Writing Spaces

Assignments & Activities Archive

AI and Language: Facilitating Emergent Participation in New Discourse Communities

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AI and Language: Facilitating Emergent Participation in New Discourse Communities

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Overview

Since the public release of OpenAI's ChatGPT in November 2022, instructors and scholars have grappled with the ways that AI technologies are transforming writing practices. In a world that increasingly relies on Generative AI (GenAI) technologies like text generators to produce content for public and professional contexts, there is great exigency for writing instructors to foster students' critical AI literacies. Developing critical AI literacy requires that students explore, identify, and critique the affordances and the limitations of GenAI technologies, including the ways that they reproduce cultural and linguistic bias, render certain literacies and language practices invisible (Johnson 170), reify dominant ideologies about standard language and monolingualism, and contribute to the continued erasure of the "missing people" at the margins of our discipline (Owusu-Ansah 143).

Examinations of the relationship between AI technologies, language, and writing can be facilitated in first-year writing courses through the concept of discourse communities (Swales). Recent writing studies scholarship describes the role of language in defining a discourse community (Melzer), examines how language and power intersect within discourse communities (Sánchez-Martín), and encourages students to develop a critical awareness of the language expectations in the discourse communities they are a part of (Tremain). This research suggests that writing pedagogies should account for students' experiences with language and discourse and should prepare students to negotiate the language expectations they will encounter in

discourse communities within and beyond academia. The process of developing a critical awareness of both language expectations as well as the constraints of GenAI technologies can be articulated in four main stages:

1. Identifying the language expectations of a discourse community

2. Enacting the linguistic patterns of the discourse community

3. Interrogating the language expectations of the discourse community

4. Negotiating the language expectations of the discourse community

This assignment asks students to collaborate with an AI text generator in order to complete this four-step process. Students train the GenAI tool to analyze and replicate the language and style of writing studies scholarship, compare the outputs with students' own work in the course, and reflect on the constraints and affordances of AI technologies for discourse community participation. This process allows students to practice making informed, agentic choices about their engagement with the community's language expectations as well as the ways that they might employ GenAI technologies in future writing contexts.

Time Commitment

3-4 weeks

Materials

For this assignment, students will need to access an AI text generator like Claude, Copilot, or ChatGPT. Instructors should think carefully about the tools that they choose to integrate into their classroom activities. It is also important to have critical discussions with students

about the ethics of using different GenAI technologies and the processes through which they are trained.

Additionally, instructors will need to collect samples from writing studies scholarship, ideally in collaboration with students and gathered from course readings that they are already familiar with. Texts should be grouped into two sample sets: one which represents dominant understandings of academic discourse and one which employs translanguaging and code-meshing. For the first set of sample texts, I draw from well-known writing studies texts like Nancy Sommers' "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," Deborah Brandt's "Sponsors of Literacy," and James Paul Gee's "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction." Popular translanguaged and code-meshed texts include Vershawn Ashanti Young's "Should Writers Use They Own English," excerpts from Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and Brittany Hull et al.'s "Dressed but Not Tryin' to Impress." For the sample sets, I extract short passages, around 1-3 paragraphs, from each text.

Assignment Process

- Students should begin the unit by familiarizing themselves with research on discourse communities, such as Dan Melzer's "Understanding Discourse Communities." This reading introduces first-year writers to John Swale's criteria for discourse communities as well as invites them to begin thinking about the relationship between how power circulates in discourse communities. The criteria "a specific lexis (specialized language)" will serve as the main focus of the unit. Instructors should spend time discussing Swales' criteria with students and practice analyzing familiar and unfamiliar discourse communities paying particular attention to the ways that discourse communities use language in different ways.

- Next, students should analyze the first set of sample texts

from the writing studies discourse community. When analyzing this sample set, students should try to identify the language conventions of the discourse community by examining the linguistic choices and voices represented in the texts. Students might identify the languages and dialects used in the text, the tone of the author, the overall style of the text, and any specialized lexis used. Instructors should encourage students to think about why certain language expectations operate; how individual writers, texts, or linguistic choices reinforce or resist particular language expectations; and how power interacts with language to privilege and silence certain voices within the discourse community. Students should then input the sample texts into an AI text generator and prompt it to generate its own analysis of the language conventions of the set. In a large class discussion, students can share the outputs that they received, compare their own analyses with the GenAI's response, and reflect on how the outputs reproduce dominant linguistic expectations for academic discourse.

- Students should then prompt the GenAI tool to rewrite one of their own previous writing assignments, replicating the language conventions of the sample texts that they have already input. Students might ask the AI to rewrite a discussion post from a previous unit, a portion of a major writing project that they've already submitted, or any other text that they've written for the course. Students can then share their results with each other, evaluate the outputs they received, and assess whether the AI effectively enacted the language conventions of the discourse community. Students should also reflect on the process of collaborating with the AI to produce discourse within the writing studies discourse community. Instructors might ask students to identify the differences between the scholar-, student-, and AI-generated texts; determine how useful the GenAI tool was in the

process of identifying and enacting the language conventions of the discourse community; and reflect on how they might utilize AI text generators in future writing situations.

▪ After working with texts which embody dominant academic discourses, students should familiarize themselves with scholarship that discusses translanguaging, code-meshing, and language justice. Students might read Lisa Tremain's "What Can I Add to the Discourse Community? How Writers Use Code-Meshing and Translanguaging to Negotiate Discourse," Christina Sánchez-Martín's "Beyond Language Difference in Writing: Investigating Complex and Equitable Language Practices in Writing," or Bailey et al.'s "What Color is my Voice? Academic Writing and the Myth of Standard English." Instructors should dedicate at least one class session to discussing concepts from these readings, asking students to think about the languages that circulate in the writing studies discourse community and how power is distributed across those languages. Students might then reflect on their own experiences using language(s) within academic discourse communities and the ways that they assimilate into or resist language expectations.

▪ Next, students should repeat the second and third steps above with the second set of sample texts which use translanguaging and code-meshing. This time, students should analyze how the authors fulfill or resist the language expectations of the writing studies discourse community that they determined earlier in the unit. Additionally, students should compare the ways that the GenAI tool responds to the translanguaged and code-meshed texts with the ways that it responded to the first set of sample texts. Instructors might ask students to reflect on how linguistic or cultural bias emerges in the AI's responses, what this indicates about the AI tool itself, and implications for future use.

- Finally, students will compose a reflection on the preceding activities, specifically considering the ways that GenAI tools might affect how writers participate in new discourse communities. Students should consider the affordances, constraints, and ethical implications of using AI text generators; the utility of using GenAI to analyze and enact the language expectations of new discourse communities; and the ways that GenAI technologies perpetuate standard language ideology and monolingualism.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Learn about discourse communities

- Examine the differences between manual and AI-generated texts

- Discuss the affordances and constraints of AI text-generation tools

- Reflect on the role of language and GenAI in discourse community participation

- Develop AI literacy and critical language awareness

Learning Accommodations

- Instructors should encourage students to utilize text-to-speech software when appropriate so that all learners can engage with course readings through the modes that are most accessible or productive for them.

- Notes from class discussions should be recorded in a collaborative, shared document, so that students can engage in discussion nonverbally by posing and answering questions

or contributing comments directly to the document. This document should remain accessible to students throughout the unit so that they may refer to their notes as needed.

- Students should be offered multiple composing options for the final reflective piece, allowing them to exercise agency in choosing how they engage with the assignment. For example, students might choose to compose a traditional written essay, record a podcast-style discussion, create presentational materials, etc.

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