

Teaching in the shadow of AI: An autoethnography of motivation, competence, and learning in the first-year digital communication classroom

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Abstract: This article presents an autoethnographic account of teaching first-year digital communication in an AI-saturated classroom. It examines how the widespread use of generative AI tools has transformed students' relationship to learning, leading to the progressive outsourcing of cognitive tasks such as writing, analysis, and argumentation. Drawing on classroom observations across multiple cohorts, the study identifies a pattern of declining student engagement, reduced motivation for skill development, and a widening gap between AI-assisted outputs and students' independent abilities. It conceptualizes this process as competence atrophy, reinforced by a feedback loop of dependency and by institutional structures that prioritize efficiency and output over learning processes. The article also reflects on the changing role of the teaching assistant, the challenges of assessing authentic competence, and the broader implications for higher education. It concludes by proposing pedagogical strategies centered on process-based assessment, intellectual ownership, and the revaluation of learning as an intrinsically meaningful activity.

Keywords: generative AI, higher education, autoethnography, student engagement, competence atrophy

Introduction

There is something profoundly disorienting about standing in front of a classroom full of first-year university students and realizing, mid-sentence, that the majority of them have already outsourced the very cognitive task you are trying to teach them. The rapid integration of generative artificial intelligence into higher education has not merely introduced a new tool into the pedagogical toolkit; it has fundamentally altered the social contract between instructor and

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student, between effort and outcome, between learning and the mere production of outputs (Vâlcea et al. 2024; Chow 2025). As a teaching assistant (TA) responsible for delivering an introductory course in digital communication to first-year students, I have occupied a peculiar vantage point over the past several years—one that has afforded me an intimate, ground-level view of how AI technologies have reshaped the texture of classroom life, the quality of student engagement, and the very meaning of competence in a digitally saturated educational environment. The present article draws on autoethnographic methods to explore these transformations, situating my personal observations and reflections within broader theoretical and empirical debates about AI, deskilling, motivation, and the future of higher education.

The course in question—Communication in Digital Media—is designed to equip first-year students with foundational competencies in writing for digital platforms, understanding media ecologies, constructing arguments for online audiences, and critically analyzing digital texts. It is, by design, a course that demands active intellectual engagement: students must write, revise, think critically, and develop their own voices as communicators. Yet over the past several academic cycles, I have witnessed a progressive hollowing out of these activities, as students increasingly delegate core cognitive tasks to AI tools such as ChatGPT and similar large language models (LLMs). The problem is not simply one of academic dishonesty, though that is certainly part of the picture. It is something more insidious: a gradual erosion of the appetite to learn, a quiet surrender of intellectual agency, and a year-by-year decline in the baseline competencies that students bring to—and develop within—the classroom.

This article is animated by three interrelated research questions. First, how does the pervasive availability of AI tools affect students' engagement with learning tasks in a first-year digital communication course? Second, how do students perceive the relationship between effort, improvement, and AI-mediated output production? And third, what transformations occur in the role of the TA when the classroom becomes an AI-saturated environment? In pursuing these questions, I draw on field notes from seminars and labs, observations of student assignments and interactions, and informal conversations with students over multiple semesters. The aim is not to produce a generalizable theory but to offer a richly situated, reflexive account of what it feels like to teach—and to try to facilitate genuine learning—in an era when the very foundations of pedagogical practice are being quietly

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dismantled by technologies that promise efficiency but may deliver something closer to intellectual atrophy.

Theoretical framework

Autoethnography as method

Autoethnography, as a qualitative research methodology, occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of autobiography and ethnography, enabling the researcher to use personal experience as a lens through which to examine broader cultural phenomena (Naghdipour 2025; Thao & Thuy 2024). It is a method that privileges reflexivity, situated knowledge, and the acknowledgment that the researcher is never a neutral observer but always already embedded within the social and institutional structures they seek to understand (Jagadale 2024). In the context of higher education research, autoethnography has been recognized as a powerful tool for examining the interplay between pedagogy, identity, and institutional culture, particularly in settings where the researcher occupies a dual role as both instructor and observer (Riva 2023; Kinchin & Wiley 2017). For the purposes of this study, autoethnography provides a means of capturing the affective, relational, and experiential dimensions of teaching in an AI-saturated classroom—dimensions that are often invisible in large-scale quantitative studies of educational technology adoption.

The choice of autoethnography is also a political one. In an academic landscape increasingly dominated by metrics, learning analytics, and algorithmic management systems, the subjective experience of the instructor—particularly the precarious, often invisible labor of the teaching assistant—is routinely marginalized (Ovetz 2020, 2022). Autoethnography, by contrast, insists on the validity of personal narrative as a source of knowledge, and it resists the reduction of teaching to a set of measurable outputs (Piercy 2022; Jagadale 2024). As Thao and Thuy (2024) have argued, autoethnography in educational contexts provides an avenue for exploring one's own experiences with pedagogy, culture, and institutional power, and for making visible the emotional labor that is inherent in teaching. Similarly, Jagadale (2024) has demonstrated that autoethnography can serve as a pedagogical strategy in its own right, legitimizing personal experience as a site of knowledge creation and enabling instructors to bridge the gap between their own lifeworlds and those of their students.

Motivation, effort, and the psychology of AI delegation

The theoretical literature on learning motivation provides a crucial framework for understanding the shifts I have observed in the classroom. Classical distinctions between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation—where intrinsic motivation refers to engagement driven by curiosity, interest, and the inherent satisfaction of mastering a skill, and extrinsic motivation refers to engagement driven by external rewards or pressures—are directly relevant to the dynamics of AI-mediated learning (Delcker et al. 2024). When students perceive that an AI tool can produce a higher-quality output than they can, and when the institutional reward structure (grades, completion, credentials) does not adequately distinguish between AI-generated and student-generated work, the rational calculus shifts decisively toward delegation rather than effort.

Kim (2025) has proposed a framework based on two orthogonal dimensions—Division of Cognitive Labor and Metacognitive Oversight—that yields four distinct patterns of human-AI interaction: Skilled Augmentation, Managed Automation, Unguided Effort, and Cognitive Surrender. Of particular relevance to the present study is the concept of “Cognitive Surrender,” in which users delegate both cognitive execution and metacognitive control to AI systems, a drift accelerated by what Kim describes as “cognitive miserliness, effort aversion, and instant gratification dynamics” (Kim 2025). This framework resonates powerfully with my observations of first-year students who, confronted with the difficulty of learning to write for digital audiences, increasingly default to AI-generated text not merely as a starting point but as a finished product. The Expertise Paradox identified by Vâlcea and colleagues (2024) further illuminates this dynamic: AI’s adequate performance at lower-level cognitive tasks may actively weaken students’ development of higher-level thinking, creating a vicious cycle in which the more students rely on AI for basic tasks, the less capable they become of performing the complex cognitive operations that the course is designed to cultivate.

Deskilling, technological mediation, and the labor process

The concept of deskilling, originally theorized in the context of industrial labor, has acquired renewed urgency in the age of AI. In its classical formulation, deskilling refers to the process by which the introduction of new technologies or management practices reduces the

skill requirements of a given job, transferring control from workers to managers or machines and rendering labor cheaper and more easily replaceable (Ovetz 2015, 2020, 2022). In the context of higher education, deskilling has been applied both to the labor of teaching—where the unbundling of academic work, the rise of learning management systems, and the casualization of the professoriate have progressively eroded faculty autonomy and expertise (Ivancheva & Courtois 2024)—and, more recently, to the learning process itself, where students' increasing reliance on AI tools threatens to atrophy the very competencies that education is supposed to develop.

Ovetz (2020, 2022) has argued that learning management systems and online education technologies function as instruments of rationalization, fragmenting the labor of teaching into discrete tasks that can be automated, outsourced, or transferred to non-faculty technicians. This analysis, rooted in the labor process tradition, provides a structural context for understanding the AI-mediated classroom: just as the unbundling of teaching deskills the instructor, so too does the delegation of cognitive tasks to AI deskill the student (Watermeyer et al. 2024; Kheiche 2022). Watermeyer and colleagues (2024) have documented how academics themselves perceive AI tools as agents of deskilling and unauthentication, eroding professional identity and the capacity for prestige generation (Gopal 2025; Chow 2025). The parallel with student experience is striking: when students outsource writing, analysis, and argument construction to AI, they are not merely saving time—they are forfeiting the very processes through which competence is developed.

The concept of technological mediation further enriches this analysis. As Feenberg (2013) has argued, the relationship between technology and education is never neutral; technologies interact with local social contexts, consumer behavior, politics, and values, reinforcing certain norms and reifying certain structures while marginalizing others.

In the AI-saturated classroom, the mediation of learning by AI tools does not simply augment existing pedagogical practices (Schiff 2020; Poquet & Laat 2021); it fundamentally reconfigures the relationship between student, instructor, and knowledge, creating new forms of dependency and new patterns of cognitive labor.

Digital communication pedagogy and competency formation

The specific disciplinary context of digital communication pedagogy adds an additional layer of complexity. Courses in digital communication are designed not merely to transmit content knowledge but to cultivate a set of practical competencies—writing, critical analysis, audience awareness, multimodal composition—that can only be developed through sustained practice and iterative feedback (Kinchin & Wiley 2017). These competencies are, by their nature, process-oriented: they require students to struggle with difficult material, to make mistakes, to revise, and to gradually internalize the norms and conventions of effective digital communication. When AI tools short-circuit this process by generating polished outputs on demand, the developmental arc of competency formation is disrupted (Chow 2025; Vâlcea et al. 2024). As Chow (2025) has argued in the context of medical education, “if learners outsource core operations including problem solving, or clinical reasoning, then the mental muscles educators hope to strengthen may atrophy,” a warning that applies with equal force to the domain of digital communication.

Methodology*Justification of autoethnography*

The decision to employ autoethnography as the primary methodological approach for this study was driven by both epistemological and practical considerations. Autoethnography is particularly well suited to research contexts in which the researcher occupies a dual role—in this case, as both instructor and observer—and in which the phenomena under investigation are deeply embedded in the researcher's own lived experience (Naghdipour 2025; Thao & Thuy 2024; Jagadale 2024). Unlike survey-based or experimental methods, autoethnography does not seek to produce generalizable findings; rather, it aims to generate richly textured, reflexive accounts that illuminate the subjective dimensions of social and institutional life (Riva 2023; Piercy 2022). In the context of higher education, where the affective and relational dimensions of teaching are often rendered invisible by the dominance of quantitative metrics and learning analytics, autoethnography offers a means of recovering the human experience of pedagogy.

The methodological rigor of autoethnography depends on the researcher's commitment to reflexivity—the ongoing, critical examination of one's own assumptions, biases, and positionality (Thao

& Thuy 2024). In this study, reflexivity has been practiced through the systematic production of field notes, the regular interrogation of my own emotional responses to classroom events, and the deliberate effort to situate my personal observations within broader theoretical and empirical frameworks. As Thao and Thuy (2024) have emphasized, reflexivity in autoethnographic research involves the researcher's conscious recognition of their own biases and the influence these elements have on the research process and its outcomes. This commitment to reflexivity is not merely a methodological formality; it is a substantive ethical practice that guards against the temptation to universalize one's own experience or to conflate personal frustration with structural critique.

Positionality: The TA as instructor and observer

My positionality as a teaching assistant is central to the analysis that follows. The TA occupies a liminal position within the university hierarchy—neither fully faculty nor fully student, possessing pedagogical authority in the classroom but lacking institutional power over curriculum design, assessment policy, or technology adoption (Ovetz 2022; Ivancheva & Courtois 2024). This liminality is both a limitation and a resource: it constrains my ability to effect structural change, but it also affords a distinctive perspective on the micro-level dynamics of teaching and learning that are often invisible to those higher up the institutional ladder. As Ovetz (2020) has argued, the adjunctification and casualization of academic labor have produced a class of “just-in-time, deskilled, disempowered, contingent” workers whose experiences are rarely centered in educational research. Autoethnography provides a means of centering these experiences and of making visible the labor—intellectual, emotional, and relational—that TAs perform in the service of student learning.

Data sources and ethical considerations

The data for this study are drawn from multiple sources: field notes produced during and after seminars and lab sessions; observations of student assignments, drafts, and final submissions; informal conversations with students before, during, and after class; and my own reflective journal entries. All student data have been anonymized, and no individual student is identifiable in the account that follows. The ethical challenges of autoethnographic research in educational settings are well documented: the power differential between instructor

and student, the risk of surveillance or judgment, and the potential for students to feel exposed or misrepresented all require careful navigation. I have sought to mitigate these risks by focusing on patterns and tendencies rather than individual cases, by avoiding direct quotation of identifiable student speech, and by foregrounding my own experience and interpretation rather than claiming to represent the student perspective.

The AI-saturated classroom

The normalization of AI as default infrastructure

The first thing one notices, teaching Communication in Digital Media in the current moment, is the sheer ubiquity of AI tools in students' workflows. When I began teaching this course several years ago, the use of AI in assignment production was exceptional—a novelty, sometimes a source of curiosity, occasionally a source of anxiety. Today, it is the default. Students arrive in the classroom with ChatGPT or similar LLMs already integrated into their browsers, their note-taking apps, their writing processes (Vâlcea et al. 2024; Delcker et al. 2024). The normalization of AI as a default learning infrastructure has been remarkably swift, outpacing institutional policy, pedagogical adaptation, and even the capacity of instructors to fully comprehend the scope of its use.

This normalization is not merely a matter of individual student choice; it is structurally enabled by the broader digital ecosystem in which higher education now operates. Learning management systems, cloud-based document editors, and AI-powered writing assistants are all part of a seamless technological environment that encourages the delegation of cognitive tasks to machines (Ovetz 2022; Kheiche 2022). As Kheiche (2022) has argued, the modularity of contemporary educational technology platforms facilitates the fragmentation and deskilling of both teaching and learning, enabling the redistribution of cognitive labor in ways that are often invisible to the participants themselves. In my own classroom, I have observed students using AI tools not only for writing assignments but for generating discussion points, summarizing readings, producing outlines, and even formulating questions to ask in class. The boundary between student-generated and AI-generated intellectual activity has become, for many students, effectively meaningless.

What is particularly striking is the speed with which this normalization has occurred. In the space of just two or three academic

cycles, the use of AI has shifted from a marginal, somewhat furtive practice to an openly acknowledged and even celebrated aspect of student life. Students speak casually about “asking ChatGPT” in the same way they might speak about consulting a textbook or searching the internet—except that the AI tool does not merely provide information but produces finished text, complete arguments, and polished prose (Vâlcea et al. 2024; Kim 2025). The implications for a course in digital communication are profound: when the primary output of the course—written text for digital audiences—can be generated by a machine in seconds, the pedagogical rationale for the course itself comes under pressure.

Blurring of authorship and originality

One of the most disorienting aspects of teaching in the AI-saturated classroom is the progressive blurring of authorship and originality. In a course designed to help students develop their own voices as digital communicators, the question of who is actually writing has become increasingly difficult to answer. Assignments that were once windows into students’ thinking—revealing their struggles, their misconceptions, their emerging competencies—have become opaque surfaces, polished and generic, bearing the unmistakable hallmarks of machine-generated text. The prose is fluent but lifeless; the arguments are coherent but unoriginal; the voice is competent but anonymous.

This blurring of authorship is not simply a technical problem to be solved by plagiarism detection software or AI-detection algorithms. It is a pedagogical and existential problem that strikes at the heart of what it means to learn. When students submit work that they have not written—or that they have written only in the most attenuated sense, by prompting an AI and lightly editing its output—the feedback loop that is essential to learning is broken. The instructor’s comments, carefully crafted to address specific weaknesses and encourage specific improvements, land on terrain that the student has never actually occupied. The student receives a grade for work they did not do; the instructor evaluates a text that does not represent the student’s actual abilities. The entire pedagogical transaction becomes, in a word, fictitious. Gendron and colleagues (2022) have argued that AI-driven deskilling in academic contexts relies on a powerful reconfiguration of the labor process into one that emphasizes “standardization, simplification, and speed, not diversity, complexity and interdependence.” This observation, made in the context of academic

publishing, applies with equal force to the undergraduate classroom, where the pressure to produce outputs has increasingly displaced the imperative to engage in genuine learning.

AI as idea generator and cognitive crutch

Beyond the production of finished text, AI tools have become deeply embedded in the earlier stages of the intellectual process—idea generation, brainstorming, outlining, and even the formulation of research questions. In my seminars, I have observed a growing tendency among students to consult AI tools before engaging with course materials, using the AI’s output as a substitute for their own reading and thinking rather than as a supplement to it. This pattern is particularly pronounced among first-year students, who arrive at university with limited experience of independent intellectual work and who are therefore especially vulnerable to the seductive efficiency of AI-mediated cognition. Gopal (2025) has argued that the pedagogical challenge posed by AI is not simply one of teaching students to critically evaluate AI outputs—the so-called “Use-First Critical Thinking” approach—but of equipping students with the metacognitive skills to recognize when delegation to AI is appropriate and when it is not. This distinction is crucial, and it is one that most first-year students are ill-equipped to make. In my experience, the default mode of AI use among first-year students is not critical or strategic but habitual and unreflective: the AI is consulted not because the student has made a deliberate decision to delegate a specific task, but because it is the path of least resistance. The result is a form of cognitive dependency that undermines the very capacities—curiosity, persistence, independent judgment—that the course is designed to cultivate.

Erosion of learning motivation

The decline of productive struggle

One of the most troubling patterns I have observed over the past several years is the declining willingness of students to engage in what educational theorists call “productive struggle”—the effortful, sometimes frustrating process of grappling with difficult material that is essential to deep learning (Chow 2025). In the pre-AI classroom, struggle was an expected and even valued part of the learning process: students understood that writing a good essay or constructing a persuasive argument required multiple drafts, false starts, and

sustained effort. Today, the availability of AI tools has fundamentally altered students' relationship to difficulty. When confronted with a challenging task, the instinctive response of many students is not to persist but to delegate—to hand the problem to the AI and accept whatever output it produces.

Chow (2025) has defined productive struggle as “purposeful, scaffolded difficulty that feels effortful yet achievable and that strengthens long-term learning,” and has warned that AI risks undermining this process by enabling learners to bypass difficulty entirely. In my own classroom, I have seen this dynamic play out with increasing frequency: students who, in previous cohorts, would have spent hours wrestling with a writing assignment now produce submissions in minutes, having outsourced the cognitive labor to an AI tool. The resulting work is often superficially competent but lacks the depth, specificity, and personal engagement that characterize genuine learning. More importantly, the students themselves have been deprived of the developmental experience that the assignment was designed to provide. The paradox is stark: by making the task easier, the AI has made the learning harder—or, more precisely, has made the learning not happen at all.

This erosion of productive struggle is not confined to writing assignments. In seminar discussions, I have noticed a growing reluctance among students to venture opinions, take intellectual risks, or engage with ambiguity. When asked to analyze a digital text or evaluate a communication strategy, students increasingly defer to AI-generated summaries or pre-packaged analyses rather than developing their own interpretations. The classroom, which should be a space of intellectual exploration and debate, has become a space of performance and reproduction—a theater in which students recite AI-generated lines rather than speaking in their own voices.

Why try if AI does it better? The discourse of futility

Perhaps the most revealing indicator of the motivational crisis in the AI-saturated classroom is the discourse that students themselves use to justify their reliance on AI tools. In informal conversations before and after class, I have heard variations of the same refrain with increasing frequency: “Why should I spend hours writing something that ChatGPT can do in thirty seconds?” “The AI writes better than I ever could.” “What’s the point of learning to do something that a machine can do for me?” These statements are not expressions of laziness or

moral failure; they are rational responses to a perceived reality—a reality in which the value of human effort has been devalued by the superior efficiency of machine output.

The Expertise Paradox identified by Vâlcea and colleagues (2024) is directly relevant here: when AI performs adequately at lower-level cognitive tasks, students may conclude that there is no point in developing those skills themselves, not realizing that mastery of lower-level tasks is a prerequisite for the development of higher-level thinking. The Innovation Paradox further compounds the problem: AI's capacity to assist with creative tasks may actually stifle original thinking by providing ready-made solutions that foreclose the exploratory, generative process through which genuine creativity emerges (Vâlcea et al. 2024). In the context of a digital communication course, where students are expected to develop their own communicative voices and styles, this dynamic is particularly destructive. Students who rely on AI for idea generation and text production never develop the capacity to think independently about communication problems, and they never experience the satisfaction—or the frustration—of finding their own words.

The discourse of futility is also, I would argue, a symptom of a deeper malaise: a loss of faith in the value of learning itself. When students say “the AI does it better,” they are implicitly accepting a framework in which the purpose of education is the production of outputs—essays, presentations, reports—rather than the development of capacities. This framework is, of course, not new; it is deeply embedded in the neoliberal logic of higher education, with its emphasis on measurable outcomes, employability, and credential production (Giroux 2013; McKay 2021; Poquet & Laat 2021). But the advent of AI has given this framework a new and devastating force: if the purpose of education is to produce outputs, and if AI can produce those outputs more efficiently than students, then the entire enterprise of teaching and learning becomes, from the student's perspective, an exercise in futility.

Minimum-effort optimization and the erosion of curiosity

Closely related to the discourse of futility is the emergence of what I have come to think of as “minimum-effort optimization”—a strategic orientation toward coursework in which the goal is not to learn but to achieve the required grade with the least possible expenditure of effort. This orientation is not unique to the AI era; students have always

sought to economize their effort. But the availability of AI tools has dramatically lowered the floor of effort required to produce passable work, enabling students to achieve acceptable grades with virtually no intellectual engagement. Kim (2025) has traced the psychological trajectory from rational efficiency-seeking through dependency to what they term “behavioral addiction to AI,” arguing that the drift toward Cognitive Surrender is accelerated by cognitive miserliness and instant gratification dynamics. In my classroom, I have observed this trajectory in real time: students who begin the semester using AI as an occasional aid gradually come to rely on it for every aspect of their coursework, until the AI is doing not just the writing but the thinking. The erosion of curiosity is perhaps the most poignant casualty of this process. First-year students, who should be at the peak of their intellectual curiosity—encountering new ideas, new disciplines, new ways of thinking—instead approach their coursework with a weary pragmatism that is more appropriate to a factory floor than a university classroom. The question is no longer “What can I learn?” but “What is the minimum I need to do?”

Delegation and the loss of competence

The progressive outsourcing of cognitive tasks

The outsourcing of cognitive tasks to AI tools is not a binary phenomenon—it is a spectrum, and over the course of a semester, I have observed students moving steadily along it. At the beginning of the term, many students use AI tools selectively, perhaps to generate an outline or to check grammar. By mid-semester, the scope of delegation has expanded: students are using AI to draft entire paragraphs, to construct arguments, to summarize readings, and to generate discussion points. By the end of the semester, a significant proportion of students have effectively outsourced the entirety of their cognitive engagement with the course to AI tools, submitting work that bears no meaningful relationship to their own thinking or abilities.

This progressive outsourcing has direct consequences for competency development. Writing, critical analysis, and argument construction are not innate abilities; they are skills that must be developed through practice, feedback, and iteration. When students delegate these tasks to AI, they are not merely saving time—they are forfeiting the developmental process through which competence is acquired. As Gopal (2025) has argued, the pedagogical challenge is not simply to teach students to critically evaluate AI outputs but to help

them understand the importance of engaging in cognitive tasks themselves, even when—especially when—the AI can do those tasks more efficiently. The concept of “virtuous outsourcing” proposed by Gopalis is instructive here: there are circumstances in which delegation to AI is appropriate and even beneficial, but these circumstances require a level of metacognitive awareness that most first-year students have not yet developed.

The consequences of this outsourcing are visible in the quality of student work. Assignments produced with heavy AI assistance tend to appear superficially confident but lacking in grounded knowledge, agency, and personality. They are, in a sense, too good—too polished, too generic, too devoid of the rough edges and idiosyncrasies that characterize genuine student writing. More importantly, when students are asked to perform tasks without AI assistance—in timed in-class exercises, for example, or in oral presentations—the gap between their AI-assisted and unassisted performance is often startling. Students who submit polished essays struggle to articulate a coherent argument in real time; students who produce sophisticated digital analyses cannot explain their reasoning when questioned. The competence, it turns out, was never theirs—it belonged to the machine.

Competence atrophy and the question of transformation

The phenomenon I have described might be characterized as competence atrophy—a gradual decline in students' ability to perform cognitive tasks independently, resulting from the chronic outsourcing of those tasks to AI tools. This concept has been widely discussed in the medical and professional literature, where concerns about deskilling due to AI automation have been raised in fields ranging from radiology to psychiatry (Monteith et al. 2022; Savardi et al. 2025; Aquino et al. 2023). Monteith and colleagues (2022) have warned that “a possible long-term consequence of the overreliance on technology is deskilling of the physician workforce, due to a loss of individual skills and a reduction in skill development,” and have called for long-term efforts to reduce deskilling in professional contexts. The parallel with undergraduate education is direct: if medical professionals can be deskilled by overreliance on AI, how much more vulnerable are first-year students, who have not yet developed the baseline competencies that AI threatens to erode?

It is important, however, to resist the temptation to frame this issue in purely negative terms. Some scholars (Poquet & Laat 2021) have

argued that what appears to be deskilling may in fact be a transformation of skills—a shift from one set of competencies to another, as students develop new capacities for working with AI tools, evaluating AI outputs, and integrating AI into their workflows. Poquet and Laat (2021) have argued for a reconceptualization of lifelong learning that embraces technology at its foundation, shifting the telos of learning from human capital to human development and focusing on capabilities rather than fixed skill sets. This perspective has merit, and it would be intellectually dishonest to deny that some students are developing genuinely new competencies in the process of engaging with AI tools. But in my experience, these students are a minority. For the majority, the use of AI is not a strategic augmentation of their capabilities but a wholesale substitution for them—a substitution that leaves them less capable, not more, of performing the cognitive tasks that the course is designed to teach.

The feedback loop of dependency

One of the most insidious aspects of AI-mediated learning is the self-reinforcing nature of the dependency it creates. Students who delegate cognitive tasks to AI do not develop the skills that would enable them to perform those tasks independently; lacking those skills, they become even more dependent on AI; and this increased dependency further inhibits skill development. Kim (2025) has described this as a “natural drift toward Cognitive Surrender,” in which the initial decision to delegate a task to AI sets in motion a cascade of further delegation that progressively erodes the user's cognitive autonomy. In my classroom, I have observed this feedback loop operating with alarming efficiency: students who begin the semester with some capacity for independent writing and analysis end the semester with less, having spent the intervening months outsourcing those capacities to machines.

This feedback loop is compounded by the institutional context in which it operates. When assessment systems reward outputs rather than processes, and when those outputs can be produced more efficiently by AI than by students, the incentive structure actively discourages the development of independent competence (Vâlcea et al. 2024; Ovetz 2022). The student who spends hours crafting an original essay receives the same grade—or a lower one—than the student who generates a polished submission in minutes using AI. The message is clear: effort is not rewarded; efficiency is. And in an educational environment that has already been thoroughly colonized by the logic of

efficiency and output production, this message is received loud and clear.

The changing role of the TA

From instructor to evaluator of AI-mediated outputs

The transformation of the student's relationship to learning has been accompanied by a parallel transformation of the TA's role. Where I once functioned primarily as an instructor—guiding students through difficult material, modeling analytical techniques, and providing formative feedback on works-in-progress—I now find myself functioning increasingly as an evaluator of AI-mediated outputs. The shift is subtle but profound: instead of engaging with students' thinking, I am engaging with the products of their delegation. Instead of diagnosing misconceptions and scaffolding understanding, I am assessing the quality of prompts and the plausibility of AI-generated text. The pedagogical relationship, which should be a relationship between minds, has become a relationship between an instructor and a machine, with the student as an increasingly peripheral intermediary.

This shift has been documented in other educational contexts. Watermeyer and colleagues (2024) describe how academics perceive AI tools as agents of “deskilling and unauthentication,” eroding the authenticity of scholarly practice and the professional identity of the instructor. In my own experience, the sense of inauthenticity is pervasive: when I write detailed feedback on a student's essay, knowing that the essay was largely generated by AI, I am participating in a fiction—a performance of pedagogy emptied of substance. The feedback I provide is unlikely to be read, let alone internalized, because the student has no investment in the text to which it refers. The entire transaction—assignment, submission, feedback, grade—has become a ritual without meaning, a bureaucratic exercise that serves institutional documentation but does nothing to advance learning.

The difficulty of assessing authentic student ability

The proliferation of AI-generated work has made the assessment of authentic student ability extraordinarily difficult. Traditional assessment methods—essays, reports, digital portfolios—are all vulnerable to AI mediation, and the tools available for detecting AI-generated text are unreliable and easily circumvented. In-class assessments, such as timed writing exercises and oral presentations, provide a more accurate picture of students' actual abilities but are

logistically demanding and pedagogically limited. The result is a growing gap between the grades students receive and the competencies they actually possess—a gap that undermines the credibility of the assessment system and the value of the credential it confers. Gin and colleagues (2024) have proposed a framework for assessing the “trustworthiness” of AI tools in health professions education, drawing on the concept of entrustment to determine the appropriate level of AI involvement in educational tasks. While developed for a different context, its underlying logic is relevant to the undergraduate classroom: the question is not whether AI should be used, but how much cognitive labor can be safely delegated without compromising the development of essential competencies. In my experience, the answer for first-year students is “very little”—but the institutional and cultural pressures pushing in the opposite direction are formidable.

Emotional and pedagogical challenges

The emotional toll of teaching in the AI-saturated classroom should not be underestimated. The sense of futility that students express—“Why try if AI does it better?”—is mirrored by a corresponding sense of futility among instructors: “Why teach if students aren’t learning?” The frustration of investing time and energy in pedagogical activities that are systematically undermined by AI tools is compounded by ambiguity: it is often impossible to know, with certainty, whether a given piece of student work is genuine or AI-generated, and the constant suspicion erodes the trust essential to the pedagogical relationship. Bozgöz and Gür (2022) document how lecturers who feel their ideas are “considered unimportant or ignored tend to lose their motivation to improve some professional skills,” a finding that resonates with my experience. The sense of being rendered irrelevant—not by institutional policy but by the quiet, inexorable logic of technological substitution—is deeply demoralizing. It is compounded by awareness that the problem is structural, not individual: no amount of pedagogical innovation on the part of a single TA can counteract the systemic forces driving the deskilling of both teaching and learning.

Pedagogical implications

The most immediate pedagogical implication of this analysis is the need to fundamentally rethink assessment methods. Traditional output-based assessments—essays, reports, digital portfolios—are no longer

reliable indicators of student competence in an AI-saturated environment. Alternative assessment methods that foreground process rather than product—such as reflective journals, in-class writing exercises, oral examinations, and iterative drafting with documented revision histories—offer a more authentic picture of students' actual abilities and provide stronger incentives for genuine engagement. However, shifting to process-based assessment is not without challenges. It is more labor-intensive for instructors, harder to standardize, and resistant to the efficiencies of scale demanded by institutions. It also requires a cultural shift—among students, who must come to value the process of learning, and among institutions, which must invest in the pedagogical infrastructure to support it. As Chow (2025) argues, redesigning assessment must be accompanied by a broader redesign of pedagogy, culture, and institutional values to be effective.

A complementary strategy is designing assignments that are either resistant to AI mediation or that integrate AI in pedagogically productive ways. AI-resistant assignments require forms of engagement that AI cannot easily replicate: personal reflection, situated analysis of course-specific materials, collaborative projects requiring real-time interaction, and tasks that apply course concepts to novel contexts. AI-integrated assignments explicitly incorporate AI tools into the learning process—for example, asking students to critically evaluate AI-generated text, compare their own writing with AI output, or use AI as a starting point for revision. Both approaches have merit, and the most effective pedagogy will likely involve a combination. The key principle is that the assignment should promote learning rather than merely produce outputs—a principle that is deceptively difficult to implement within contemporary institutional constraints.

The most important pedagogical response to the AI-mediated classroom is cultivating “intellectual ownership”: the sense that one’s ideas, arguments, and communicative choices are genuinely one’s own and that the process of developing them is intrinsically valuable. This requires pedagogy that foregrounds process over product, rewards effort and improvement rather than polished outputs, and creates space for the productive struggle essential to deep learning. In my teaching, I have experimented with strategies to foster intellectual ownership: requiring annotated drafts documenting revision processes; incorporating in-class exercises immune to AI mediation; facilitating

peer review where students articulate and defend choices; and engaging students in reflective discussions about learning processes and AI use. These strategies are not panaceas—they are labor-intensive, imperfect, and easily undermined by institutional and cultural forces—but they are a necessary first step toward reclaiming a pedagogical space colonized by AI.

Rebuilding engagement requires more than pedagogical innovation; it requires reorienting the values underpinning education. Students must see that education's purpose is the development of capacities—thinking, communicating, analyzing, creating—that are valuable because they are human, not because they are efficient. This is challenging in an institutional context emphasizing efficiency, employability, and measurable outcomes. Yet it is the only message capable of sustaining genuine learning in the AI era. Delcker and colleagues (2024) argue that “educators in higher education must facilitate students’ AI competencies and integrate AI tools into instructional designs.” This is only half the story. The other half is cultivating intrinsic motivation, intellectual curiosity, and the capacity for sustained effort—qualities no AI tool can provide and no integration strategy can substitute for.

Conclusion

What I have described is not a crisis of technology but a crisis of meaning. AI tools in the first-year digital communication classroom are not, in themselves, the problem; the problem is the broader system of values, incentives, and institutional structures in which those tools operate—a system that has reduced education to output production, teaching to content delivery, and learning to credential acquisition. In this system, AI is not disruptive but a logical culmination: the final step in a long process of rationalization that has stripped education of its human substance.

The paradox of AI in education is that it simultaneously empowers and erodes. It empowers students with tools of extraordinary capability while eroding conditions for genuine competence development. It empowers instructors by automating routine tasks while eroding their expertise and visibility. It empowers institutions through efficiency and cost reduction while hollowing out the educational experience that defines their purpose.

As a TA, I am acutely aware of my powerlessness against these structural forces. I cannot single-handedly reverse the deskilling of

student learning, the casualization of academic labor, or the neoliberalization of the university. What I can do—what autoethnography enables—is bear witness, name the phenomenon, and insist that it matters. The students I teach are not lazy or incapable; they are rational actors responding to a system that has long taught them that efficiency outweighs understanding, outputs outweigh processes, and the goal of education is credential acquisition, not human development.

The task of education in the AI era is to challenge this lesson—to insist that learning is worth the effort, that struggle is a feature, and that developing one's own voice, thinking, and competence is a project no machine can undertake. Whether universities, as currently constituted, can rise to this challenge remains an open and urgent question.

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