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Post-Traditional Assessments and UDL to Encourage Ethical AI Use Among College Students

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Abstract: Contextualized in the existing literature on AI in higher education and our own experiences in course design and delivery, this manuscript will examine how the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Constructivist Learning Theory (CLT) in higher education settings intersects with the growing use of AI. In discussing the implications of this intersection, we will focus on the advantages of structuring pedagogy and designing assignments that are less compatible with disingenuous AI use by students. We ultimately recommend pedagogical teaching and learning approaches that make it more challenging for students to use AI and do not compel instructors to focus solely on AI detection. This discussion encourages instructors to reconsider their assessments and consider how removing barriers and creating opportunities for autonomy and authentic assessment allows students to engage more actively with their learning and demonstrate how essential topics resonate with them while also authoring their own work.

Keywords: Generative AI, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Constructivist Learning Theory (CLT), High-impact Practices, Higher Education

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Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to deep-learning models that generate text, images, and other content that was created from training on existing data. As AI becomes ubiquitous in our news outlets and social media feeds, the question is no longer **whether** AI will affect things, but **how**. In higher education, AI has added complexity to teaching and learning, particularly in discerning authorship and fostering critical thinking skills (Ifelebuegu, 2023). Simultaneously, faculty are making courses more accessible to students with varying learning needs using Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL is an approach for making curricula and assignments more inclusive by offering multiple means of engaging with course materials, multiple ways that students can access course information, and multiple options for students to express their learning (CAST, 2024). Contextualized in the literature on AI in higher education and personal experiences in course design and delivery, this manuscript examines how the use of UDL and Constructivist Learning Theory (CLT) in higher education settings intersects with expanded use of AI. In exploring this intersection, we emphasize the advantages of structuring pedagogy and designing assignments that are less compatible with disingenuous student AI use.

This discussion is inherently interdisciplinary, as three of the authors are associate/assistant professors in university-level credentialing programs (teacher education and counselor preparation). The fourth author was an undergraduate student majoring in psychology with a disability studies minor who has taken multiple classes with the first author. From these positions, we see AI as an inescapable (and ever-evolving) part of the higher education landscape and have some concerns about its use in credentialing programs. Our students must be prepared to meet the educational and therapeutic needs of their future students and clients. In our fields, mandatory standardized credentialing exams serve as an important gatekeeping measure for students who might be 'AI-ing' their way through coursework. Despite recommendations to detect and monitor AI use, we feel that policing student work is an imperfect practice that creates additional stress and work for faculty. In this discussion, we identify some key issues pertaining to AI use in higher education and ultimately recommend pedagogical approaches that make it more challenging for students to use AI and do not compel instructors to focus solely on AI detection.

Discussion Grounded in Literature

AI in Higher Education

AI in higher education has changed how students engage with teaching and learning and introduced new challenges for faculty. The literature on AI use in higher education is primarily focused on ways to integrate technology into curriculum and detect inappropriate use, with limited commentary on ethical implications (Bearman et al., 2023). Dishonest use of AI limits our ability to accurately assess whether students have achieved required competencies to pass certification exams and practice ethically in their chosen careers. Instructors must provide parameters for AI use and educate students about its applications and appropriate use in both educational and professional settings, but that is not enough.

Higher education has not come to a generally accepted position regarding AI (Yeralan & Lee, 2023). Recent surveys of university students suggest that many are using AI in some capacity for assignment completion (McDonald et al., 2025), representing a major concern for university faculty. AI is often built into productivity programs that students routinely use to edit and revise, which is desirable, as it helps students refine their work. It is also used routinely by professionals writing in their disciplines (and was used in the piece that you are reading now). Rather than focusing on ways to detect, or ethically use AI, our intent is to explore ways to provide rich learning experiences that are less compatible with AI.

Students must use AI effectively without engaging in dishonest behavior that can compromise their academic integrity and education. If students use AI unethically and excessively, they are liable to become dependent on AI rather than using it as an ancillary tool (Gallent-Torres et al., 2023). A significant limitation of using AI to complete assignments and/or professional work is that it cannot assess the validity of the content to determine if it contains misinformation (Chan & Hu, 2023; Messeri, 2023). Over-reliance on AI can also cause challenges for language learners who rely on AI for linguistic skill development instead of learning the language (Chan & Hu, 2023).

Academic Dishonesty and AI

AI use in higher education has created challenges for detecting and defining dishonest behavior. Identifying instances of academic dishonesty and plagiarism are familiar frustrations in higher education. With widespread availability and the limitations of detection software, there will inevitably be students who turn to AI regardless of the stated consequences, even in the most sophisticated syllabus statements.

While instructors are encouraged to use AI detection software to uphold academic integrity standards, this strategy may foster a narrow and ableist framing of writing. Some autistic and neurodivergent students' naturally formal writing style can get incorrectly flagged (Pollina, 2023). Additionally, false positive detection disproportionately affects non-native English speakers and scholars with distinctive, formal writing styles (Giray, 2024). Even when used with integrity, integrated AI applications in software can cause a student's work to be flagged by AI detection screening, making it difficult to assess how and why students are using AI. There are also extreme material and psychological consequences when work is incorrectly flagged, especially related to resultant academic dishonesty procedures. Rather than feeling pride in their work, students are placed in a high-stakes climate of ethical scrutiny and anxiety, as they defend their academic reputations (Gegg-Harrison & Quarterman, 2024). Policing student use of AI software is increasingly problematic for instructors, considering the strong possibility of false positive results and their limited time.

To help mitigate these challenges, faculty are increasingly adding statements in their syllabi clarifying the permissibility of AI in their courses (Dang & Wang, 2024). This is often at the professor's discretion, with statements ranging from AI use being not only permitted but desired, to minimal use for editing purposes only, to no permissible use whatsoever. For the latter two options, statements may also dictate consequences connected to the university's academic honesty policy if AI use is detected. Despite syllabi statements, as AI tools become more sophisticated, there remains an overriding concern that students may not be operating within these established parameters. Essentially, there must be mutual trust between students and the professor established at the start of the class and fostered throughout the course.

Impacts of AI Use

For faculty, the benefits of AI for higher education pedagogy include the potential to facilitate adaptive learning, provide personal feedback, support research and data analysis, offer automated administrative services, and aid in developing innovative assessments (Rasul, et al., 2023). However, those benefits are shadowed by myriad limitations. AI use by instructors can create challenges impacting ethical and equity practices, maintaining academic integrity, evaluating and reinforcing specific skill sets, assessing learning outcomes, and potential biases and use of falsified information (Rasul, et al., 2023). The consequences of student use of AI demonstrate what may transpire if we acquiesce to embracing AI as a necessity. Farrokhnia et al. (2024) identified undesirable student outcomes resulting from AI use, including lack of deep understanding, assessment difficulty, risk of bias and discrimination, and lack of higher order thinking skills.

Despite the challenges of determining authorship and plagiarism, research on AI in higher education has indicated that some applications are uniquely beneficial, particularly for people with disabilities. Ayala (2023) found that AI helped enhance disabled college students' comprehension of content through asking questions that required them to seek clarification for a deeper knowledge of a topic (Ayala, 2023). Smith & Smith (2020) drew from their personal experiences as disabled people to illuminate the potential and limitations of AI, as the technology can provide essential access, but still fails and makes errors in output at times. AI technologies are also being used to develop advanced assistive tools for children with disabilities that improve communication and learning, such as voice and speech recognition, augmentative alternative communication (AAC) devices, etc. (Zdravkova, et al., 2022). AI can enhance the capabilities of assistive technologies, making them more personalized and efficient, which certainly has implications for students at all levels of education.

Faculty do not need to employ an embrace or reject mindset regarding AI. We need to see it for what it is—a tool that, when used with integrity, can enhance productivity; however, when used disingenuously, can undermine the very cornerstone of education. There is a gray space between those two extremes, where instructors can decide how to structure courses, learning activities, and assessments to maintain integrity in educational practices. The remainder of this discussion will focus on ways to counter the negative consequences that Farrokhnia and colleagues outlined.

A More Balanced Approach

In considering the benefits and consequences of using AI in higher education, Rasul et al. (2023) suggested Constructivist Learning Theory (CLT) to provide rigorous and authentic learning opportunities where AI is not useful or applicable. The literature on AI in higher education unilaterally directed us toward creating assignments and assessments that require students to perform higher order thinking activities. Scholars have implored instructors to use more formative and authentic assessment practices such as self-assessment, reflection, portfolios, and peer feedback and scaling up those assignments that AI might not be able to generate such as real-life problems and experiential education (Ifelebuegu, 2023; Farrokhnia, et al., 2024; Rasul, et al., 2023). These recommendations did not ask that instructors recreate a new AI-resistant system/pedagogy, instead, they drew on well-established educational foundations like CLT and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). CLT is foundational in many teacher preparation programs (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), and UDL is a common topic in pedagogy courses and professional development in p-12 education (Moscato & Perdone, 2024).

However, encouraging teachers to move to a constructivist curricular design can be challenging in higher education (O'Connor, 2020). In CLT, learning is shaped by individual student needs, available materials, and an environment where educators assume a leadership role by considering how those factors intersect (Taber, 2012). CLT encourages active student engagement with learning material within the teacher-supported context of learning. Social interactions, contextual learning, and problem-solving are not generally supported by AI use. Rasul et al. (2023) implore higher education academics to "devise new assessment strategies that AI cannot easily replicate, such as evaluating learning processes rather than outcomes" (p.10).

Similarly, Farrokhnia et al. (2024) suggest that educators adjust curriculum to explicitly include learning goals, tasks, and assessment approaches with a focus on creativity and higher-order learning outcomes. We argue that instructors should focus on developing and promoting assignments that students recognize as relevant to their education/future career so that students will want to complete them authentically. UDL constitutes a research-based pedagogical framework that draws upon key principles of CLT and invokes a personalized approach to teaching and

learning by creating student-centered social educational experiences (Mistry & Sutheswaran, 2024).

Universal Design for Learning

UDL stems from Universal Design (UD) concepts that emerged in the 1980s. Originally, UD implored architects to design physical spaces with multiple points of entry and access to accommodate as many people as possible to the spaces, goods, services, and amenities inside (Kennette & Wilson, 2019). Retrofitting physical spaces to improve accessibility often results in clunky designs where modifications are imposed that are often impractical or ineffective. It is much easier to design from the beginning with no (or fewer) barriers than to remove established ones. In UDL, the concept of eliminating physical obstacles extends to teaching and learning, with educators, instructional designers, and curriculum specialists designing instruction proactively with minimal barriers and multiple means of access (Kennette & Wilson, 2019) so all learners can transform accessible information into usable knowledge (Meyer et al., 2014). Additionally, UDL engages the affective networks of the brain in learning, which relates to sensory information that filters through memories and emotions to make meaningful connections (CAST, 2024).

Although UDL was originally promoted in p-12 settings, its inclusion and utility in higher education settings have grown in recent years (SUNY, 2025). Universities are places where students are encouraged to grow and explore careers/disciplines of interest, with an additional focus on interdisciplinary learning and extracurricular engagement (Laist, et al., 2022). The autonomy and embedded experiential learning activities in higher education make it an ideal space for UDL-based pedagogy. However, many faculty do not have a good understanding of UDL due to lack of professional development and needed time and resources to implement it (Hills, Overend, & Hildebrandt, 2022). Soffer-Vital & Finkelstein (2023) present UDL in higher education as a framework through which diverse students can be viewed holistically and are empowered to feel fully included and engaged, while expressing their learning in meaningful ways.

As a framework for instruction, UDL requires curriculum that encourages multiple means of garnering learner interest (Engagement), multiple ways that learners can access the information (Representation), and various ways that they can demonstrate their learning (Action and Expression) (CAST, 2024). This discussion focuses primarily on the **Action and Expression** principle of UDL, which emphasizes

providing students with options for demonstrating their learning through flexible, multiple means, like physical actions, media, the construction of objects, experiential learning, project-based learning, and writing (CAST, 2024, Barrera Ciurana & García, 2023, Fovet, 2020). In addition to accessing information, learners need to know how to show that they understand it.

Assessment is the pedagogic category that aligns best with **Action and Expression**. It is how instructors know if students achieved, or did not achieve, the learning objectives of a learning activity; it is the accountability piece of instruction (Nelson, 2021). In higher education, assessment is the basis for student grades, accreditation standards, and instructor feedback on teaching performance. UDL expands the concept of assessment to be more robust and flexible, providing the students with the opportunity to be co-creators of the assessment with the instructor (Fovet, 2020). Recent research has examined implementation of UDL in the assessment of student learning (Action and Expression) and shown that faculty are less comfortable providing options for students to show mastery, and that actively involving students in assessment can increase student motivation and responsibility (Owenz & Cruz, 2025). Providing alternatives to multiple-choice assessments that have clear guidelines and grading rubrics promoted student autonomy and creativity while decreasing anxiety (Owenz & Cruz, 2025). In a study of UDL implementation in higher education STEM courses, student engagement with optional and flexible assignments scaffolded learning while fostering autonomy, reducing stress, and increasing engagement with their learning (Healy, Manchanda, & Nelson, 2025).

Post-Traditional Assessment in Higher Education

Most assessments can be categorized as formative (ongoing, informal) or summative (cumulative, formal) (Nelson, 2021). Unfortunately, teachers often feel compelled to follow a narrow, test-based curriculum that encourages students to be more focused on passing the exam than learning the content in deep and meaningful ways (Zakharov & Carnoy, 2021). When designing UDL assessments, educators must provide options for students to set goals, plan and manage their learning, and monitor their progress (Nelson, 2021). Narrowly defined traditional assessments, such as standardized objective tests, teacher-made objective tests, essay tests, and oral quizzes (Newton et al., 2020), should not be the primary method of assessment. In addition to creating barriers for some students,

traditional assessment formats frequently emphasize lower-order cognitive skills, such as recall and comprehension. Because of this tendency, traditional assessments are becoming increasingly corrupted by AI use (Pellegrino & Quellmalz, 2010).

Instead, Newton et al., (2020) argue for the increased use of non-traditional assessments that "humanize and deepen the learning experiences for both faculty and students" (p. 41). Non-traditional assessments typically require higher-order activities that employ cognitive skills like analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creation, require a deep understanding of the curriculum, demonstration of critical thinking, and complex problem-solving (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Ifelebuegu (2023) suggests creating assessments that require these higher-order cognitive skills such as specific contextual and problem-based scenarios, portfolio representation, and collaborative work. For example, Mimms (2022) recommended reflections that include face-to-face discussions incorporating peer-evaluation and constructive feedback that improved engagement, competency, and real-life value while addressing UDL principles. UDL's emphasis on providing options for action and expression encourages students to use alternative formats such as cartoons, storyboards, blogs, podcasts, and creation of material items to choose assessments with which they feel demonstrate their learning.

In this discussion, we refer to the non-traditional category of assessment as post-traditional. We define post-traditional assessments as those that draw upon UDL and CLT principles to provide multiple, dynamic, and flexible options for student choice that require evidence of higher order thinking and human engagement. We argue that when used as formative and summative assessments, post-traditional assessments can increase students' confidence in their academic capabilities, which often encourages them to work harder and achieve higher rates of success than with summative assessments.

The shift from sole reliance on traditional assessments to including, or favoring, post-traditional assessments requires releasing the belief that educators must (and can) create a finite and representative sampling of questions to determine student learning. Faculty must create meaningful learning activities and trust that most students enrolled in credentialing programs are committed to expanding their knowledge and developing the skills that will be required in their future professions. We believe that by foregrounding choice and autonomy in course curriculum and

assessments, students might be more eager and motivated to author their own work than turn to AI.

Examples of Post-Traditional Assessments

As the capabilities of AI have evolved at a rapid pace, the quest for post-traditional assignments that deter students from using AI for authorship can seem daunting at best and futile at worst. We offer the following examples for post-traditional assessments that may decrease student's use of AI, which we have found to be useful in our own assessments. These include: a)experiential and reflective assignments that require students to write personal reflections, create video diaries, or audio recordings about their personal experiences; b)collaborative and interactive assignments which require students to develop case studies and simulations using constructivist principles of collaborative learning and require human and physical interaction; c) performance-based assessments such as portfolios that require self-reflection, peer feedback, and evidence of revisions foster authentic learning; d) process-focused assignments that ask students to document learning progression through reflections, concept maps, or photo journals, making the tracking of learning personalized to students; e) applied research projects where students engage in action research and problem-based learning unique to the student's learning environment and requiring original application of the curriculum; and finally, f) creative and artistic expressions of learning, which are generally open to multiple media formats, link creative expression and critical analysis, and encourage students to share personal perspectives to demonstrate their understanding of information. These post-traditional approaches are examples that might provide educators with ideas for how to create assignments that might deter disingenuous student AI use. These assessments require personal experience, real-time interaction, physical and context-specific elements, process documentation, original creation, collaboration, and performance-based elements, which foster academic rigor with formats that are not easily replicated by AI tools.

Pedagogical Experiences with Post-Traditional Assessments

What follows are brief narratives from the first three authors about how they have implemented AI policies and UDL post-traditional assessments in their university courses, as well as a narrative from the fourth author centered on her experiences with AI as a university student.

Defining Parameters and Expectations

Marisa started her classes with a clear discussion about AI use by the students, but also explicitly explained her use of AI. She stated explicitly that she would not use AI to grade their assignments. This was a shocking revelation to some of the students, that a professor could use AI in this manner. Marisa also explained to her students that the act of learning can be hard and accompanied by a feeling of discomfort, which may lead them to seek a quick fix to alleviate that uncomfortable feeling. However, this interrupts their deep learning process. In her special education classes, she reminds her students that there are ethical implications to AI use that extend far beyond the course. In future courses, it will be assumed that students know the content (e.g. IEPs, inclusive practices, etc.) and will be able to thoughtfully discuss it with teachers in the field. In addition to the ethical consideration, this limits the usefulness of AI as a tool to enhance their learning, which is a key determinant when students choose whether or not to use AI for assignment completion (Zhu et al., 2024).

Infusing UDL's Multiple Means of Expression

Jennifer's approach emerged primarily as a way to implement more UDL into her course assessments, not to subvert student use of AI, though this was a somewhat unexpected side effect. After the COVID-19 quarantine and return to in-person instruction, there were many changes in how students interacted with each other and with their instructors. Jennifer also came to see the limitations of traditional essays and research papers in eliciting evidence of authentic learning from her students. It enabled some students to simply regurgitate information, while it created barriers for others for whom text was not the best medium. UDL, particularly 'multiple means of action and expression,' seemed like a way to address this. It was only after seeing the range of work that was submitted that Jennifer realized that in removing text-based barriers, students were able to engage more meaningfully with their learning using mediums that were not as compatible with AI programs. Over the past few semesters, students have created comic strips, crocheted an object and stitched key curriculum words onto it, created complex collages, wrote, performed, recorded, and annotated an original song, created and recorded podcasts, created detailed concept maps that showed connections between multiple course readings—all with contextual explanation and APA citations. Learning occurs when the affective parts of the brain are engaged, and

the assignments that students submitted showed more evidence of this than expected.

Course/Assignment Design that Might Discourage AI Use

Jessica has found success in writing assignment instructions and rubrics that discourage the use of AI by incorporating reflective components and/or limiting the resources that students can use to complete their work. For example, in her grief counseling course, students complete a paper based on reading a book (fiction or nonfiction) that has significant themes of grief and loss. Students are given choice in what they read; however, the assignment instructions are universal and require the textbook as a primary source and for students to choose a main character from their book as the focus. Creating these boundaries makes the use of AI more cumbersome for students, making it less likely that they will use it for their work. They also must incorporate specific examples from the book they read to substantiate their conclusions. Another useful approach is to develop assignments that require reflective and/or experiential components. It is quite difficult for AI to write a coherent reflection on what insights a student gained from attending an on-campus speaker, for instance.

A Student's Perspective

Worried about being accused of cheating or using it unethically, Kenyetta rarely uses AI. Her professors did not provide much detail on their policies regarding AI. It seems like they do not fully grasp the extent of its capabilities.

Then, she took a class with Dr. Ashton, who made it clear that assignments were meant to reflect the students' creativity and understanding. Kenyetta found Dr. Ashton's class to be the most engaging class she had ever taken. Most importantly, (author) cared about how well students understood the material rather than how well they memorized. In Dr. Ashton's class, her assignments prompted the students to explore how they felt about a topic and offered a variety of assignment options to demonstrate that learning. Kenyetta was able to generate new ideas that were personally meaningful. After each assignment, she felt confident because she had engaged with the material in a meaningful way. This style of teaching and assessment really worked for Kenyetta. AI cannot be used to tell you how to feel about an assignment or reflect on your personal experiences.

Each of these narratives expresses a unique perspective on AI use that reflects the author's academic position, professional discipline, personality, and preferences.

Marisa integrated the language and logic of AI into the curriculum while building an environment based on mutual trust and respect. Jennifer initially incorporated more UDL in her classes to remove barriers for her students while modeling inclusive pedagogy and assessment more authentically and later realized that this shift created a natural barrier to AI use. Jessica's approach foregrounded choice and reflection while limiting resources and providing clear guidelines, which reflects how post-traditional assessments can be created with more structure. Finally, Kenyetta shares her unique perspective as a university student grappling with AI use, which provided a powerful testament to the power of post-traditional assessments in encouraging students to take ownership and authorship over their work in a world where the pulls to use AI are strong.

Implications for Practice

The push to utilize more constructivist and UDL assessments is enhanced by using High-Impact Practices (HIPs) in higher education. HIPs in higher education include engaging educational practices such as first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, writing-intensive courses, learning communities, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, service-learning/ community-based learning, internships, capstone projects, and portfolios (Kuh, 2008). HIPs boost student retention and degree completion, can significantly enhance a university student's higher education experience, and increase a student's ability to self-regulate and improve their learning (Kuh, 2008; Ndoye, 2024). HIPs also help students develop critical thinking, active learning practices, collaboration, integration of prior learning, a sense of belonging, and sustained engagement in their learning and increased likelihood of success (Kuh, 2008; Ndoye, 2024) all factors and outcomes recommended by the literature on post-traditional assessments. When educators heed the advice of AI critics to create assignments that foster higher-order cognitive thinking, they also provide a greater proportion of HIPs in their courses and expose more students to the benefits of UDL in reducing educational barriers. The intersection of HIPs, UDL, and CLT lands at post-traditional assessment, which represents a pedagogically sound approach that counters some of the challenges associated with the use of AI.

While there is no explicit guide for how to deter AI use by using UDL, we encourage instructors to explore pedagogic changes appropriate for their disciplines, teaching styles, curriculum, and student needs that might make it less likely for a student to

reach for AI to author their work. This discussion encourages instructors to reconsider their assessments and consider how removing barriers and creating opportunities for autonomy and authentic assessment might allow students to engage more actively with their learning and demonstrate how essential topics resonate with them while also authoring their own work.

Educators in a global and diverse society must anticipate diversity in our learners, including students with disabilities (SWD), LGBTQAI+ students, students learning English as a New Language (ENL), and students with non-dominant racial/ethnic identities. To best address the needs of diverse students, UDL encourages us to identify as many barriers to learning as possible and choose approaches that minimize them (Meyer, et al. 2014). These might include emotional barriers like anxiety and engagement and format barriers like language, text modality, and rigidity. UDL provides a strong framework for structuring coursework that maintains high standards for students while removing physical, curricular, and technological obstacles to learning (Nelson, 2021).

There are myriad ethical implications related to AI use in higher education, and as AI evolves, the ethical implications become even more complicated. AI cannot and should not replace the role of the sentient human teacher, as AI is not equivalent to human intelligence (Jafari & Keykha, 2023). Institutions must tackle ethical challenges with security, privacy, transparency, and equity. Faculty must make an ethical commitment to themselves and their profession, acknowledging AI as a tool and not a stand-in for teaching and research. Moreover, faculty need to be willing to reconsider their role as assessors and possibly cede some degree of control over student learning. We have to trust that students enroll in our programs and courses to learn about a profession and by diversifying our assessments and de-centering text-based traditional assessments, we not only open up spaces for students to engage meaningfully with our curriculum, but we might also be making it less appealing, or less possible, to use AI unethically.

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