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**UWM fashions strategies for artificial intelligence in the classroom**

Written by Jennifer Walter

College-level writing requires students to do much more than put words on a page. In English 101, they learn and practice rhetoric — the art of effective communication. Crafting convincing arguments, tailoring messages for a specific audience and carefully considering how words affect a reader are important skills that provide the foundation for writing and critical thinking.

Thousands of UWM students take English 101 every year. But in Fall 2024, the English department debuted a new curriculum designed to teach students rhetoric in the age of artificial intelligence.

Generative AI apps, which run on large language models, are growing in popularity and creating disruptions to college writing classes.

“As worrisome as all that is, I feel strongly that it’s here to stay,” said Shevaun Watson, an associate professor and the director of composition in the College of Letters & Science. Professional organizations like the Modern Language Association and the Conference on College Composition and Communication are also calling for English teachers to get their hands on AI tools and figure out how to effectively use them in the classroom.

In response, Watson and David Kocik, a PhD student in media cinema and digital studies, designed and integrated a critical (as in critical thinking) AI literacy program. It teaches students how AI tools work and when to use them for writing and research. Students also learn to consider the big picture of AI’s world-altering impact and its shortcomings.

“To have a critical AI literacy curriculum doesn’t mean just unvarnished enthusiasm and adoption,” Watson noted. While students learn how to use the tools in class, they also discuss the ethical issues around AI, such as bias and environmental impact. Knowing how to use AI is one thing, but instructors also aim to help students develop critical thinking skills so they can assess how it continues to shape everyday life.

**Designing the curriculum**

English 101 is an introductory course that teaches students to dig into the complexities of college-level reading, writing and research. Emerging tech is constantly reshaping these practices.

Students are now much more likely to come across AI-powered writing and research tools than even a few years ago, and many are finding ways to use them in their work. Search engines like Google and software programs like Microsoft Word are adopting their own built-in AI assistants, making it harder for students to avoid the tools altogether.

“It’s already being integrated into those things, and it’s going to be part of what they experience when they go to do these tasks,” Kocik said.

In designing the new English 101 curriculum, Kocik said, the instructors were interested in using AI to help students think deeply about their writing, reading and research processes. AI assistants, which generate content based on patterns they detect in other pieces of writing, do not process information the same way as human minds. As a result, these tools aren’t good at rhetoric – they can’t consider the nuances of audience, purpose and context as well as a person can.

Because rhetoric is fundamental to English 101, students learn how to develop those skills while also exploring how AI tools work and how best to use them.

“It’s important for us to be a space where students can explore and consider what AI is in a more nuanced and complex way than they probably experience in the advertisements that get shot out to them in their daily lives,” Kocik said.

**Impact in action**

The new curriculum is split into three segments. With each one, students sharpen their rhetoric skills around reading, writing and research via solo and group projects – all while digging into how AI works.

Over the summer, Kocik piloted the new curriculum with students. During the exploration projects, students were “really surprised with how much conversation was happening around AI within the fields they were looking at,” he said. For example, several nursing students found themselves overwhelmed by how AI is going to affect the field of nursing, in both good and bad ways.

“I think what students find in their exploration projects in particular is that there’s a lot more happening about AI within their specific area than they expected,” he explained. “And that is helpful in getting them to understand how it relates to their everyday lives and how they approach it.”

Working closely with UWM librarians in the user services department, Watson and senior teaching faculty Jennifer Dworschack-Kinter, the assistant director of the program, are currently revamping the English 102 program to incorporate critical AI literacy. “(We) really hope that students who take both 101 and 102 emerge with not just solid research and writing skills and reading skills, but also with just a deeper understanding of AI,” Watson said.

**Studying broader impact**

They also plan to study the broader impact of the new English 101 program on student learning outcomes, as well as the approaches taken by instructors and teaching assistants. They are waiting on Institutional Review Board approval to run a formal study, which is required whenever human subjects are involved in research – even for conducting a survey. Once approved, Watson and Kocik want to study the impact of the curriculum over at least a few semesters.

At its core, the research project is designed to determine if the curriculum affected students’ and instructors’ attitudes toward AI or changed their writing and research practices. “What we’re really interested in is, do they feel more equipped through critical reading, through rhetoric, through technical knowledge of these (large language models) … to at least kind of track some conversations?” Watson said. If students and TAs feel like they have a better grasp on AI’s capabilities and can stay ahead of discussions in the real world, then the curriculum is doing its job.