How AI could save—or sink—creative writing in schools

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Key points

- **AI tools like ChatGPT can change the way students approach writing by facilitating rapid prototyping and offering real-time feedback.**
- **Using AI to support student writing has the potential to help students see failure as an opportunity for growth.**

Ninth-grade English was a paradox for me—both the best and worst year for helping me learn to write.

Every month, my Advanced English teacher, Mr. Johnson, assigned our class one of the classics of English literature and expected us to demonstrate what we had learned with an accompanying essay. He set a high bar for clearly articulated

theses, well-structured paragraphs, well-crafted sentences, and supporting quotes from the text. I credit Mr. Johnson's class for eventually helping me pass the AP Writing exam my senior year without ever taking an AP-level English class.

However, that same 9th-grade English class also planted the seeds of debilitating habits and mindsets in my writing process. Mr. Johnson was willing to provide feedback on drafts. But the demands of all my other classes and activities rarely afforded me the time to take him up on his offer. Consequently, I found myself in a pressure cooker each month, drafting essays in the final days and hours before they were due. The ticking clock and the weight of a looming grade forced me into a mindset where every sentence had to be near-perfect in my desperation to maintain my academic record. Writing became less of an exploration of ideas and more of a high-stakes gamble.

Fortunately, schools and society seem to be entering an era in which AI could completely upend the dysfunctional part of my 9th-grade English experience.

The damaging mindsets forged by conventional grading

The pressure I felt to craft near-perfect drafts on the first attempt is hardly unique to me—it's symptomatic of a broader issue common across US K–12 education. In most classrooms, students don't iterate on their work. With all the volumes of content to be covered, there just isn't time in either the class period or the school year for cycles of feedback. Instead, teachers give assignments, students complete those assignments, teachers grade students' work, and each assignment grade leaves an indelible impact on a students' final grade for that class. Grades from individual classes then get averaged together, semester by semester, into GPAs that permanently carry the marks of any prior failures and shortcomings in a students' learning.

I suspect these norms of practice are major cultivators of what Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck would term a 'fixed mindset.' They create a stifling atmosphere where failure is a brand to be avoided rather than an experience to learn from. The binary of 'success' and 'failure' prevails, leaving little room for trial and error, an invaluable aspect of the learning process. The emphasis on the end product over the process perpetuates the fear of failure, curbing creativity, curiosity, and the potential for new discoveries. The outcome? A learning experience that prioritizes safe choices and known paths over innovative thinking and problem-solving.

Now, more than ever, students' future <u>success</u> in an ever-changing world requires that they learn how to think critically and creatively while collaborating with others to solve complex problems. But the unwritten curriculum of most schools—instilling process perfectionism through rewarding flawless performance—is probably doing more harm than good.

The threat and opportunity of AI

Against this backdrop, there's a lurking concern that AI is just going to help students find mindless shortcuts for cheating their way to good grades. But that's only a risk if schools and teachers hold a low bar for what they expect of their students. Wharton professor, Ethan Mollick, made a compelling argument in his ASU+GSV <u>talk</u> last April that ChatGPT should really mean the end of lousy student writing. "I don't accept papers that aren't good anymore because the minimum you can do is turn in a good paper. So, why am I going to force you to write a bad one? … [With AI] we can increase our standards of what we can accomplish." Knowing the minimum bar that tools like ChatGPT can produce, he expects students to prove that they've developed their ideas beyond what the AI can generate.

Journalist Adam Davidson noted on a recent Freakonomics podcast <u>episode</u> that he's taken to calling ChatGPT "the 'B-minus at everything' program." If schools set low expectations for the quality of students' essays, then AI will enable those who so desire to cheat their education. But if schools and teachers want to elevate expectations for their students, AI can be a powerful tool for rapid feedback and iterative prototyping.

<u>AI can be a powerful tool for rapid feedback and iterative prototyping, reshaping the future of education.</u>
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Breaking 9th-grade writing mindsets and habits

I think my 9th-grade self would have loved having a tool like ChatGPT to help with my essay assignments. But the real reason why is probably not what you're thinking.

I relish the first part of writing—coming up with ideas worth sharing—and I find satisfaction in the final part of writing—polishing my prose for persuasive power. But the middle part—hammering out a lousy first draft—is a painful process given my bad habit of perfectionistic editing as I write. But over the last few months, I've found two amazing things that ChatGPT can do for me as a writer.

First, ChatGPT allows me to do what my colleague, <u>Bob Moesta</u>, calls "rapid prototyping." I feed the AI my ideas—often through verbal dictation using its mobile app—and then it hands me back an outline for organizing those ideas into a blog post. We do some back and forth on the outline, then I ask it to write me the first draft, one headings-worth at a time. I'm not giving it a topic and then asking it to do the work of coming up with what to say on that topic. I'm doing the thinking, then it's doing the initial writing.

Are the first drafts written by ChatGPT up to par with what I expect of my own writing? No. They look like they were written by an average high school student following all the formal conventions they've been trained to mimic. The structure is so predictable that it's boring, and the sentences are full of cliche turns of phrase.

But with this leg up from ChatGPT, a process that has typically taken me around four to six hours gets cut down to about an hour. What's even more important is that this collaboration between me and the machine has been easing my dread of writing the first draft.

Second, ChatGPT gives me quick and convenient access to an outside perspective on my work. When I'm not sure if my structure is working, or I'm struggling to come up with a concise and catchy way to convey my ideas, outside feedback is often the best remedy. Unfortunately, the turnaround time for collegial feedback is typically a day or more, and when my colleagues are pressed for time, asking for feedback can feel like an imposition. Meanwhile, ChatGPT can often give me just what I need: a little bit of new insight to break me out of the rut I'm stuck in. Are its insights as good as those of a colleague? No. But what it lacks in quality it compensates for in on-demand responsiveness.

In short, while AI can handle the 'how' of writing, it falls short in understanding the 'why' and 'what'—the substance that gives a piece of writing its rigor and depth. Nonetheless, I've experienced first hand how tools like ChatGPT can facilitate cycles of writing, revising, and refining, all while helping me foster low-stress, fail-forward mindsets.

Harnessing AI's potential to revolutionize educational feedback

I think we're on the verge of a future where AI dramatically reshapes how students experience learning to write. With the help of AI, students will be able to see more clearly that the most important part of writing isn't what happens when your fingers hit the keyboard—it's the learning and the thinking that happens before you ever pull

up a blank page. Once they do their thinking, AI can help them translate what they've discovered into written text. Then, as they learn to work with that text to hone in on what they really want to communicate, sophisticated algorithms can help them sharpen their intuitions for that medium by providing real-time feedback on not only grammatical errors but also argument coherence, evidence use, and rhetorical strategy.

When schools and educators see AI as an ally rather than an adversary, I suspect they'll discover an unprecedented opportunity to both raise the bar on what they expect from their students as well as make the learning experience more enjoyable and meaningful. Did I mention that I used AI to write the first draft of this piece?

This post was written with assistance from ChatGPT. For anyone interested in how the post was crafted, here's a <u>link</u> to the ChatGPT conversation that helped produce this post.

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