

Teaching History in the Time of Generative AI

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When I sat down at my departmental retreat in August 2023, one of my colleagues began interrogating me about my use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in the classroom. She was upset that in one of my courses that spring, I had students use ChatGPT to construct constitutions as a group activity to wrap up the semester.¹ As I explained the assignment to her, detailing why I wanted to teach students how to engage with ChatGPT, she cut me off. Then, she rhetorically asked why I was “not doing more to stop this nonsense.” Her frank assessment of generative AI as inherently bad is not an uncommon one in academia. Despite holding innovation and the creation of knowledge at the core of academic institutional missions, academics are not always early adopters of change. In fact, as Brian Rosenberg’s *Whatever It Is, I’m Against It* argues, twenty-first-century academics are very likely to actively, openly, and vehemently resist change.² My conversation with my colleague very much highlighted that reality for me. While I was excited about the possibilities that generative AI posed, my colleague was strongly digging her heels in to resist it. Neither of us were right nor wrong. Rather, the rapid development of tools like ChatGPT, Perplexity AI, and Microsoft Copilot has sparked considerable trepidation, excitement, and confusion.

As large language models (LLMs) become increasingly sophisticated and accessible, history educators find themselves at a crossroads, grappling with the opportunities as well as the challenges that these tools present. Generative AI tools offer unprecedented opportunities to enhance research capabilities, as well as to provide personalized learning experiences, and to streamline administrative tasks. Yet, it also raises profound questions about academic integrity, critical thinking skills, and the very nature of historical inquiry and knowledge production. This special section, “Teaching History in the Time of Generative AI,” of *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* explores the deliberate efforts that higher education instructors have made to teach *with* AI. Intended to inspire educators looking to innovate and rethink their assignments, course designs, and teaching philosophies, this special section optimistically embraces the possibilities generative AI presents while also acknowledging the need for additional ethical discussion and the development of barriers around its exponential growth.³

Each of the six authors demonstrate tremendous ingenuity and pedagogical bravery, sharing their assignments, reflections, and ideas for refinement. Several of the articles explore a rather accessible entry point for many teaching in the time of AI: critique. By inviting students to critique LLM-generated responses, instructors can check students’ knowledge acquisition and help students grow their critical thinking skills. Three authors also touch on the importance of teaching students a new transferable skill: prompt engineering. In teaching students how to effectively and ethically prompt LLMs, students may be empowered to employ these programs as tools instead of as replacements for human thinking and creativity. One particularly innovative author, Ben Breen, even details his experience building an LLM-enabled educational game. From these articles, history educators can

¹ See Julia M. Gossard, “Creating Constitutions with ChatGPT,” in *Teaching and Generative AI* (Utah State University Press, 2024); Gossard, “Empowering Citizens: Teaching Constitutionalism and Generative AI,” *AHA Perspectives*, September 11, 2024. <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/empowering-citizens/>

² Brian Rosenberg, *Whatever It Is, I’m Against It: Resistance to Change in Higher Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023).

³ In the spirit of experimenting with generative AI tools, I employed Perplexity AI to help me craft this and the paragraphs that follow in the introduction. To let you compare how I updated it, you can access the public link to the PerplexityAI response here: https://www.perplexity.ai/page/teaching-history-with-ai-Boo_TyCOTmzcWiXm2O1wQ

find inspiration to experiment with new tools, build effective strategies, and adopt approaches to teaching that do not revert to traditional, perhaps outmoded, techniques of assessment and learning in the face of unprecedented change.

What these articles do not include are polemical treatises warning of the end of the historical discipline as we know it. Though the authors acknowledge that there are serious concerns that must be addressed at both institutional and individual levels regarding the use of AI in educational spaces, this is not their primary focus. Yet, it would be remiss to not recognize that as AI programs become more prevalent, additional questions arise about academic integrity violations, the nature of intellectual property, the potential for bias in AI-generated content, and the impact on students' critical thinking skills. At the conclusion of this special section, an interview with Jeffrey Washburn and Jennifer McCutchen about their article, "AI Meets AI: ChatGPT as a Pedagogical Tool to Teach American Indian History" touches on these topics, especially the prevalence of racialized biases as well as the need to teach students about intellectual property and LLMs.

There is no denying that generative AI tools have and will continue to fundamentally change the world around us. The speed and prevalence of generative A.I.-enabled learning tools (and shortcuts) is a marked difference from one of the other great threats of the historical discipline in the twenty-first century, Wikipedia. Due to its very nature as a crowd-sourced encyclopedia, Wikipedia did not grow at nearly the same rapid rate that LLMs are. But, academics had similar concerns around it as evidenced in headlines from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that warned the death of universities and critical thinking as we knew it.⁴ Despite that fear mongering, academics found ways to actually embrace Wikipedia. For example, Sam Wineberg and Mike Caulfield even advocated for its use as a research tool.⁵ While the generative capabilities of LLMs may indeed make ChatGPT, CoPilot, and Perplexity AI a different kind of obstacle compared to Wikipedia, we will likely find ways to ethically, appropriately, and meaningfully use these tools.

⁴ See, for example: Laurie Essig, "Can Wikipedia Shut Down Universities?" *Chronical of Higher Education*, January 18, 2012; Cathy N. Davidson, "We Can't Ignore the Influence of Digital Technologies," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 23, 2007. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/we-cant-ignore-the-influence-of-digital-technologies/>; Brock Read, "What Does Wikipedia Mean for the Future of Expertise?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 20, 2009. <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/what-does-wikipedia-mean-for-the-future-of-expertise>; Brock Read, "Middlebury College History Department Limits Students' Use of Wikipedia," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 15, 2007. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/middlebury-college-history-department-limits-students-use-of-wikipedia/>.

⁵ Mike Caulfield and Sam Wineberg, "Teaching Students How to Use Wikipedia as a Tool for Research," *Edutopia*, January 24, 2024. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/using-wikipedia-for-research/>