Morris: The truth behind ChatGPT

Opinion: Some college students have resorted to relying on Chat GPT or other AI platforms for help with their assignments. While AI has a number of benefits, there are some critical issues we need to be aware of like privacy laws and misinformation.

Daria Morris, Opinion Columnist

In the spring term of my freshman year of college, I finally gave in to using Artificial Intelligence platforms to help me understand some of my more difficult coursework. I successfully never used it until I started taking science classes here at University of Oregon. But, as soon as I was stuck trying to decipher one of my complicated assignments for my anthropology lecture, I asked for a chat to explain the criteria in simple terms.

Since then, I have used AI platforms to grammar check some of my assignments and essays, summarize instructions for homework assignments, help me create thesis statements for essays and generate ideas for my argumentative articles. For me, it has reached a point where I use it at least once a day. Nowadays, I rarely go through and grammar-check my work myself.

Molly McPherson

ChatGPT is an artificial intelligence chatbot made by OpenAI. (Molly McPherson/Emerald)

I think there are plenty of benefits to ChatGPT, Grammarly, Gemini and other AI platforms, especially in an academic setting. AI is often referred to as a "modern approach to learning," allowing us access to a wide range of tools for certain aspects of our class work.

I don't mean cheating. However, I know that UO students and I have a tendency to lean on AI way too much for help, and there are negatives to that. A study performed by Dr. Mohammed Ahmed, who worked as an assistant professor in engineering management at Eastern Michigan University, showed that not only is AI reducing our critical thinking skills, otherwise known as cognitive offloading, but open access AI is not always reliable.

Leanne Fan, a journalist for the Nexus reported Dr. Ahmed's findings. "Survey data from 285 students found that 68.9% of laziness and 27.7% of the loss of decision-making skills were the result of artificial intelligence use."

Jessica Talisman, a senior information architect for Adobe, works primarily with AI platforms. She has produced several podcasts relating to the subject of AI, such as "The AI Digest," as well as "Data Dialogues," a podcast about navigating the data landscape and "The Data Democracy, "a podcast about educational neuroscience.

I asked Talisman what she thought the biggest concerns were for students at UO using AI platforms and what they should be cautious about.

"It is a large language model, (or) what is known as LLM. It is a statistical model, not a number model. It is notoriously terrible with numbers, security, data, data analytics and realistically is only a sophomore to junior level when it comes to data coding," Talisman said.

"AI such as ChatGPT has a lot of disinformation, misinformation and bias. Be careful about fact-checking; it is known to have hallucinations. In other words, it can be seen as AI's creative agency, meaning that it can get very creative and make things up that are not factual," Talisman said.

Talisman also talked about potential student overuse of ChatGPT and other AI-related platforms, which may reduce their ability to learn.

"There are a lot of academic scholarly publications that prove there is a broad range of cognitive offloading. Critical thinking is one of the main objectives of education. It is the mission of the university. If critical thinking is obstructed, then your brain fails to develop knowledge, handle tasks and synthesize knowledge," Talisman said.

According to Talisman, ChatGPT is a profitable open-access AI platform, which is a contributing factor to why it isn't as trustworthy. Additionally, it has its privacy issues such as collection of sensitive data, collection of data without consent, use of data without permission, unchecked surveillance and bias, data exfiltration, and data leakage.

I became curious about how professors at UO feel about ChatGPT and its use in the classroom. I asked Professor Mark Blaine, who works in the SOJC department teaching journalism classes and is known for his documentary work, about AI. He said that he believes AI is both a positive academic attribute and has some major downfalls.

Blaine discussed student reliance on AI tools and the ways this impacts education.

"If you're leaning on it too hard when you're not exercising the muscles you're supposed to be using while you're here, you can't expect to become a better writer. It might give you the right answers, but that is not what we are looking for here," Blaine said.

Blaine talked about the issues students may face when looking for jobs in the future, especially with portfolio building. "You are going to be judged on what you produce. If that production suffers from the use of AI, it is going to make you less competitive, not more competitive."

Blaine also had some thoughts on how he has seen students use AI platforms, especially when it came to writing papers for his classes.

"Some were good, some were a pain to read, but when you have to turn in a really long dry report or some sort of technical material, it gets you to an answer really fast. In other cases, that doesn't pass the sniff test," Blaine said.

I have personally seen students use ChatGPT and other AI platforms in class to help understand assignments, help with homework, asking AI to summarize articles, etc. I am not 'dissing' these individuals because I understand how difficult and stressful classes can get. When it comes to my personal experience using these AI platforms, I noticed that once I started using AI for academic assistance it started becoming hard not to use it for basic assistance.
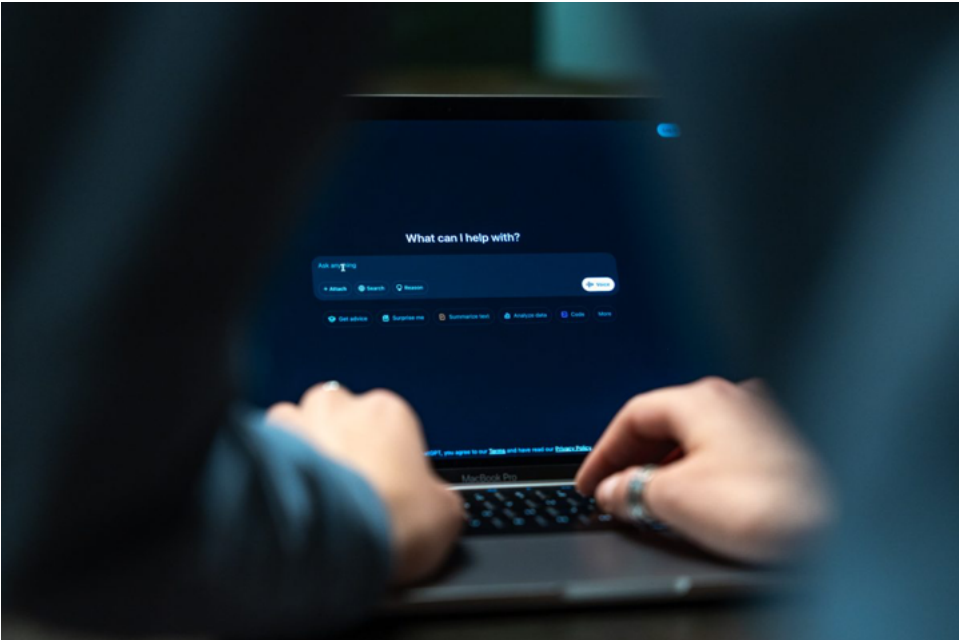
UO sophomore Campbell Schlecht talked about her use of AI tools..

I asked Campbell what she typically uses ChatGPT or other AI platforms for. "The main area in my life that I don't and probably would never use is for my current job as a promotions assistant," Schlecht said.

"I probably use ChatGPT in way too many areas in my life. If I feel stuck on schoolwork or in need of inspiration, I quickly ask ChatGPT, which I find always helps get the creative wheels turning for me. I definitely feel the majority of students overuse it, and that could be harmful to learning, but at the same time, I feel it is smart to use the resources that are at our disposal," Schlecht said.

While there are plenty of benefits to ChatGPT and other AI platforms for students in terms of supplying resources, it seems like the student use of AI isn't being managed properly. Even so, it would be hard to manage.

My goal is to reduce the amount of assistance I rely on AI for when it comes to understanding an assignment and helping me come up with a thesis, and I know many other students over-rely on it too for many different reasons. While there are plenty of net-positives about these platforms, there are also many net-negatives that may personally affect you and make the platforms unreliable.