

ICMANEWS



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ICMA News welcomes submissions from medievalists at any career stage, representing a diverse range of perspectives, living around the globe, and working in any geographic region of the medieval world.

WITH FEATURES ON:

Gaming with archaeology, AI in the classroom, and exhibition reports on Siena, the sculptures of Notre-Dame, and the Silk Roads.







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REFLECTIONS ON AI IN THE CLASSROOM:

How We are Not Using AI in the Classroom

By Sonja Drimmer & Christopher J. Nygren

Premise

Prompt engineering is a term that has become commonplace since the widespread availability of generative AI applications like ChatGPT. The idea is that the outputs of the large language models (LLMs) on which these applications are based are only as good as the prompts that are input: vague prompts result in equally vague outputs. And thus was born the race to train for careers in prompt engineering. Unfortunately, the bubble seems to have burst before even the first generation of students was trained for this career outcome.

We were given a prompt as an invitation to participate in this newsletter: “How are you using AI in the classroom?” While we have accepted this invitation, we are engaging in the most humanistic act we can imagine—refusing the prompt.

The emergence of machine learning, and in particular computer vision, alongside popular generative text programs such as ChatGPT have caused educators to hunt for “ChatGPT-proof” solutions: some have devised new kinds of writing assignments that do not lend themselves to automated text generation; others, however, have cited the “inevitability” of this technology’s incursion into education and, rather than fight it, have instead decided to incorporate some elements of AI into their pedagogy. In his contribution to this newsletter, Stephen Perkinson has offered valuable first-hand experience of what it is like to try to incorporate the use of LLMs and “generative AI” into a classroom dedicated to the study of the Middle Ages. There is much to learn from Dr. Perkinson’s experience, and those who wish to incorporate so-called AI into the classroom do well to learn from his experiences.

As scholars who have been preoccupied for several years with the impact of this new technology on the study of art history, we would advise the following for those thinking of incorporating it in the classroom: don’t.

We believe that the intellectual, ethical, and institutional downsides to using this technology are so substantial that normalizing its integration into pedagogy poses risks that far outweigh whatever benefits one might associate with it. In fact, we would argue that thus far the only benefits to using AI in art historical research have been to demonstrate how poorly equipped it is to conduct research in the historical humanities.

The purpose of our contribution here is to offer a digest of those downsides (for an expansion of this discussion, see our article **“Art History and AI: Ten Axioms”**) and some concrete suggestions for resisting the incursion of machine learning into art historical pedagogy:

- **Environmental:** The energy demands to run the LLMs in which programs like ChatGPT run are so high that they both contribute massively to harmful emissions while also disrupting the power supply in ways that exacerbate economic disparity. Likewise, the water required to cool data centers is already exerting a heavy strain on water retention and provision. Even as DeepSeek’s most recent advances promise to be less resource-intensive, research has shown that, in an instance of what is known as Jevon’s Paradox, efficiency gains spur an increase in consumption.
- **Ethical:** There is a particular paradox that makes AI essentially useless as a tool for studying history. The entire point of what we do as historians is to look for *untold stories*...elements of the history of mankind that are novel and unexpected. There is a fundamental epistemological disjuncture between what PhD-holding historians do and what ChatGPT and its ilk do: the former meticulously, purposefully, and rigorously comb through a mountain of human-curated documents looking

for revealing details that diverge from the baseline, offer indications of cultural shift, or elements humanity embedded in seemingly mundane activities; the latter processes terabytes of machine-harvested data in order to predict what will be the most likely next token in a string, and when these tokens are words they may or may not result in a grammatically coherent sentence.

- **Institutional:** Educational technology (Ed tech) is an industry of its own whose ends are very far removed from those of the educators they purportedly serve. As Audrey Watters has shown in her book, *Teaching Machines: The History of Personalized Learning* (MIT Press, 2023), the zeal to “optimize” education by means of technology goes back well over a century, and both the promises offered and the language used to make these promises have changed remarkably little. This is a profitable industry that requires ever-new products to sell to educational institutions by convincing administrators and educators alike that teachers can improve learning outcomes and prepare students to meet the demands of the job market, all while “scaling up” by integrating new technologies into the classroom. Remember Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs? How much time and money were wasted by investing in the technological and physical infrastructure required to perform what ultimately we all did under the duress of a global pandemic, the devastating educational outcomes of which we are still feeling?

Ultimately, though, our objection to incorporating LLMs and generative-AI in the classroom is more fundamental: not only does it short-circuit the pathways of learning, but it also potentially nullifies what we see as our fundamental pedagogical commitment to our students and our scholarly commitment to the past. This may seem overblown rhetoric, but it is important to take a moment to reflect on what we do in the classroom. What, at the level of first principles, are we trying to accomplish through the study of the Middle Ages and early modernity? Why do we continue to believe it is important to educate students about the past? Having an answer to that question is a crucial

first step to understanding that the promotion of AI in education is nothing less than an attempt to colonize the university with the impoverished notion of “learning” that resides at the core of “Machine Learning.”

We believe that learning is something akin to the prolonged process of embodied cognition that cuts across accumulated experience, instantaneous calculus, acculturation, and institutionalized education, which combined allow someone to operate in the world. This goes from knowing not to eat raw chicken and “don’t pick up the long scaly things with fangs” to “buckle the seat belt before pulling out of the driveway.” But it also encompasses sentiments like “I relate to Hamlet because I too have wondered what it would be like to commit suicide and stop existing” or “how did we go back to making literature in the wake of the Bubonic Plague? I can imagine it would have been hard to make ‘art’ in 1350.” All those things are the product of a process of “learning.” Some of it is lived, some institutionalized, and some of it is a natural human instinct for survival and empathy. If that is what we mean by “learning,” it is vital that at every turn we insist upon the humanity of the process.

Computers are good at pattern recognition; but pattern recognition and token prediction are not learning. To continue calling them machine “learning” or artificial “intelligence” is to agree with a fallacious metaphor that risks irreparable harm to students, the citizenry, and, by extension, humanity in the form of death-by-a-thousand-cuts.

One crude definition of human cognition might run something like this: one of the highest forms of learning is to have cultivated the ability to look at a situation and imagine it otherwise. This runs the gamut of cognition from the ethical (would it have been right to strangle the infant Pol Pot in his crib?) to the aesthetic (Beethoven but with electric guitars) to the historical (I live in a world with steel support beams, but can I imagine what it would have been like to walk into a Gothic cathedral and not understand how the building supported its own weight while reaching toward heaven?). Machine Learning has now beaten a human player at the game GO. This was long

thought to be an impossible feat of “cognition.” Ultimately, though, the game was jailbroken by a machine that could process permutations and recombinations to make the mathematically “optimal” move. This is an amazing accomplishment of computer engineering. But “learning” entered the equation when master GO players began seeing the game otherwise by seeking to find the rationality behind a mathematically “optimal” move. Our job as educators is to make sure that our students are learning, and this means thinking critically about what it has meant to be a human being at different moments in time. What did “love” mean in the fourteenth century? What did a “portrait” look like in the Middle Ages and how is that different from the hundreds of “portraits” you’ve taken with your iPhone? These are questions to which a machine is unresponsive in the most fundamental way because it is made of silicon and shares no kinship with human beings who lived hundreds of years ago. For our part, we will continue trying to induct our students into what Marc Bloch called “the solidarity of the ages,” in all its complexity.

Suggestions

While in recent years universities have promoted student “productivity” (projects, online portfolios of their work, social media posts about their research papers, the list goes on), little of this push to deliver outputs and create content serves the actual purpose of education, which is to foster the capacity to think well, read well, listen well, and look well. Higher education strengthens the process; if we are going to teach sophisticated materials and challenging content, students need to learn how to think, read, listen, and look their way through it. The emphasis on “content creation” is detrimental to the educational mission. “Content” is a vague term that has been defined down in such a way that a grammatically acceptable, conceptually unobjectionable, and procedurally unimpeachable ten-page paper about the reliquary of Sainte Foy generated by an LLM counts as acceptable “content” for a student to submit in response to an assignment.

One concrete step towards pedagogy after AI is shifting the focus of our attention from

product to process: both students’ and our own. In both of our experiences we have found it fairly easy to determine when a response to a question was generated by AI. For instance, in spring 2024 Nygren taught a course on the Italian Renaissance. One question in a quiz conducted through Canvas (the Learning Management System [LMS] at his home institution) asked about court art. About 10% of the responses included reference to Hans Holbein’s *Ambassadors*, a work of art that was not discussed in class. A few others used Velazquez’s *Las Meninas* as a core example, always with the same banal commentaries about the *Spanish* court context. Similarly, when in Fall 2024 Drimmer set a question asking students to respond to the biopic of Hildegard von Bingen, *Vision*, by relating the film to works they had studied in class, one essay brought up the works of Dante, whose name did not appear once in lecture or assigned readings. The point here isn’t how easy it is to surveil and penalize our students, activities that waste our time, make us feel disillusioned, and alienate us from the actual work of providing education; the point is that coordinating our assignments tightly to the content of the course prevents generative AI from being responsive to the writing prompt in a satisfactory way.

An exercise that compels students to become aware of the process by which they formulate responses to our prompts is one of the most traditional pedagogical exercises in the art historian’s toolkit. Drimmer has students sit in a dim classroom, look at a work in silence for twenty minutes, and jot their thoughts. The class then reconvenes not only to talk about their observations but also to reflect on what that process was like. They always say, “it’s hard.” Without fail, they articulate how challenging it felt to maintain their focus when they thought they had nothing left to write and then how unexpected it was to be able to work through a barrier of stultification toward discovering more to see, to think about, and to write.

A discomfiting fact worth articulating is that so many of the students who arrive at universities like ours have been so underserved by their secondary schools that the outputs of ChatGPT

are often *better* than what they can produce (if by “better” one means grammatically and orthographically correct and keyed to the syntactic and structural formulas of college writing). So the suggestion to have them compare an algorithmically generated essay to their own or even to published work of scholarship risks defeating the very purpose of the exercise; our students might either extrapolate from it that they may as well outsource school work to code or they may not have the skills to distinguish thoughtlessly automated text from a scholar’s thoughtfully argued essay. In this challenging context, then, we need to focus less on product and far more on process. We need to cultivate students’ attention. They need to learn to attend to images. They need to attend to words.

Within the context of the “attention economy,” all people who spend any time online, our students included, are constantly subject to the brutal competition for their eyes. Another return to traditional methods is making attendance mandatory and equating attendance with attention. Drimmer regularly teaches large enrollment classes and, implementing a suggestion from a graduate student in her program, recently began recording attendance by producing name cards that each student picks up from a table as they enter the class and returns as they leave (the cards not retrieved at the beginning are recorded as absences). It’s an elegantly low-tech solution that has shown immediate results: the average grade on exams in Drimmer’s classes has risen by nearly ten points since she made attendance mandatory.

Our hypothesis is that grades have increased because there is now a very subtle technology for encouraging students to attend—both literally to attend class, but also to attend to the material that is covered in class. Attention is a skill that must be cultivated. As educators, we try to help our students learn to process that which is unique. We help them learn to see distinctions that make a difference and to notice subtle gradations that have maximal impact. That is a truly human skill. By the time “artificial intelligence” has “seen” millions of photographs of paintings or sculptures, all the distinctions—the uniqueness that makes these objects the product of human minds and hands—have been flattened under the steamroller of “big data.”

We teach our students to see the things that are human, to appreciate the unexpected, and to see the variation that breaks the pattern rather than repeats it. Our job as educators is to foster that in our students.

Finally, we need to advocate for ourselves and demand from our universities specific plans for supporting students as they learn to write. Thus far university administrations have mostly capitulated, incorporating AI into higher education in ways that are financially intensive. ChatGPT does not comply with FERPA, and therefore administrators have contracted with Microsoft (Copilot) to incorporate AI into university-licensed software in ways that will supposedly preserve student privacy while nevertheless feeding anonymized data into the hopper of LLMs. That’s when they care to exercise any caution at all about the wholesale incorporation of this technology into education. A more brazen example is California State University, the largest public university system in the United States, which has just signed a \$16 million deal with OpenAI to “create an AI-empowered higher education system.” The [**press release from the university itself**](#) is worth reading in full to see the discrepancies between the vision of “empowerment” it projects and what we believe actually works to develop students’ critical faculties and humanity. The power of learning to write is not the written product itself but the process of *learning* to write. Ultimately, AI short circuits that process and in so doing breaches the entire educational contract.

If these sound like unexciting proposals: good. One of the seductions of technosolutionism is the promise of exciting new tools to advance the project of learning and enhancing students’ experience of education. That seduction is more often than not snake oil. There is no killer app, no one cool trick, no hack. We may need to deprogram ourselves from thinking that there is.

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