



# DLSI NEWSLETTER



Supporting teaching and learning at La Salle

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## IT'S TIME TO PAY ATTENTION TO AI

Just as our fall semester was nearing its end in late November, OpenAI released a project called **ChatGPT**. Within two weeks, over a million people had signed up to use it. Social media lit up with posts. Many major news outlets published articles about it, and the popular NYT podcast, [The Daily ran this informative piece](#). It's not that artificial intelligence and chatbots are new, but for the first time the power of AI was put into the hands of anyone who wished to use it.

I asked ChatGPT to explain itself to me. It replied, "ChatGPT is a variant of the GPT (Generative Pre-training Transformer) language model that was specifically designed for generating responses in chatbot-like systems. It was developed by OpenAI and was trained on a large dataset of human-generated chat logs. It is trained to predict the next word in a sequence based on the words that come before it, allowing it to generate fluent and coherent responses to user inputs."

While chatbots have been in use for some time (think of those automated systems that you connect to when calling the airline, or seeking online help from the cable company), it is these "fluent

and coherent responses" that are, well, really mind-blowing. ChatGPT will keep track of your inputs, allowing you to follow up, refine what you are asking, and, in a way, converse with you.

Right now, the system is very good, able to respond fairly accurately to a wide range of questions, write letters, essays, scripts, code, jokes, and more. I've seen ChatGPT being described as "disruptive." That certainly seems like an understatement. **It's time to pay attention.**

Take a moment to consider what this means for us. Yes, this will be another way to cheat. While there already exists at least [one tool for identifying AI generated text](#), social media is already rife with work-arounds for students who wish to bypass that trap. Further, detecting AI generated information will simply become impossible as the technology rapidly improves and becomes ubiquitous. In fact, [Microsoft is already moving to incorporate Open AI's chat technology into its suite of office products](#). Let me be clear, regardless of AI we need to engage in conversations about how to construct better homework and motivate academic integrity. Frankly, however, **there are more significant issues to consider right now.**

ChatGPT correctly defined plagiarism for me. When I followed up, asking if using ChatGPT was a form of plagiarism, it replied, in a word, "it depends." It told me that presenting ChatGPT text as your own would be plagiarism. However, using ChatGPT as a tool to generate ideas, and properly citing the use of the tool in your work, "would not be considered plagiarism."

With that reassurance, I asked ChatGPT to produce a 15-week syllabus on the topic of educational psychology for pre-service teachers, including relevant readings. In seconds, I had my outline...and it was fairly well aligned with the course I've been teaching for many years. Some of the readings were invented (or at least I couldn't locate them), and it was far from perfect or complete, but there was certainly enough accuracy to save me hours of time had I been creating this course anew.

Let's say I use AI to brainstorm an initial set of potential approaches to a problem that I hope to solve. That brainstorming eventually leads me to develop a prototype for a new electronic device that addresses the problem. I return to ChatGPT to help me develop a way

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to explain the supply chain complexities for the manufacture of this new device, in order to craft part of a grant proposal. Later, I ask it to check my proposal for readability. Finally, I call upon AI to identify errors in the computer code I've written for the device. Yes, AI can do all of these things today, and as long as I cite my use of it, this could be incredibly helpful.

Up until now, chatbots have been used for automation; that is, to streamline repetitive tasks (like looking up your prescription when you call the pharmacy). What we are able to see now, however, is how AI might allow us to be more creative and efficient, and we need to begin thinking about how to **teach students to ethically make use of the technology**. This will mean raising critical questions about the contexts where the use of AI might (and might not) be appropriate, and explaining how to best cite its support. By the way, ChatGPT suggested several ways to do this, including, "Ideas for this paper were generated in part using chat GPT (accessed January 1, 2020)."

As impressive as that sounds, a significant challenge is that AI presents inaccurate information as confidently as factual information. It is not canvassing existing content on the internet, or even programmed to be accurate. These are language generation models trained using machine learning on data sets that exceed billions of words. (ChatGPT "told" me this). They predict and generate language on the fly, in

response to one's queries. The conversational nature, however, makes it easy to believe, whether it is accurate or not.

Essentially, the output of AI systems today is simply bullshit (using the philosophical definition of the term), as [Ezra Klein points out in this interview](#). It has no understanding of the truth or right and wrong, so any output is completely divorced from those concepts. If you think misinformation in social media has been a problem over the last few years, consider how AI-generated, targeted, human sounding text, produced a no cost, and incredibly quickly could soon get out of hand.

However, Mollick points out that we humans also confidently create BS when we don't fully understand something, and we are terrible at learning from our mistakes. So, even though ChatGPT makes its language predictions devoid of fact checking, it is surprisingly able [to pass the bar exam, perform the tasks of radiologists, and correctly refute commonly held myths about psychology and learning](#). Even at this early stage, AI is currently better than humans at many tasks.

As I have learned about and used ChatGPT, I've been both impressed...and a little concerned about the future. The creators of this version included some important guardrails. It won't help you build a weapon, or create a defense for a crime you've been accused of (I asked), but those things are entirely possible for a model trained on billions and

billions of language data sets worldwide...and other versions don't have these guardrails in place.

Consider this: **Whoever controls AI algorithms will have an immense amount of power**... significantly more power than Musk and his attempt to disrupt Twitter, for example. Perhaps this public unveiling will encourage more people to pay attention and consider the ramifications.

AI is not going away, and is rapidly improving. Our first step in approaching this should be to explore the issues that AI presents. There is something here for all of us. We need to be thinking today about what that means for our work as academics and educators. Because this is their future, **we should be engaging our students in these conversations**. What are the ethical issues of AI? What are the practical issues? How can we use AI productively to help us solve problems? What kinds of plans should be developed to mitigate the inevitable unethical uses of AI? [How can we use AI as a teaching and learning tool?](#) ...and, while you are thinking about it, now is a good time [to be clear, in your syllabi and assignments](#), about the use of AI.

We might take this as an urgent call to better understand the implications of AI, and collaborate on how to use it in the best ways possible, while carefully considering its inherent challenges. **It's time to pay attention to AI.**

(ChatGPT reviewed this article on 1/12/23. I discarded most of its ten editorial suggestions, which were, indeed, BS, but it did point out a few important errors that I revised.)



Open Educational Resources (OER) are very low or no-cost texts and other materials that can save students money, and allow you to tailor your course. [Learn how to evaluate them here.](#)

## SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS

**Melissa Gallagher**, Associate Director, Center for Academic Achievement

Eyler, in his book [How Humans Learn: The Science and Stories Behind Effective College Teaching](#), notes the importance of “pedagogical caring” where we consider our students “as learners and as human beings” (129). **Caring relationships** are an important component of learning. He argues that part of caring for students includes “felt safety”, mitigating the role fear can play in inhibiting learning (140). Throughout the book, he encourages many forms of feedback to students, which serve to create a caring learning environment.

My role includes administration of our [Starfish student success management system](#). I want to encourage the use of the feedback components of the tool (flags, kudos, and referrals) as instruments of caring, and the system to be a place where feedback can lead to better learning. Students may fear feedback or perceive it as a sign of their own failure, so it is important to be clear in communicating our intent when using such tools.

Eyler mentions that one tool of pedagogical caring is the syllabi statement of university support, which can also address the concerns that may contribute to student struggles (188). The suggested syllabi language I send each semester now includes a description of how and why we use Starfish. However, as you know, most students don't carefully read the syllabus, so **hearing directly from you** about your goals in using Starfish can set expectations and outline your support for next steps.

One way to do this is by stating, “I've been asked to provide feedback in Starfish on students. I plan to share any academic and attendance concerns I have. You'll get an email that includes my comments, and it is my hope is that you come talk to me, since it's

early in the semester and there's lots of time to improve. Your adviser and others you might work with will also be notified so everyone is on the same page. Our common goal is to support you.” Your language and focus may be different, and many of you probably already do this in some fashion.

Each semester, I reconsider my own communications and assumptions as I work to care for our students, and support you as you provide feedback to them. If you have questions about the Starfish system, or how we can work together to support our students, please [do not hesitate to contact me](#). Finally, I hope you can join us on February 7th at 12:30pm in the Library, Room 111, for a “**Lunch and Learn**” on best practices for using the Starfish system.

[Visit our archive](#) to access materials from our workshops and helpful resources to support teaching and learning. Find past issues of the [DLSI Newsletter here](#).

## CREATING A COMMUNITY OF CARE

Leslie Berntsen, our keynote speaker at the 2023 Winter Teaching and Learning Conference, highlighted the troubling toll that mental health issues are taking on our students. We need to be vigilant, supportive, and work together to promote mental health. An important way to start the semester is to consider how we can [prepare and maintain a classroom of care](#). Burrow, in the linked article, suggests welcome surveys, check-ins, and brain breaks as useful tools for setting the tone and providing support.

Leslie shared [a one-page handout](#) containing several “life happens” strategies that can be used in any course, as well as some good information about how to support our students. Also important, was her reminder that we can help our students by “busting the deeply held myths” they carry about grades and self-worth. A community of care, indeed learning itself, is built on interpersonal relationships. It is our responsibility to foster these connections in our academic spaces. **It starts with us.**

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