

U.S. EDUCATION

The Creative Ways Teachers Are Using ChatGPT in the Classroom

8 MINUTE READ



Illustration by Pete Reynolds for Time

BY OLIVIA B. WAXMAN X

UPDATED: AUGUST 8, 2023 11:39 AM EDT | ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED: AUGUST 8, 2023 7:00 AM EDT

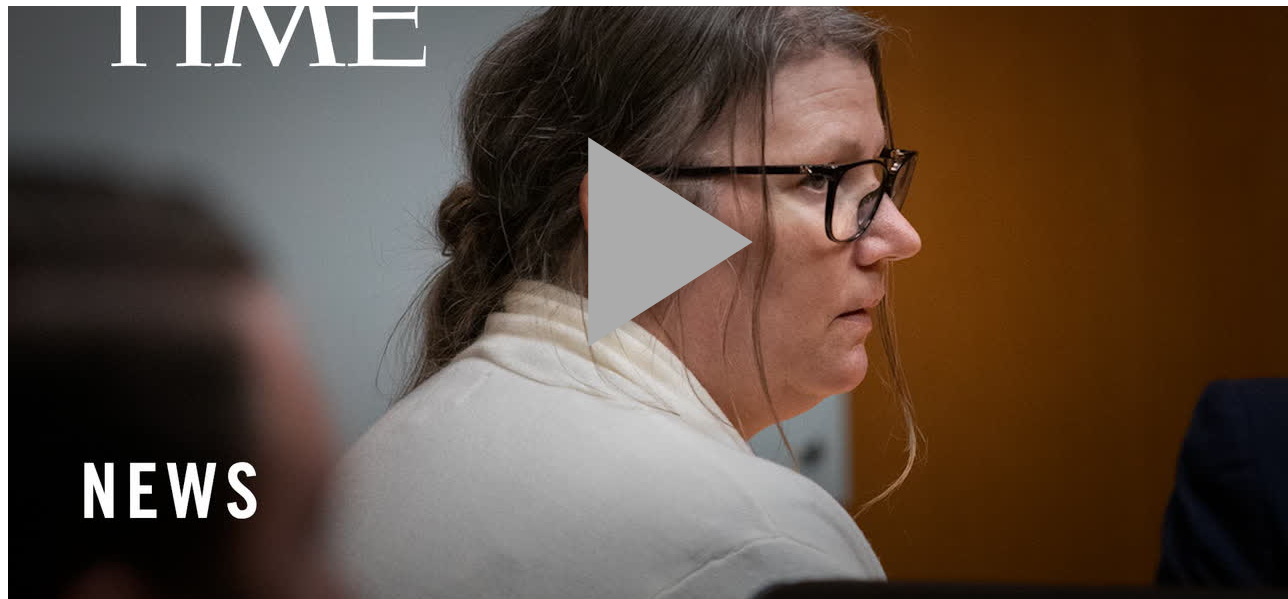
Peter Paccone, a social studies teacher in San Marino, Calif., has a new teacher's aid helping him in the classroom this year. He plans to defer to his helper to explain some simpler topics to his class of high schoolers, like the technical aspects of how a cotton gin worked, in order to free up time for him

His new assistant? ChatGPT.

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“What I feel that I don’t have to do any longer is cover all the content,” Paccone told a group of more than 40 educators in a May Zoom workshop, which he organized. If artificial intelligence is on the cusp of **reshaping entire aspects of our society**—from healthcare to warfare—the first realm that leaps to many minds is education: Asked a question online, the ChatGPT chatbot will produce an answer that reads like an essay. So as students and teachers prepare for a new school year, they are also grappling with AI's implications for learning, homework, and integrity. Paccone is only one of many high school teachers who has been experimenting with ChatGPT in the classroom. But the tool is inspiring as much trepidation among educators as it is excitement.

nation's largest school districts, from New York City to Los Angeles, banned its usage in the classroom while they worked to formulate policies around it. Meanwhile, teachers desperate to figure out how to harness the tech for good congregated in Facebook groups like "chatGPT for teachers" (about 300,000 members) and "The AI Classroom" (more than 20,000 members).



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BY MELANIE LYNE

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"The majority of the teachers are panicked because they see [ChatGPT] as a cheating tool, a tool for kids to plagiarize," says Rachael Rankin, a high school principal in Newton Falls, outside of Youngstown, Ohio.

Federation of Teachers, a major teachers union, believes the panic about AI is not unlike the ones caused by the Internet and graphing calculators when they were first introduced, arguing ChatGPT “is to English and to writing like the calculator is to math.” In this view, there are two options facing teachers: show their students how to use ChatGPT in a responsible way, or expect the students to abuse it.

Math raps and Shakespeare translation

As teachers wrestle with whether to use AI in their classrooms this year, they’re also learning about the pernicious ways that abuse can take place.

At another Zoom teacher training workshop that TIME observed in July, hosted by Garnet Valley School District in Garnet Valley, Penn., education consultant A.J. Juliani ran through various AI apps that students are using to cut corners in class. Photomath lets students upload a picture of a math problem and get detailed instructions on how to solve it. Tome can turn notes into a narrative, perfect for essay writing and preparing for presentations. And Readwise can highlight key parts of PDFs so that students can get through readings faster.

“Many of them are just using it to do the work because they’re bored,” Juliani said. “They’re not engaged. They don’t care. And we have to own up to that.”

Many of the more than a dozen teachers TIME interviewed for this story argue that the way to get kids to care is to proactively use ChatGPT in the classroom. A Walton Family Foundation survey published July 18 found 73% of teacher respondents had heard of ChatGPT, and 33% used it to help come up with “creative ideas for classes.”

Some of those creative ideas are already in effect at Peninsula High School in Gig Harbor, about an hour from Seattle. In Erin Rossing’s precalculus class, a student got ChatGPT to generate a rap about vectors and trigonometry in the

competition. In Kara Beloate's English-Language Arts class, she allowed students reading Shakespeare's *Othello* to use ChatGPT to translate lines into modern English to help them understand the text, so that they could spend class time discussing the plot and themes.

Teachers are also using ChatGPT to generate materials for students at different reading levels. Aileen Wallace, who teaches a class on current events in Falkirk, Scotland, said the tool could instantly produce simplified versions of readings on the causes of terrorism for 14-year-olds who either read at lower reading levels than the rest of the class or have been learning English as a second language.

To be sure, ChatGPT doesn't always get things right—but teachers are finding that provides its own way to engage students. Some are having students fact-check essays generated by the program in response to their prompts, hoping to simultaneously test students' knowledge of the topic and show them the problems with relying on AI to do nuanced work. In Panama, International Baccalaureate teacher Anna May Drake had juniors and seniors critique a ChatGPT-generated essay comparing George Orwell's *1984* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, while in the Detroit area, Sarah Millard, a ninth-grade honors English teacher, had students critique a ChatGPT-generated essay on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. "My students have never been so engaged in writing," Millard says. "They wanted to beat the computer" and were "tearing apart" the AI-generated essay.

Teachers are even finding ChatGPT is a big time-saver for their own homework. Larry Ferlazzo, who teaches English, Social Studies, and International Baccalaureate classes in Sacramento, has had AI help write college recommendation letters for some of his students. He says it did it "10 times better" than he would have alone.

'There's a tidal wave coming'

Some think it will be a revolution. “There's a tidal wave **coming for education**,” says Dan Fitzpatrick, an author and keynote speaker on AI in education and administrator of “The AI Classroom” Facebook group. “Our schools could really find themselves irrelevant in the next few months to a few years.”

Others believe it may become a useful tool, but the basics of schooling won't change. “I've lived through probably nine hype cycles of AI and education where visionaries proclaim that this is the big breakthrough—and then it isn't,” says Chris Dede, a Senior Research Fellow at Harvard Graduate School of Education who is an expert on the history of educational technologies. “Generative AI is certainly not, in my opinion, some kind of enormous breakthrough that's going to transform education.”

There are **real concerns** about ceding too much instruction to the program: Weingarten of the teachers' union and others fear it will promote educational inequities, further dividing classrooms into students whose families have the resources to afford the high-speed internet connection that eases access to ChatGPT and students whose families do not. There are also worries about biases in the data AI uses to craft its answers to users' prompts. “Much of the information that's online, that ChatGPT is trained on, is going to be predominantly of western perspective, and what's going to be less represented are the perspectives, knowledge, and experiences of underrepresented communities,” says Ezekiel Dixon-Román, Director of the Edmund W. Gordon Institute for Urban and Minority Education and Professor at Teachers College, Columbia University.

And it will be no small challenge for teachers to figure out how to use the technology to develop students' critical thinking skills without sacrificing the meaningful connections that can be the product of human-to-human teaching—an even more urgent challenge when it comes to students who mentally checked out during the abrupt shift from in-person instruction to virtual

they're getting ready to welcome ChatGPT into the classroom when the doors re-open this year, that's reason enough not to fear the extent of the disruption on the horizon.

"I've been to former students' weddings and baby showers and funerals of their parents," says Millard, the high school English teacher in Michigan. "I've hugged my students. I've high-fived my students. I've cried with my students. A computer will never do that. Ever, ever."

Correction, Aug. 8

The original version of this story misstated the surname of a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University. He is Ezekiel Dixon-Román, not Ezekiel Dixon-Ramon.

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