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AI is Making the College Experience Lonelier.

Does ChatGPT's 'study mode' mean students will spend less time talking with their peers?



THE REVIEW | ESSAY

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In the coffee shop on our campus, students gather around a blackboard. On the table lies an open copy of Lobachevsky's *Theory of Parallels*. Each student holds a different color of chalk and marks a different element in the theorem they're proving: blue for spherical triangles, orange for parallel lines, green for perpendiculars. Line by line, their multicolored diagram illuminates a stage of the theorem none of them had seen individually. They notice their mistakes, point them out, correct them; joke, laugh, groan in frustration; suddenly find the right line to draw to make everything clear. This is the real work at which our assignments aim: not the presentation of the theorems in class, important though that is, but the behind-the-scenes work students do with their peers. These hours in common study spaces, between classes, are when students absorb and process the material in their own way and time.

In all the clamor around AI's effects on higher education, we may have been fixated on the wrong danger. The loudest concerns have been about plagiarism: that students will use AI to generate their essays and dodge the work of writing. There are ways for instructors to mitigate this threat—more in-class writing, more reliance on class discussion and oral examinations—but these are not always suitable, and some students will still attempt to plagiarize with these new tools as they did with the old ones.

But even for those students committed to doing their own work, AI poses a threat that is quieter and harder to measure: that they will go off to college and find the experience of learning far more solitary, far lonelier, than ever before. That is the threat that AI increasingly poses to higher education today: not that it will steal our words, but that it will steal our ability to think and work together.

ChatGPT's primary market looks to be academic. Futurism recently reported a dramatic two-thirds drop in ChatGPT use coinciding with the end of the academic year. OpenAI has now debuted a new "study mode" designed to help students draft assignments, prepare for exams, and receive personalized tutoring. The drive to embed AI in student learning is not coming from tech companies alone: some universities—like Indiana University, with its soon-to-be-launched ChatAIU—are actively integrating AI to cut costs and boost "outcomes."

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"Study mode" is mostly marketing, a fresh label on the same tool. It repackages existing functions to appeal to students without fundamentally changing what ChatGPT can do. But that marketing signals a new, radical expansion into academic life: Why study with a handful of classmates or meet with professors or TAs when you can absorb the synthesized opinions of millions in seconds?

The problem is that the messy, time-intensive process of studying with peers is at least as valuable as the lessons absorbed through direct instruction in the classroom. Large language models recycle what others have said, and the programs themselves cannot understand anything they regurgitate. They don't understand why you don't understand a concept; they are not generous or subtle, nor do they read between the lines to understand the assumptions behind your question. You have no need to overcome shyness before them and admit boldly what you don't know. ChatGPT is a powerful and efficient research tool. "Study mode" will save you time. It will even help you sidestep social anxiety—but it won't help you work through it.

The loss isn't just to the students trying to understand, but to those trying to explain. As faculty, we can tell you that you hardly ever understand something deeply until you have to explain it to someone who doesn't yet understand it. And let's not even mention the social loss when, instead of bonding over a difficult assignment, students in the same class simply work alone in their dorm rooms.

At its best, the kind of learning students do in college is challenging, collaborative, frustrating, enjoyable, and peppered with earned insights. Results are important—but education is a process with results, not a result arising from incidental processes. As majors come to matter less for post-graduation careers, students should recognize the advantage in thinking and working together and in learning to tackle unanticipated challenges creatively. This is all the more important as technology like ChatGPT replaces certain kinds of human labor. In this landscape, ChatGPT's newest "study mode" feature feels outdated, built for yesterday's expectations. It's not prepackaged summaries or made-to-order study guides that students need, but the messy experience of shaping ideas together.

Where we teach, St. John's College, that messy experience is front and center. All of our classes emphasize this collaborative aspect to learning. We offer no lecture classes and expect no note-taking; instead, the work is collective inquiry. The classroom is deliberately horizontal: faculty members are not authorities but fellow learners, model questioners. Students test their ideas against one another and learn to speak precisely, listen closely, and practice the patience and generosity collaboration requires. Frictions inevitably arise, but over time something remarkable happens: the group begins to think together, ideas flowing from one mind to the next.

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These conversations may begin in the classroom, but they certainly don't end there. Walk by a common area and see students at a blackboard preparing group demonstrations of theorems from Euclid, Galileo, or Newton. Sit on the quad and notice students busily reading Hobbes before class, popping their heads up to ask one another what a particularly obscure sentence could mean. Stop by the campus coffee shop and hear faculty and students discussing an Einstein paper. The campus is abuzz at all hours with the sounds of collaborative study; it's how we know without asking, without checking, that our students are deeply engaged in their education. Take those collaborations away, outsource them to a large language model, swap natural thoughts for synthetic ones—and the rest is silence.

The appeal of ChatGPT's "study mode" relies on a vertical conception of education, in which the person who does not yet know simply imbibes knowledge from the one who already knows. But AI cannot really replicate the horizontal aspect of education, in which students work together to figure something out that none of them knows in advance. This horizontality can take many forms. At St. John's, it permeates nearly all aspects of our education. But it is present at every college to some degree, from peer review of essays to discussion-based classes to student-led reading groups. Sometimes all it takes to introduce students to this horizontal model is for faculty to come to class with questions that are alive for them, for the class to mull over together. The only way students will not succumb to the temptations of ChatGPT is if they are truly persuaded of the joy and fruitfulness of horizontal learning.

Despite our concerns, we are optimistic about the future of higher education. AI-generated papers can help us to articulate what good human writing can do that machines can't; so too, AI imitations of other essential activities can force us to notice and emphasize those aspects of the college experience that can't be programmed and replaced. If learning were merely a matter of acquiring information, it could easily be a solitary affair. But real learning, the cultivation of one's own mind, is the work of many (chalk-coated) hands.

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