CHAPTER 6. A SPRINGBOARD, NOT A LANDING ZONE: STUDENT-FIRST DISCUSSIONS ABOUT AI AND ETHICS

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On Tuesday, March 26, 2024, we stood poised at the front of the Library Assembly Room at our small women's college in the Southeastern United States. Students began to file in, many that we knew as fellow student consultants from the Writing Center, and several that we did not know at all. We cleared our throats, introduced ourselves—Joella first, then Anna—and welcomed our student participants. Months of research, weeks of planning, a complete dry-run of the workshop for writing center staff, and effusive support from our writing center director had culminated in an hour-long workshop and dialogue around generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) that was open to all students. Thus began the first student conversations regarding GenAI programs at Salem College: student-led, student-centered.

CONTEXT: SALEM COLLEGE

We want to preface this piece by providing additional context for the place in which we exist and where this conversation began. Salem College, as previously mentioned, is a women's college with a focus on health leadership and a traditional liberal arts approach. Being a small institution of only around 700 students, Salem affords individuals the opportunity to potentially have an immense impact on the campus. With a robust staff of undergraduate students overseen by our professor director, the Salem College Writing Center (SCWC) is uniquely supported by the women's college in its pedagogical approach and in its policies as well. We recognize that Salem's size, demographics, institutional policies, and values allow our center to function with an amount of freedom that might not apply to all collegiate writing centers.

CONTEXT: WRITING CENTER

Our philosophy in the SCWC is informed by a cultural rhetorics approach (Brooks-Gillies), and our center functions not only as a "community of practice,"

but also as a "critical community," drawing from the work of Bettez and Hytten (Walter). To this end, our director has worked to create a place where students feel comfortable as they approach the vulnerable task of sharing their writing. For us, this is centered in feminist decolonial studies and means utilizing a dialogic approach to consultation in an endeavor to understand and contextualize subjective experiences and realities, rather than strictly adhering to abstract objectivity rooted in "white rationality" and patriarchal standards (Anzaldúa 36). Ratcliffe's theory of rhetorical listening (Walter) and Street's ideological model of literacy (Grimm 46) are necessary to our daily work in the writing center as we strive to meet students where they are mentally and emotionally, with consideration to their positionality and our own. In our work, our consultants endeavor to move beyond "words on a page" and to help our clients work on improving their broader relationship with the writing process (Grimm 46). Our decolonial pedagogical approach fosters a holistic methodological focus on the *person* rather than merely the products they produce and influences all of the writing center work we do. Like many other writing centers that adopt a cultural rhetorics approach, the SCWC provides subcommittees that allow consultants to pursue additional writing center work and professional development. It was through our partnership on a subcommittee that we began our first fledgling steps towards developing this workshop.

Building off of Ede's work regarding "the interdependence of theory and practice," we wanted to utilize our time and resources as part of the SCWC Workshop Subcommittee—which was focused on the development of workshops to teach writing skills outside of our typical tutoring hours—to explore our own anxieties and concerns regarding GenAI through a collaborative learning project that would spark broader campus dialogue and benefit the campus community (Ede 4). Our chief concern was that many of our student peers would be thrust into professional environments that might expect (or demand) that GenAI tools be implemented without adequate means or time to begin their own inquiry into the potential impact of those tools—personally, professionally, socially, environmentally, ethically, politically. For this reason, we wanted to develop a workshop that would allow students to begin the process of ethical inquiry into GenAI programs in a safe and neutral environment.

FRAMEWORK: WORKSHOP

This workshop grew out of our shared anxieties and concerns about GenAI and its potential impact on the discipline of writing, on academia as a whole, and on our futures as dedicated writers. Our feelings were compounded by the lack of an official campus policy regarding the use of GenAI at our institution.

As Johnson and Wynn Perdue (this collection) suggest, we are writing center practitioners, accustomed to finding and filling in these gaps in true interstitial fashion. Because of our training and approach to tutoring, we felt the most holistic method of addressing GenAI concerns was through meaningful discussion with peers. We both firmly believe that it is the duty of each individual to determine for themselves whether GenAI can or should be used in specific applications as a matter of personal ethics. However, we both felt quite lost as to how we might begin navigating our own decisions, and we knew that other students must certainly be in the same boat. We further recognized that, while neither of us felt any urge to gravitate towards GenAI to complete or assist in completing our assignments, our positionality as tutors in the writing center and as majors in the professional writing program is likely to mean that we have an increased awareness of and comfort with the writing process that other students on our campus might not have. While we initially sought to find ways for the writing center to offer alternatives to students who might feel tempted to turn to GenAI programs, we decided early on that an open, student-led conversation would offer a better approach in allowing students to have their perspectives heard without fear of judgment or retribution. Like many other writing center practitioners featured in this collection, we also feared that the rise of chatbots, available all hours of the day and never fatigued, might lead to a decline in our appointment numbers (see Johnson and Wynn Perdue; Girdharry; Hallman Martini; Fledderjohann and Perkins). Like Girdharry, we wanted to approach our AI workshop as a "neutral space," and commit to "prioritiz[ing] student learning and support." As such, we decided to create a hybridized conversation and workshop. After all, if all of us as students are tasked with determining how we will approach and respond to GenAI as individuals, might we not benefit from shared perspectives and frank discussions?

We knew that encouraging students to become active participants in a campus-wide dialogue regarding GenAI was likely to cause concern among faculty members. While our writing center director had offered a faculty workshop about GenAI the previous spring, their general impression was that faculty were (understandably) apprehensive about the subject. Though many faculty members expressed their desire to participate in or attend our workshop, we elected to restrict attendance to students only, in order to provide a comfortable environment for participants to openly engage in frank discussion. While some students may view student writing consultants as having a certain amount of authority, we wanted it to be very clear that there was no traditional hierarchical structure at play, as that would be antithetical to the environment we hoped to foster. However, we also wanted to ensure that our workshop did not become a source of added anxiety for instructional faculty and staff. Our director was essential

in fielding their questions and concerns while providing us with direct support to conduct this student workshop in a way that would be truly beneficial to our student participants.

With GenAI being a relatively new technology in terms of general accessibility at the time, it was unsurprising that many of the sources we encountered were framed through an instructional lens—written by professional writers and instructors. Chiefly instrumental were Annette Vee and Tim Laquintano's resources, generously available through Creative Commons NonCommercial license. Formatted as a series of frequently asked questions, their letter, "Dear Students: Should you use AI for your Writing?" was perfectly aligned with our goal to lead students through inquiry. We adapted this structure to suit our student-led format and pared it back to ensure that the information provided would be digestible as part of a sixty-minute workshop. While we supplemented with further readings, we also used Vee and Laquintano's basic explanation of Large Language Models (LLMs) and introduction to GenAI as a starting point for our research.

For the sake of practicality, we knew early on that we wanted our workshop to address both sides of AI tools: Conceptual AI and Applied AI (Dobrin 8). Conceptual AI addresses the ethical questions and consequences that surface with GenAI use, while Applied AI asks how we utilize GenAI practically. Dobrin's 2023 publication, *AI and Writing*, further affirmed that we were asking the right questions as we approached this workshop. Citing a *Best Colleges* survey from earlier that year, Dobrin reiterates that the majority of college students "anticipate increased use of GenAI" and that they are interested in learning "how to use these tools responsibly in their academic careers, as well as their professional, civic, and personal lives" (4). See Velez et al., "Lending Our Voices: The Role of Writing Center Leadership in Institutional Conversations about AI," for more robust research regarding students' eagerness to engage with GenAI.

Our approach to the Conceptual AI portion of this workshop was informed by the Salem College Engaging Ethics Program, an ethics across the curriculum project centered around five ethical touchstones: integrity, justice, courage, respect, and care. At Salem College, these touchstones serve as the basis for guiding ethical inquiry for all students across the disciplines, beginning in their requisite first-year seminars. Given the familiarity and accessibility of that existing framework for our students, we hoped that they would be encouraged by our use of the touchstones to actively engage with our questions. We planned and prepared discussions for all five of these touchstones. Although we hoped that student participants would lead us through the touchstones freely in ways that intersected their own lives and planned careers, we prepared material for discussions on all five touchstones so that we would be adequately equipped to more directly steer the conversation if participation was timid.

The majority of our planned discussion was centered around integrity, justice, and care. We grounded our discussion of integrity through questions of academic honesty and the use of GenAI, as we wanted to ensure that students were aware of the potential repercussions for using GenAI in their writing. Beyond that, we wanted students to understand how those given texts are generated by AI chatbots and that many consider them a form of plagiarism. Furthermore, despite our college's lack of a formal institution-wide AI policy, many professors at Salem *do* have individual policies that forbid the use of AI for any assignments, and failure to comply with such policies constitutes an Honor Code violation—an important factor at a college with student-proctored and self-scheduled exams. The justice touchstone was used to anchor considerations of bias, which we felt very deeply about addressing during our allotted time. Our discussion of bias was used to underscore our argument that GenAI should never be considered as an endpoint—the bias inherent in any AI program requires that all AI-generated products, from images to text, be subject to careful *human* review. We also wanted to help guide students to question the use of AI programs in professional settings by asking who or what is ultimately being privileged through the use of AI and products that are produced by it, leading us to tie our discussion of care into Salem's health leadership focus via questions regarding the use of AI programs in medical settings.

THE HYBRIDIZED WORKSHOP

The basic structure of the hybridized workshop was split into two sections: 20 minutes for the GenAI "crash course" and ethical framework and the remaining 40 minutes for a prompt engineering session using OpenAI's ChatGPT 3.5, a program equitably accessible to all students at that time. We transitioned from our ethics conversation into a discussion of the writing process to foreground our prompt engineering session. Again, we wanted to illustrate that GenAI always requires reflection and review, and that AI-generated texts should never be considered a "final product" in any setting. Rather than taking a negative stance, we hoped instead to positively instruct students on how to use GenAI to help them brainstorm for assignments, if it is aligned with their instructors' policies regarding GenAI use. After using GenAI to brainstorm ideas, we wanted to help move our participants beyond the brainstorming portion and into planning—a process that again returns to the necessity of human-centeredness when working with GenAI.

The prompt engineering session guided student participants through the process of ethically engaging with GenAI. We provided students with several

potential essay prompts and allowed them to choose which we would use to brainstorm with ChatGPT:

- Prompt 1: "Write an argumentative essay supporting or refuting why you believe that your generation experiences more anxiety than previous generations."
- Prompt 2: "Write an essay describing how technology has evolved in your lifetime and what the impacts of those technological advancements have been for society."
- Prompt 3: "Write an essay persuading your reader to break a specific habit that is detrimental to their physical, mental, or financial health."

We wanted students to gain practical experience inputting different prefixes into ChatGPT as we workshopped together and outlined our sample essay, not only to discourage the wholesale copy and paste of prompts into AI programs, but also to demonstrate how GenAI can be ethically used as a brainstorming resource or sounding board (Dobrin 68).

WORKSHOP REFLECTION

The most surprising result of our workshop was discovering how eager students were to discuss Conceptual AI. Although we had originally planned to dedicate 20 minutes of our workshop to Conceptual AI and utilize the remaining 40 minutes for Applied AI and the early stages of the writing process, our discussion of Conceptual AI stretched to 30 minutes. Our participants were highly enthusiastic to discuss the ethical implications and considerations of AI usage. Originally, our writing center director had planned to remain in the room to take notes despite it being a student-only workshop, but through a shared spur-of-the-moment decision, we collectively decided they should exit the room. We believe that this spontaneous decision at the beginning of the workshop fostered a more comforting and relaxed environment, as it remained truly student-exclusive, leading to deeper and more raw discussions about AI. This peer-to-peer conversation crossed interdisciplinary boundaries that extended past writing and included ethical considerations related to the broader societal landscape. Students from different backgrounds and academic disciplines were eager to voice their opinions and concerns about how GenAI was infiltrating their respective fields of art, film, healthcare, law, business, and more. We found that students were most interested in discussing the integrity touchstone, and we specifically examined how AI relates to plagiarism and authorship. Students eagerly asked questions about platforms such as Grammarly, Paraphrase, and other writing applications, specifically curious if we believed—and if their professors might

believe—that the use of those platforms constituted plagiarism. While some of their questions were readily answered (check the syllabus!), we also made it very clear that we didn't have all of the answers.

When we moved to the prompt engineering session, students chose to workshop the argumentative essay prompt. Anna manned the computer, while Joella used a whiteboard to formulate an essay outline with students as we went. We showed students that instead of copying and pasting the essay prompt into ChatGPT, they should instead use prefixes to receive more digestible and workable results, encouraging them to pause and reflect *before* they begin engaging with GenAI. As an example, one of the prefixes we included was, "Give me a list of 5-10 reasons that anxiety has increased in the past few decades." We did not want huge blocks of text, but instead short ideas and topics that students could expand upon in their own writing. As we workshopped through the brainstorming process, we reminded students that further research from valid sources should be done afterward to ensure the accuracy of the information given. The brainstorming session with students and ChatGPT went smoothly, and students chose to use a linear outline to display their ideas for the argumentative essay. Despite being pushed for time during prompt engineering due to the extended ethics conversation, we still managed to create a complete outline by the end of the workshop. We discovered that students didn't even rely on ChatGPT to brainstorm for them as much as we anticipated; once we got the ball rolling, students quickly came up with their own ideas.

At the conclusion of the student workshop, we asked our participants to take an informal survey, wherein the main questions were (1) Was this workshop helpful? and (2) Would you be interested in more campus conversations surrounding GenAI? Ninety percent of participants answered "Yes" to both questions, and ten percent responded "Maybe," indicating that the need for further conversation and guidance on how to use GenAI is warranted on our campus. Following the success of our workshop, multiple instructors reached out to our writing center for information on how to continue the conversation in their own classrooms, seemingly bolstered by the reassurance that our writing center would help support them. In the summer of 2024, as we worked on drafting this chapter, one of our deans reached out to our writing center director about creating an AI Literacy minor at Salem.

CONCLUSION

As a community of students, tutors, and writers, the SCWC welcomes the exploration of new ideas that go beyond our perceived boundaries and challenge our existing perspectives (McKeehen). From our own 'brave space,' within our

four walls (and screens), we hope to provide our students with the fortitude and confidence they will need as they venture into an ever-evolving and unpredictable future (Walter). We recognize the privilege of working within a space that equips us with the resources to create a groundwork for conversations on our campus, and we believe that writing centers ought to be epicenters of the discussion regarding how all of higher education will address and reorient itself around the implementation of technological advancements. In agreement with many other authors in this collection, we firmly believe that writing centers should capitalize on their positionality within the broader academic landscape by continuing to resist "strict policing" and rather focus on prioritizing "critical empathy in addition to critical thinking" during this time of change (McKeehen). Although many writing center practitioners, ourselves included, have espoused concern that GenAI reproduces existing work and thus "runs contrary to values writing centers and their staff broadly uphold regarding responsible source use" (Roustio), we must also consider how important it is to "interrogate our own assumptions, ideologies, and beliefs about writing and how writing should be taught" (Lundin). Furthermore, while writing center work has historically been dismissed or misunderstood because of its existence in the periphery of academia, this is precisely where these conversations should be taking place: on the periphery, away from centers of power.

We are finishing our final edits to this chapter in late July of 2025—over a full year after we gave our workshop. Since then, the SCWC has updated tutor training to address GenAI and crafted an official writing center policy on GenAI with the assistance and input of all current tutoring staff. Our director has led multiple workshops on GenAI—on and off the Salem College campus—and several of us participated in a panel at the 2024 IWCA conference. Both of us have continued to research AI and ethics—Anna furthered her research through her senior thesis project, and Joella completed an honors independent study to assist our writing center director with developing the aforementioned AI Literacy minor. We still don't have all the answers, but we remain hopeful that our contributions have laid the foundation for our fellow students not only to adapt or rise to the challenges presented by AI, but to emerge as thriving leaders in an era of continued uncertainty. Although there are many times that the future seems admittedly bleak, we are here—still sharing ideas and writing our very human thoughts to and *for* one another. The conversations that bind these books are the very ones that we should continue encouraging in our own writing centers and broader communities. We offer this chapter as a single piece in the collective patchwork of writing center work, and we hope that you will find it as handy and enlightening as it has been for us, as writing centers emerge as leaders of AI conversations on campuses. In the spirit of outreach, we

have made our workshop presentation materials available for anyone to access through the SCWC webpage via the following link: https://guides.library.salem.edu/c.php?g=1339751&p=10669643.

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