On Fishbowls, Student Personas, and the Wicked Problem of Generative Artificial Intelligence

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Discourse on generative artificial intelligence moves almost as fast as the technology's evolution. How can teachers, scholars, and administrators join the conversation without feeling overwhelmed or being haunted by the expectation they must know everything? The 7C Ad Hoc Committee on AI presents fishbowls and student personas to guide critical conversations on wicked problems, such as Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI).

Joining a research community as a professional requires engagement with multiple writing genres (Miller, 1984; Swales, 1990). The conference presentation maintains important status as it allows an early entrance into a conversation, the testing of ideas, and inviting others into potential collaborations. For a graduate student or junior scholar, for example, a conference presentation and its subsequent question-and-answer (Q&A) portion centers their expertise rather than frequently nodding to established scholarship. They can offer careful insights and pose curious provocations to engage audiences. While many conference presentations cover topics that attendees themselves know tangentially, other topics are wicked problems – "complex, ambiguous problems involving many stakeholders. They neither have easily identifiable, one-time solutions nor can they be solved simply with more information" (Garskie, 155). In that case, a de-centered, communal approach to audience engagement may be more appropriate, not to solve the problem per se––wicked problems are inherently unsolvable––but to establish shared values, practices, and priorities that help the research community address smaller consequences of the wicked problem itself.

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Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) poses a wicked problem for writing pedagogy. Although not a new technology or even a new conversation in Computers and Writing (C&W) scholarship (Johnson, 2023), the current iteration of GenAI effectively and quickly generates text, images, and sounds in response to user prompts. This feature alone presents multiple challenges, risks, and rewards (Cummings, Monroe, & Watkins, 2024). For example, a writing instructor can worry that students will submit inaccurate synthetic text as their own work, while students may find AI a helpful collaborative tool for brainstorming and drafting (Li, 2024); Researchers can anticipate GenAI leveling the playing field for English language learners (Gupta, Atef, Mills, & Bali, 2024), while also acknowledging the racial, gendered, and linguistic bias of the training data (Byrd, 2023); students can want college faculty to teach them how to use GenAI ethically, yet that possibility remains dubious considering issues of surveillance and privacy erosion (Woods & Johnson, 2024) and the extreme impacts even minor AI output has on the environment (Crawford, 2021; Luccioni, Jernite, & Strubell, 2024). Given these risks and rewards, many writing instructors are wrestling with the nuances of GenAI.

The 7C Ad Hoc Committee on AI (the Committee) facilitates conversation and helps to imagine potential actions on GenAI for the C&W community. We met multiple times in Fall 2023 and Spring 2024 to discuss various ways we might encourage critical discussions about GenAI from diverse perspectives. To engage audience members on the wicked problem of GenAI more broadly, the Committee proposed a fishbowl format for the 2024 conference. By stepping away from a traditional conference panel, we imagined different opportunities for engaging audiences in collective thinking about GenAI, in particular a tight focus on the perspectives of students across multiple institution types.

Here, we encourage scholars to consider using this underutilized presentation format for contexts that require multiple perspectives and resources. We begin by briefly outlining the fishbowl format. We, then, highlight the potential of using research-informed student *personas* as conversation starters. We present the methods and process for collecting and analyzing student survey responses that informed the student personas. Then, we discuss the planning and organization of our fishbowl, and Committee members offer reflections on this format. Unfortunately, unlike traditional conference presentations, we cannot accurately capture the dynamics of the fishbowl in writing; therefore, the ideas attendees presented could not be featured here. Nonetheless, we hope this brief essay will encourage more widespread use of the fishbowl format when working on wicked problems in our classrooms and research.

What's a Fishbowl Session?

Typically, conference presentations come in a few formats. The most common format is the concurrent panel session, which typically features three or four panelists presenting individual papers that are thematically linked followed by audience Q&A. Roundtable sessions typically are less formal than paper presentations and feature brief remarks from five or more presenters followed by a moderated dialogue and audience Q&A. While these formats have their advantages, typically the audience acts as listeners with the opportunity to (maybe) ask a question or provide a comment at the end of the session.

Figure 1.1. Fishbowl graphic posted on Facebook created by Kit Snyder.

The call for proposals for C&W 2024 offered the typical session types as well as a *fishbowl* format. A fishbowl is a presentation format or teaching strategy that encourages participation through discussion and listening. It allows presenters and teachers to maintain organization while allowing for a wide-ranging discussion. (Event Leadership Institute, 2019). Leading up to the proposal submissions deadline, conference organizers encouraged fishbowl sessions via social media. For example, Figure 1.1 was posted on Facebook on October 23, 2023. The graphic, which features the unofficial 2024 C&W Conference mascot Clem the Orange Dinosaur swimming in a fishbowl, is divided into four dialogue boxes each addressing the question: What's a fishbowl session?

The graphic explains that a fishbowl session is:

- Moderator-guided discussion where anyone can contribute or listen
- Collaborative and engaging sessions where participants step into the "fishbowl" to contribute!
- Conversations that start with a common topic and then change to follow the group's interests.
- It concludes with "Sound fun?" and a call for proposal submissions.

While considering how to represent the work of the 7C Ad Hoc Committee on AI at the conference, the fishbowl format became appealing because of its flexibility, open-endedness, and increased opportunities for audience participation. Further, the Committee recognizes the lack of student voices in discussions about GenAI and are working to rectify this by collecting stories from students working with GenAI in 2023-24–the early days of widespread GenAI implementation in our classrooms. Therefore, for our session, we chose to theme the fishbowl around "Amplifying Student Voices."

Additionally, we chose the fishbowl because we believe hearing from students amplifies voices often silenced by the academy. The Committee assembled a group of tenured, tenure-track, contingent faculty, and graduate students who teach writing and study GenAI, and, most importantly, value student perspectives as a critical, necessary element of the future of GenAI. Our goals, now and in the future, are to enter and center the discussion on the stories that we tell students, the stories we tell about students, and students' stories about the integration of GenAI in education and their futures. While educators often drive conversations about GenAI, bringing students into these worldmaking conversations at each crux is crucial. Students are not just consumers but active participants and burgeoning experts in the evolving landscape of GenAI in higher education. To meet the multiple challenges that arise with amplifying student voices, the Committee decided to utilize personas as a method. We discuss this decision-making process, and subsequent reasonings in the following section.

Personas: An Opportunity to Amplify Student Voices

To amplify student voices in this ongoing conversation, the Committee decided to ask students what they thought about GenAI and what their experiences had been with it, both inside and outside of the classroom. To do this, we developed an IRB-approved research project. Our short survey asked students to share their perceptions on the use of GenAI both in the contexts of writing and education and outside of education. Topics covered instructors' guidelines and policies, how instructors discussed issues related to challenges in using GenAI,

how students used GenAI in their personal or professional lives, how many courses taught AI literacies, and the types of assignments and activities that involved GenAI use. This final question was inclusive of courses, programs, writing centers, and labs. We distributed the survey at our respective institutions and received 52 responses from graduate and undergraduate students. The responses represented a total of five public R1 and R2 institutions. Committee members then analyzed the survey data using open and closed code analysis. In the process, we found that the best way to present our findings was not as a series of themes with supporting quotes and analysis but rather organizing the collective experience of students' use of GenAI into personas.

Personas are not fictional but realistic collective representations of users that have been a staple of technical communication scholarship and practice. Often used for interface design research or audience analysis, personas are tools used to define problems and keep research teams focused. It follows then that we might draw on User Centered Design methods "to honor student knowledge" (Martin 2022, 49) as we locate students and their relationships to AI. Lisa Melonçon (2017) explained, "Persona creation involves overlapping concepts and ideas that lead to three-dimensional representations of users who have bodies and who move for specific purposes" (60). Using the results of our survey, we generated four personas representing different student orientations toward GenAI, which are presented in detail in the following section.

As a method for research (or in this case, conversation starter), personas do important work including identifying thoughts and motivations for using a tool, identifying pain points, and revealing potential opportunities for additional research. For us, these personas allowed investigation of teaching strategies that might align with student needs and desires while keeping in mind that we are balancing a class of students who likely account for all personas. That is, we are able to consider how to teach about or with GenAI while attending to a range of students. A limitation of personas is that, while grounded in research and realistically rendered, they are not meant to be one-for-one representations. Students, after all, are complex humans with complex emotions and experiences related to GenAI. Therefore, individuals might be represented across multiple personas.

Results: Student Personas on AI Use

Our analysis revealed the following personas below. Images used to display the personas for the fishbowl are also provided afterward:

- *The AI Avoider:* learns from professors that AI leads to a decline in students' wanting to complete work on their own and that it keeps them

from thinking critically. Avoids GenAI use so they aren't perceived as a lazy student or seen as dishonest in any way.

- *The Inquisitive AI User:* uses GenAI to learn faster, especially with process-based tasks, such as summarizing articles, asking questions about the articles, and considering approaches to writing in general.
- *The AI Brainstormer:* uses GenAI to get started on writing and overcome the "blank page problem." The AI Brainstormer uses GenAI to come up with ideas for writing and generate synthetic texts they can revise and integrate into their original writing later on.
- *The AI Enhanced Communicator:* uses GenAI as needed, but when they do so it's often to generate common writing genres such as emails because they tend to be clear and have a professional tone. In addition, this persona uses GenAI for creative works, such as editing photos and digital art.

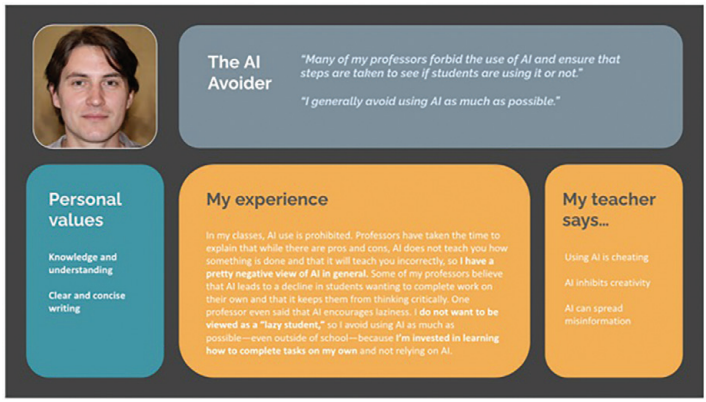

Figure 1.2. Persona profile for "The AI Avoider" created by Ashley Beardsley

Figure 1.3. Persona profile for "The Inquisitive AI User" created by Ashley Beardsley

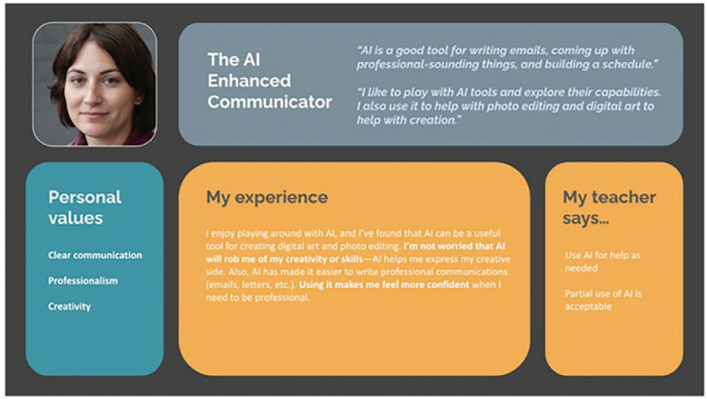

Figure 1.4. Persona profile for "The AI Enhanced Communicator" created by Ashley Beardsley

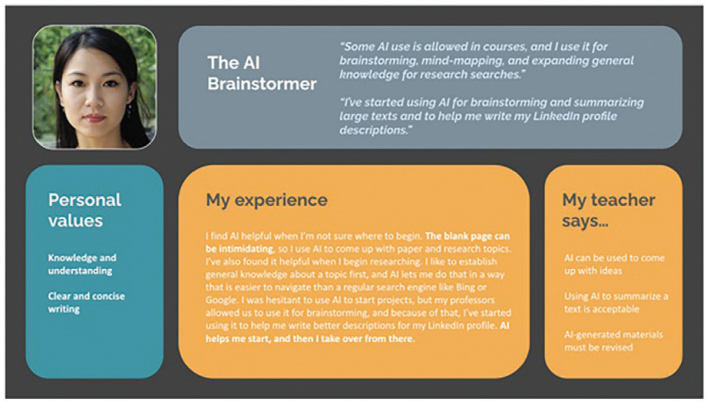

Figure 1.5. Persona profile for "The AI Brainstormer" created by Ashley Beardsley

Our Approach to the Fishbowl

When dealing with wicked problems, it is important to account for upwellings of sentiment and varied approaches that are fluidly forming and reforming, and, we suggest, traditional conference presentations do not provide an appropriate amount of flexibility for such topics. In contrast, the fishbowl format decenters the presenter and engages with the audience organically, inviting a community-based problem-solving atmosphere (Garrison and Munday 2012). To this end, the format of the fishbowl is exceptionally good for nascent subject matter. Pairing the fishbowl format with research-informed student personas make clear that GenAI is not a settled issue. The Committee's fishbowl presentation at the 2024 Computers and Writing Conference,

titled, "Amplifying Student Voices in Our Stories about Generative Artificial Intelligence" occurred on Friday, June 25, 2024, in Tandy Hall Room 1308 of the Neely building on the campus of Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas (pictured in Figure 1.6). The room was designed well to host a fishbowl: it had two curved tables near the front that created a semi-circular installment mimicking the curvature of a fishbowl surrounding participants who were seated at a square table in the center. The audience was seated in tiered rows (lecture hall style) or standing along the back of the room, which provided clear sightlines throughout the room and opportunities for bringing attendees into the conversation.

Our fishbowl session was moderated by Charles Woods and Jason Tham and was divided into four sub-sessions, each anchored around one of our personas. For each sub-session, moderators would invite a diverse sample of attendees to act as discussants. These discussants, seated at the center table, would first introduce and review their designated persona to the audience and then engage in a discussion among themselves using guided questions about what the persona meant to them and how they would use it in their pedagogic practice and policy contexts. Moderators introduced the personas, one at a time, with the attendees. The conversations were lively, engaging, and even frank as the discussants shared their experiences framed in the context of the persona on the projector and the associated questions. The audience was invested and listened to the conversation until the moderator called for questions or comments from the audience. Once the sub-session for a persona was complete, a new diverse sampling of discussants was selected from the attendees to come to the center table to discuss the next persona in the collection. This pattern repeated throughout the session until all personas had been discussed. Our moderators Charles Woods and Jason Tham returned to offer a wrap-up of the conversation's highlights and offered an exit ticket, walking the audience through an inventory of their attitudes before the session and comparing them to their perceptions after the session.

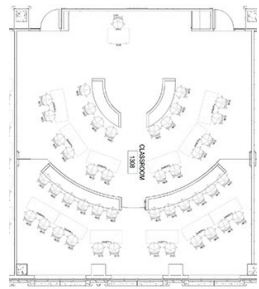

Figure 1.6. A CAD drawing of the layout of 1308 Tandy Hall in the Neely Building: the location of the 7C's Ad hoc committee on AI fishbowl session.

Reflections on the Fishbowl

Here we offer our reflections on the session and on the project as a whole. The reader will note that although we worked together on this effort, and stood and sat in the same room during the session itself, the scope of our takeaways was wide and varied but quite productive.

Antonio

While our research sought to amplify and understand students' voices on GenAI, the fishbowl itself amplified the voices of scholars and teachers in the room. By happenstance, our moderator for the fishbowl session, Jason Tham, selected participants who came from a variety of institutions. The fishbowl brings into sharp relief the need to address some problems as a collective rather than relying on the expertise of any one scholar or a small group of scholars. If we're intentional in how we design these discussions, institutions that we take for granted, such two-year colleges, come to the forefront as important knowledge producers.

Charles

For me, utilizing the personas allowed fishbowl participants the opportunity not only to discuss pertinent issues related to integrating GenAI into their classrooms via assignments and activities, but also offered a robust glimpse into the different pedagogical approaches instructors might employ with students with various perspectives in their classes. The rise of virtual conferences spurred by the coronavirus pandemic has reshaped how higher education does conferencing. To me, the fishbowl format is an attempt to reshape the monotony of the traditional conference panel format: read papers and respond to queries.

Gavin

To be honest, when we first started planning the fishbowl, I wasn't sure how it'd all work. I've participated in many paper presentation panels, roundtables, and even workshops, and I'm very comfortable with those conference genres. As we planned the session, the vision became a bit clearer, especially with the creation of the student personas; however, I was still uncertain about the format. What if we had a small audience or an audience not willing to jump in? What if the space was not accessible for this kind of format? Will these personas be recognizable to the audience or feel overly manufactured? These concerns quickly dissipated when we started the session. The room, as mentioned, provided a seemingly ideal design for a fishbowl, every seat was occupied and some attendees were standing around the perimeter of the room,

and Ashley Beardsley did an excellent job developing the persona profiles. With Jason and Charles acting as moderators, the session went smoothly and the conversation was lively. While there is always room for improvement, I feel like the fishbowl was a success and one of the best sessions on GenAI I've participated in or attended precisely because expertise was spread throughout the room.

Joseph

The use of the personas as content anchors to steadily regulate and move the conversation forward, coupled with the invitation for audience members to participate–not only with questions from their own seats but by actually *coming to the table* to share their concerns and experience–made this one of the most engaging forms of roundtable I have ever seen. The repeated questions that focused the attention on each persona in succession and inherently invited comparisons and contrasts between the students the personas represented and the ways in which we might connect with them. I entered the room in trepidation but left invigorated.

Morgan

While I was unable to attend Computers and Writing in-person due to my first commencement as a faculty member, I *was* able to reflect on the results of the fishbowl and persona-making. In particular, based on the reflections from Committee members who were present at the fishbowl, as well as personal reflections from attendees, our next step is situating how the fishbowl could be reimagined in other contexts. Because of the student-centered *and* audience-centered nature of the fishbowl, this provided an opportunity for multiple perspectives. The physical space, as noted, should also be of consideration: say, for instance, the fishbowl were to be introduced to your classroom space. What does the physical space of your classroom afford for this type of activity? Personas, too, are a useful tool in the fishbowl to begin the conversation *and* steer conversation as it naturally shifts. Lastly, it is important to note that instructors should refrain from recording in classroom settings unless otherwise noted to protect student privacy, and intellectual property.

Anuj

For me, the design of the fishbowl represents a user-friendly way in which we can make our research on the scholarship of teaching and learning more accessible, meaningful, and impactful for a wide range of audiences. Scholars across writing studies produce very insightful research but teachers, students, and administrators do not always know how to apply it meaningfully in their localized contexts (Gupta, Shuck, & Tardy 2024). Using innovative

designs, like a fishbowl session created with user personas, is an excellent way to merge best practices in user-experience (UX) design and instructional design to give greater rhetorical velocity (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2017) to our research work.

Other Projects and Future Possibilities

The Committee organized this session as our first public opportunity to engage the Computers and Writing community in critically discussing GenAI. The fishbowl, however, is just one project that the Committee has taken on in order to contribute to the growing investigations of GenAI in the field.

There are a number of resources available for the scholar who wishes to explore the topic further and we wanted to provide a starting place for those scholars. While many other presentation styles do offer excellent ideas and resources, the engagement that we anticipated from a fishbowl session might leave participants and audience members alike in need of an immediate resource with which to continue their conversational inquiry into the affordances and limitations of GenAI. The Special Issue on AI published in *Computers and Composition* and edited by Nupoor Ranade and Douglas Eyman (2024) seemed like a natural place to direct our fishbowl audience to as that issue, and its authors, draw on a wide array of conversations that ground their own contributions to the conversation.

Knowing also how many demands there are on our time in this age, three readers (Mahaffey, Mitchum, and Robertshaw) engaged that special issue in an effort to develop a deliverable that could be offered alongside the fishbowl presentation as a help for those who connected with the presentation and wanted next steps. These readers annotated the articles of the special issue pulling out points that caught their attention or inspired them. The readings and comments from each reader were vetted and extended by a second reader for reliability. A spreadsheet came from this effort that categorized the comments from each article in several major themes: Application to Teaching, Application to Research, Application to Administration, and Application to Industry. The deliverable can serve readers as a quick reference to help them understand which of the articles in the special issue are most relevant to their areas of interest. The spreadsheet is also a site to locate potential research questions, gaps in the conversation, and take a look at what our readers saw as the main takeaways of each article.

Furthermore, the committee has also compiled resources and approaches for instructors to create an AI "policy" in the classroom space. In particular, GenAI technologies have and will continue to revolutionize the professional world: students, teachers, and professionals are finding uses for text generative

technologies to assist with their work, and recent data has shown they are being used frequently in many diverse contexts (Vee, Laquintano, & Schnitzler 2023; Westfall 2023). We've found it useful to have students do the metacognitive work to articulate their position on AI. Such articulation gives them a chance to engage with shaping class policy, and supporting their decisions based on conversations, readings, and their own research and/or experiences. Will they use GenAI? In what ways? To achieve what ends? If they won't use it, what has shaped that decision? Has learning about the larger ethical implications of AI helped them frame the issue differently? To do this work, we have created a list of "policy" resources (linked here: Teaching with AI: Policy Resources). The policy resources range from field-specific and higher education guides, to our own institutional guides (or lack thereof), as well as publication statements/guides. We have not yet found venues or means to share all of the artifacts and projects our committee has been developing.

The 7C Ad Hoc Committee on AI has plans for the future. We have identified a multitude of ways to effectively serve the C&W Conference and community. One of these plans includes hosting a fishbowl about GenAI annually at the C&W Conference. Currently, the Committee is considering the sustainability of their work as they navigate how to maximize their impact. How might we reinvest in our policy document project and make it useful for the Computers and Writing community? Additional projects the Committee is interested in developing include an article historicizing GenAI panels, writing a Wiki entry on "GenAI and Writing," and using the data from their recent study to further literature in the field regarding and amplifying students' perceptions. As we move forward, as a Committee and a community, it is important that we remain willing to move the practices of the fishbowl into our conversations with students, colleagues, and the wider-world. As discussed throughout this article and the fishbowl session, takeaways such as working to recognize a vast range of expertise, distribute opportunities for input equitably, and rethink the genres of knowledge-production will be essential if we hope to continue tackling the wicked problem of GenAI.

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We want to hear from you!

Use the QR code below to share more about how you think the 7C Ad Hoc Committee on AI can serve the Computers & Writing Community.

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Appendix. Student Perception Survey

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. Your instructor should inform you of your rights as a participant prior to beginning the survey. Please know that your participation and responses in this survey will not be used against you in any way. We appreciate your help with our study.

1. Are you 18 years of age or older? (For participants from Alabama, you should be at least 19 years old.) *
   - ○ Yes
   - ○ No
2. Do you consent to participate in this study? You can withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. *
   - ○ Yes
   - ○ No
3. Please tell us the university/institution you are affiliated with. This helps us to contextualize your responses in this survey. We will not look up your identity using this information.

Please tell us your class standing.

- ○ Undergraduate: First-year
- ○ Undergraduate: Sophomore
- ○ Undergraduate: Junior
- ○ Undergraduate: Senior
- ○ Graduate: Master's level
- ○ Graduate: Doctoral level
- ○ Other:

4. Have you used AI (or been asked to use AI) as part of any of your courses? Your answer will not be used against you in any way. *
   - ○ Yes
   - ○ No
   - ○ Other:
5. What policies, guidelines, or instructions in your courses, programs, centers, and labs have informed and guided your use of AI in the last 2 years? Please try to provide as many details as possible. Links to resources are welcomed. (Enter "N/A" if not applicable.) *
6. In what ways have your instructors discussed issues related to challenges in using AI technologies in teaching & learning? Please try to provide as many details as possible. (Enter "N/A" if not applicable.) *
7. In what ways do you utilize AI outside of academic settings? Please try to provide as many details as possible. There are no wrong answers. (Enter "N/A" if not applicable.) *
8. In the last 2 years, how many courses have you taken that included AI as a learning component?*
   - ○ 0
   - ○ 1–2
   - ○ 3–4
   - ○ More than 4
9. What assignments and activities have you performed using AI in your courses, programs, centers, and labs in the last 2 years? Please try to provide as many details as possible. You can be as formal or informal in your description as you wish. (Enter "N/A" if not applicable.) *