

VITALITY

VITAL Teaching Ideas

“Preserving Learning” in the Age of AI: Insights from Villanova Faculty

On October 28th, Villanova faculty gathered for a panel discussion on how generative AI continues to transform their teaching practice. Panelists shared how they have fundamentally rethought elements of their course design, assessment practices, and the purpose of assignments, given AI’s emerging role within their disciplines.

Panelist Examples of AI integration in their Course(s):

Jim Mendez, Clinical Associate Professor, Nursing: To help his graduate students prepare for their exams, Dr. Mendez assigns student groups to produce AI-generated study guides. These study guides are then compared to student-created guides, thus helping students engage in meaningful use, critical evaluation, and practice and reflection on the ethical use of AI.

Veronika Ryjik, Professor and Chair, Spanish: Together with her students, Dr. Ryjik explores the role of AI in learning a foreign language. Specifically, students engage in an AI literacy workshop where they brainstorm ways to use AI responsibly and intelligently within the language-learning class.

Stephen McGill, Assistant Teaching Professor, Mechanical Engineering: Recognizing industry expectations of students’ ability to use AI, Dr. McGill emphasizes the need to teach students foundational course concepts and critical thinking skills. His students use AI to solve engineering problems and then explain the process AI used to solve each problem and why the answer is or isn’t correct.



Brian Grant, Assistant Professor, Accountancy: Dr. Grant replaced traditional writing assignments with an individualized AI project that helps students use AI to generate information about specific companies and evaluate the outputs. Given the growing use of AI in the profession, he stressed the importance of students being able to critically discuss AI use in their job search.

Main Discussion Themes

A Shift in Pedagogical Practice

AI’s rapid evolution requires faculty to continuously examine how it impacts their courses and what this means for how they assign work and assess learning outcomes. This is an ongoing, iterative process of adaptation.

Several panelists described reconceptualizing homework from an evaluative tool to a low-stakes assessment focused on skill development and practice. Dr. Grant has moved to in-class paper exams while making homework ungraded, allowing students to experiment and practice without the pressure of evaluation. This shift reflects a deeper pedagogical principle: when AI can complete certain tasks, the value of those tasks warranted reexamination.

Rather than abandoning homework, Dr. Grant is reframing its purpose, transforming it from graded activity to an opportunity for formative learning.

Preparation for the Profession

Dr. McGill articulated a shift in his approach to his profession, stating "Every engineer is an AI engineer." From this perspective, the question is not whether students will use AI in their careers but whether they will use it well. His goal is to ensure his students aren't "gullible" engineers.

Through application-based learning where students observe the limitations of AI, they develop the critical evaluation skills necessary to assess AI output in professional contexts.

This approach recognizes that technical competence includes the ability to work alongside AI tools while maintaining independent judgment.

In their work, the panelists observed that preparing students to use AI thoughtfully, helping them understand its limitations, and maintaining their own expertise are of equal importance.

Transparency and Student Agency

A striking theme across the panel was faculty willingness to make their pedagogical decision around AI use visible to students. Panelists described discussing AI integration with their classes, soliciting feedback, and acknowledging the exploratory nature of assignments.

Dr. Ryjik shared how asking students to evaluate AI-generated content sparked meaningful discussions about AI's limitations, turning a potentially threatening technology into a teaching moment about critical evaluation.

Assessment That Measures What Matters

The panelists discussed how AI has prompted them to clarify their learning objectives.

Questions emerged: When a tool can generate competent written responses or solve routine problems, what do we want students to be able to do?

What competencies are essential for success in subsequent courses or professional practice? The panelists' examples provide insight into how we might distinguish between competencies AI can demonstrate and those that require human judgment, creativity, and critical thinking.

These questions bring forth the role of authentic assessment to help students develop and demonstrate core competencies.



Moving Forward

The Q&A session highlighted four key issues: encouraging students to value the ownership and agency of their work, balancing meaningful AI integration while ensuring students meet essential competencies, understanding AI's role in students' future careers, and maintaining Villanova's Augustinian Catholic values of veritas, unitas, and caritas.

As we continue to contemplate how can preserve learning in an emerging AI context, the panelists' willingness to share their ongoing struggles suggests that effective AI integration in higher education requires ongoing dialogue, exploration, and willingness to revise long-standing practices.

For resources on teaching with AI, including panel recording, visit our [teaching with AI resource page](#).

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