

CHAPTER 17. CENTERING THE HUMAN: A TUTOR TRAINING APPROACH TO AI-GENERATED WRITING TECHNOLOGY

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As soon as generative AI (GenAI) was widely introduced to the public, concern and fear over its implications for writing followed. This was clear even in the response on the writing center administrators' email listserv, WCenter, at the beginning of 2023. Three days after the new year began, an innocuous-seeming email was sent to the list entitled simply "Thoughts on ChatGPT." What followed was a flurry of responses that variously referred to ChatGPT as a "monster," "a useful tool for writers of all kinds," and "a new starting point for student writing," among other descriptions.¹ The emails continued after this initial burst and still continue. As writing center professionals, it seems we are all left wondering how GenAI will affect the landscape of tutoring and writing on university campuses.

In response to this tool, this threat, and this monster, the scholarly conversation has begun to tease out the many implications of GenAI. This technology has been rightfully critiqued for its erasure of human voice (Lester 21), perpetuation of racial injustice (Owusu-Ansah 146) and dominant systematic and sociocultural values (see Anderson et al., Chapter 23), and instigation of ableist teaching practices to curb its use (Stanberry et al.). GenAI technology works by aggregating written work available online and synthesizing this work in order to generate responses to user prompts. Because of the aggregation that is integral to its functioning, it perpetuates oppression in at least two ways: by amplifying stereotypical and dominant viewpoints that comprise the majority of writing available online and by taking from the work of marginalized communities without proper attribution or payment. Both of these issues boil down to an erasure of individual human experience in favor of an aggregation of textual data.

At the same time as this new technology burst onto the scene, I (Lisa) was contending with a birth of a different kind—the birth of my son, Felix, whom I

1 We have chosen to anonymize these comments since they were posted to an email list.

delivered during the last few days of 2022. As I watched these emails flood into my inbox and the scholarly conversation begin to transpire, academia never seemed more “academic.” The anxieties about this new technology seemed theoretical and far away in comparison to the concern I felt over bottles, wake windows, and trying to keep a new human alive. What I remember of that time is the messiness of new life that could not be confined to schedules, which interrupted the normal tempo of my routines. I was contending with what it means to be human—our lack of perfection and predictability, what differentiates us from machines. Without this messiness, there cannot be new life. And this is the messiness that we (Ellen and Lisa) believe must be retained when we are using and teaching about GenAI.

Although the issues that scholars have identified cannot be overlooked, we believe that it is incumbent upon writing center professionals to learn how to work with GenAI tools like ChatGPT, given their incipient ubiquity in the space of higher education. And so, the question remains: how do writing center administrators address the problems that GenAI creates—the erasure of individual experience and authorship?

We propose that this question be addressed by centering the messiness of human experience when introducing GenAI in writing center tutor training. While acknowledging the challenges and ethical dilemmas of GenAI, we simultaneously recognize that we must adapt our practice given the new reality enabled by these technologies. Taking an optimistic approach, we will present a framework for introducing GenAI in writing center tutor training based on our own experience. Our goal is to present both a theoretical approach to integrating information about GenAI into tutor training and to show how this approach was put into practice so that writing center administrators can adapt these ideas. To meet this goal, we will first discuss the theory that underpins our approach. Next, we will describe a framework for addressing GenAI within tutor training, which emphasizes dialogue and includes a discussion of (1) fundamentals, (2) policies, (3) ethics, and (4) strategies. Our final section, “Praxis,” explains how we incorporated this framework into our training, emphasizing the places where our expectations did not meet reality. In doing so, we push against the flattening of GenAI prose, where the individual eclectic stories of human writers are stripped away to generate anonymous data. Our approach, then, re-centers the human as we navigate a terrain that could silence a diversity of identities, thought, and expression.

THEORY

Our framework is informed by a techno-optimistic approach that is indebted to the work of Afrofuturism, Black Optimism, and disability justice. Responding to the erasure of race and gender in discourses of the future, and particularly of

African Americans, Alondra Nelson elaborates a vision of “things to come” where technology and race can go hand-in-hand in her description of Afrofuturism (9). In a similar vein, Black Optimism tells us that living is possible despite anti-blackness and social death (Sexton) and that Black agency is *a priori* to anti-blackness (Moten 318). Afrofuturism and Black Optimism are not unaware of racism and systemic oppression, but they posit that there are avenues for Black life despite these forces, both now and in the future. We also draw from disability justice, specifically Mia Mingus’ work on interdependence. Interdependence rejects the falsity of rugged individualism and affirms that all humans (disabled and non-disabled) depend on others, human and non-human. Through the lens of interdependence, we can see GenAI technology as a point of access—a tool that can be leveraged for justice (see Violini, Chapter 24, this collection). These concepts tell us to center the humanity of those who are marginalized as we build toward justice and that the future does not always already imply erasure, inaccessibility, or death.

Central to these philosophies is defining the human in an inclusive way that makes space for those who have been historically barred from this category. Thus, we conceive of the human not just as the antithesis of the algorithm but as a multivalent set of identities that we read against the norms of social capital to ensure that the periphery becomes the center. Thus, our vision of the human is not raceless or genderless—it is not the vision of the human that GenAI gives us. Instead, our understanding of the human takes into consideration the complexity of human expression and existing power structures to posit a radical conception of humanity that is always plural, is imbued with the complexity of identity, and is constructed by centering the marginalized. As such, a guiding principle of writing center training about GenAI must be recovering the human voices and stories that GenAI precludes.

Although this chapter outlines a framework and praxis for introducing GenAI in writing center tutor training, this is not to say that we are not still grappling with the ethics of GenAI. There are real-world implications of this technology that may involve loss of jobs, industries, and natural resources. No amount of ethical tutor training can obviate these issues. And so, at the same time as we provide a resource for training tutors about GenAI, we do not mean to imply that we can fully address the affordances and limitations GenAI creates through our pedagogical efforts. We hope, instead, to offer a techno-optimistic approach to tutoring training that centers humanity while contending with these ethical concerns.

FRAMEWORK

Our writing center first began working on developing tutor training materials during the late summer of 2023. We imagine that many writing centers felt the

same pressure to address the emerging technology immediately, but the daily and semester demands of running a writing center prevented a quicker response. Jennifer Conrad, Abigail Letak, and I (Ellen) teamed up to brainstorm and plan an approach that would be meaningful for our staff of all graduate student tutors at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. During those early meetings, we expressed our hopes and concerns over authorship, accessibility, campus policies, linguistic diversity, and ethics. These conversations led to the early unspoken configuration of the theoretical approach we articulated here. We wanted our tutors to adapt to the individual writers’ needs and positionalities—the humanity of the writers—while being cognizant of the affordances and limitations of GenAI, especially for disabled, linguistically diverse, and historically marginalized students. The conversations also helped to elucidate policy guidelines to our tutors in a time when campus policy and technology were rapidly shifting and evolving. Our conversations led us to emphasize the importance of dialogue when addressing four key concepts: (1) fundamentals, (2) policies, (3) ethics, and (4) strategies. We see this framework as offering a flexible approach that centers the human experience, which other writing centers might adapt to help their tutors navigate the ethics and possibilities of GenAI.

DIALOGUE

Encouraging dialogue and engagement is not a novel component of writing center tutor training; however, we emphasize it here as an integral component of re-centering the human. Offering tutors the opportunity to discuss their opinions, experiences, excitement, and concerns not only assists with comprehension but focuses attention onto the diversity of identities, thought, and expression that AI-generated writing can strip away. Therefore, opportunity for dialogue should be woven throughout the introduction of the framework’s four concepts.

KEY CONCEPTS OF THE FRAMEWORK

Fundamentals

We cannot assume that our tutors have any experience with GenAI, and assuming as much would reinforce disparities in access for historically marginalized students. While it may seem like GenAI is discussed nonstop, our tutors might not be aware of how they operate or have been exposed to biased, partial, or inaccurate information. In our experience, some students are so afraid of the potential stigma or academic consequences of using GenAI that they have not explored the technology or literature for themselves. Therefore, training on the technology should provide equal access to background information and allow

tutors to play with the capabilities and limitations of GenAI. We recommend addressing topics like how GenAI generates text, prompt engineering, limitations of the technology (e.g., originality, hallucinations, bias, etc.), and the variety of GenAI programs available.

Policies

Once tutors understand how the technology works, then it becomes important to introduce some of the policies that respond to how GenAI is being regulated (or not) nationally and on your campus. Speaking to the national scope of higher education's range of GenAI policies will raise awareness of the contextual nature of these policies and provide opportunities to discuss their limitations and affordances. The local context and policies will likely influence writing centers' own individual policies on AI-generated writing. In addition to ensuring that individual policies are in alignment with colleges' policies, we would recommend that writing centers create policies that are flexible and allow for tutors to have the capacity to adapt policies to the messiness of idiosyncratic students and sessions.

Ethics

While higher education institutions may allow or support the use of GenAI, we believe tutors should be aware of the ethical considerations of using this technology. Writing tutoring is a highly contextual and individual practice that shifts based on both the tutor's and the student writer's positionality, experience, and education. Presenting tutors with an understanding of the ethical considerations of GenAI will allow them to take a nuanced approach when tutoring writers who want to or are using GenAI and can help them build critical AI literacy (see Lepp Friesen and Buettner, Chapter 16). Ethical considerations that could be addressed include the unauthorized source material to train GenAI, environmental impact, providing private personal or professional data to companies, contributing to developing GenAI capabilities, reproduction of biases, and linguistic diversity erasure.

Strategies

Once the fundamentals, policies, and ethics are covered, tutors can then begin imagining strategies they can use in their writing center sessions. While most are familiar with GenAI's ability to generate whole texts, they can also be used to support human writing. Tutors can learn strategies that allow writers to leverage the generative power of GenAI while still retaining their agency. Drawing from our techno-optimistic approach and desire to center marginalized human voices, we see teaching strategies to harness GenAI as particularly important for

equity. While the capabilities of GenAI can benefit many students, it can also be used as an accessibility tool to support disabled students and students who have not had equal access to education. Some strategies that could be introduced include brainstorming paragraph or sentence focuses, discussing the merits and limitations of an output for idea generation, outlining or reverse outlining, and editing support (see Deans et al. for more ideas).

PRAXIS

We put this framework into practice at our center primarily via two avenues—lessons within our monthly staff meetings during fall of 2023 and during our training class for new tutors beginning the spring of 2024. First, we parsed the material out into smaller 20-minute lessons during staff meetings throughout a semester so that we could build skills and check in with our tutors. However, as new tutors joined our center, we had to shift to incorporating content into our tutor training class because we wanted to avoid repeating the same information to returning tutors. We're still finding the ideal way to include this material into our training course, since, like many writing centers, there is more material than time available to cover all of the necessary topics for new tutors. Recently, we've also prioritized including an annual staff meeting on GenAI, rather than devoting time throughout all of our staff meetings. We offer the following examples as illustrations of how our framework can be put into effect, and also, to emphasize that the gap between framework and practice is not something to be eliminated, but rather embraced.

DIALOGUE

As addressed in our “Framework” section, dialogue plays a key role in recentering the human. From the beginning, we centered dialogue within our training sessions, even in the context of large staff meetings, which often lend themselves to more didactic approaches. During our first staff meeting of the semester, we invited our staff to respond to the following questions:

- How comfortable are you feeling in relation to GenAI writing?
- What hesitations or areas of excitement do you have around GenAI writing?
- How and when do we talk about GenAI in relation to writing center appointments?

These open-ended questions invited our tutors into the conversation about GenAI and gave them the space to share their feelings and insights about the

technology before we established best practices as a center. (For additional approaches, Greene and Kupsh's habits of mind in Chapter 13 of this collection can offer a useful place to prompt dialogue.)

POLICIES

We believe that it is necessary to clearly identify boundaries and guidelines for tutors so that they feel confident when the topic of GenAI is broached in a tutoring session. To ensure that we are able to respond to the latest evolutions of GenAI thoughtfully, we establish flexible policies, and we encourage our tutors to be responsive to the local context of the human (student) with whom they are working. We presented the following policies during a staff meeting and in our tutor training course.

1. Prioritize Course Instructors' Policies around AI-Generated Writing

Our university allows each instructor to determine whether or not and to what extent they allow the use of GenAI for classwork. To account for this range, our appointment intake form includes a question that asks students whether or not their instructor allows them to use GenAI when drafting. Our tutors must adhere to instructors' choices when helping students.

2. Meet Students Where They Are

We ask that our tutors allow students' preferences to guide them, while keeping in mind instructors' policies. This means that if a student is allowed to use GenAI, then they can work with them in a critically engaged way that acknowledges the positionality of the student along with potentials and limitations of this technology. If a student prefers not to use AI-generated writing tools, we ask that tutors avoid pushing students to do something that makes them uncomfortable. Although this guideline centers student and instructor agency, it does not fully account for tutor agency in determining how they would or would not like to work with GenAI. We have not yet found a way to resolve this dissonance, but we anticipate that it will inform future discussions as we refine our policies.

3. Rely on Skills Cultivated as Writing Center Instructors

Finally, we want our tutors to rely on their writing center skills when navigating GenAI technology: being student-centered, asking questions, and inviting critical thinking about writing and the writing process. We ask tutors to remember that GenAI is one tool in their multimodal toolkit (Cecil-Lemkin and Marvel Johnson; Hitt) and to be considered in how they deploy it.

ETHICS

As we have emphasized throughout this chapter, we cannot critically engage with GenAI without dealing with their complex ethical implications. Before our final meeting of the semester, we asked our tutors to read Alfred L. Owusu-Ansah's "Defining Moments, Definitive Programs, and the Continued Erasure of Missing People." This reading, which emphasizes that GenAI tools can replicate bias and reinforce language hierarchies, helped to inform a discussion about a mock scenario in which an international multilingual writer, "Jay," had written a personal statement using ChatGPT. Much like May in Chapter 15, we provided our tutors with Jay's draft so that they could evaluate the work of GenAI.

We thought this reading would help our tutors identify and then articulate the ethical implications of GenAI tools that Owusu-Ansah introduced, and their responses both did and did not follow this line of thinking. They were concerned primarily for Jay, and wanted to help him navigate the ethical considerations directly relevant to the appointment and draft rather than focusing on the writers that are erased when ChatGPT aggregates internet data. For example, one tutor² remarked that he "would be concerned that [Jay's] not learning to write in his own voice—rather, that he wants ChatGPT to produce something 'good' through a sort of 'standardization.'" Piyaboot Sumonsriworakun, another tutor, pointed out that use of ChatGPT in this manner may be considered plagiarism. While Haley Johnson, another tutor, prioritized Jay's agency, explaining, "I would support the student's decision to use AI, because I support students' ability to determine what they want their writing to sound like." And so, while this reading helped to spark an important conversation about ethical use of GenAI, our expectations did not quite match with the messiness and unpredictability of tutor training. While we had assumed that our tutors would think about the broader ethical implications of this use of GenAI, they instead articulated concerns for the hypothetical student—which was an important reminder to us about the local and individual effects of this technology.

STRATEGIES

It is imperative that tutors understand not only the ethical implications of GenAI but also how to use GenAI within tutoring sessions in a critically informed manner. During our second meeting of the semester, we asked instructors to identify strengths and limitations of a GenAI essay. Although our tutors were quick to notice the pitfalls of the draft—namely, vagueness and lack of depth—they also were able to identify a few strategies for using GenAI in a tutoring session.

2 This tutor wished to remain anonymous.

These strategies included using GenAI to develop a basic outline and to edit an essay rather than generate one.³ So far, we have not been able to study how tutors use (or do not use) GenAI within their writing center sessions, and so it is unclear how these hypothetical strategies may be implemented. Additionally, due to high staff turnover characteristic of writing centers, it's been challenging to determine the long-term impact of our initial training.

CONCLUSION

Before concluding, we want to go back to the beginning—to remember how we all felt when we learned of the capabilities of GenAI. When I (Ellen) saw the initial WCenter emails regarding GenAI, I was skeptical and then shocked. When I shared my concerns with my spouse, a computer programmer, they assured me the technology was nowhere near what I feared. It wasn't until I showed them the emails and we played around with ChatGPT that we both fully realized the dramatic technological shift. While we were excited at the possibilities for both of our industries, there was also a degree of concern. When reflecting on our personal and the field's early reaction, there can be a tendency to turn away from the messiness of uncertainty and laugh off our reactions. These messy moments mark intense human imagination—which propels us forward to innovation. This drive led us to the framework discussed in this chapter, which may initially seem to skirt around this complexity because of its straightforward categorization. However, implementing a new training approach is rarely an easy endeavor. The simplicity we present is the result of trial, error, and reflection. There were many times when we had to make last-minute changes to our materials based on evolving policy, technological developments, and competing stakeholder agendas. If you decide to implement our framework or borrow from our praxis, we know that the translation will not be simple and will involve messiness. Messiness drives us and helps us innovate, and we encourage those adapting from our early endeavors in this area to embrace the places where theory does not map easily onto practice. In other words, we hope that you embrace the mess.

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