

Your Students Need an AI-Aware Professor

Here's a sustainable plan to bring you up to speed on a technology that academe can't afford to ignore.

By [Marc Watkins](#) May 5, 2025

Stephanie Dalton Cowen for the Chronicle

ChatGPT now has a staggering 400 million weekly users. Here's the kicker for educators: Most of those users [are students](#). Further proof that OpenAI views higher education as a crucial market arrived with the recent announcement that college students can use [ChatGPT Plus for free](#) through May in the United States and Canada. The accompanying slogan: "ChatGPT is here to help you through finals." Meanwhile, Google topped OpenAI's two-month trial by offering any college student a full year of free access to its premium AI, [Gemini Advanced](#), emphasizing that it was "free for college students through finals 2026."

A quiet disaster is unfolding in college classrooms around this country as artificial intelligence becomes an undeniable reality for students — with little or no guidance from professors. Most faculty members never dreamed they would need to learn about an emerging technology as it arrives in real time and, understandably, they don't feel comfortable talking about it in class.

But that must change — otherwise, we risk an entire generation of students being forced to chart their own path in using or resisting AI.

Tech companies should pay attention to the chaos they have introduced into our classrooms with this unending public experiment and consider more than just usage statistics. Students today will grow up surrounded by AI, and their perspectives will increasingly shape the future of not only the technology but human-digital interaction as a whole. It's surprising that few companies seem to question whether it's a good thing for an entire generation's primary experience of AI to be as a means of circumventing learning.

AI misuse in the classroom is just one aspect of how society is dealing with this unregulated tech. We're increasingly seeing AI used as a [deepfake generator](#). We're also seeing people develop "friendships" with [an AI character](#) and lose their grip on reality. With Elon Musk's newly launched Grok 3 app, you can download it free on your smartphone and have a chat with a synthetic voice using [conspiracy mode](#). Think about that: One of the top advisers to the president of the United States created an AI app with a built-in conspiracy mode, for fun.

Unleashing this technology on the public with minimal safeguards — while students become superusers with even less guidance — hardly supports the narrative that AI leads to human flourishing. Yet banning AI isn't the answer, either. History is littered with failed public policies

attempting to restrict young people's behaviors around drugs, sex, and, most recently, cellphone use in schools. Why would we expect AI bans to be any more effective?

It's no surprise that we struggle to teach something that we're being forced to comprehend. Eventually, educators will have practical frameworks in hand to guide our students in using generative AI. For now, we're on our own. How, then, should we educate ourselves about this ever-evolving technology — in a way that is not too time-consuming but allows us to keep up to date on AI and make sure we're offering solid, practical advice to students?

That is no simple feat. AI updates now arrive like bullet trains, and our attention spans can barely keep track with what's taking place.

But as someone who's been [writing about AI](#) from its inception and is now training faculty members on the topic, I have a sustainable path to offer. It will require only a modest amount of your time — specifically, 30 minutes, three times a week. Think of this as a 90-minute exercise routine to help you keep up with generative AI in a manageable way and make the best decisions for your students.

Read about AI for 30 minutes a week. Some amazing books are out there to help you explore hype versus reality: [AI Snake Oil](#), [Atlas of AI](#), [More Than Words: How to Think About Writing in the Age of AI](#), [The Opposite of Cheating: Teaching for Integrity in the Age of AI](#), and [Teaching With AI](#) are all prime starting points.

Educators are producing a growing number of free newsletters to keep you up to speed on AI: Jason Gulya's [The AI Edventure](#), Annette Vee's [AI and How We Teach Writing](#), Anna Mills's substack on [AI, writing, and pedagogy](#), Marcus Luther's [The Broken Copier](#), John Warner's [The Biblioracle Recommends](#), Justin Cerenzia's [The Academic DJ](#), and Jane Rosenzweig's [Writing Hacks](#) all offer nuanced advice and exploration about education and AI. Some standout resources include:

- Casey Fiesler's amazing database that tracks the latest [AI ethics and policy news](#).
- Ethan Mollick's newsletter [One Useful Thing](#) offers insight into what new generative tools can do.
- Stanford University's [AI x Education](#) newsletter gives a useful overview of AI tools for a student audience.
- Mike Caulfield's [The End\(s\) of Argument](#) gives readers a step-by-step guide about how to use AI to validate sources.

Explore AI tools for 30 minutes a week. Using AI might be the last thing you want to do. But reading up on the subject isn't enough. Professors must actively engage with a variety of AI tools to fully understand what they can do, how they work, and why they might appeal to students.

If you're confused about which tools to try, start with Google's; it has the most accessible AI suite on the market. A single, free Gmail account will give you access to all of Google's AI features, including many premium models. But don't use your personal Gmail. Take a safety-first approach to your data and create a secondary Google account to sign up for any

nonuniversity-provided AI tools. Be mindful of what data you feed into an AI tool as you acquaint yourself with the terrain:

- [Google Labs](#) contains some of the most compelling AI options you can sign up for free to use, including NotebookLM (to take notes), Career Dreamer (for career planning), Data Science Agent (to organize data), VideoFX (to create video clips), ImageFX (to turn texts into images), and MusicFX (to write songs).
- [Gemini](#) offers users free access to a range of programs for coding and writing assistance, such as 2.0 flash, Deep Research, Canvas, and Gemini's still-experimental 2.5 pro. Other Gemini tools act as programmable chatbots, do advanced image generation, and can turn any document into an AI podcast.
- Google's [AI Studio](#) allows users to explore new AI features, like Multimodal Live where you can speak to AI, share your screen with it, and even turn on your camera so the AI can watch your reactions and interact with you. AI Studio also gives free access to all of Google's advanced features that are often locked behind paywalls or rate limits through other providers.

Spending 30 minutes a week on these tools won't make you an AI expert, but it will be necessary just to keep up to date. It's vital now that students have free trials of premium AI tools like ChatGPT Plus to gauge how the paywall version of this technology affects student learning. Running your assignment directions through a free model that isn't as powerful as one of the premium models, or thinking students won't use the greater-usage limits bundled with premium access, is sure to create a false sense of what students who use premium gen AI can and cannot do in the disciplines we teach.

Reflect on AI for 30 minutes a week. Perhaps the most important aspect is putting aside your devices and trying to make sense of what generative AI means for our world. You don't have to do that alone. In fact, I find that I can often make the best sense of AI's potential and perils by having a conversation with a colleague, or a few, to ask aloud the glaring questions that often confound and discomfort us about this technology: What does it mean to write or read in this new AI era? How can we persuade students to see the value in human-centric education when a chatbot offers them an easy method to avoid learning? What will teaching look like in the next five or more years?

At this point, you may be thinking: I don't have a spare 90 minutes a week to read, explore, and reflect on generative AI. But really, that is very likely the minimum amount of time that it will take you to become informed enough about AI to offer the type of practical advice that students desperately search for about their own AI usage.

Demand institutional support. Generative AI presents an immense challenge for higher ed, and campus administrators have to wake up to the reality that most faculty members cannot navigate this tech alone — especially contingent and adjunct instructors who teach the majority of students at many campuses. Expecting those instructors to self-train on AI without any support will doom your college's AI awareness to failure. In my previous column, "[Adopt or Resist?](#)"

[Beyond the AI Culture Wars](#),” I recommended that administrators support faculty training on AI via course-release time, fellowships, yearlong cohorts, and teaching and training institutes.

All of us in higher ed have come to terms with generative AI as yet another problematic thing we all must confront in our daily working lives. The way forward begins with an AI-aware faculty.

Perhaps the greatest challenge — and unique opportunity — posed by generative AI is that it forces us to rediscover what makes education a compassionate profession in a world in which machine intelligence threatens to make learning an entirely autonomous and transactional affair. By educating ourselves about this technology and guiding our students with wisdom, rather than fear, we can ensure that higher education continues to cultivate the uniquely human capacities for creativity, critical thinking, and ethical judgment that no algorithm can ever replicate.

About the Author

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