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Reconceptualizing postsecondary adaption to GenAI within the turn toward digital life

1 Introduction

Given its capacity to personalize writing practices, generative AI (GenAI) can be a productive tool for postsecondary student writers. Moreover, the conversational nature of some of the interfaces such as AI chatbots makes students feel as if they are personally interacting with a writing service meant for them: an AI as a personal editor or AI tutor. Yet, the use of GenAI apps in learning environments is still debated in higher education. On the one hand, human–AI teaming is lauded for its benefits. One article indicates that OpenAI’s ChatGPT has a “positive impact on improving learning performance” although with several caveats, including that “ChatGPT should be flexibly integrated into teaching as an intelligent tutor, learning partner, and educational tool” (Wang & Fan, 2025, para. 1). Conversely, research findings on GenAI’s negative implications for higher education are myriad: “Concerns around GenAI have included academic integrity and diminished development of evergreen skills like critical thinking, problem solving, communication and creativity” (Matsui, 2025, p. 8). Deeply concerning are “confusing, and harmful GenAI outputs on social media, turning AI safety into a public concern” due to risk of bias and discrimination (Singh et al., 2025, p. 6). Researchers have suggested that postsecondary educators ought to introduce novel literacy practices in their curricula to ensure ethical adoption (or rejection) of GenAI for writing (Duin & Pedersen, 2021; McKee & Porter, 2020). One route to that recommendation is to respond to GenAI as a personal technology that is increasingly geared to “digital-life” experiences.

2 Definitions

AI literacy

AI literacy is defined “as a set of competencies that enable individuals to critically evaluate AI technologies; communicate and collaborate effectively with AI; and use AI as a tool online, at home, and in the workplace” (Long & Magerko, 2020, p. 598). The emphasis on competencies is important. AI literacy is about what one can *do* as well as what one knows. It is becoming apparent that educators are moving beyond a strict binary of including or excluding GenAI in curricula; and the importance of AI literacy has come to the fore in higher education. Education scholars frame AI literacy as a means to encourage students “to critically examine ethics, bias, privacy, inclusion, data collection and explainability in popular AIED [AI in Education] tools” (Wilton et al., 2022, p. 183). From these criteria,

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AI literacy affords students the agency to evaluate AI tools personally “at home” and at “work” (Long & Magerko, 2020, p. 598) as well as while using AI EdTech tools “in the classroom” (Wilton et al., 2022, p. 182). Another criterion by Woods and Johnson (2024) grounds GenAI usage in “*privacy literacy* as an essential component of reconceptualizing our digital lives” (p. 87). They argue that “moving from a binary of ‘literate = protected and private’ and ‘illiterate = unprotected and public’ toward multidimensional layered literacies is essential for developing critical privacy literacy in the age of genAI” (p. 88).

Digital life

GenAI is also changing how people live. A digital-life theoretical perspective looks more closely at the individual, the *flip side* of the conversation. One often privileges either AI’s hype and technological feats or the organizations desperately seeking governance models to deal with the chaos of GenAI adoption. Instead, one ought to recognize the many ways that digital technologies become inter-meshed in people’s lives, that is, take an ontological perspective. “Digital life fronts individuals’ lived experiences rather than the capabilities or possibilities of technologies” (Stambler, Veeramoothoo, & Davis, 2024, p. 7). AI industries are increasingly encroaching on people to adopt self-centric AI tools promising personalized, human–AI assistant interaction for everyday tasks (Pedersen, 2025a). Yet, the adoption for *personal* uses is sometimes ignored in higher education. Postsecondary students are adapting to using personal, noneducational GenAI tools. They use these tools embedded in platforms to automate the composition of personal content to make their lives easier. It helps them craft résumés, generate videos for social media posts, plan personal events, and share them with others. They use GenAI to explain all kinds of practical things that confuse them in life such as renting a car for the first time, signing a lease, or accepting a job offer. If Google search is a textbook, GenAI is not only an AI tutor, but also a one-on-one life assistant. Moreover, GenAI chatbot technologies behave as personal interlocutors and companions (Farmer, Smakman & Birtwistle, 2025). The point is not to marginalize this cohort from their everyday-life uses of GenAI. The point is to acknowledge that they and other actors in postsecondary spheres, namely professors, instructors, staff members, administrators and adjacent professionals, are being normalized to its adoption as well.

This short article goes into greater detail on these themes and makes four arguments to support the call to reconceptualize GenAI adoption in higher education using a sociotechnical, “digital-life” point of view.

3 Reconceptualizing postsecondary adaption to GenAI

First, the growth of GenAI technology adoption is exponential; and, thus, using these tools is becoming normalized. As of August 2025, ChatGPT has 800 million active weekly users, doubling from 400 million in February 2025 (Singh, 2025). According to a survey involving 16 countries, the majority of postsecondary students (86%) said they use artificial intelligence in their studies (Kelly, 2024). AI writing tools are becoming more accurate and better at assisting student writers. This deployment is dynamic and AI development is rapidly entering its second wave (Schwarcz et al., 2025). Retrieval-augmented-generation (RAG) models tailored to specific content are “a technique for enhancing the accuracy and reliability of generative AI models with information fetched from specific and relevant data sources” (Merritt, 2025, para. 9). For example, research supports the claim that law students using RAG models in commercial AI apps are benefiting from them. Results “led to substantial, statistically significant improvements in the speed with which participants completed legal tasks”

(Schwarcz et al., 2025, p. 7). The point here is not to assume that the speed and accuracy of these tools necessarily improve learning outcomes for all postsecondary students, nor that educators should adopt them blindly. The point is that first-wave GenAI tools and the original large language models (LLMs) that students use now are advancing. AI literacy competencies need to accommodate constant, dynamic, and substantial technological change.

Second, AI-literacy approaches need to reframe GenAI as an aspect of society and personal life, as introduced above. With the mass adoption of GenAI apps in nonacademic spheres, *adaptation* to AI assistance is undergoing societal assimilation (Cardillo, 2025). People are using it for communication in their everyday social lives, exchanging highly personal information with chatbots (Elon University, 2025). Work-based practices are also evolving to accept it. “Fifty percent of U.S. CEOs say their companies have already automated content creation with it, according to a 2024 Deloitte survey” (Tools for why CEOs, 2025, p. 24). A simplified “sociotechnical perspective means viewing society and technology together as one coherent system. In other words, it is not possible to understand the ‘social’ without the ‘technical,’ nor the ‘technical’ without the ‘social.’” (Chen & Metcalf, 2024, para. 3). AI tools in education require assessment as an aspect of society and personal life.

Consumer GenAI writing technologies function in the social ecosystems of postsecondary students, instructors, and administrators. Digital-life researchers have identified that “digital literacy is not just about using tools; it also attends to the socio-technical environments in which technical communicators perform their work,” which amounts to their life worlds (Stambler et al., 2024, p. 220). A digital-life perspective supports a dialogue on privacy “for actively protecting one’s private data” beyond the time students spend in school (Woods & Johnson, 2024, p. 87). Reconceptualizing AI writing tools in higher education means accepting the process of their enculturation occurring in the lived realities of those who use it.

Third, universities are integrating good guidelines for sanctioned usage of AI tools, but they are not making room for the way users, across postsecondary, incorporate AI platforms in their lifeworlds. For example, Harvard University integrates a good range of AI tools including OpenAI’s ChatGPT Edu, Google Gemini, and Adobe Firefly in its “AI for General Use” category with access to them controlled by faculty or unit. Harvard University (2025a) defines general use as the:

category of tools [that] includes “chatbots” and AI assistants for general use and productivity. They are designed to understand and generate human-like responses to text-based, natural language prompts. They can generate text, code, and images, translate languages, write different kinds of creative content, or integrate with productivity and collaboration tools. (para. 4)

It also discusses “security and privacy protections that ensure the tools are appropriate for use with certain types of confidential data, and assurances that the data entered will not be used to train vendor models” (Harvard University, 2025b, para. 8). Harvard University offers an exemplary policy framework for a GenAI toolset usage to meet expectations for first-wave GenAI.

When GPT technologies first deployed in 2022, people went to websites to use them, and they still do. However, AI content-generating chatbots are on students’ phones, in earbuds, and they are “working” on very personal devices. Wearable AI is defined as a type of computing consisting of AI technologies embedded in wearable computer devices such as AI glasses. Postsecondary students are early adopters of current wearables (Pedersen, 2025b). Problematically, Harvard’s policy treats an AI toolset as if a university can control its usage, or that *its university contracted platforms* will be the *only* ones used by students. It does not acknowledge the integrated ways that people use these tools regularly for other purposes, for communicating in myriad ways.

Fourth, the final and most important point is that students need to be included as co-designers and critical evaluators in every act of AI adoption to achieve ethical reframing. Education is not the only sector calling for a reevaluation of AI adoption. The Data & Society Research Institute & AI Risk and Vulnerability Alliance express it well:

we must reframe the relationship between AI and society from adversarial to co-constitutive. By co-constitutive framing, we mean that AI is always already embedded within society. AI emerges from social practices, responds to social cues, mediates social practices, and is built from historically shaped, socially produced knowledge and data. This framing draws our attention to how AI produces and mediates particular social relations; how existing social relations shape certain AI applications and evaluation strategies; and how AI harms are experienced in everyday life. (Singh et al., 2025, p. 59)

The paradigm shift of AI's positioning from adversarial to co-constitutive is not a simple task, nor should it be. However, this article is arguing that all actors who might experience harm ought to be included in evaluation strategies to determine whether it should *or should not* be used. Along with evaluation, disclosure of tools' usage should also always be incorporated for student, instructor, or administrative use (Weaver, 2024).

There are many ways to involve students in evaluation strategies as a facet of AI literacy. Getting them to validate facts and sources from outputs to determine the feasibility of using AI tools or to reject them empowers them. One more structured method is red teaming, whereby teams "use adversarial methods to identify vulnerabilities in systems" (Singh et al., 2025, p. 4). Whereas red teaming is controversial, "practitioners and policymakers alike have pointed to *red-teaming* as an integral part of their strategies to identify and address related risks, with the goal of ensuring some notion of alignment with human and societal values" (Feffer et al., 2024, p. 421). Proposed by UNESCO, "public red teaming" is one that invites participation from "everyday users who interact with AI in their daily lives" (Chowdhury et al., 2025, p. 14). The crux of this point is to include students in decisions about GenAI tools, involving them in determining inaccuracy or harm based on their interactions with instructors and their own training.

4 Conclusion

Although difficult to prove, it might well be that postsecondary students are using GenAI to compose, write, represent meaning, and narrate their lives more than ever before. One can speculate that writing practices are changing as a result at home, in school, and in work scenarios. Along these lines, this article argues that GenAI tools impact not only writing in specific academic contexts, necessitating AI literacies, but that they are also changing students' lives. Reconceptualizing GenAI adoption in higher education will help students adapt to it from a "digital-life" point of view for future contexts as writers across a multitude of genres.

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