

Who's Afraid of ChatGPT?: Thinking Through Generative AI for Organizational Behavior Educators Who Teach Writing-Intensive Courses

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Abstract. The sudden emergence of ChatGTP and other generative AI platforms has led many business educators to revisit longstanding assumptions about teaching, learning, and effective assignment design. Particularly affected by these developments are OB faculty who teach writing-intensive courses in a business school. In this piece, I provide a brief overview of large language models, describe recent surveys on how companies and workers are incorporating them into their workflows, and pose three important questions for writing-focused OB faculty to think through as they update their writing assignments and assumptions for the emerging genAI age.

Keywords: generative AI, business education, academic policy, writing instruction.

1. Introduction

Over the past 24 months, educators at all levels and from all fields have found themselves subjected to a barrage of wide-ranging – and often wild-eyed – assertions claiming that “teachers are now obsolete” and “classroom cheating has never been easier” and “teachers will soon be replaced by bots”. I am referring, of course, to the sudden emergence of for-profit generative AI platforms like ChatGPT, Bard, Co-Pilot, and Anthropic, among others. Hundreds of news stories, think pieces, discussion panels, along with massive segments of academic social media have led us and our colleagues to ask some uncomfortably deep questions about our professional identity, institutional security, and classroom impact in a new AI era. However one answers those questions for themselves, it seems fair to say that the emergence of platforms like ChatGPT has been the most frequently and publicly discussed topic among the global professoriate in recent memory.

Because Large Language Models like ChatGTP are designed to output plausible-sounding sentences and generate entire pages of human(ish) sounding statements, educators in Communication, English, and the Liberal Arts fields in

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general have been especially troubled by these developments. While colleagues in chemistry, economics, or engineering – fields for which there is typically “one right answer” – may not be that bothered by the prospect of a tool that can help students simplify their lab notes or outline their technical analyses, our friends in the humanities and “writing disciplines” more broadly – where there is very rarely “one right answer” – have been kept up at night worrying about a tool that will output entire term papers with minimal prompting in a few seconds.

Since business school fields span both the highly quantitative and the highly qualitative, dealing with both the concrete materiality of figures (Finance, Accounting, etc) and supply chains in addition to the ambiguities of human relationships (HR, Sales, etc) and behavior (OB, Leadership, etc), business educators are in a unique position to occupy a special place in discussions about the benefits and risks of generative AI. This kind of intellectual and institutional diversity is a strength that, in the best of cases, can enable us to facilitate a wide-ranging education of the whole person for our students. This diversity also means that our attitudes about and approach to using generative AI in our courses are likely to rub against or even conflict with the attitudes and approaches of business faculty colleagues teaching classes in the room next to ours. This exposure to differing approaches to AI in the classroom and the conversations that result from that friction could create potential for business school faculty to be key players in the conversations about AI that are already happening on our campuses.

While empirical studies of the implementation of genAI across large-scale organizations already exist (AI at Wharton 2024, Lodge, Yang, Furze & Dawson 2023), my goal in this piece is to assist OB faculty seeking to shape conversations about genAI by focusing on perhaps the most “AI-troubled” subset of business school faculty: those who either teach business writing or have students do a lot of writing in their courses. These colleagues are the most likely to be experiencing professional and institutional pressures to adapt their teaching practices for success in this rapidly changing environment. But where and how to start? First, I will give a brief, non-technical overview of what generative AI is and is not. Second, I describe what recent surveys report about how and why business practitioners are using generative AI in the workplace. Since effective written communication is consistently one of the most desired skills in the professional world (NACE 2023; Fletcher & Thornton 2023, Robles 2012), business educators who either teach writing or assign writing projects in their classes do so in order to allow students to develop a critically needed skill set that will hopefully open professional doors for students leading up to graduation. If generative AI is changing how people are writing at work – and it is – then understanding the ground-level nature of those changes can be a useful foundation on which to design new classroom experiences for our students. Finally, I ask three key questions that writing-focused business faculty will want to think through as they begin their planning for whether and how to integrate generative AI into their classrooms. The goal is to stimulate readers to consider the shifting grounds upon