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Maintaining Integrity: Valuing the humanity in education

In February of 2023, as a new semester approached, my English teacher decided to undertake the syllabus a little differently - rather than begin the semester with the study of short stories or the analysis of Shakespeare's novels, she took it upon herself to modernize the, now ancient, curriculum. And so, she began this new semester introducing a topic still unknown to most of us at that point: generative AI. Despite looking slightly different, the ways in which we teach have not changed in a long time. My English teacher, rather correctly, theorized that as our world continues to evolve, so should our education evolve to reflect the fact. The increasing integration of social media and AI tools, such as Chat-GPT, into educational settings has sparked significant debate regarding their influence on academic integrity within school assignments. This essay aims to investigate the intricacies between these tools and their potential to shape the future of schooling.

The use of social media has been mostly encouraged by secondary school teachers & those in higher education, using text-based social media like blogs, WhatsApp groups or Twitter posts, to make class discussions more engaging for students. Making education more engaging is a major way to increase student retention rates, as well as removing friction between what students perceive as difficult (school) and what they perceive as easy (social media).

Studies have shown that social media is particularly helpful for informal learning - driven more by students' needs and interests rather than by an institution's. A 2015 study stated that "the use of social media, like Facebook, provided students with opportunities to engage in network support, and for their friends' network to interact with and contribute content in ways both unplanned and unseen by the teacher." (Greenhow and Lewin). A later point in that same study affirmed that "[the use of social media in the classroom] supported the development of twenty-first-century skills including collaboration, creativity, and communication. Social media effectively enabled students to become more autonomous and develop metacognition." Social media forums have even been shown to help shier students participate more actively in group discussions.

Generative AI, like ChatGPT, has been integrated into the education system since its very conception by teachers such as my own, who saw the enormous potential of this technology to revolutionize the way we do things. Many of these teachers reasoned that students would use this technology anyway, so to them, it would be better to teach them how to use it effectively rather than discourage its use or pretend it does not exist. They also used generative AI as an argument against rote learning, stating that if a chatbot can answer a series of factual questions, are they even worth asking?

Generative AI can also remove barriers to extracurricular help. Many students, including myself, use chatbots to explain difficult concepts instantaneously as a supplement for expensive tutors. However, access to generative AI may be a barrier within itself as secure, fast internet access is not always a given to all students - especially to those who would have the most difficulty accessing extracurricular help. It can also make cheating on written assignments incredibly easy, bypassing the hours of drafting that often goes into writing essays.

For students, academic integrity often carries with it a negative connotation, evoking discussions of cheating, plagiarism & fraud. Enforcing academic integrity in an era of advanced technological tools will no doubt bring with it challenges: social media can be a great distraction for students already struggling with assignments, by having learning integrated too closely with entertainment (Javaeed et al.) and, as discussed before, generative AI can be devastating for students who simply see it as an essay generator rather than a tool to enhance writing, reducing a student's ability to write on their own. However, the main measure to invoke academic integrity into students is to start valuing the unique, human perspective they can bring to assignments. For example, that same English teacher assigned a take-home personal essay as a final exam. She asked us to write an essay about an epiphany that we'd had in our very short lives, and to support the retelling of that epiphany with one of the many books, poems, or short stories that we'd read in class that semester. The exam was personal in a way that made it impossible to simply type a command into ChatGPT and get a fully-fledged essay. It required us to look deeply within and truly consider what major events had shaped us and how what we'd been learning all semester related to it, in a concrete way. This type of assignment, I believe, will be the wave of the future as it assures academic integrity in a way that more traditional assignments cannot.

In conclusion, the integration of generative AI and social media in education offers both opportunities and challenges. While social media platforms can engage students, promote informal learning, and develop essential soft skills, they also raise concerns about distractions and academic integrity. Generative AI, represented by ChatGPT, can enhance learning, and remove barriers to extracurricular help, but it also poses risks related to cheating and diminishing students' independent writing abilities. Striking a balance between embracing this technology and upholding academic integrity is crucial. Encouraging personal reflection and requiring students to connect their experiences with course materials represents the future of education, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter and ensuring academic integrity in a way that traditional assignments cannot. This approach will prepare students to thrive in an evolving future while maximizing the benefits of technological advancements. (937 words)

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