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Opinion – Chat GPT and IR: Preliminary Reflections from within ‘Dark Academia’

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FELIX MANTZ, FEB 10 2023

Since appearing seemingly out of nowhere, ChatGPT has quickly risen to fame among teachers, lecturers, and professors across Western academia. While students to date seem mostly unaware of the technology and there are serious doubts over its effectiveness, ChatGPT now dominates numerous conversations among colleagues, department meetings, and ‘special discussion sessions’ across university spaces. This rapid emergence of ChatGPT has provoked a range of reactions among academics, spanning from excitement, curiosity, and techno-fetishism, to concern, anxiety, and existential worry about the future of academia and its disciplines. Among the more sceptical reactions from within the social sciences, including Political Science and International Relations, one key issue seems to be the question of student assessment: ‘If we cannot know whether essays are produced by students or computers, how can we meaningfully assess learning?’ Or more specifically, ‘How can we catch those who want to use ChatGPT to trick “the system”?’

My initial reaction was to reflect on how these questions might affect the introductory International Relations courses I teach this semester. While much of the overall grade students receive (45%) is through in-class presentations, activities, and participation – i.e. forms of assessment for which ChatGPT seems to be less of an issue – the other 55% of the grade is determined through essays. In other words, some students might be able to use ChatGPT to produce, submit, and receive a grade for these essays. Aside from being unsure how to prevent students from using ChatGPT or how to ‘catch’ those who do, I am not sure I am very interested in doing so in the first place.

Following feminist, decolonial, and anarchist pedagogies, I believe that a large part of an International Relations teacher’s role in academia is to provide students with opportunities to critically engage with the world around them, to equip them to think deeply about the convergence of global crises in the 21st century – ranging from rising global inequality, escalating climate and environmental catastrophe, global displacement and migration crises, the resurgence of a global fascist movement, accelerating militarization and conflict, and heightened vulnerability to health crises, to name but a few – and to encourage them to tackle these issues creatively, courageously, and based on a sensibility for planetary social and environmental justice. These critical pedagogies also hold that students are people with legitimate and relevant experiences, desires, knowledges, and ideas which they develop in the context of the historical conditions in which they find themselves. As such, they are responsible people capable of making their own decisions within the ramifications of these conditions. Based on this teaching philosophy, a key question is *why* students might choose to use ChatGPT or not and what questions that in turn produces.

There seem to be at least two key reasons why students might use ChatGPT. First, a student might not be interested so much in the content of the course itself, but rather is taking a course because it is required or otherwise helps them to receive a university degree. This addresses a much-bemoaned issue among academics in the social sciences – students are no longer as interested in learning for intellectual pleasure or curiosity, but rather in receiving a certificate that will enhance their socio-economic mobility once they leave academia. In other words, academia is more a stepping stone for young career-focused people rather than an institution that is sought out in order to learn for the sake of learning. In the extreme, students see themselves as fully neoliberal subjects; as customers who pay for a product (the degree). This is a massive issue that is fundamentally eroding the public university model and realigning academia with broader neoliberal and corporate agendas. This includes expanding logics of

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managerialism, careerism, individualism, and competition that transform the university into increasingly private enterprises or at least institutions that are ‘run like a business.’ Given these deeper and more complex processes which are at their core *structural* issues, I find it difficult to have too serious misgivings for students who see the university as a business providing them with a service. It is without a doubt unfortunate, sad, and frustrating, especially given the need for serious and urgent global change and the highly problematic misogynist and racist attitudes that some students bring to the classroom. Nonetheless, we should focus our energy and efforts on addressing these structural conditions rather than finding ways of policing and surveilling students for their potential use of ChatGPT.

Second, a student might use ChatGPT because they don’t feel competent or capable of writing an essay on their own. This does not have to do necessarily with their confidence in their own abilities – although the spectre of evaluation and grading can do serious damage to such confidence. Rather, it has also to do with the broader circumstances in which students find themselves. Today, undergraduate students across at least Western university spaces (especially in the US and the UK) are faced with rising tuition fees, student loans, and cost of living. Fleming finds that in the US,

between 1990 and 2010 funding for full-time enrolled students in public universities has dropped by 26 per cent. During the same period tuition fees rose by 113 per cent... For the not-so-wealthy, student debt is an inevitable corollary. It is expected to reach US\$ 2 trillion by 2022, larger than credit card debt and auto-loans.

As a result, many students, especially those from working-class backgrounds have to work alongside their studies. Further, I encounter more and more students with care responsibilities – for parents, siblings, partners, and beyond. In addition, young people’s prospects for secure, stable, and reasonably paid employment are extremely dire, and obtaining a university degree is increasingly becoming a basic requirement for many jobs. This is nothing to say of these students’ prospects for an inhabitable planet free from fascism, police violence, and misogyny. On top of that, through its increasingly performance-based, assignment-heavy, and support-deprived character, academia is becoming less a space for intellectual growth, curiosity, creativity, and learning, and increasingly a source of anxiety, stress, and frustration for students and teachers alike – what Fleming calls an ‘anxiety machine.’

In a global investigation of 14,000 students in 19 countries, researchers found that 35 per cent experienced (at least) one of six mental health disorders noted in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health*. Contributing factors included demanding workloads, the pressure to excel and financial worries.

Fleming adds that studies on US undergraduates found that ‘Suicide attempts rose from 0.7 per cent in 2013 to 1.8 per cent in 2018. Student reporting depression jumped from 9.4 per cent to 21.1 per cent.’

Faced with these structural conditions, arrangements, and imperatives I can more than understand if a student decides to use ChatGPT. Once again, this suggests that our attention, energies, and efforts are best spent on pursuing urgent, deep, and structural changes to the university systems rather than policing students. These changes are complicated, complex, and require large efforts of sustained critique and consciousness-building, collective mobilization, mutual aid, and care, and undoubtedly go beyond classrooms, departments, and campuses. This involves contending with critiques that draw attention to the historical and contemporary role of universities in reproducing racialized class systems, and as lynchpins of advancing 500 years of colonial and imperial expansion. As teachers in academia, we should seriously consider and engage with such critiques – from student-led ‘decolonizing the university’ movements to #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall – as well as other educational models – from spaces created through the Antiuniversity movement such as the Free University of Brighton, and curricula like the Mexican-American Studies Program in Arizona, to radical pedagogies informing the Zapatista movement and la Universidad de la Tierra.

ChatGPT might well have negative (or positive) impacts on student learning and change academia in one way or another. Such impacts and changes would surely vary across different disciplines and fields of study. It is also clear that should ChatGPT stay, ethical issues should not be brushed aside, especially if plans to make ChatGPT into a paid subscription service will proceed and potentially exacerbate class disparities. A colleague teaching at a US

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university dominated by white elite students also pointed out that ChatGPT might make it even easier for relatively privileged students to essentially buy degrees, deepening classed and racialized inequalities. Further, there are legitimate concerns about how to equip students with basic reading, writing, and algebra skills. Nonetheless, ChatGPT points us to urgent *structural* questions about the nature of ‘dark academia,’ including questions about its deep entanglements with race and class, the purpose of university learning, and ways to work towards systemic change. This involves counteracting the sedimentation of hierarchical student-teacher relationships, the erosion of trust and reciprocity, and the dominance of stress-induced learning whereby performance is constantly checked, assessed, and evaluated. Finally, there are strong arguments not to fall for the hype around computer learning and AI; ChatGPT might not be here to stay after all. What will undoubtedly continue, if not urgently addressed, is the deepening realignment of the university with corporate agendas, as well as academia’s role in reproducing class hierarchies and buttressing imperial and colonial expansion.

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