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Enhancing Hispanic Literature Courses with Large Language Models: The Power of AI Tools

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My continuing practice of incorporating AI tools in Latin American Studies courses in literature provides versatile opportunities to craft engaging, meaningful exercises that inspire deeper critical thinking and creativity. The tools empower students to take an active role in their learning and broaden their comprehension of diverse literary traditions.

Keywords: AI and education, AI and learning, critical thinking skills, LLMs, chatbots, AI and creativity

Mi práctica actual de incorporar herramientas de IA en las clases de literatura dentro de la rama de Estudios Latinoamericanos brinda oportunidades versátiles para elaborar ejercicios atractivos y significativos que inspiran mayor profundidad en creatividad y pensamiento crítico. Las herramientas de IA permiten a los estudiantes asumir un papel activo en su aprendizaje y ampliar su comprensión de las diversas tradiciones literarias.

Palabras clave: IA y educación, IA y aprendizaje, pensamiento crítico, LLM, chatbots, IA y creatividad

Introduction

In recent years, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT, Copilot, Claude, and Gemini, has brought both exciting opportunities and potential risks to educational settings, especially in the Latin American Studies classroom. Following up on my article in Volume 7, Issue 1 of *MARLAS* (December 2023)—"An AI Solution: Using ChatGPT to Counter Plagiarism and Boost Enrollments in Hispanic Literature Courses"—I will present practical applications of LLMs in Hispanic Literature education.

The discussion will focus on how I have incorporated AI tools in three Spanish and Latin American Survey of Literature courses, although their applications extend to all content-

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focused classes in Latin American Studies. I will also address how these tools have evolved classroom dynamics and the process of developing deeper critical thinking skills.

This summer and over fall semester 2024, I will be creating YouTube @AI for the Humanities videos on how I use LLMs, elaborating on techniques that are applicable to other disciplines. You can check them out later in the year: https://youtube.com/@aiforthehumanities-ob2ly?si=L_-_b92uNCs9wodL.

Using AI for Open Educational Resources (OER)

In the spring of 2024, I transformed materials for my literature courses into Open Educational Resources (OER) with the objectives of enhancing accessibility, reducing costs for students, and introducing more diverse readings. Over January, I curated reading materials and developed comprehension and discussion questions for the classes. I used LLMs, particularly ChatGPT, to craft targeted questions that complemented the assigned texts and reflected course objectives.

I uploaded the readings and questions to the Perusall platform, which provides an interactive space where students can annotate, comment, and engage in discussions. Because most readings were new to my courses, I lacked ready-made guiding questions. With ChatGPT, I generated prompts like: "Help me create six comprehension questions about this reading for intermediate-advanced students."

Simply requesting questions from ChatGPT without providing the specific text often resulted in varied and sometimes inaccurate results. However, by uploading the reading directly, I could obtain tailored comprehension questions aligned with my specific learning objectives. This strategy allowed me to maximize the potential of AI while ensuring questions were accurate and relevant.

In developing discussion questions, I found that broad prompts like, "Help me create six discussion questions," often yielded generic results. More specific prompts, such as, "Help me create six discussion questions: two on literary devices, two on critical commentary, and two on the relationship between the work and contemporary Latin American culture," delivered more nuanced, diverse questions that challenged students' critical thinking.

Students then worked in groups to answer these questions, and occasionally, they experimented by asking ChatGPT, Copilot, or Perplexity to help generate answers. Initially, I feared this approach would stifle critical thinking, but to my surprise, the opposite occurred. Students used the AI-generated responses as a springboard for their analyses, often pushing their conclusions to a higher critical level.

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In-Class Summaries and Critiques

In addition to comprehension and discussion questions, we leveraged LLMs to create concise summaries of challenging literary works. Once again, specificity in prompts proved vital. For instance, "Create a summary of 'La casa de Asterión' by Jorge Luis Borges, including the main characters, the plot development, and message" resulted in accurate, clear summaries. Particularly challenging works required a summary with blanks and a word bank, guided by a prompt like, "Help me create a summary of this text with blanks for important terms and vocabulary, plus a word bank."

In cases where LLMs had limited prior knowledge of the work, providing the text alongside the prompt prevented errors. While more renowned texts often had pre-existing summaries, it remained crucial to verify accuracy. Collaborating with students in crafting prompts reinforced their ability to master LLMs, critique generated summaries, and identify any hallucinations (nonsensical or inaccurate outputs).

Students learned to compare the AI-generated summaries with their understanding of the work and identify critical omissions or misinterpretations. This exercise encouraged students to adopt an active role in critically analyzing the material, thereby fostering greater understanding and retention. Students critiqued responses, refined prompts, and learned to approach LLMs with skepticism, enhancing their evaluative skills.

Creative Endeavors with LLMs

Moving beyond summaries and discussion questions, LLMs were utilized for creative activities, enriching students' understanding of themes in the works studied. One engaging exercise involved directing ChatGPT to write poems in the style of Plácido, a freed nineteenth-century Cuban slave renowned for his neoclassical poetry. By feeding the chatbot a poem and asking it to "Create a poem in the style of the 19th-century Cuban neoclassical poet, Plácido, on the theme of freedom," students received poems reflecting historical themes in their work. More specific prompts like "focus on the theme of freedom" led to higher-quality poems that students then critiqued for style, theme, and creativity.

This creative endeavor deepened students' appreciation for the literary works studied. They identified stylistic devices used in the generated poems, elaborated on thematic interpretations, and recognized the historical and cultural significance of each literary style. While ChatGPT proved useful for creative writing, Copilot and Gemini struggled to emulate poetic styles effectively.

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Visualizing Literary Themes through AI-Generated Images

Another innovative use of LLMs was generating images that captured literary themes. Although ChatGPT 3.5 lacked built-in image generation capabilities, tools like Copilot and Perchance allowed students to create illustrations reflecting their interpretation of a text's themes. For instance, students designed visual prompts such as: "A young Black man lost in Paris, searching for his father while wearing a worn-out leather jacket and carrying an old photograph," to depict themes from "Lluvia en la ventana" by Ixiar Rozas. The resulting images mirrored their understanding of the protagonist's desperation, accurately portraying the character's emotions through a photo-realistic approach (see illustration below).

AI-generated illustration from the prompt, "A young Black man lost in Paris, searching for this father while wearing a worn-out leather jacket and carrying an old photograph."

Student Perceptions and Ethical Considerations

Over three semesters, I noticed a marked shift in student confidence regarding the usefulness and reliability of LLMs. In an anonymous end-of-semester survey, students were asked to evaluate LLMs' impact across several areas, including fostering creativity and academic integrity. The overwhelming consensus was that these tools did not encourage plagiarism but rather heightened engagement and creative exploration of the texts. However, students became more critical of using AI in conjunction with the final paper, thereby acknowledging its benefits and deficits more critically over time. They also recognized the importance of citing LLMs, with adherence to academic integrity factoring into their participation grades.

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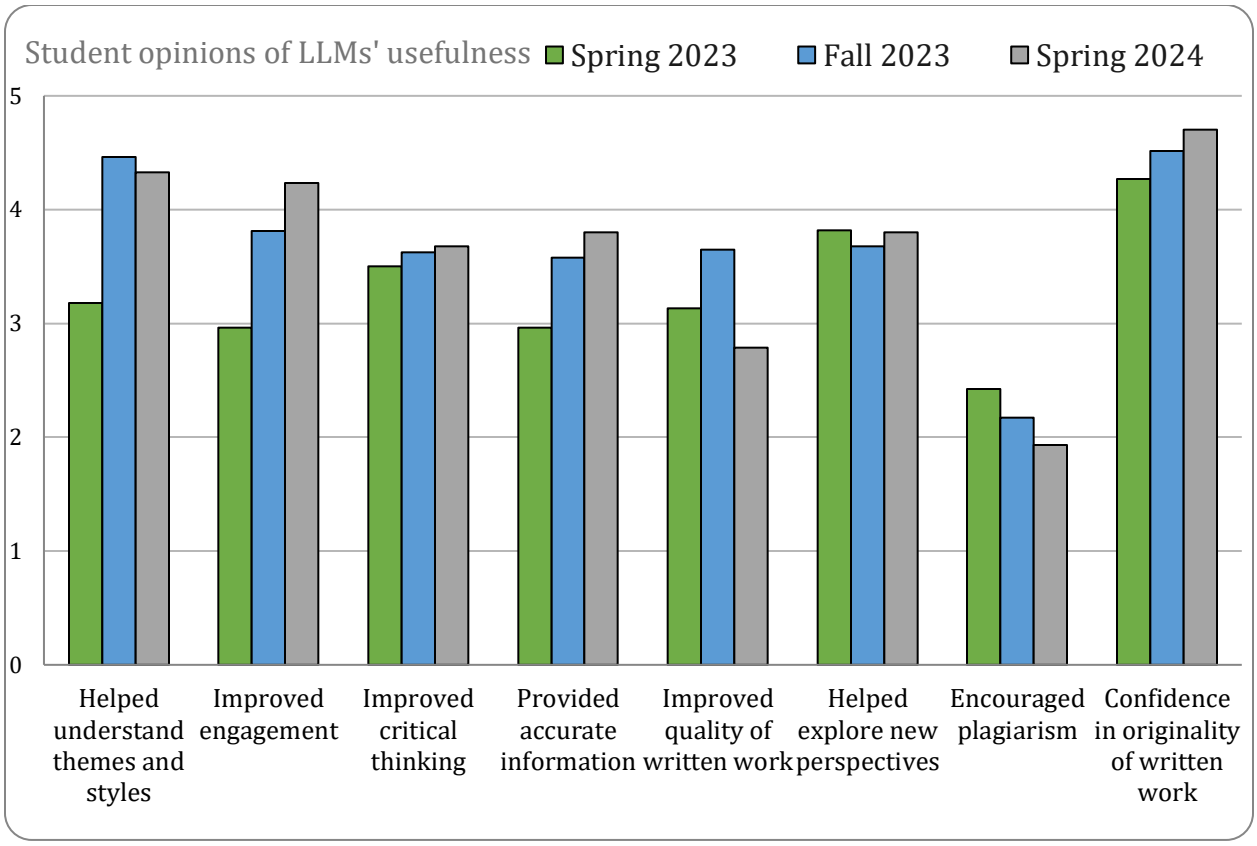

Using LLMs responsibly required me to foster a classroom culture rooted in ethical use. Students learned to acknowledge AI as a tool, not a substitute for original thought, and their critical engagement with prompts and responses reinforced this understanding.

Conclusions

The rapid evolution of AI has transformed teaching practices, especially in Latin American Studies and Hispanic Literature courses. LLMs like ChatGPT, Copilot, Claude, and Gemini provide versatile opportunities to craft engaging, meaningful exercises that inspire deeper critical thinking and creativity. While challenges remain, particularly regarding ethical use and the occasional hallucination, these tools have empowered students to take an active role in their learning and broadened their comprehension of diverse literary traditions.

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