July, 2023

A Submission in response to the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Inquiry into AI in Education

Australian Association for the Teaching of English

About AATE

The Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) is a national professional association established and supported by state and territory English teaching associations. Together we provide a national voice with local impact, strengthen professional connections and collaborate to influence the teaching of English in Australia. We are active in:

Leading the profession

AATE generates and promotes opportunities for state and territory associations to share their knowledge nationally.

AATE contributed to the development of the national professional standards for teachers through its engagement with the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership.

As a member of the International Federation for the Teaching of English, AATE promotes the work and interests of English teachers at home and internationally.

Advocating for teachers

AATE represents the professional interests of its members directly to the Federal Government and its agencies.

AATE joins with other professional teaching bodies and subject associations through various educational authorities and forums – amplifying the voice of the profession on matters of common interest.

AATE provides a national voice, working with state and territory associations to ensure key messages are heard by the Federal Government on matters such as the Australian Curriculum: English that impact the teaching of English in Australian classrooms.

Professional learning

AATE showcases Australian and international best practice in teaching English through our national conference.

English in Australia, our highly regarded, peer reviewed professional journal shares current research and classroom practice, highlights trends in teaching and brings international and national best practice to the fore.

AATE develops professional publications such as the AATE Interface series – focusing on teacher research at the interface between theory and classroom practice.

Providing state of the art resources

AATE is proactive in producing state of the art teaching resources, drawing on the expertise of teacher writers from state and territory English teaching associations.

In partnership with the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership, AATE writers produced the English field and learning area statements and English annotated illustrations of practice to support the National Professional Standards for Teachers.

AATE initiated and led a consortium to produce units of work for the English for the Australian Curriculum project, funded by Education Services Australia and available free of charge online at www.e4ac.edu.au.

AATE is currently working with the Asia Education Foundation to produce units of work for the Engage with Asia through English and History Pilot Project.

AATE sources and reviews the latest professional titles and classroom resources We maintain a carefully selected catalogue of publications for purchase through our online bookstore at www.aate.org.au/bookstore.

Recent titles in AATE's Interface series are: Digital Games: Literacy in Action; Teenagers and Reading: Literary Heritages, Cultural Contexts and Contemporary Reading Practices; Teaching Australian Literature: from Classroom Conversations to National Imaginings.

Our Process

Our submission draws on contributions from a working party. Members of the working party are highly experienced Australian English teacher educators, researchers and former English teachers. We identified four items from the terms of reference that relate specifically to the work of English teaching, namely:

1. The strengths and benefits of generative AI tools for children, students, educators and systems and the ways in which they can be used to improve education outcomes;
2. The future impact generative AI tools will have on teaching and assessment practices in all education sectors, the role of educators, and the education workforce generally;
3. The risks and challenges presented by generative AI tools, including in ensuring their safe and ethical use and in promoting ongoing academic and research integrity;
4. International and domestic practices and policies in response to the increased use of generative AI tools in education, including examples of best practice implementation, independent evaluation of outcomes, and lessons applicable to the Australian context

As is evident in the responses below, each item has been reframed as a question and related specifically to English teaching.

Question 1

What are the strengths and benefits of AI tools for students and teachers of English and the ways they can be used to improve English outcomes?

AI tools, as novel and rapidly developing as they are, have much to offer teaching and learning in English. In particular, generative AI has much to offer the teaching of writing. The way AI tools can work with textual input and reframe this input text into other genres offers a creative tool that teachers and students can utilise to explore concepts of textual generation.

These tools might also lower the entry barrier for certain forms of writing and creative composition. It may simplify the process for students to create multimodal texts, music, videos, and written narratives. It is conceivable that students who find writing challenging, may be scaffolded through digital technologies, with the support of teachers, to produce sophisticated texts. AI tools could be of particular value to ESL learners as they are developing mastery of English, and as assistive technology for students in inclusive settings with special needs that impede their capacity to learn to write.

Furthermore, the ability of AI tools to perform literacy tasks immediately, such as summarising a text, writing topic sentences, or synthesising multiple reports, can be brought into English teaching to support a wide range of comprehension tasks. Lower order literacy activities that might take students significant time could be replaced with AI processes, creating time for the more valuable and challenging higher order thinking that subject English requires of all students.

There is of course room in the English curriculum for using generative AI in creative ways beyond the teaching and assessment of essay style writing. While AI will inevitably dramatically change the nature of teaching and assessment in English, it is important to note that we are a long way away from such outcomes and that such a future is entirely dependent on a generation of teachers raised with complex understandings of how AI tools work and how they can work in combination with pedagogical imperatives.

Question 2

What is the future impact of AI tools on the teaching and assessment of English, the role of educators, and the English teaching workforce more specifically?

We hypothesise that AI will be employed to generate assessment tasks, provide formative and summative feedback on such tasks, and provide teachers and students with advice on 'next steps'. While we don't advocate for the transfer of all responsibility of assessing writing to artificial intelligence, there is potential for students to use AI as a self and peer-assessment tool. This could enhance their writing skills without the immediate need for teacher feedback.

However, there is significant cause for concern regarding the impact of generative AI in the English classroom, especially with regards to extended composition (writing) in English. The potential for key elements of composition to be outsourced to algorithms risks undermining the development of important human processes between writing to learn and learning to write. Teachers may misunderstand and underestimate the importance of thinking and problem solving in teaching complexities of language and processes of writing, including drafting, rewriting, publishing, especially those teaching the subject without a specialisation. Given that performative contexts for writing (e.g. exams, NAPLAN testing, auto marking, narrow rubrics) dominate and have become increasingly high stakes, teachers may see students' use of AI for writing as a shortcut for better outcomes.

Furthermore, it may be tempting to overcome students' fear of the 'blank page' or not knowing where to start in poorly designed writing tasks by allowing students to generate first drafts via AI. This would detract from the obligation to ensure that students have ideas, content and knowledge to write about. Designing front loading and pre-writing experiences and phases of learning is a critical part of teachers' designing for learning. Transforming writing into a process of tweaking AI generated robotext, risks minimising the creative potential of young people. Key elements that make writing a meaningful human communicative activity - such as sense of (human) audience and (real world) purpose - are at risk of being abandoned.

Teachers who feel less comfortable teaching writing, including those teaching out-of-area, teachers, may be misled by certain claims about the capacity of Generative AI to produce human-level writing. When coupled with reports from teachers who are already using generative AI in lesson planning, there is a danger that we forget how meaningful lesson planning for students must always be sensitive to individual students, classrooms and schools in order to maintain effective and high-quality teaching and learning. Given the well-reported work-load challenges already facing teachers, we may have created the perfect storm of conditions where teachers see generative AI as a solution to a myriad of problems. It is here that

government can intervene with cross-sectorial professional learning that favours the needs of students and an ethical approach to what can be achieved with generative AI tools.

It is clear that the emergence and evolution of these digital tools will also require revisiting the nature of initial teacher education (ITE). The teaching of writing is a fundamental component of English ITE. If the future of English teaching is to incorporate the best and most appropriate parts of AI technologies, then socialisation into such practices must begin at the pre-service stages of teacher development.

Question 3

What are the risks and challenges of AI tools, including issues of safe and ethical uses and the promotion of ongoing academic and research integrity?

There are many ethical issues associated with artificial intelligence, including bias, discrimination, copyright and intellectual property concerns, datafication, privacy and security, and the potential reinforcement of social inequalities due to underrepresentation of marginalised groups in the datasets. AI writing machines that privilege 'most likely' or 'most common' next word or item flatten out criticality, creativity, individual thought, and ingenuity. All of these are qualities that are highly valued in our curriculum. Qualities of writing such as 'personal voice' are eradicated by reliance on the generative AI simulacra of voice.

Generative AI is a commercial for-profit product. We know very little about the corpus of text that these large language models have been trained upon, except that they are limited to publicly available online material from finite time periods, and that no permissions were given by anyone anywhere for the scooping and repurposing and repackaging for commercial use of the data.

Every student who creates an account with one of these AI programs, and enters data into the commercial platforms, hands over personal and private information. This raises enormous problems for teachers who encourage or require students to create accounts with AI platforms for the purposes of learning and teaching.

Problematically, banning the use of these technologies in English classrooms may also create issues of equity. There is great risk of widening divides as students who are most privileged, including those in independent schools, may bypass state-imposed regulations, or be able to pay for advanced versions of the software that are not available to less-advantaged students. In an unevenly resourced education system, this must be a consideration.

Banning new technologies like AI is not a viable solution. Any integration of AI tools needs to be coupled with a rich and broad critical digital literacy education for teachers and students so that informed engagement can occur. Writing is about thinking and outsourcing thinking to algorithms is incredibly dangerous. Before teachers use such technologies with their students, we need a comprehensive understanding of the ethical issues. This could be addressed through professional development. These concerns should also be discussed with students prior to using artificial intelligence.

While AI poses risks to academic integrity, these risks have always emerged when new technologies are incorporated into education. Students have always been able to utilise the latest technology to breach

research integrity. Even today, in an age when students sit external exams, it is not uncommon to hear reports from assessors of students memorising essays downloaded from the internet and simply copying this material down in exam booklets. Having said this, academic and research integrity are profoundly challenged by unacknowledged use of generative AI in schools and higher education. We suggest that English teachers will need to carefully develop protocols regarding the use of such tools within clearly defined parameters and purposes and acknowledging such use. To put it simply, it is likely to be better to use and acknowledge such use rather than not to acknowledge at all and allow students using generative AI to slip under the radar.

Question 4

What do we know about international and domestic practices and policies relating to the use of AI tools in English education, including examples of best practice implementation, independent evaluation of outcomes, and lessons applicable to the Australian context?

The European Union has been the first to attempt serious regulation of artificial intelligence, and to offer guidance in education through the EU council. To date the various state education policies in Australia, for example New South Wales, South Australia, and Queensland, are very broad, and only focus on Chat-GPT as opposed to the broader suite of generative AI tools. Australian education policy needs to address the full multimodal nature of generative AI, and the fact that these tools can be used to generate not only text, but also audio image and video.

While some jurisdictions have acted cautiously in deciding to temporarily ban AI tools, we reiterate our stance that this is not a long-term viable solution to the challenges of these technologies. Such a step fails to recognise that students possess sophisticated digital skills, often more advanced than their teachers, that can be used to evade such bans. Students already use a range of online tools to plagiarise. Like all new technologies, education rather than prohibition is the best approach. It is important that we explore and harness ways for our students to advance their knowledge of AI technologies.

We acknowledge that there is a rapidly evolving effort to generate materials to support educators wishing to incorporate such materials into school use. The field is too nascent to be able to refer to 'best practice implementation'. Schools and teachers are desperate for government to dedicate resources that provide the kinds of informed advice and exemplars necessary to work productively with AI tools in classrooms, whilst protecting the digital identities of our students. These resources must be both generic and subject-specific. OECD (2020) work on "Trustworthy AI in education" emphasises the imperative to develop complex skills that are less easy to automate (eg. higher order skills like critical thinking and creativity'). This should guide our planning and regulation in this space.

Report authors

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