Headline: Elon University embraces AI: Integration looks different in every classroom as professors choose whether to include AI into their curriculum

Deck: As Elon University moves to integrate AI tools into its curriculum, departments across campus are exploring how artificial intelligence can reshape learning. A wide range of integration can be found in every department as students adjust.

Byline: Cassie Weymouth

As a push for AI use in classrooms has swept Elon University, professors and students vary in their opinion and use of tools like ChatGPT and Gemini. From professors encouraging and designing projects around the use of AI to others banning it from their classroom, AI has become a topic of debate on college campuses. Some classes like Politics and Mass Media have introduced projects that utilize ChatGPT asking it to write analyses based on a student’s notes, while others ask that their students to refrain from using any AI. As AI becomes a larger part of the conversation, how do professors and students feel about these changes?

Some, like Tom Kerr from the Political Science Department, ask students to refrain from using AI to write papers.

“Having the knowledge base of doing your own reading and writing makes it so that you can utilize the AI tool better in the future. So, I think that it's necessary that you have to be able to think for yourself, because really when you use AI, you're outsourcing the creative process. You have to quality check, so having the skill set to do it on your own makes it so you can use AI more effectively in the future,” says Kerr.

When asked if it is easy to pick out AI written papers, he said that regardless of his own policies it is becoming harder and harder to distinguish AI written papers from student written ones.

“No, I don't think there is. Yeah, even over the past year and a half, I've seen the quality of what's clearly AI increase. It's still recognizable, but it's not as blaringly obvious as it used to be. So I think probably within the year, two years max, we'll get to the point where it's not going to be detectable, which is unfortunate,” says Kerr.

Others, like Israel Balderas a journalism professor, have decided to take a different approach, implementing AI into their classroom and curriculum.

“I started talking about AI in the context of ethics, I could recognize that this tool would make it easier for students to do their homework, like Grammarly, like a calculator, but I thought this was different in that this thing was going to evolve over time, that whatever it was that I was teaching in the winter of that year, it would be different by the spring time, and certainly different by the fall. So as a teacher, AI has forced me to evolve my curriculum, my you know, in academia, we call it my pedagogy,” says Balderas.

He also spoke about how AI would change the face of journalism, and how students would need to adapt to that.

“For me, what I've been rethinking about is, how do we get away from this idea that journalism equals content, that journalists are content creators, and instead, journalism is about service. Journalism is about what we do. Journalism is about why we do it, not what we do. The what is, oh, we create content, okay, but people don't buy the what, people buy the why, the why, the why. I'm passionate, I want to know people. I'm curious. I'm curious about the world. And so for me, I'm rethinking. When I talk to students, it's not so much focusing on, get me a good video. Get me the why, the w, the five W's. It's go and talk to somebody, learn something, and then come back and tell me what you learned. That's your story. Yeah. I mean, I think journalism is human interaction. I mean human interaction is journalism,” says Balderas.

Students have also had varying opinions on the use and implementation of AI in classrooms. Emma Butsch, a finance major in her sophomore year, has stated that her professors have a wide range of policies and that they are fairly new.

“I would say, up until this year, like not that much, but almost all of my professors have actually mentioned it, two of which have said they're fine using it as a go off point. They're like, please don't write a paper using AI, but if you're going to look up questions, it's a useful resource. So they actually would not be shocked if we use AI on some of their work,” Butsch said.

However, she has mixed feelings on how she feels about AI.

“I know it's become such a controversial topic, I think that you should be careful with how much you use AI as a crutch for your learning. Like, yeah, it can solve problems for you, but can you actually do them? That's what you really need to know. And I think like the idea that AI becomes smarter than humans, I don't know like that feels so sci fi right now,” Butsch said.

Amie Sanneh, a strategic communications major, has also seen an increase in AI use in her classrooms.

“Yes, in most classes, either we address it and say that we're probably going to use it in our class, or it's the opposite, and we address it, and we say we're not going to ever use it in our class. Don't use it to turn and work things like that. But there are some classes where we use it to our advantage and like, use it to do research things like that,” said Sanneh.

Elisa Edwards, an International Global Studies major, stated that she is very nervous about the use of AI.

“Personally, I feel like AI is really tricky to use in classrooms, sometimes I feel like I'm using it wrong. So I kind of stray away from it because I feel like I'm cheating regardless,” says Edwards.

Regardless, of the wide ranging opinions on the use of AI in classrooms, it is being implemented more and more frequently.