Generative AI and Opportunities for Feminist Classroom Assignments

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Cover Page Footnote
The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and Dr. Christopher Keyes for regularly discussing AI's development with me.

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Generative AI and Opportunities for Feminist Classroom Assignments

With the recent popularization of ChatGPT, many educators have been wringing their hands about students using generative artificial intelligence (AI) to complete assignments and, in turn, how instructors ought to surveil students’ work (Lo, 2023). Generative AI tools can create text, images, or music based on input parameters. ChatGPT provides text output based on a prompt, but several other generative AI programs are becoming increasingly accessible. Many students may use ChatGPT in their coursework: generating answers to tests or writing assignments in lieu of writing themselves. While this is concerning on some levels, rather than resisting the coming tide, educators can see this improved accessibility of generative AI as an opportunity to reshape their class assignments in feminist ways. I share two processes for educators to intentionally engage with ChatGPT and adopt feminist assignments.

I discuss these approaches through my lens as an economics instructor in the United States. Mainstream economics has largely not adopted the thinking of feminist economists (Pearse, et al., 2019). Therefore, the introduction of feminist pedagogy with the popularization of ChatGPT presents especially disruptive opportunities in the field.


ChatGPT and other AI models analyze existing data to inform their content creation, which presents opportunities to amplify existing biases. This has raised alarms among feminist scholars for decades (Adam, 1995, D'ignazio & Klein, 2020). For instance, Bolukbasi et al. (2016) find that a generative model trained on a large corpus of text from the internet demonstrated gender bias in its text generation. Other scholars have shown that the groups of researchers developing AI lack diversity and, thus, impart Western, white, and patriarchal value systems on their technology (Prabhakaran, et al., 2022).

ChatGPT is not devoid of these issues: it pulls from a multitude of web sources and currently rarely cites sources nor acknowledges biases. Instructors may use this as an opportunity to challenge their students to be more explicit about knowledge creation and more aware of feminist epistemology and standpoint theory (Ashton & McKenna, 2020). Though citation politics can be used to reproduce hierarchies within the academy, conscious citation can also be a feminist avenue of resistance that demonstrates engagement with authors and voices we want to elevate (Mott & Cockayne, 2017).

For example, an economics instructor may develop an assignment that asks students to use ChatGPT to defines a term or measurement that has competing definitions within the field. For instance, feminist economists, Marxists, and historians of economic thought have indicated that the terms ‘work,’ ‘productivity,’ and ‘economics’ are not straightforward and often biased toward mainstream economic thinking (Backhouse & Medema, 2009, Mohun, 2002, Nelson, 1995). When one asks ChatGPT how economists define ‘work,’ it replies with a paragraph or two explaining the term (See Figure 1). Students could enter such a prompt, or experiment with rephrased prompts as in Figure 2, then critically examine ChatGPT’s generated paragraphs by (1) working to provide appropriate citations, then (2) reflecting on the positionality of the scholars which they cite. More specifically, instructors might challenge students to think about why an
individual economist or group of economists researched this topic: are their social locations relevant? Who else has written on these works and how are their perspectives different? Why might one definition be favored in the mainstream and who benefits from that definition’s privileged status?

Relatedly, if such an assignment also prompts instructors to think more deliberately about whose ideas are being presented in class, it may challenge us to introduce plurality and diversify our syllabi (Harris et al., 2020). Ultimately, encouraging students to critically cite ChatGPT’s work has the potential to demonstrate the program’s imbedded biases and nip amplification of such biases in the bud. Students will use ChatGPT, so it is up to educators to encourage them to use it critically: highlighting data and algorithmic biases within AI is one step toward minimizing reproduction of bias knowledge hierarchies.

2. Working in Tandem With ChatGPT: Encouraging Reflexivity and Community Engagement

Scholars in feminist pedagogy have encouraged self-reflexivity in classrooms and have insisted curricula become more connected to lived experiences, especially of those who have been historically excluded from the academy (Allen & Farnsworth, 1993). Namely, feminists have argued that teaching without reflexivity can spur an alienating curriculum or maintain systems of oppressive epistemology. Instructors should instead encourage students to integrate personal experiences with scholarly knowledge (Geerts, 2019).

In my time as a student and educator in economics, I have rarely seen assignments that ask students to reflect on how economic policies or phenomena connect to their personal experiences or that of their loved ones. However, such opportunities abound. For example, ChatGPT could provide students information about trends in trade or globalization, but it cannot describe (1) a personal connection to global trade (e.g. how it has shaped one’s education, career, or migration choices) nor (2) a self-reflexive account of how and individual or their particular social location (race, class, gender, geography) might disproportionately accrue the benefits or harms of globalization. Crawley et al. (2008) offer specific suggestions on how instructors might incite reflexivity and may be worth referencing when developing questions for students’ reflection.

Instructors might also develop an assignment encouraging learning from community members. For instance, an economics assignment could ask a student to interview a friend, family member, or coworker on their experiences in a specific occupation or industry, then evaluate responses in light of course content. Instructors could encourage the use of ChatGPT to help students develop background knowledge and still make space for hands-on learning community connection (Manicom, 1992). Interviewing may improve learning outcomes (Roulston, 2012), and feminist economists argue that qualitative methods are undervalued in economics (Tejani, 2019), so exposing students to this way of knowing could be transformative for the discipline.

Asking economics students to incorporate lived experiences alongside ChatGPT might challenge them to consider how market institutions have shaped their preferences (Bowles, 1998)
and to consider their role in economic systems that produce inequities (Darity, 2022) in ways that ChatGPT alone cannot do. Generative AI is not able to speak to students’ (or students’ loved ones) perspectives and experiences. For this reason, privileging individual and community voices as ways of knowing may become central to education the wake of generative AI as it is central to feminist pedagogy (Webb et al., 2002) and provides opportunities for instructors to highlight the clear limits of generative AI.

Questions Going Forward

The popular introduction of ChatGPT could usher in an era of antifeminist pedagogy: concerns over its use may lead to heavy surveillance of students, which comes with unequal outcomes (Logan, 2021) and is not inclusive nor nurturing. Still, instructors must revamp student assessments to contend with radical changes brought on by AI. I believe, if we continue to brainstorm approaches like those I have outlined above, our educational responses to generative AI can be transformative in feminist directions.

Given the socioeconomic shifts that will likely occur from generative AI (Felten et al., 2023), I am optimistic that instructors will help students’ embrace use of AI with both a critical feminist lens and with an openness to novel forms of knowledge creation.

References


OpenAI. (2023). ChatGPT (Mar 14 version) [Large language model]. https://chat.openai.com/chat


Figure 1. Screen Shot of ChatGPT Responding to Prompt About Economists’ Definition of ‘Work’

Note: Prompt entered in June 2023 using the open access version of OpenAI’s ChatGPT May 24 Version.
Source: OpenAI (2023).
Figure 2. Screen Shots of ChatGPT Responding to Varied Prompts About the Definition of ‘Work’

In economics, the term “work” typically refers to human labor or effort that is expended in the production of goods and services. It encompasses the physical and mental activities undertaken by individuals to contribute to the production process.

Work can take various forms, such as manual labor, intellectual work, creative endeavors, managerial tasks, and more. It involves the application of knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform specific tasks or functions that contribute to economic output.

From an economic standpoint, work is considered a factor of production, along with other inputs like land, capital, and entrepreneurship. It is one of the fundamental components in the production process that helps transform inputs into outputs.

In the context of labor markets, work is often associated with employment, where individuals offer their skills and services in exchange for wages or other forms of compensation. The study of work and labor is a significant area within labor economics, which explores various aspects such as labor supply and demand, wages, productivity, and labor market dynamics.

Feminist economists approach the concept of “work” from a broader perspective than traditional economic theories. They recognize that conventional definitions of work often overlook or undervalue certain types of labor, particularly those traditionally associated with women and unpaid or underpaid work. Feminist economists emphasize the need to challenge and redefine societal perceptions of work to account for gender disparities and power imbalances.

Feminist economists typically define work as encompassing both paid and unpaid activities that contribute to the production and reproduction of society. They acknowledge that while paid work in formal employment settings is important, it represents only a fraction of the overall work carried out in society. Implicit work, such as caregiving, household chores, community volunteering, and emotional labor, is also recognized as vital and should be valued equally.

Furthermore, feminist economists highlight the concept of “reproductive labor,” which refers to the activities involved in sustaining and reproducing the labor force and the broader society. This includes activities like child-rearing, elder care, housework, and emotional support, which are often performed by women but have historically been marginalized and undervalued within economic systems.

Feminist economists argue that recognizing and valuing unpaid and reproductive labor is crucial for understanding the full extent of economic activity and for addressing gender inequalities. By broadening the definition of work to include these often overlooked forms of labor, feminist economists aim to challenge traditional economic models and advocate for policies that promote gender equality and social justice.
Note: Prompt entered in June 2023 using the open access version of OpenAI’s ChatGPT May 24 Version.
Source: OpenAI (2023).