

Using AI as a Divisive Topic to Create Pedagogical Opportunities

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of aggressive corporate marketing that positions AI as a tool for academic shortcuts, we contend that higher education must reclaim AI as a subject of serious, civic-minded study. The essays that follow, contributed by scholars and practitioners across multiple institutions and countries, collectively model how to engage generative AI not merely as a technology to be adopted or resisted, but as a complex cultural and social phenomenon worthy of sustained classroom debate.

Keywords: *Generative AI, Pedagogy, Critical inquiry, Higher Education, Divisive Concepts, Academic Freedom, AI Literacy, Civic Education*

In 2026, American educators are facing new and disconcerting challenges, and generative AI is only one of many examples. The pandemic changed how our students attend classes. Reading is now far more challenging for students. Politicians are banning subjects and promulgating anti-intellectualism. They are passing laws based on the dubious claim that schoolteachers have been insidiously indoctrinating American students. Any one of these poses a generational challenge. All four, all at once, is simply overwhelming. Indeed, AI may be one of the least of our worries.

As of August 2025, anti-DEI laws have been enacted in 29 states and introduced as bills in many more (*Chronicle*, 2025). State and system boards are often following along without much protest or resistance. For example, regents for the entire Texas A&M System have banned the teaching of courses that “advocate” for race or gender ideology (Kepner, 2025). Teachers, administrators, and staff members are losing their jobs for breaking such laws or, in some cases, simply for contradicting the spirit of these laws (Patel and Goodman, 2025; Saul, 2025). Some politically motivated students, meanwhile, are filming lectures and filing complaints against perceived “wokeness.” Teachers across higher education are understandably confused, unsettled, and often afraid.

In many states, lawmakers have broadly targeted the teaching of “divisive concepts,” a rather vague and ill-defined term. As law-abiding citizens with very little power, teachers are complying by self-censoring their classroom lessons and assignments, often removing material beyond what is explicitly banned by the government. Again, the environment is confusing and unstable. What is clear is that the powerful opponents of diversity, equity, and inclusion are most concerned with issues related to race and gender. In today’s America, those are the most taboo of all “divisive concepts.”

Of course, this is bad news for many reasons, not the least of which is that divisive issues are often the best kinds of issues for college classrooms, where teachers want students to grapple, think, debate, and grow. Controversy stimulates young minds. Debate is essential. While effective

teachers have never prescribed a particular position, effective teachers have always prescribed civil discourse, argument, research, and independent, engaged thinking. We love it when students take a position, when they debate, when they pose arguments, and acknowledge counterarguments. Oftentimes, we need to play devil's advocate. Individual political opinions aside, effective teachers want all students to test orthodoxies in the safe and experimental space of the college classroom. Suddenly, in this new era of censorship, American teachers have fewer stimulating subjects available to us. Students have less to explore. Freedom is being replaced with caution.

The good news is that even as we lose large swaths of interesting material, a new and exciting divisive issue, one not verboten by the authorities, has suddenly emerged. Artificial intelligence is a divisive concept, one quite handy for classrooms in many disciplines and at many levels. How so?

The rise of AI is a goldmine of provocative pedagogy. It is a subject that our students need to engage, a subject that will likely define our era and have profound consequences far into the future. Almost every facet of this dynamic subject offers confusing and contested material useful to the effective teacher. The questions are myriad.

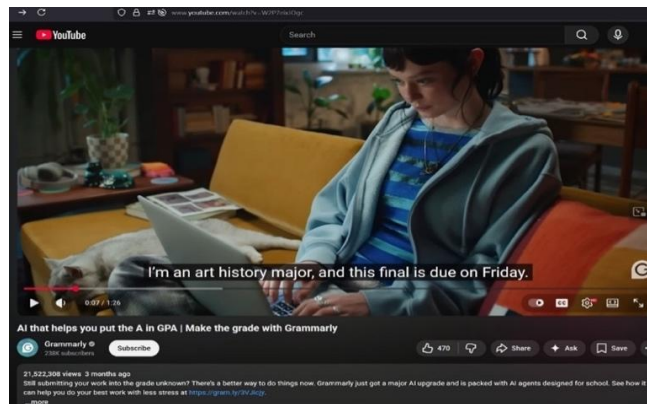
- Should governments regulate AI? If so, how?
- Does AI pose an existential threat to humanity?
- Will AI exacerbate socioeconomic gaps? Will AI create new opportunities?
- What are the gaps between corporate marketing of AI and reality? Can we trust companies like OpenAI, Google, and Anthropic?
- How will AI compromise individual privacy? Does privacy matter?
- What about linguistic diversity? Will AI move all humans toward a small set of standardized languages?
- What will AI mean for learning in K12 and beyond? Should children have access to these tools? Should colleges have policies limiting AI use?
- What ethical responsibilities should technology developers and policymakers consider when designing and regulating AI-mediated relationship bots?
- Are we adequately prepared to assess the risks of excessive reliance on AI Bots, particularly as they may contribute to social isolation, mental health challenges, or even self-harm among young adults?
- What are the environmental costs of AI data centers?
- Such data centers are proliferating across rural America and the Global South. Are local communities benefiting from their presence?
- What are the religious and/or ethical implications of AI? What do students think about AI's rising deployment in churches?
- How will AI influence geopolitical conflicts, including America's relationship to China and Russia?
- How is the federal government asserting power to control major AI companies for military and surveillance?
- Until recently, why were most computer scientists skeptical about the potential of neural nets and Large Language Models? How can an entire field of experts be caught off guard? Can orthodoxies be blinding?
- How will AI impact scientific and medical research and practice? Would students be comfortable receiving care from a non-human doctor?

- Should our society pursue AI development, even if AI will replace many human jobs?
- If AI does displace human workers, how will those people find purpose in life? How does work help to make modern lives meaningful?

These are big, exciting, and debatable questions with no clear answers. Divisiveness abounds! Indeed, college educators are already making good use of this material by teaching students practical discernment—when to use AI and when it must be avoided within the context of their learning. One example is a robust and developing project called the Two-Lane Approach from the University of Sydney (2025), replete with creative lessons and assignments that both resist and embrace this new technology. And, as for classroom reading materials, the internet and library databases are already full of insightful and provocative texts, like Karen Hao’s *Empire of AI*, a book that confronts the juggernaut of OpenAI. Our point is that the novel, complicated, and ever-shifting subject of AI is perfect material for college teachers in need of debatable and divisive content. While fear and trepidation are understandable (and perhaps even reasonable), creativity and excitement are equally rational responses. Faced with the disruption of AI, teachers across higher education are creating spaces where students can passionately engage with our new reality.

Indeed, we believe that teaching *about* this new technology as a subject of critical inquiry is imperative, and that doesn’t necessarily mean using AI. Whatever happens in the future, our society will need educated citizens capable of positively influencing AI policy and practice. Passive scrolling and screen-fueled consumption are the enemy. Instead, we can and should foster creative discernment. Our students are ready to learn and engage, and we certainly cannot surrender AI education to technology companies, who are frantically chasing our students as customers, selling AI products as tools of convenience.

For example, Grammarly, now part of a larger technological enterprise called Superhuman, is actively marketing their refreshed system as the “AI that helps you put the A in GPA.” One of their many viral ads from the fall of 2025 sells Grammarly as AI that shortens student workloads from hours to minutes, so they can “focus on what matters most,” like a weekend trip with friends. The ad’s protagonist, a young college student working on an art history research project, uses Grammarly to research, write, and format her essay, then uses the Grammarly grading assistant to calculate her supposed grade before using Grammarly to revise (for a minute or two) to achieve her “dream grade.” It is a stunning, disturbing advertisement that treats our students like consumers only looking for academic shortcuts; it has been viewed on YouTube more than 21 million times in the first three months.



Screenshot from 2025 Grammarly ad, targeting college students.

In the spring of 2026, Grammarly faced a class action lawsuit over one of these new features, dubbed “Expert Review.” Each time a user or student clicked on the “Expert Review” tab, an AI agent would use the persona of a famous living or dead author to offer feedback based on the AI’s prediction of what that author might say. Such features created questions of authorial intent, agency, and copyright. Grammarly has since removed the “Expert Review” feature, but the implications are clearly deeply concerning.

Without our intervention, the average college student will not be able to arrive at discernment to judge their own ideas or separate the advice from that of an algorithm on their own. As educators, we have a responsibility to educate students about GenAI; otherwise, this information will be done so via direct marketing, mostly by condescending promotions, which are flooding their social media feeds. In our experience, students today know very little about how AI technology works and even less about its potential consequences for our society. Thus, we must teach and inform. If ours is an age of breathless corporate development and overwhelming hype, if Silicon Valley is selling simplified and optimistic half-truths, then we as educators can and should interrupt with lessons that are complicated, fully truthful, and balanced.

For now, there seems to be no end in sight to the rapid development and deployment of AI within education. If the arms race continues (at even a fraction of the current pace), we will have fascinating material for our classrooms for decades to come. Even if the AI bubble pops in the next year or two, teachers will have ample material: the rubble of the aftermath. We should begin now, empowering our students to analyze the implications of this era’s frenzied rise of articulate machines.

The writers in this volume are exactly the kind of thoughtful teachers and scholars poised to utilize the divisive material of the moment. In the following essays, they engage Generative AI as a complicated subject of study. Cynthia Gerstl-Pepin, an accomplished scholar of education and policy, tackles AI’s role in disinformation, arguing that a civic-minded AI curriculum can be one antidote to burgeoning online fakery. In Dr. Gerstl-Pepin’s hopeful view, the AI-informed students of today will become the engaged citizens of tomorrow—prepared by higher education to recognize conspiracy theories and ready to lead us toward a healthier, more genuinely informed democracy.

Robert Cummings, who has spent his career in composition and rhetoric advocating for the use of technology in the classroom, pivots unexpectedly toward pen and paper. GenAI caused Cummings to reinvent his classrooms as sites where “no personal technology was used, and student interaction was emphasized.” His essay connects the AI disruption to the pandemic, using both global challenges to reconfigure teaching practices.

Alexandros Papaspyridis and Simon Bates explore GenAI’s potential to catalyze improvements to traditional teaching and learning. They encourage institutions to promote (and support) faculty experimentation with AI. After charting various challenges and frustrations, like the rapid pace of change, Papaspyridis and Bates argue persuasively for proactive faculty development and ongoing student involvement.

Independent researcher, Eric Rubin, also sees reasons for hope, arguing that higher education should equip students for a changing workforce by teaching AI literacy as a new job skill. He makes a cogent case that employability in the future will depend, in large part, on AI upskilling, and he believes that higher education is poised to capitalize on this shift, which is already underway.

Lori Doyle and Jill Swisher focus their essay on the sudden unreliability of the traditional research paper as a trustworthy assessment tool. They begin by looking with fresh eyes at the

traditional research paper before proposing some very specific and useful revisions, including some that lean into AI and some that resist AI. In their view, teachers should purposefully and carefully integrate AI into long-form assignments, rather than ignoring or resisting its sudden ubiquity.

Andrea Arce-Trigatti, Dorota Silber-Furman, Aimee Klaschus, and Hannah Willis are similarly pragmatic and insightful. They chart many examples of how AI is currently being used in postsecondary education, openly sharing and reflecting upon “the good, the bad, and the ugly” of these early days, before proposing that all AI experiments need to place ethical behavior at the forefront. These authors view AI as a potentially powerful partner but insist on the preservation of productive human intellectual toil for students and faculty alike.

From the University of Mauritius, Chitisha Gunoo, R.K. Sungkur, and I. Tarling show how GenAI is affecting the teaching and learning of information and computer technology. Their essay reminds us that, unlike many previous technologies, GenAI has reached every corner of the globe almost simultaneously. As teachers, we are all in this together. The authors find value in recent UNESCO reports, document hopes for GenAI’s power to level the playing field for students in Mauritius and other remote communities, and urge international collaborative efforts between educators, policymakers, and technology companies.

A common thread amongst these fascinating essays is the acknowledgement of GenAI’s disruptive presence and the hopeful pivot toward utilizing this disruption as an opportunity. GenAI provides us with big and debatable questions. Judging from the essays in this volume, those of us in higher education are already pursuing answers.

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