

Ethical costs of GenAI CoW: Summary of Main Themes

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Notes were emailed out by Ting Li a few weeks ago

Main themes

1. AI and the Academic Mission
2. Critical Thinking vs. Professional Preparation
3. Skills and Cognitive Development
4. Institutional and Policy Questions
5. Environmental and Ethical Costs
6. Homogenization of Thought and Language
7. AI as a Pedagogical Subject and Tool
8. Emotional, Motivational, and Social Effects

AI and the Academic Mission

- Widespread concerns that Generative AI undermines the core purpose of a liberal arts education, with a focus on how it affects critical thinking, creativity, experiential learning, and independent thought.
- Faculty repeatedly return to Skidmore's motto, "*Creative Thought Matters*," arguing that AI contradicts or erodes this principle.
- The central anxiety for most: AI shortcuts the struggle that makes learning meaningful.

Critical Thinking vs. Professional Preparation

- One of the most persistent divides: Is our goal to produce critical thinkers or employable graduates?
- Some faculty argue we cannot ignore AI's presence in the workforce; others fear adopting it too easily betrays the educational mission.
- An emerging answer to this issue is that the tension itself must be part of how AI is taught—students must learn to question its role in their professional and intellectual lives.

Skills and Cognitive Development

- Recurrent fears of deskilling, cognitive offloading, and loss of foundational learning—especially in writing, research, and analysis.
- Debate over where AI might belong: some faculty see it as inappropriate in 100–200-level “foundations” courses, but potentially useful at advanced levels.
- Shared concern that students “can’t tell when AI is wrong,” reflecting weak metacognition and information literacy.

Institutional and Policy Questions

- Lack of clarity on whether a college-wide policy is possible or desirable.
- Debate between a policy framework (ethical boundaries, plagiarism rules) versus curricular integration (teaching AI as subject and tool).
- Calls for faculty involvement in any future policymaking and recognition that disciplinary differences make a single approach challenging.

Environmental and Ethical Costs

- Strong through-line across groups: AI's environmental footprint (data centers, resource consumption, energy use).
- Ethical concerns about Big Tech, data mining, profit motives, and intellectual property theft from artists and writers.
- Concerns that AI exacerbates existing inequalities—technological, financial, linguistic, and cultural. There is the recognition that AI facilities have clear environmental and social impacts in marginalized communities.
- Questions about how underserved or marginalized students access and use AI tools, and whether reliance on commercial systems deepens divides.

Homogenization of Thought and Language

- Some participants noted that AI “flattens” or homogenizes language, producing sameness in student writing.
- There was persistent anxiety about the loss of voice, creativity, and heterogeneity—skills especially valued at Skidmore.
- The fear: students’ individual intellectual and cultural expression could be erased.

AI as Pedagogical Subject and Tool

- AI could serve as an object of inquiry—a way to teach ethics, digital literacy, or critical analysis.
- Possible use in advanced courses, or as a comparison point for human creativity, discernment, and process.
- The key is intentional framing: AI must serve learning, not replace it.

Emotional, Motivational, and Social Effects

- Concerns that AI lowers students' excitement about learning, encourages apathy, and diminishes resilience.
- The “shortcut effect”: students lose the satisfaction and self-confidence that come from hard intellectual work.
- Some raised the question of whether AI might cause emotional harm