UB University Business

AI AIn't the solution: Why the climb still matters

Academic Affairs

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Everest. Just reading the word evokes images of a snowy mountain top with humans struggling against frigid temps and whipping winds to climb the world's highest peak. A journey not for the faint of heart.

Yet, hundreds of people embark on this journey every year. Many of us wonder "why?" What drives a person to spend years preparing for this type of expedition?

For most of us, this type of adventure seems impractical—ridiculous even. The same can be said for those of us who have earned (or are currently earning) a doctorate.

Those who share that they are in a doctoral program are often met with quizzical looks, frowns and head-shaking, and usually the question that follows is "why?" Why would we put ourselves through years of more schooling for a few letters after our names?

The answers can be simple and may range from "It's something I've always wanted to do" to "This is what I need to do to be an expert in my field."

Earning your doctorate should feel like the mental equivalent of summiting Everest. However, AI is changing that.

A doctorate is an apprenticeship in higher-level thinking

There are programs out there that can (with the correct prompting) write out a research paper in minutes. Large language models can review hundreds, if not thousands, of articles in less time than it takes for us to type the prompt.

Thus, why bother doing all that work when AI can just do it for you? Is the age of first-person academic research dead?

We hope not, as what we really need to focus on is that the process itself—from coursework to lectures to presentations—is an apprenticeship in higher-level thinking. Coursework is not busywork; it has been designed to cultivate habits of mind that cannot be outsourced.

are formed.

Much of the public debate about AI in higher education has been focused on undergraduates: cheating scandals, detection software and whether the traditional essay is obsolete. But the stakes are higher at the doctoral level.

When doctoral students use AI to write course assignments, they are not simply cutting corners. They are undermining the very purpose of a doctoral education.

In Clay Shirky's article, he argues that learning is not a performance, but a biological process; it's a change in long-term memory produced by sustained mental effort. It is this sustained mental effort that AI reduces, but for all the wrong reasons.

Writing a dissertation takes nothing if not a sustained mental effort, yet if scholars do not practice and build this proverbial muscle, how will they ever complete their research or writing?

The problem is compounded by the enticing flow of AI-generated work. Large language models create work that sounds scholarly (measured, organized and citation-ready).

Yet, faculty are finding that when students are pressed to discuss the (AI-generated) work they've submitted, they cannot explain their thinking, defend assertions, back-up claims,or even revise the work in a meaningful way.

One can argue that using AI to generate one's coursework is the equivalent to plagiarism—presenting someone else's words, ideas or work as your own without giving proper credit. Even if a student notes that parts of their work has been AI-generated (giving proper credit), they are still missing out on a crucial aspect of the learning.

It's as if the words on the page and the thinking no longer align. It is this misalignment that creates the fatal flaw.

Confusion is not an obstacle

Doctoral work is not just about "fancy academic language," it is a way to assess comprehension, production of original work and strong analysis. Work that a student cannot defend is essentially useless as evidence of scholarly growth.

There is also the issue of the loss of student voice in writing. Academic writing is meant to be designed as an opportunity for students to grow whether that is in testing ideas, taking risks or developing a distinctive way of thinking and sharing those thoughts on the page. AI-generated work short-cuts that process by replacing form with imitation.

Some argue that concerns about AI use reflect nostalgia for outdated academic practices. However, the resistance to AI-written coursework is not about preserving tradition. Rather, it is about preserving the way in which students learn and grow as scholars.

of a doctoral program is to learn from productive struggle; AI not only removes the struggle it also robs the students of the reason they have enrolled in the program—to learn.

Confusion, slow progress and intellectual discomfort are not obstacles to be removed, they are the conditions under which higher-level thinking occurs and original thoughts emerge.

As we step back and consider the "why" around the scholarly use of AI, take a moment to think about the difference between the arduous journey of summiting Everest and compare it to someone being dropped-off at the mountain peak by a helicopter.

Are both people still standing at the top? Yes. Yet the process—and the growth from that process—are two entirely different outcomes.

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