our research developed through an iterative process of exploration and analysis, focusing on three main areas: understanding Gen AI as a tool for teaching and learning, investigating faculty perspectives on integrating Gen AI, and identifying strategic integration points within our doctoral program. This led to the development of an emergent conceptual framework that explores both the potential benefits and challenges of using Gen

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AI in doctoral education. This emergent framework provides a comprehensive approach to integrating Gen AI in doctoral education, emphasizing both the technological and social shifts required for effective implementation.

GEN AI AND ITS IMPACT ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

Initially, we examined the potential benefits and challenges of Gen AI in education. This involved analyzing how Gen AI can enhance learning and increase student engagement, as well as its role in fostering creativity and critical thinking. Our investigation highlighted the transformative potential of Gen AI in making education more accessible and effective. Peer reviewed research, however, on the incorporation of Gen AI in graduate schools of education is scarce. The literature does suggest the inequitable use of Gen AI begins with access. For example, while surveys suggest that a huge majority of individuals in the U.S. use Gen AI (Faverio & Tyson, 2023), discrepancy exists along socio-economic lines. A Fall 2023 survey conducted by San Diego State University revealed that students in the most urban areas reported using Gen AI, and feeling comfortable with it, at twice the level of students in the lowest socio-economic county (Torre & Frazee, 2024). The digital use divide, a term used to describe the gap that exists between students who are regularly encouraged to create with technology, provided the means to do so, and given instruction to accomplish those tasks, continues to grow (Cardona et al, 2023). As faculty, therefore, we must assume that students entering our program have vastly different experience, comfort level, and ability with Gen AI. Furthermore, the scant evidence available suggests that at a minimum, experience with Gen AI will skew towards the most privileged. Any assumptions of AI competence will disproportionately impact individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

FACULTY PERSPECTIVES AND AWARENESS

Another key component of ensuring equitable Gen AI use is faculty perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes toward Gen AI as a teaching and learning tool. This phase emphasized the importance of understanding diverse faculty perspectives and approaches to Gen AI integration. While AI itself is not new and has been embedded in many areas of academic life for years, since the ChatGPT announcement in 2022 of free use, universities have published guidelines to begin to define the use of Gen AI within higher education. These policies and position statements do not provide prescriptive guidance but rather function as pillars or philosophical ideals.

While these broad ranging policies attempt to create definitions of acceptable and unacceptable use of Gen AI across a broad range of university disciplines, faculty beliefs will play a key role in driving technology acceptance and inclusion within classrooms (Liu et al., 2020). As with other technological adoptions into the classroom, the self-efficacy of faculty beliefs will be a driving factor in their adoption (Kwon et al., 2019; Teo, 2009). Differing faculty positionality on integrating Gen AI will result in unequal use and experience with Gen AI, with some students benefiting and some missing out. Therefore, understanding faculty beliefs around the use of Gen AI in the classroom is critical when considering how to leverage Gen AI in the Graduate School of Education.

FACULTY ENGAGEMENT SESSION: OUTCOMES AND INSIGHTS

The EdD Faculty at Northeastern University recently initiated a series of Faculty Engagement Sessions focused on Gen AI use and its impact on students and programs. These sessions aimed to develop shared understandings and norms for Gen AI use that align with the program's commitment to equity. The primary concern was ensuring that Gen AI is leveraged to promote fairness, inclusivity, and equal opportunities for all students and faculty members.

The first session included breakout rooms where faculty members discussed questions to support planning for practice and policy development. These discussions addressed potential challenges and disparities in Gen AI use within the EdD program. Each breakout room had a lead facilitator, and notes were taken to be shared in a general session following the breakouts.

The outcomes from this initial Gen AI session highlighted the complexities and challenges of integrating responsible Gen AI use into the EdD program. They provided a roadmap for continuing this work, emphasizing the importance of consistency, early exposure, and adaptability throughout the curriculum in the doctoral program. The outcomes also stressed the need to address diverse student backgrounds and faculty roles, including differences between adjunct and full-time or half-time positions.

One key outcome was the recognition of the need to integrate responsible Gen AI use into the doctoral curriculum. Faculty emphasized the importance of introducing Gen AI in coursework to ensure equal access to tools and understanding.

Another important outcome was the concern about helping students develop an ethical perspective on when and why it may be inappropriate to use Gen AI. Discussions focused on designing activities in the curriculum to address this, such as in the EdD program's first foundation and research courses, recognizing the significance of early exposure to responsible Gen AI use.

The session also emphasized the importance of preparing graduates to become agents of change in a professional landscape that includes AI. Integrating responsible Gen AI use throughout the curriculum was deemed essential to ensure graduates acquire proficiency in this area.

Faculty recognized the need for policies related to Gen AI use. Given the dynamic nature of the Gen AI landscape, discussions explored the possibility of determining a discrete set of responsible Gen AI use guidelines. Questions were raised about who would determine these guidelines and how they could be integrated into all courses, highlighting the need for adaptability to technological advancements.

Lastly, the initial session acknowledged that students enter programs with varying levels of prior Gen AI expertise. This outcome underscored the importance of addressing the part-time/full-time divide among students and prompted consideration of how part-time faculty members, whose primary roles may be outside of the program, can integrate responsible Gen AI use into their teaching practices.

Following this session, we identified key touchpoints for inclusion into the EdD program. This involved a thorough examination of our curriculum, teaching methodologies, and assessment practices to determine how Gen AI could enhance learning outcomes and prepare students for future career demands.

We focused on the literature review and on qualitative analysis. Our emergent framework highlights the need to balance AI integration with human judgment and ethical considerations to maintain practical wisdom in scholarly practice.

EXPLORING GEN AI: A PLAYFUL APPROACH TO LITERATURE REVIEW TOOLS

Gen AI tools and their applications are changing rapidly. These tools will continue advancing and become more prevalent. However, our approach to new technology and the process by which educators assess and determine its usefulness in teaching and learning will largely remain the same. This section provides an example of using play, performance, and dialog to determine how the EdD program at Northeastern University considers adopting Gen AI tools for a specific project: the literature review. The literature review project, which becomes part of coursework, calls for students to use no fewer than thirty peer-reviewed sources to assemble at least three major theoretical/conceptual strands that surround their research study. This seems a logical place to consider the use of Gen AI tools for a few reasons: 1.) The process of doing a literature review changes with the available tools i.e., card catalogs and microfiche to online databases and word processors, 2.) AI tools presently available lend themselves to the tasks that make up the process, and 3.) our graduate students report anxiety about undertaking the task. An additional set of factors enables this exploration: the department acknowledges the historical shift that Gen AI presents to teaching and learning, wants to advocate for equitable access for our students, and believes that the faculty and students can be partners in this endeavor. The Principal Instructor (PI) is responsible for materials in the research course in which the literature review is assigned.

The PI of one of our research courses and a co-author or this paper demonstrated a process by which students could use an array of Gen AI tools for various steps in the literature review process, including Copilot, Elicit, and Litmaps. The PI started with questions about their experiences with Gen AI, their concerns, the opportunities they envision, and how those might connect to the literature review process. Some students expressed being afraid to use it or not knowing how, and some thought using Gen AI tools would be cheating. The PI then asked for a student to volunteer to go through the process with him, online, together with those in the session using their research study. He observed jaws dropping as certain AI tools – using well-crafted prompts – created outlines with suggested themes and subthemes, located seminal, well-cited, and relevant peer-reviewed articles, organized their references and provided summaries based on selected criteria, and even suggested tangential, yet related, research. He discussed the role of scholar-practitioner experience in determining the validity and usefulness of the information, the role of context in curating and editing sources, and what felt like too much encroachment on academic integrity – like when he showed one Gen AI tool that would attempt to draft their paper for them.

In the faculty engagement breakout session, he recounted how he played with the tools, shared them with students, and performed the process for a group with a substantive dialog. This provided the platform for additional dialog from the perspective of the faculty – all experts in the field of education and experienced instructors within the program. The dialog produced a set of agreed-upon statements to guide us and our program, as we consider our collective implementation of AI tools.

1. Skill remains essential for effectively using Gen AI for literature reviews and that falls within our purview as faculty members. We must determine the essential skills such as discernment, critical thinking, and contextualization that remain the human elements that Gen AI tools cannot supplant. We must clarify those essential skills for students, base them on unique human abilities, and design our projects to elicit/demonstrate them.
2. Align usage with program and course objectives. The use of AI tools within the program cannot be solely dependent upon the instructor. We must collaboratively determine how to embed AI tools and processes within the curriculum to meet our objectives. This calls for the continuation of cyclical review of program/course objectives to also consider if emerging AI capabilities impact those objectives requiring revisions.
3. Use a well-organized process log as a teaching tool. As a pragmatic consideration, we thought that documenting how we, as faculty and students, are using/playing with AI tools could serve us well in providing performances of practice. These may then serve as teaching tools, as well as platforms for further dialog.
4. Faculty value learning from colleagues. Our engagement must be ongoing in an environment supportive of different approaches, varying comfort levels, and openness to not be the expert in something new. Learning from each other means we approach the opportunities and challenges with a shared mission and familiarity with our contexts.
5. Concerns about the use of AI tools regarding academic integrity. We must continue to raise and debate ethical issues. Within academic integrity lies authorship, source material, appropriate citations, and plagiarism – to name a few, these bedrock ethical issues of academia take on additional complexities with the introduction of AI, which necessitates vigilance while not being troglodytic.

The use of Gen AI tools for a specific project from one academic department's using play, performance, and dialog to determine approaches offers one example of a way toward carefully considered implementation. In the broader discussion, however, Gen AI's impact on the scholarly writing process must be considered. In the beginning stage, as described above, Gen AI may assist with idea generation and topic narrowing, potentially leading to innovative research questions. This, however, risks over-reliance on AI-generated ideas. Gen AI can efficiently summarize academic literature for more comprehensive background research, though this may result in less critical engagement with primary sources. During the middle stage, Gen AI's impact becomes more nuanced. It can provide initial drafts to increase writing efficiency but raises concerns about authenticity and depth of engagement. At the end stage, using Gen AI for grammar checks and editorial improvements is generally accepted but must preserve the writer's intended meaning and voice.

Ethical considerations span all stages. These include questions of authorship and originality, data privacy and integrity risks, potential bias perpetuation in analysis, unintentional plagiarism, and the need for transparency about Gen AI's role in the research process to maintain credibility and academic integrity standards. As we consider the wider implications, it becomes crucial to examine how these tools

might impact the analysis of qualitative data, particularly in educational research settings.

GRAPPLING WITH THE USE OF AI FOR QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The rapid advancement and integration of AI in various online tools and platforms has brought the question of how Gen AI can facilitate researchers' analysis of qualitative data under critical scrutiny (Hitch, 2023, Morgan, 2023). In our programs, it is paramount that our students gain a critical understanding of how to collect and analyze qualitative data to inform their personal lines of inquiry. This includes transparently sharing their process of analysis to evidence the rigor of their methodology. Concerns, however, have arisen that students could turn to these platforms to shortcut the rigorous activity of coding and analyzing data to arrive at reliable themes and findings (Christou, 2023a, 2023b). If students readily turn to Gen AI platforms to simply paste in their data and have the tool provide themes, our students will not arrive at a significant understanding of the analysis process, and there will be no way for them to critically examine the output in relationship to the data.

For us, and likely all programs who foreground qualitative data analysis, knowing how to thoroughly explore and systematically analyze qualitative data and pursue a rigorous analysis is essential. We want our students to understand what it means to examine and critically analyze the data and reliably arrive at insights, themes, and findings true to the data. With the advent of Gen AI, some fear that students will bypass the intellectual work of analysis and synthesis and rely on AI-generated outputs taken at face value.

As this realization became clear to some of us, we decided to create a space for faculty to learn about and discuss the potential use of Gen AI with our students. Of course, as we did so, critical questions regarding the use of Gen AI for analysis of qualitative data became very real, and many faculty who had not yet been using Gen AI at all quickly turned to fearing that students would simply use it as a shortcut for doing the necessary work of critical analysis. On the other hand, those of us who had immersed ourselves in the use of Gen AI in a variety of ways saw how it could be a useful tool to unpack, disaggregate, aggregate, and synthesize data in ways beneficial to the analysis process (Cheligeer et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). Not supplanting the process but augmenting it.

Recognizing the need to extend and expand our conversations, a veteran and well-respected senior faculty member initiated conversations among a small group of faculty who used Gen AI. This faculty member eventually organized several opportunities for all faculty to learn about and discuss the potential use of Gen AI in our doctoral program. Thus began as series of voluntary faculty conversations to (1) share what various Gen AI platforms could do and then (2) broach the question of how we, as a faculty, may want to incorporate the use of Gen AI as a tool for our students' learning. The question then became how we may want to present guidelines or expectations to our students as to how they could use Gen AI, ensuring that they are using it in service of their learning and not as a tool to shortcut their learning. The larger umbrella question then became how we would make sure that all students would be afforded the opportunity to use Gen AI and learn how to use it in ways beneficial to them. In this way, it became a question of equity. How could we ensure that our students would be exposed to, gain access to, and know how to use the tools?

These conversations were critical as we began to recognize some faculty shred with students useful ways to use Gen AI tools as scholar-practitioners (for example, for finding literature, doing first pass analysis of data, developing action research designs, and improving their writing) while other faculty were not yet aware and thus not engaging their students with the potential of these tools.

As a result of these conversations, we are now introducing all faculty to the use of Gen AI to assist in our students' literature reviews. We are also beginning to discuss how AI-powered tools can facilitate our students' analysis of qualitative data. This includes how AI supports qualitative analysis in previously available platforms, such as atlas.ti, MaxQDA, and NVivo, but also continuing to discuss how new platforms such as AILYZE, as well as ChatGPT, may support students' analysis of qualitative data without supplanting the rigorous activity they need to undertake as a developing researcher.

Clearly, we need to examine this new educational space as recent studies have demonstrated the potential benefits of combining AI and human expertise in qualitative research analysis, leading to more comprehensive data understanding (Hamilton et al., 2023). And at the same time, we need to address several ethical implications, as researchers have also raised several concerns regarding AI's integration into different stages of the research process (Marshall & Naff, 2023). Ultimately, most feel that transparency in reporting how Gen AI was used is crucial.

While Gen AI offers potential for efficient analysis, including the ability to manage and analyze large datasets, controversies surrounding AI and the need for researchers to retain control over the interpretative process, including mitigating potential biases, must be acknowledged (Anis & French, 2023). This includes recognizing that many AI systems may be challenged to take into account significant nuanced contexts (Bano et al., 2023).The transformative impact of AI-based digital tools on qualitative research is clear, but potential limitations and risks, such as ethical concerns related to data privacy and confidentiality, potential biases in algorithmic decision-making, and the risk of over-reliance on AI-generated insights, must be addressed (Costa, 2023).

With this as a backdrop, one outcome of our conversations is the idea of developing a sequence of activities across all of research courses. These activities would scaffold and assist the development of our students' capacities and skills in collecting and analyzing qualitative data with the appropriate use of these tools. With the key word being "appropriate" – something we are working to agree upon with input from across our faculty (Christou, 2023b; Bano et al., 2023). We want our students first and foremost to develop the skills to collect and analyze data that can directly inform their line of research which includes understanding the rigorous process of coding, theme development, and analysis. But we also want our students to understand the ethical and appropriate use of AI to augment and assist in their rigorous analysis.

Ultimately, we want to ensure all our students are equitably exposed to and supported in how AI can assist them as a tool for their research and as scholar-practitioners. One way to do this is to ensure that we deliberately incorporate how Gen AI can be used in service of research and not supplant the rigorous, intellectual, and human ingenuity of our students. If we build these activities and experiences into our core courses, we believe we can ensure that all our students are being exposed to and supported in how to beneficially, ethically, and appropriately use these tools in service of their work, studies, and research (Morgan, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

Based on our work, as a faculty we believe it is essential to ensure that all students are equitably exposed to and supported in using AI tools to enhance their research and scholarly practices. This includes incorporating AI into core courses to promote beneficial, ethical, and appropriate use of these tools. The challenges and opportunities we identified – the need for ethical guidelines, the importance of faculty development, and the varying levels of student preparedness – are all addressed within our emergent framework, which emphasizes a holistic approach to Gen AI integration. This framework acknowledges that while AI can streamline tasks and improve analytical processes, it is equally important to cultivate critical thinking, discernment, and contextualization skills. To that end, we developed a guiding document that focuses on the ethical use of Gen AI. Students are expected to maintain the cognitive burden of their work, disclose all Gen AI use, and address any ethical issues that may arise. The faculty discourages early reliance on Gen AI to prioritize the development of research design skills, promoting Gen AI as a collaborative tool for enhancing original work and efficiency rather than as the primary creator of scholarly content. Consulting with faculty or dissertation chairs is encouraged when uncertain about Gen AI use.

While Gen AI can enhance learning processes, it is important to recognize that certain skills such as discernment, critical thinking, and contextualization remain essential human elements that AI tools cannot replace. Faculty members should focus on developing these skills in students alongside the use of Gen AI tools. And finally, as Gen AI tools continue to evolve and become more prevalent in educational settings, we must remain open to exploring new technologies and adapting our teaching practices to leverage the benefits of Gen AI while upholding academic integrity and ethical standards.

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