Schooling Teachers on How AI Can Be More Than Just a 'Cheatbot'

Generative artificial intelligence programs such as ChatGPT can act as an additional aid in the writing process for students. (Getty Stock)

When ChatGPT first materialized last fall, many U.S. school districts banned the tool, understandably concerned that this chatbot would become a "cheatbot," with students rejoicing as they used it to write their essays on "The Great Gatsby." Now, schools realize that ChatGPT

and its generative AI relatives – Bard, Bing, DALL-E and others – are here to stay. Teachers are exploring how to use ChatGPT creatively and effectively and asking, "How can we help students use ChatGPT to develop writing skills, not cheating skills?"

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As high school English teachers turned education researchers, we think this is a great question – and we feel more optimistic about the answers than some might think. We recently partnered with a high school teacher and some of his students to see how they used ChatGPT for different kinds of writing, including persuasive essays and short stories.

In analyzing students' work, we found that students rejected opportunities to simply copy and paste from ChatGPT. Instead, they asked ChatGPT to give them ideas for stories, outlines for arguments or first lines to hook a reader. They treated ChatGPT not as a cheating resource, but as a writing partner or a coach.

For instance, we asked students to use ChatGPT to write letters to their administration arguing for a new school mascot. Students mostly prompted ChatGPT for ideas about different mascots. A junior, Xavier, asked the bot, "Give me all of the characteristics of a warrior." ChatGPT returned a long list of characteristics, including "disciplined, adaptable and honorable." Xavier selected some characteristics from that list, added some of his own, and then wrote the first sentence of his argument: "The mascot that would best reflect our school is the warrior, because they are disciplined, resilient and adaptable."

In using ChatGPT in these ways, we think students can learn new words, clarify their own arguments, consider others' perspectives, and maybe even change their own minds.

Does it count as cheating to get ideas, outlines or even complete sentences from ChatGPT? As long as students acknowledge ChatGPT's contribution to their work, we don't think so. In fact, students' choices underscore what we know to be true about writing: With a few exceptions, writing is not a solo activity. Writing, like all learning, is social. To write this article, for example, the two of us drew on a network of resources, including academic research, ChatGPT tutorials on YouTube, our students' knowledge, editors at this publication and an online spell-checker and thesaurus. ChatGPT is a new and powerful addition to this network.

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We think this tool can be useful for all students, but especially those who don't already have a network of writing support. Now, those students also have access to a co-author, debate partner, editor and translator. Just as important, ChatGPT can support teachers who – despite their skill and dedication – simply don't have the bandwidth to play all these roles for their students.

ChatGPT served other valuable purposes for the students in our study. One student, Laura, said she had "no idea where to start" the superhero story we asked her to write. She asked ChatGPT to give her an example of a superhero story. ChatGPT's story began:

A student named Jake is attending his first day at a new school where he quickly realizes that the school is not an ordinary school. Students at this school possess superpowers that they use to keep the city safe.

Laura thought that ChatGPT's story was "kind of boring," but reading this example gave her ideas about characters and action, and it also helped her understand the general structure of superhero stories. As she explained, in such stories, "you start less powerful than everybody else, and then you have the journey of obtaining some power, encountering the villain and winning." With that structure in mind, Laura wrote a new story that opened with:

I hate school. I'm the only one without a super power. Brandon's got a dimension he can walk into and Dave can hear what he wants no matter how far it is. My biggest brag is that I passed my last algebra test.

Was Laura cheating? We don't think so. Experienced writers have read hundreds of stories and often use them as jumping-off points for their own work. Without ChatGPT, Laura would likely have looked elsewhere for inspiration. In fact, when we asked Laura what she would have done without ChatGPT, she said, "I would just have thought of the most recent Marvel movie I saw and based my story off that."

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ChatGPT can be a muse for students, offering endless examples of stories, songs, tweets and other texts that will help students build a broader understanding of structure and style — things that will help them become stronger writers. One teacher cannot play the role of muse for 30 or more students in a classroom. But AI can.

Students appreciated ways that ChatGPT could help them write, but they also recognized its limits. Many students found ChatGPT's writing to be mechanical and uninspired, and in turn, they rejected its editing suggestions. One student said, "ChatGPT makes writing sound distant and robotic." Another described its output as "too perfect." In fact, ChatGPT seemed to help students value their own voices.

Will some students actually cheat with ChatGPT and other AI tools? Yes – and likely at higher rates than they did before ChatGPT. But as teachers and students learn to use AI strategically, we predict that more students will learn more about writing and maybe even read more than they did before ChatGPT. And we think they will remember, as one student told us, "ChatGPT just repeats words from other people. We still want to think for ourselves."

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