THE INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF STUDENT SUCCESS

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Open Access **Opinion**

AI Isn't the Enemy—It's an Equity Tool

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Citation: Robinson, A. B. (2025). AI Isn't the Enemy—It's an Equity Tool. The Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Success.

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Received: 07/15/2025
Accepted: 07/16/2025
Published: 07/17/2025

Abstract: This practice-based reflection discusses the integration of generative AI (genAI) tools into an instructional design course to address equity gaps faced by international learners. Through a "design-in/design-out" approach, genAI was embedded to reduce specific barriers to success—grammar, graphic design, and cultural fluency—while maintaining the integrity of the assessment. Outcomes included improved project output. The editorial concludes by proposing several guiding principles for leveraging genAI for better equity in higher education.

Keywords: Generative AI, Equity, Higher Education, Instructional Design, Inclusive Pedagogy, AI Literacy, Cultural Competence, Universal Design for Learning

I've taught ELD-3073: Training, Development, and Storyboarding at Lambton College every fall for three years now. It's an online course where students—most of whom are international and racialized—work in teams over the term to design e-learning for a real-world client. A truly authentic assessment, the final project is collaborative, creative, and client-facing. And for many learners, it's truly daunting. For the first time, they are expected to perform like instructional design professionals, building polished and culturally fluent e-learning content in a language and cultural context many are still mastering.

As an instructor committed to equity, I always welcome students to chat with me about their struggles. And, in Fall 2022, I noticed a disturbing pattern. One student told me they felt sidelined in their group—excluded not just by classmates, but by the very learning environment they were working so hard to navigate. Another wondered aloud during a class discussion if the client for our final project was racist. As the course wrapped up, several groups submitted work that was culturally inappropriate, and struggled to understand why. Together, these events formed a problematic pattern: they were manifestations of the sense of disbelonging that, unfortunately, many international students still carry with them into Western classrooms.

Alarmed at the issues students were experiencing despite my best efforts at creating an equitable learning experience, I asked myself what I could change in my approach to support them. In Fall 2023, I turned to a controversial ally: generative AI.

Can AI Level the Playing Field?

We've all heard the dire predictions: AI will erode academic integrity and replace human creativity, but what if assessment is designed with AI in mind from the start? My goal wasn't to replace student effort with shortcuts, or to outsource thinking to machines. It was to cognitively offload skills that were not necessary to the learning in order to eliminate them as barriers to success, while preserving the integrity of the assessment. I also sought to develop AI skills to better prepare the learners for future trends in instructional design.

I "designed in" generative AI (genAI) only where it made sense, and "designed out" genAI where it didn't. I allowed learners to use genAI tools like Leonardo.ai and Skybox to generate images for their training modules. But they were required to personally deliver the final client presentations and build the eLearning modules in Articulate Storyline. These tasks require human abilities, and there is no AI that can perform them (at least, not yet).

With my design approach set, I approached Fall 2023 wondering whether generative AI tools might improve some of the equity problems that my past students had articulated. I reflected on the feedback from the previous cohort of students and identified several key equity issues.

Issues of Equity…Solved?

In 2022, before I introduced genAI into the course, student projects were hampered by recurring issues including:

- Language barriers: Grammar and clarity suffered, limiting the professional polish expected in e-learning design.
- Cultural misunderstandings: Students unintentionally selected phrasing or imagery that didn't align with Canadian norms and experiences, undermining content messaging.
- Time and collaboration struggles: Many students worked long hours off-campus, making it hard to meet deadlines or contribute equally to group work.
- A default to the "white gaze": Final projects overwhelmingly featured white, able-bodied characters, as if students were trying to mirror what they assumed their evaluators wanted to see.

With genAI tools woven into the learning design, things changed. Students who struggled with English grammar used large language models to polish their writing. Learners could use diffusion models to generate visual content that matched their ideas without needing a graphic design background. With most genAI tools trained extensively on the English language and Western content, generated content was naturally more culturally appropriate to the client. Learners also unlocked greater efficiencies in the design process, decreasing the time required to complete mundane tasks. These tangential skillsets and limitations that were not part of the learning used to hold back talented designers from successful outcomes, but no longer.

Aware of the bias issues in genAI, I embedded discussions about cultural bias in AI into the curriculum, and had students conduct inclusion audits of their output as part of learning to use the AI tools. They caught themselves generating only white, male, able-bodied characters, and corrected course. They were explicitly trained to ask better questions about representation, about disability, about gender. Asked to use a critical lens when working with AI output, they honed their ability to spot and critique bias in all contexts, including in their own work.

GenAI Isn't a Cure-All; It's a Catalyst

Using genAI didn't eliminate all challenges, and it raised a few new ones. Students struggled with:

- Prompt writing: Knowing what to ask was half the battle. Getting consistent results from AI tools took trial and error.
- Tech access: Free versions of tools were limited, and some students couldn't afford upgrades, reinforcing existing resource gaps.
- Time investment: High-quality genAI outputs required significant human effort, skill, critical judgment, and

collaborative iteration amongst the group members. Those who treated AI as a shortcut were often disappointed, as they did not invest sufficient time to master the tools and then struggled to pull together their project as time grew short.

These hurdles are not reasons to ban genAI; they're reasons to teach it better. In fact, some of my students' biggest breakthroughs came from learning how to avoid relying blindly on AI. One group, frustrated by generic image outputs, explored methods for training their genAI tool to produce more targeted and consistent results. These lessons were not just technical—they were transformative, leading to advanced AI-powered proficiency.

Equity Is About Design, Not Just Intention

There's growing research to support what I saw firsthand. For instance, Addy et al. (2023) found that genAI tools can help multilingual learners. Many others point out how genAI tools can offload cognitive load and support executive function for neurodiverse or busy learners.

But these benefits don't emerge automatically. As D'Agostino (2023) rightly points out, genAI can easily replicate bias and widen the digital divide if implemented without care. Diene (2024) also sees how AI-powered systems might inadvertently perpetuate biases, affecting marginalized students disproportionately, and discusses institutions' responsibility to implement AI in ways that support inclusivity and diversity. When these considerations are kept in mind, Roscoe et al. (2022) foretell a gen-AI-driven paradigm shift that is "poised to empower more personalized and effective outcomes for a greater diversity of learners."

When educators approach genAI not as a threat to academic integrity, but as a tool in our equity toolkit that must be handled by trained users, they activate the power of AI for equity

I propose the following principles to guide genAI use in higher education:

- GenAI must be taught. Don't assume digital natives know how to use it well. Teach prompt writing, critical thinking, and ethics.
- Equity must guide integration. Ask: where does AI help students succeed? Where does it harm learning or creativity?
- Inclusive and ethical use must be part of the assignment. Build bias checks and cultural audits into project criteria.
- Scaffold access. Don't reward those with paid versions and punish those without. Curate free tools. Build in technical training and support.
- Center the human. Use frameworks like Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the SAMR Model to ensure the technology serves learning, and not the other way around.

A Call to Educators: Don't Fear AI—Leverage It

In a world where generative AI is here to stay, the real question isn't whether we should integrate it into our teaching, but rather: how do we ensure it makes education more equitable? As educators, we have a choice: resist the tools our students are already using, or teach them how to use genAI with care, with purpose, and with ethics in mind. This is not a call to replace human learning; it's a call to reimagine it.

I'm not saying genAI is a silver bullet. I'm saying it's a mirror—and a lever. It reflects the gaps in our current systems, but it also gives us leverage to close the gaps just a little bit more. Used critically, generative AI can amplify diverse voices, remove unnecessary barriers, and make our classrooms more just.

I've seen one possible path. It starts with equity-minded design. And it's powered—critically, ethically, and imperfectly—by AI.

Disclosure of AI Use

ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-4) was used in the drafting and revision process for editing, paraphrasing, and refining structure and clarity. All content, ideas, and critical analysis are original and reviewed by the author.

Funding

N/A

Declaration of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.

Ethics Approval and informed consent

N/A

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