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Link to original story: <https://www.uwsp.edu/news/aaron-gierhart-ai/>

**Innovations in Technology: UW-Stevens Point professor explores AI’s role in K-12 classrooms**

Written by University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point

Teaching in a time of advancing digital technologies presents complex and unknown challenges in K-12 classrooms. While artificial intelligence (AI) will likely contribute to certain efficiencies across various industries, educators specifically look to balance how to incorporate those benefits while addressing the evolving landscape of digital literacy and academic integrity.

Assistant Professor of Educational Technology [Aaron R. Gierhart](https://www.uwsp.edu/directory/profile/aaron-r-gierhart/) aims to guide students into the world of generative AI (ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini, etc.) to increase awareness of its nuances and how it can be a tool effectively used in the field of education. His course for pre-service teaching candidates explores the impacts and implications these tools have on instructional design, student learning, accessibility and more.

“My interest lies in making sure that when candidates enter our program, they are as prepared as I can get them for not just finding ways around AI or upholding academic integrity without it,” he said. “I also want them to look at it as another instructional resource that can be used to push student accessibility and learning forward.”

He hopes to help [School of Education](https://www.uwsp.edu/education/school-of-education/) students become willing to incorporate and cultivate AI literacy with their future students. Gierhart models in his EDU 331 – Educational Technology course how one can prompt generative AI to create a research plan with peer-reviewed sources, enabling students to conduct paths to research they may not have been able to do without it.

Gierhart adds that as with any research, students must go back and check for credibility and accuracy of all their sources. The heavy use of online research today means educators must emphasize the importance in developing literacy across digital content areas.

“That is going to be important when we conceptualize AI literacy,” said Gierhart. “We can generate content so much more readily and efficiently, but we also want to make sure that we’re still remaining critical of anything that we consume and work with online, especially in K-12 learning.”

Deconstructing complex concepts or summarizing lengthy articles into simpler levels of understanding for students new to certain concepts can lend itself to them being able to grasp those concepts at an earlier age as well, he said.

With accessibility of this vast amount of knowledge on our fingertips, does this mean that teachers will soon be replaced by AI educators or facilitators? Gierhart points out two scenarios that should reassure educators to continue pursuing the field.

In the early childhood setting, heavy screen time is discouraged in favor of play-based, exploration and social learning. The most important factor AI cannot replicate in the present, Gierhart says, is the genuine relationship and connections teachers have with their students.

“Coming out of a post-COVID world from where teaching was to how it is now, those relationships are important than ever,” he said. “We saw what happened when we were unable to have those face-to-face connections and the struggles that arose for students, families and communities. Making connections with students and having those relationships is something that is not going to go away. That’s the work of teaching, first and foremost for me.”

COVID also opened the eyes of educators to adapting their teaching in new ways that have resonated and continued to be incorporated in their practices. With the rapid transition to digital learning, there were growing pains, Gierhart notes. “Through it, we also saw we can pull off some digitally mediated teaching and learning approaches that we weren’t really exploring prior to that time.”

“States are going to need to start deciding whether AI literacy is a priority,” he said. “If so, that does alter a lot of how we conceive what it means to be literate, to be digitally literate.”

Students in Gierhart’s course work in groups to record a series of audio podcast discussions to reflect on AI applications and its challenges in the education sector. He also offers an opportunity for his students to publish research report briefs in the “[Digital Touchpoints](https://minds.wisconsin.edu/handle/1793/89720)” journal for which they conduct literature review research based around their interests in education technology as it relates to their teaching field.

At the core of Gierhart’s instruction is challenging his students to ask themselves what it means to learn in the 21st century. For example, do students need to memorize their states and capitals with how readily available collective intelligence has become? These topics, he said, are the impacts that will change the way we measure academic achievement in the future.

“At the end of the day, we’re preparing students for the real world. I would like to think the real world would want to be a part of that discussion too,” says Gierhart. He encourages everyone to take a seat at the discussion table, adding, “I think having as many voices at the table as possible to get this right is optimal.”