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ChatGPT, Plagiarism, and Multilingual Students' Learning to Write

ChatGPT has been at the center of media coverage since its public release at the end of 2022. Given ChatGPT's capacity for generating human-like text on a wide range of subjects, it is not surprising that educators, especially those who teach writing, have raised concerns regarding the implications of generative AI tools on issues of plagiarism and academic integrity. How do we navigate the already complex discourse around what constitutes plagiarism and how much assistance is acceptable within the bounds of academic integrity? As we contemplate these theoretical questions, a more practical approach is to assess what these tools can do to facilitate students' learning of existing academic integrity codes. In this short piece, we share our exploratory interactions with ChatGPT relevant to issues of plagiarism and academic integrity, hoping to shed light on how writing instructors can use the tool to facilitate the teaching and learning of ethics in academic writing.

Keywords: Writing, plagiarism, academic integrity, generative AI

ChatGPT has been at the center of media coverage in recent months, with an unprecedented number of new users exploring the capabilities and boundaries of the tool every day. Given ChatGPT's advanced capacity for generating human-like text on a wide range of subjects, it is not surprising that educators, especially those who teach writing, have raised concerns regarding the potential implications of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools on issues of plagiarism and academic integrity. How do we teach students the importance of academic integrity and its essential role in safeguarding standards of academic work when we can have ChatGPT write a complete research paper in less than a minute? Is banning the tool the way to go for ensuring academic integrity and validity of assessment? In this short article, we would like to share our exploratory interactions with ChatGPT relevant to issues of plagiarism and academic integrity, hoping to shed light on how writing instructors can use the tool to facilitate the teaching and learning of ethics in academic writing.

The concern among writing instructors that the widely available generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, may complicate the already complex discourse on what constitutes plagiarism and how much assistance is the right amount under academic integrity codes. Below is an example illustrating how ChatGPT can generate writing that is not the best, according to college-level academic writing standards, but decent enough to pass as acceptable writing. We asked ChatGPT to write an introduction on generative AI tools and plagiarism.

Paragraph generated by ChatGPT: The advancement of artificial intelligence has given rise to numerous applications in various fields, including natural language processing. One of the most notable developments in this field is the creation of language models such as ChatGPT by OpenAI. ChatGPT is a transformer-based AI model that has been trained on a massive corpus of text data,

enabling it to generate human-like responses to a wide range of questions and prompts. The capability of such models to understand and generate text has made them popular among researchers, educators, and businesses alike. However, the widespread use of ChatGPT and similar models has brought attention to the issue of plagiarism in the context of AI-generated text. Plagiarism is defined as the act of using someone else's work or ideas without proper credit or permission. In the case of language models like ChatGPT, this can occur when individuals use the generated text as their own without acknowledging the source or making any modifications to it. This raises ethical and legal questions about the responsibility of AI models and their creators in preventing plagiarism, as well as the role of users in ensuring the originality of their work. (OpenAI, 2023)

The content of the paragraph clearly lacks depth and falls short of showcasing an informed and sophisticated understanding of the topic based on disciplinary knowledge. However, the points included in the paragraph (i.e., popularity and capacity of AI tools, discussion on the impact of these tools and plagiarism, and the definition and consequences of plagiarism) are all relevant to the central topic, and the writing style is mostly appropriate for academic purposes. A paragraph like this, although formulaic to some extent, can easily achieve a passing grade based on common academic writing standards.

As this example shows, the integration of generative AI tools into the writing process blurs the distinction between original and borrowed work, raising critical questions about authorship, intellectual property, responsible uses of external sources, and assessment of learning progress. These issues may be particularly pronounced in educational settings where students of multilingual backgrounds engage in the learning of both the subject matter and the English language. In such contexts, students may not have developed the necessary language skills or cultural understanding to fully comprehend the complex and nuanced expectations of plagiarism and academic integrity. Students may therefore be tempted to use generative AI tools to produce writing that hides the typical linguistic traits characterizing their multilingual status, which is often not viewed positively and will likely result in lower grades.

In a traditional writing class, it is the instructor who assesses multilingual students' language use patterns and provides targeted feedback on how to improve their unconventional language use according to "standard" academic English. Research generally recommends that writing feedback not only include explicit corrections of students' unconventional grammatical choices but also offer explanations and concrete examples that demonstrate preferred ways of using these grammatical structures (e.g., Bitchener et al., 2005). Instructors will also guide students in the use of discourse-level and rhetorical choices to enhance their communication. Such recommendations can now be accomplished by generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, from which multilingual students can get immediate feedback on their language usage, even at the level of discourse and rhetoric. The use of generative AI can, in fact, be used to scaffold revision and chunk the numerous things students should consider when revising. For example, we have a sample prompt for students to have ChatGPT review their text from the perspective of the intended audience. Then the sample prompt has ChatGPT move beyond this general feedback to specifically provide suggestions on word choice, tone, level of specificity, and rhetoric if the student wants them. The student must give ChatGPT key information such as who the audience is, what characteristics of the audience are important, and what their communication goal is. In this prompting, the student does one level of critical thinking behind revising for the audience. As they work through these one at a time, they are reinforcing their understanding of the iterative nature of writing. In some cases, ChatGPT will give good suggestions, in others (e.g., level of specificity seems to be challenging), it is less useful. When using an AI tool, we recommend pairing the use with a reflection at the end of what was useful, what was difficult, and what they might do next time.

Some might argue that students are not, in fact, revising their writing on their own if they are taking the AI feedback into account. Although this is true if the AI is asked to provide a rewrite of the text,

if the AI simply indicates issues and provides examples of ways to deal with them, then the student is tasked with making authorial choices and remains the author of the text. We remind students that whether getting feedback from a teacher, a peer, or AI, they must remember that as the author, it is up to them to ensure that the text is accurate, unbiased, and reflects their thinking. Incorporating--or not--feedback is one place where they are required to make authorial choices. This raises the question for writing instructors regarding how to draw a line between using generative AI tools to promote self-directed learning and relying on them to the extent that the writing no longer represents students' actual language proficiency. Or will one's language proficiency become an illusion with the widespread use of powerful generative AI tools that have the capacity to polish a piece of writing in any chosen style? Answers to these questions are critical for re-evaluating (and possibly re-conceptualizing) the current perspectives on plagiarism and learning in a rapidly evolving educational landscape that features more and more advanced technologies.

As we contemplate these theoretical questions about plagiarism and learning, a more practical approach for writing instructors to handle the inevitable integration of generative AI tools in our teaching is to assess what these tools can do to facilitate students' learning of existing academic integrity codes. As a large language model that continues to accumulate knowledge from interactions with humans, ChatGPT is capable of rapidly acquiring information on a wide range of subjects, which presumably would include topics of plagiarism and academic honesty. We conducted a few rounds of preliminary testing, and below were responses produced by ChatGPT. When we asked the question, "If I use ChatGPT to help with my writing, will I run the risk of plagiarism?," ChatGPT generated the following answer (the answers one might get now may be different given how ChatGPT works):

Answer by ChatGPT: As a language model, ChatGPT can assist you in generating text on a given topic but the final decision on the text you use and how you use it lies on you. It is important to understand that while I can assist you in generating text, I am not a human writer and my responses are generated based on patterns and data in the texts that I was trained on. Therefore, you should always verify the information and ideas you get from me with the original source and make sure to properly cite any information you use from other sources to avoid plagiarism.

It is also important to note that plagiarism is a serious academic offense and it can have severe consequences. It's always a good idea to double-check your work with a plagiarism checker and make sure you understand your school's policy on plagiarism.

To avoid plagiarism, you must always give credit to the original author when you include the words, ideas, or data in your work. To accomplish this, you must properly cite all sources you use, including those you generate with me. (OpenAI, 2023)

For a multilingual student who lacks familiarity with plagiarism policies in English academic contexts, this answer by ChatGPT can be a valuable resource, as it covers important aspects of academic honesty in easy-to-understand language and directs students to look for additional information to further their learning. The answer explains that the decision about how to use text generated by ChatGPT lies with the writer, recommends that writers cross check the reliability of information, and highlights how writers should always cite when using "the words, ideas, or data" from other sources. Compared with typical cautionary statements available on institutional websites, ChatGPT's answer might feel more accessible and practical from a student's perspective.

We also tried other plagiarism-related questions with ChatGPT, such as whether a writer needs to cite it as a source if using the text it generates, how to use ChatGPT appropriately and responsibly, and whether Wikipedia can be considered a credible source to use for academic writing. ChatGPT's answers

are overall consistent with what writing instructors typically expect of students, and the information provided by the tool is reasonable and easy to understand. It is worth noting that when asked what paraphrasing plagiarism is, ChatGPT's response even included a note about how paraphrasing plagiarism can be unintentional, recommended that students carefully review their paraphrases to avoid this type of plagiarism, and provided an example demonstrating what an inadequate paraphrase may look like. The information presented in these answers is introductory in nature. However, the information is adequate for directing multilingual students, who are inexperienced with English academic writing conventions, to make the right writing decision when they are uncertain about what counts as plagiarism. Such foundational information can also serve as a starting point for writing instructors to initiate discussions on the often more complex relationship between plagiarism and writing decisions (e.g., when and how to paraphrase). Guided tasks like this will further help students develop a nuanced understanding of the benefits and limitations of AI tools so they can use them more strategically for self-directed learning.

Some of our colleagues are taking the approach of banning the use of ChatGPT and similar tools. Although we understand their concerns that students need to build up their *own* independent writing skills, and that takes practice, we believe that any attempt to police the use of these tools is ultimately likely to fail. The tools are quickly becoming ubiquitous, with Microsoft already embedded in its online Word document application AI-assisted tools including a summarize feature. AI-detection tools, although becoming more prevalent, are also subject to workarounds by motivated students. Rather than spending our energy engaging in an ultimately doomed endeavor, we would rather teach students to be ethical and skillful writers when using AI tools.

Overall, our initial exploration of ChatGPT in relation to issues of plagiarism and academic integrity shows that the tool's ability to immediately provide introductory information and examples in easy-to-understand language can prove to be particularly useful for multilingual students. These students are often still in the process of learning about academic writing conventions in English. Students will benefit from receiving instant feedback about plagiarism when they work on writing assignments and have questions about the potential consequences of different writing decisions. Although generative AI tools such as ChatGPT are becoming increasingly powerful in various aspects, the nature of the tasks that they are capable of performing is not that different from what is offered by paid tutoring services, except that the AI tools are reaching a far broader audience as they offer immediate feedback anywhere, anytime. Our current academic integrity policies that value originality, critical thinking, and giving credit to sources of information still apply in the ChatGPT era. What needs major revamping is perhaps not how we word academic codes, but how we help students understand why these codes still matter with powerful AI tools readily available and how to uphold academic integrity while taking advantage of what new technologies can do to facilitate learning. As the CEO of OpenAI, Sam Altman states in a X post: "ChatGPT is incredibly limited, but good enough at some things to create a misleading impression of greatness" (Altman, 2022). If we can help our students develop the ability to accurately pinpoint the advantages and limitations of these AI tools, this itself is a noteworthy accomplishment in the teaching and learning process.

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