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Becoming creative cyborgs: What role(s) for GenAI in the creative writing classroom?

Abstract:
This article reports on my action research study exploring the integration of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) into creative writing pedagogy at higher education level. Over twelve months, I conducted six pedagogical experiments across three London institutions, engaging fifty-two students in exploring AI's functional dimensions: as ideation catalyst, collaborative tool, scaffolding mechanism, editorial assistant, research facilitator and assessment instrument. Using a critical realist framework, I examine what emerged from this systematic investigation: GenAI demonstrates clear affordances in particular contexts (research, translation, ideation generation) but significant limitations in others (editorial feedback, assessment, true creative collaboration). Students across all cohorts showed sophisticated critical awareness of AI's training processes and ethical implications, and most remained cautious about deploying AI as a creative tool. The article argues that engaging with GenAI's weaknesses might be its greatest pedagogical strength.

Biographical note:
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Keywords:
generative AI, creative writing pedagogy, action research, assessment, critical realism

Introduction

> People of the twenty-first century write differently than those of previous centuries, due in part to the profoundly different technologies that come to bear upon them as they write. (Robinson, 2023, p. 117)

Nowhere is this more evident than in a post by Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI, creators of ChatGPT, on X on 11 March 2025: "We trained a new model that is good at creative writing (not sure yet how/when it will be released). This is the first time I have been struck by something written by AI; it got the vibe of metafiction just right. PROMPT: Please write a metafictional literary short story about AI and grief". ChatGPT dutifully churned out a response. Writing a few days later in *The Guardian,* the novelist Jeanette Winterson offered this critique: "What is beautiful and moving about this story is its understanding of its lack of understanding. Its reflection on its limits." She concludes her analysis by claiming "AI reads us. Now it's time for us to read AI." (Winterson, 2025).

Altman's contribution to the creative writing task was the eleven-word zero-shot prompt at the end of his tweet.

Creative writing AI algorithms are nothing new. To explore whether AI-generated text could elicit an emotion, Yanardag et al. (2021) designed Shelley, an AI bot they released on Twitter, to co-create horror stories with social media users; Sharples and Pérez Y Pérez (2022) created MEXICA for writing plot driven stories; and Mirowski et al. (2022) built Dramatron on a hierarchical story generation structure for performance writers.

Released the week prior to Halloween 2017, Shelley offered prompts for users to complete or completed stories initiated by users. A validation study with 105 participants revealed that both bot-generated and collaboratively created stories significantly induced anxiety and fear when compared to control texts, with collaborative stories being most effective. Of MEXICA, Sharples and Pérez Y Pérez (2022) report that:

> 50 people from 12 countries judged seven stories for coherence, structure, content, suspense and overall quality. Four stories were generated by MEXICA. When the participants were asked to rank the stories from best to worst, 58% put the optimised MEXICA story first. (p. 124)

But the writers who engaged with Dramatron found the Small Language Model's (SLM) output to be biased (ageist, sexist and racist); the heroes were always young white men and the supporting characters always women.

At the MIX2025: Writing with Technologies Conference at Bath Spa University, Krishna Stott, an interactive story creator, presented SiD, an AI assistant for scriptwriters and Sarah Immel, a PhD student at Edinburgh University pitched Autograph, which she positions as a tool for writing with/against AI.

It seems AI creative writing tools are here to stay.

As the MA Performance: Writing course leader at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London, and a visiting lecturer at other institutions, I feel it is imperative to grapple with AI and what role it might play in the creative writing classroom for two reasons: firstly because of this proliferation of AI writing tools and their potential impact on industry, and secondly because:

> While AI holds promise for transforming teaching and learning, its opaque nature often alienates educators who are unfamiliar with its inner workings. This lack of understanding manifests in several interconnected ways: conceptual confusion, pedagogical disconnect, technical barriers, and professional disempowerment. (Zhang et al., 2025, p. 676)

I feel that I must confront this sense of alienation. I must empower myself if I am to have any hope of empowering my students – because the research is already being compiled highlighting the negative impact of AI. It exacerbates feelings of loneliness and fosters dependency (Fang et al., 2025), hampers critical thinking skills (Lee et al., 2025), stultifies creativity (Runco, 2023) and has a negative impact on learning (Bastani et al., 2025).

This article reports on a series of pedagogical experiments designed to answer the question: what is/are the role(s) of AI in the creative writing classroom? Rather than a theoretical treatise on AI and creativity, this is a practitioner's account of what happened when I systematically explored six different functions of GenAI within the constraints and contexts of actual teaching. The findings are modest in scope but, I would argue, significant in implication. They suggest that GenAI is neither a panacea for creative education nor an unqualified threat to it. It is a tool with particular strengths and limitations, and understanding those distinctions is what matters for creative writing pedagogy. Most importantly, this research advances a claim that runs counter to the dominant discourse: the most pedagogically productive question is not how to harness GenAI's capabilities but how to make deliberate use of its limitations. The encounters with GenAI's generic, inadequate output – rather than being merely frustrating – repeatedly became the occasion for more precise, more authentic creative thinking. If this is correct, it reframes what we ask of AI in the creative writing classroom entirely.

Positionality

To understand this research, it is necessary to understand where I am situated. I am a creative writing educator who has taught screenwriting and performance writing at university level for over ten years. I have always felt it is imperative to create forward thinking, constantly inquisitive and innovative courses that embrace a student-centred pedagogy (Rudra Pratap, 2024) and are technologically advanced (Yue, 2024). On becoming course leader at Central Saint Martins, I encouraged writers to become producers, directors and performers. Students put on plays, created interactive games and wrote, directed and produced TV and web shows. Students embraced the video essay to explore contemporary narrative theory for the Autumn Writers' Symposium while others used social media as a channel for comedy and sketch shows.

When GenAI emerged into public consciousness in late 2022 with the release of OpenAI's ChatGPT, the question became not whether to keep AI out of the creative writing classroom, but how to engage with it thoughtfully. Noel Gough (2004) calls this "becoming-cyborg" (p. 255). Gough argues that in educational contexts, becoming-cyborg means embracing the complexities of sociotechnical relations and deliberately reshaping educational practices to reflect these realities. In their analysis of education and technologised learning, Edwards and Fenwick (2010) conclude: "becoming-cyborg, in Gough's terms, does not seem to be an option. We already are. To be human is to be cyborg" (p. 84). But they could not have foreseen the explosion of AI and how it would force us all into a new state of becoming. The choice is whether we do so consciously, with critical awareness, or by default.

Yet I am cautious; I am acutely aware that much of the current AI discourse is driven by venture capital and corporate interests rather than by educational necessity or student benefit. Chassignol et al. (2018) argue that the push for more AI in education is a drive for less teachers, and Du Sautoy (2019) makes the astute point that "the current drive by humans to create algorithmic creativity is in the most part not one fuelled by the desire for extending artistic creation but rather enlarging a company bank balance" (p. 301). Becoming-cyborg does not mean being naive about the structures and interests shaping the technologies we encounter. When I began this research, I did not assume that GenAI should be integrated into creative writing teaching. I set out to investigate whether it should, and, if so, how it might be usefully deployed.

I approach this question from a critical realist perspective, drawing particularly on Margaret Archer's (2007) work on reflexivity and human agency. This framework is useful because it takes seriously both the material realities of how AI systems function (their technical constraints, their training on particular datasets and their subjugation to corporate structures) and the human dimension of how we think, make meaning and decide how to live and create. It refuses both technological determinism (the idea that AI's trajectory is inevitable) and human exceptionalism (the idea that technology does not matter). Instead, it positions us as reflexive beings who must constantly interrogate the systems we use and decide how to engage with them. In Gough's terms, we become-cyborg consciously, maintaining critical awareness of the sociotechnical relations we are entering.

Methodology

This research took the form of action research, an approach well suited to practitioner inquiry in creative writing contexts (Gilbert & Macleroy, 2021). Action research, as Tripp (2005) argues, is fundamentally a strategy for developing teachers as researchers, enabling them to improve their practice through systematic cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. Rather than seeking to produce generalisable findings applicable across all contexts, action research generates insights that are specific to particular teaching situations while remaining potentially transferable to others.

I conducted this research across three higher education institutions in London between May 2024 and April 2025. These were: Central Saint Martins (part of the University of the Arts, London), MetFilm School at Ealing Studios, and Regent's University. Across these sites, fifty-two students participated in six pedagogical experiments. The cohorts varied considerably: some were small (two students and I), others large (thirty-seven students). Students came from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, from working class British to a married couple from Iran. Some were first-year undergraduates encountering structured storytelling for the first time; others were second-year postgraduates specialising in performance writing.

At the beginning of each session, I explained the purposes of the research and discussed the ethics of AI use. Students were informed they could opt out of AI engagement if they had a strong opposition to the technology but were encouraged to complete the end of session questionnaires so their thoughts could be recorded. All participants completed consent forms (except in one session where verbal consent was obtained), and all data was anonymised. I used free versions of generative AI tools, primarily ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot, as these are accessible to all students.

Each experiment employed a different research method appropriate to its research focus. Likert scale questionnaires with free text spaces were used to gather qualitative and quantitative data. In one case, I collaborated with the UAL Online team to investigate AI's capacity for student assessment. Rather than a single methodological approach, this research is deliberately pluralistic, using whatever tools seemed most appropriate for understanding what was happening in each teaching context.

Throughout, I was attentive to what emerged rather than what I expected to find. The research evolved iteratively; early experiments informed later ones. I did not start this enquiry with a predetermined hypothesis, but rather I set out to explore a genuine question where I did not know in advance what the answer would be.

Method: Six experiments

The first experiment, which I refer to as 'AI as collaborative tool', took place with two postgraduate students and employed Carroll and Latulipe (2009)'s Creativity Support Index (CSI), a validated tool for measuring how well digital tools support creative work. This small-scale study explored whether GenAI could function as a collaborative partner in a structured creative task: adapting a well-known fairy tale to reflect contemporary social and cultural concerns.

The second experiment 'AI as ideation catalyst' involved four final-year undergraduates in a workshop on generating text through research-based exploration. This investigated whether AI could help students move from research materials (objects, images, locations) into initial creative ideas for performance pieces and utilised Chakrabarty et al. (2024)'s Torrance Test of Creative Writing (TTCW).

The third experiment ‘AI as scaffolding mechanism’ was the largest, involving thirty-seven first-year students across two identical sessions. It examined whether AI could serve as an educational scaffold, helping students learn the specific craft of writing loglines and synopses by analysing AI-generated loglines and synopses before applying those skills to their own work. For this experiment I adopted Kim and Kim’s (2022) Artificial Intelligence-Enhanced Scaffolding System (AISS) which they created to help students write scientific papers.

The fourth experiment ‘AI as editorial assistant’ involved eleven students across two cohorts studying screenwriting at Regent’s University. Students formulated editorial feedback on a script, then compared their analysis to AI-generated feedback using a framework I designed using ChatGPT.

‘AI as research facilitator’ emerged as an ongoing dimension of my work with Chinese students, where AI tools enabled translation of Chinese texts on narrative theory and supported the production of our first fully Mandarin-language theatrical performance.

Finally, ‘AI as assessment instrument’ was conducted in collaboration with UAL Online’s Research and Innovation Coordinator, investigating whether AI could generate meaningful feedback and grades on student creative work. Two postgraduate portfolios were assessed by both humans and an AI system using identical rubrics.

While each experiment investigates a discrete pedagogical function – collaboration, ideation, scaffolding, editorial feedback, research facilitation and assessment – they are not simply six isolated case studies. Put together, they chart the terrain where GenAI’s affordances end and the irreducibly human work of creative writing begins. Read in sequence, they build a cumulative argument: that the most revealing thing about GenAI in the creative writing classroom is not what it can do but what it cannot, and that this limitation, understood clearly, is itself a pedagogical resource.

AI as collaborative tool

The impulse for this initial experiment came from my reading of recent scholarship on computational creativity and the hyperbole suggesting we are entering an era of co-creativity (Mirowski et al., 2022) and Co-cre-AI-tion or augmented creativity (Vinchon et al., 2023). Yet when I asked students whether they thought AI was creative, their answers were consistently sceptical. I decided to test this empirically.

Along with two postgraduate Performance: Writing students (both international students from China for whom English was a second language), I adapted a lesson plan incorporating Carroll and Latulipe (2009)’s Creativity Support Index (CSI). The CSI was developed to measure how well specific tools support creative work by asking users to rate tools across dimensions including exploration, collaboration, engagement, effort/reward trade-off, tool transparency, and expressiveness. Mencarini et al. (2015) used the CSI to assess collaborative comic book creation and Young (2019) used it to compare Beat Blender to other music generating software.

The task was straightforward: in forty-five minutes, each student (and I) would work with ChatGPT to create a socioculturally relevant adaptation of 'Little Red Riding Hood'. We had spent the first part of the session tracing the fossil record of this fairy tale, from Charles Perrault's version through the Brothers Grimm to Angela Carter's feminist reimagining, and contemporary film adaptations. The students understood how each iteration had made the story speak to its historical moment and how, once Angela Carter had made Little Red Riding Hood active and no longer a victim (Perrault) or a victim waiting to be saved (Brothers Grimm), she inevitably became the aggressor (*Hard Candy*, 2005).

What emerged was illuminating. Both students found the experience frustrating. Student 1 compared working with ChatGPT to "teaching a child" – the AI required constant prompting and refinement. When Student 1 wanted to incorporate strong Chinese cultural elements, ChatGPT generated clichés instead. Student 2 found that when she wanted her story to go in a particular direction – having the grandmother and wolf fall in love – ChatGPT resisted.

The CSI scores we generated out of 100 were high (Ray: 80, Student 1: 69.3, Student 2: 80.3), suggesting that ChatGPT functioned reasonably well as a creativity support tool. Yet the qualitative feedback revealed a different picture. All three of us felt that ChatGPT stuck to the archetype too slavishly and that trying to be truly creative with GenAI was not possible.

Margaret Boden's (1990) observation is pertinent:

> Creativity is a matter of using one's computational resource to explore, and sometimes to break out of familiar conceptual spaces … it is clear that the program did not break out of its initial search-space. It did not even bend the rules, never mind break them. (p. 108)

Importantly, we had spent the session sitting in silence staring at screens, not collaborating with each other. The psychological and societal importance of being able to work collaboratively with other people, an important learning outcome of the session, was not achieved.

AI as ideation catalyst

If AI struggles to "break out of its initial search-space", might it instead help students develop ideas that were authentically their own? This question animated the second experiment, conducted with four final-year BA Performance, Design & Practice students at Central Saint Martins in a workshop on 'Text and Action.'

This session looked at ways of creating ideas and generating texts using research. Research could either be field research (visiting locations), picture research (using visual stimuli) or object research (using tactile physical objects).

The usual session involved introducing students to the lesson aims, discussing the various forms of research, placing the students into groups and allowing them to conduct their research.

They would then return after a break and use the object of their research to stimulate ideas. This would lead to a text and the session would end with each group sharing the text with the class (activating it).

As the cohort was so small, each student was allowed to conduct their own research and GenAI (ChatGPT) was integrated into the ideation stage of the process after the break. The session finished with the students coming together to create a single piece for performance with assistance from GenAI.

For this session I worked in collaboration with the students' tutor.

I utilised Chakrabarty et al. (2024)'s Torrance Test of Creative Writing (TTCW). Based on the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (Torrance, 1966) which measures creativity as process, the TTCW measures creativity as product. Chakrabarty et al. utilised Torrance's original parameters for testing creativity – fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration – and augmented it by engaging eight creative writing experts to suggest creativity measures for evaluating short fiction aligned with Torrance's four dimensions. Though Chakrabarty et al. and the writing experts created 14 different parameters, I simplified this to ten for gauging the students' experience but retained the original 14 for the tutors' assessment of the final performance.

An opening questionnaire exploring the students' current GenAI usage revealed that while they believed it could be used for creative tasks, they were also concerned about using AI creatively: a dichotomy that shows the students are aware of GenAI's potential but also acutely knowledgeable about the way it is trained.

After the students used their research and GenAI to stimulate ideas, they completed the TTCW. Two students found that GenAI functioned better as a research tool than a tool that could create original ideas. Flexibility scored the highest for all students, with the students praising GenAI for allowing them to explore multiple perspectives and offering diverse approaches to the task, enabling them to see their concepts from angles they had not considered before and to integrate both imaginative and practical elements into their work.

Using the TTCW, the students' tutor and I assessed the students' final performances across dimensions of fluency (how many ideas they generated), flexibility (how many different approaches they explored), originality (how novel the final work was) and elaboration (how fully developed the work was). Fluency and flexibility scored highest, suggesting that engaging with AI prompted students to think about their work from multiple perspectives. Originality and elaboration scored lower, which aligns with the broader finding that AI tends towards the conventional.

This points to something important: the value of AI in creative work is not that it generates good ideas, but that engaging with its (often inadequate) ideas helps clarify your own thinking.

AI as scaffolding mechanism

The third experiment was the largest: involving thirty-seven first-year filmmaking students at MetFilm School, London, across two four-hour sessions in which they needed to learn the specific craft of writing loglines and synopses – condensed prose documents used in the film industry to sell a story. These are fundamentally different from screenplays; they are marketing and persuasion documents, and the writing craft has more in common with copywriting and advertising than screenwriting.

For this session I adapted Kim & Kim's (2022) Artificial Intelligence-Enhanced Scaffolding System (AISS). The AISS was built using an earlier model of ChatGPT (GPT 2.0) and was originally used for writing scientific essays. Kim et al. (2022) later used the tool to measure whether it could increase students' rhetoric skills. The basis of the AISS is simple: it would suggest alternative – potentially more robust – sentences based on a rough draft of students' essays. The expectation was that this would provide conceptual scaffolding (i.e. tools, hints and concepts that guide students through their knowledge acquisition) and metacognitive scaffolding (i.e. it would allow students to reflect on their own thinking and learning process) (Kim & Kim, 2022.

Without access to the AISS interface but with access to a more advanced iteration of ChatGPT (GPT 4.0), I used Kim and Kim's findings to adapt the session on writing loglines and synopses.

The sessions began with a PowerPoint presentation outlining the aims of the lesson and introducing the students to loglines and synopses by looking at successful and unsuccessful examples of both.

We then discussed AI engagement which, across the two sessions, was very limited. I introduced the students to the AI-enhanced element of the lesson. They were to use ChatGPT to write the loglines and synopses to pre-existing films. The rationale for this was to increase their vocabulary, grammar and syntactical knowledge around condensing stories into a single sentence (logline) and a single page (synopsis) and to reflect on how they would use that acquired understanding to write their own. This would therefore fulfil the requirements for conceptual and metacognitive scaffolding.

I then showed the students how to engage with ChatGPT to achieve the most out of the exercise. I used iterative prompting: that is, developing ChatGPT's response by asking it to improve or augment its answer in some way. I also asked it to focus on character and genre, both elements that had been covered in previous sessions and essential components of storytelling (i.e. building on pre-existing knowledge to develop further knowledge) (Wood et al., 1976).

It is interesting to note that one of the students was aghast at ChatGPT's use of the compound word "pulse-pounding" in one of its logline iterations. Who, the student wondered, would ever

use the word pulse-pounding? That is exactly why you should use it, was my response. A Large Language Model (LLM) is nothing if it is not a lexicon and vocabulary builder.

Once the students had spent 45 minutes writing and rewriting loglines and synopses with ChatGPT they shared the results with the rest of the class.

The questionnaire responses revealed high engagement. The question "I found the process of interacting with AI intuitive and easy to follow" received the most "strongly agree" responses followed by: "I would recommend using GenAI to other students learning to write loglines and treatments". This suggests that the session was a success. Students who had not engaged with GenAI in a meaningful way before the session now found it intuitive and would go on to recommend the tool for writing to other students. "The AI-generated suggestions were relevant to the loglines and treatments I wanted to create" and "The tool made me feel more efficient in developing loglines and treatments" also scored highly, suggesting that the scaffolding aims of the session had been achieved.

However, the dichotomous nature of creative GenAI engagement became evident again. Responses to the question "I felt my personal creativity was enhanced by collaborating with AI" were notably negative. One student wrote: "AI can smooth over and fill creative gaps but lacks the capability to further information and ideas". Student 21: "I don't like AI in general so I won't use it. It's fun but lacks creativity". And Student 37: "As much as I think AI is useful I don't think it should be used to create 'original' ideas. It is a good learning tool but it shouldn't overshadow traditional writing methods". Student 36, who opted not to engage with AI, wrote: "GenAI is highly immoral: it takes so much energy and destroys the environment. It contributes to the job crisis. It steals from real artists and writers".

These responses are not dismissible as uninformed technophobia. These students understood exactly what they were objecting to. Yet the pedagogical aims of the session were largely achieved: students learned the conventions of loglines and synopses, developed their vocabulary around story compression, and gained confidence in the craft. The scaffolding functioned. What it did not do was enhance their sense of creative ownership or make them enthusiastic about using AI as a creative partner.

Interestingly, when I reviewed students' final submissions several weeks later, those who had most clearly used AI to write their loglines and synopses – rather than using it as a learning tool and then developing their own – were predominantly students for whom English was a second language.

AI as editorial assistant

Moving from ideation to refinement, the fourth experiment investigated whether AI could function as a script editor.

Eleven students across two cohorts at Regent's University participated. Both cohorts were at the early stages of developing a first draft script: seven first-year students were working on short film scripts and three second-year students were writing the first draft of television pilots. In both cases this was an ideal time to explore whether GenAI could function as a script editor to help the students through the drafting process before submission. I designed an 'Amalgamated Script Evaluation Framework' (ASEF) using ChatGPT, drawing on established narrative theory from Aristotle through Robert McKee. The framework addressed ten dimensions: narrative structure, character development, conflict and tension, pacing and rhythm, thematic coherence, dialogue, emotional engagement, clarity of transitions, iterative refinement, and originality.

Each session began with a discussion about the role of the script editor. Then, in groups in the case of the first-year students and in one group in the case of the second-year students, the students took on the role of script editor and formulated editorial advice they would give the writer to improve a script, basing their suggestions on the ASEF. Once this task was completed we asked ChatGPT to perform the same task. We then performed a comparative analysis study of ChatGPT's advice to the students to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of ChatGPT's assessment of the script.

The results were striking. ChatGPT's feedback was technically competent but fundamentally bland. It identified genuine issues in the script but proposed only generic solutions. Where students had offered specific, character-driven suggestions – "The protagonist needs a moment of vulnerability that contradicts his public persona" – ChatGPT offered abstractions: "Character development could be enhanced through deeper exploration of internal conflict".

Most tellingly, ChatGPT was enthusiastically positive about weak passages. It praised work that students had identified as needing revision. This phenomenon – what researchers call 'sycophancy,' the tendency of language models to be agreeable rather than critically rigorous – rendered the feedback unhelpful.

When asked "Would you recommend the use of generative AI editing tools to your peers", students were overwhelmingly negative. One wrote: "The feedback the AI gives is very generic and non-specific". Another: "It reinforces what had already been discussed but doesn't push you further". This aligns with Gero et al.'s (2023) study that found writers prefer human editors.

Yet, the session was not without value. By examining both student and AI feedback side by side, students deepened their understanding of what good editorial feedback looks like. They recognised that the best feedback was both specific and actionable, grounded in particular character and narrative choices rather than abstract principles. In this sense, AI's inadequacy became pedagogically productive.

AI as research facilitator

This dimension of the research emerged less as a planned experiment and more as an organic development of my work with two Chinese postgraduate students. In their first year of study, I asked one of my Chinese MA Performance: Writing students which texts on narrative theory they studied during their undergraduate degree in China. They responded that they had studied Robert McKee (Hollywood script doctor) translated into Chinese. This struck me as problematic; so, as they entered their second year and started work on their final-year project, the students and I set ourselves the task of researching Chinese narrative structure from a Chinese perspective.

Using Claude, Google Translate and our combined linguistic knowledge, we translated sections of Yi's (2004) Narrative Principles of Chinese Classical Novels which begins (in Chinese - translation by Claude):

> We must also recognise that the universality of Western theory is a flawed universality. When Western theorists established their novel theories, they never considered the existence of Chinese novels, which had already existed for a thousand years. (p. 1)

We used Google's LLM to create podcasts of expansive chapters 'On Structure' and 'On Narrative Perspective' in Yi's (2024) *Chinese Narratology Vol 1: Heaven and Human* and Yi's (2025) *Chinese Narratology Vol 2: Ancient and Modern*.

The students used both ChatGPT and Google Translate to translate their one-act plays – which they wrote in Chinese – into English so I could read them and offer dramaturgical support. I also used ChatGPT to translate a conversation between one of the students and their actors during rehearsals. This work culminated in the production of our first Mandarin theatrical performance in the course's history.

This is where AI demonstrated clear, unambiguous value – not in generating creative ideas but in enabling access to knowledge across language barriers. The students experienced what it meant to centre their own cultural traditions in their creative work rather than to perpetually view their practice through a Western lens. For them, AI was not a threat to their creativity; it was an enabler of a more capacious and decentred creative education.

AI as assessment instrument

In March 2025, I collaborated with UAL Online's Research and Innovation Coordinator, Dr Truelove, to investigate a question that increasingly preoccupies higher education institutions: can AI grade student work and provide meaningful feedback?

As both the online team and I were exploring the use of GenAI as an assessment tool, a collaboration seemed advantageous to both parties. The online team were looking into various aspects of assessment – scoping and reducing the amount of work for assessment – but our research objectives aligned in exploring whether GenAI could generate effective feedback and grade students' work.

As both the UAL and MA Performance: Writing adhere to a robust constructively aligned framework, we decided the best way to test GenAI would be to upload the learning outcomes of a module, along with UAL's generic rubric and 15-point marking scale, in addition to a precise prompt. Microsoft Copilot was used for this test as it gives UAL staff protected status.

Two postgraduate students who had already submitted their work and received grades for their Unit 1 coursework – a portfolio including a one-act play, the opening ten pages of a television series along with a series outline, and a digital media synopsis – consented to have their work reassessed with GenAI. Dr Truelove wrote a precise role prompt and I prompted Copilot to create its own prompt: "write a prompt that would allow you to assess pieces of creative writing against intended learning outcomes and a rubric and award a grade on a 15-point grade scale". Copilot created an elaborate contextual prompt.

The results were sobering. CoPilot's grades were not inaccurate – they aligned roughly with human assessment – but they were imprecise. More problematically, the feedback was "bland but broadly fine", in Dr Truelove's assessment. It was also systematically generous, particularly with weaker submissions. In his interim report (2025) Dr Truelove noted: "The auto-generated feedback had a generic feel to it, with the relevant criteria being too obviously regurgitated. This did result in feedback that was constructively aligned, but we felt the words lacked personality, warmth and authenticity". Shortly after this experiment, UAL issued guidance explicitly cautioning against automating the student-facing aspects of assessment. The risks, it was judged, outweighed the potential benefits.

This experiment raised important questions about what we ask of feedback in higher education. Feedback is not simply information transfer; it is an act of human attention and care. When a student reads feedback from a tutor, they are reading evidence that someone who knows the discipline and their development as an artist/thinker has spent time poring over their work. AI-generated feedback, no matter how technically competent, cannot replicate this dimension of the academic relationship.

Discussion

What emerges from these six experiments is a picture of AI's capacities and limitations. The hyperbole that GenAI must be shoehorned into every crevice has been shown to be exactly that: hyperbole. But interesting insights into GenAI engagement in the creative writing classroom were revealed.

Creativity requires resistance

Across three experiments, one phenomenon proved consistent and revealing: the generic, inadequate or blunt output AI produces sparked deeper creative thinking rather than inhibiting it. This unexpected finding suggests that AI's limitations might be pedagogically productive.

In the collaborative tool experiment, when ChatGPT generated clichéd Chinese cultural elements, Student 1 responded not by accepting the output but by clarifying exactly what authentic cultural specificity they wanted to achieve. When GenAI resisted Student 2's attempts to make the wolf character and the grandmother fall in love, it showed them that they had created a truly novel approach to the story. We did not get good ideas from ChatGPT; we got frustrated, and in that frustration, we became more creative. The three final adaptations of Little Red Riding Hood – one exploring austerity and campus activism, one blending Chinese mythology with contemporary political concerns, one a cyberpunk narrative about power and deception – emerged precisely because we had rejected ChatGPT's conventional suggestions and forced ourselves to articulate an alternative vision.

The same pattern appeared in the editorial assistant experiment. ChatGPT's feedback was technically competent but fundamentally bland. Where students had written "The protagonist needs a moment of vulnerability that contradicts his public persona" ChatGPT offered abstractions: "Character development could be enhanced through deeper exploration of internal conflict". Rather than accepting this generic feedback, students recognised its inadequacy and, in responding to it, deepened their understanding of what good editorial feedback requires. They articulated that effective feedback must be specific, grounded in character choices, and attentive to what the writer is actually attempting. ChatGPT's sycophancy – its tendency to praise weak work – forced students to think critically about assessment itself. One student wrote: "The feedback the AI gives is very generic and non-specific. It doesn't push you further". This recognition became pedagogically valuable. By examining what ChatGPT got wrong, students clarified what they themselves valued in editorial practice.

Most tellingly, in the assessment instrument experiment, Dr Truelove and I observed that Copilot's systematically generous feedback – praising work that human assessors had identified as needing revision – created a productive friction. Rather than accepting the AI's bland endorsement of weak passages, we were forced to articulate precisely why certain work fell short. The AI's inadequacy became a mirror; it showed us what impersonal, generic assessment looks like, and in recognising it, we articulated more clearly what assessment should be. As Dr Truelove noted, the feedback "lacked personality, warmth and authenticity". This observation led to institutional recognition that automating student-facing assessment removes something essential: the evidence of human attention and care.

This suggests something important about the relationship between creativity and constraint. Margaret Boden (1990) observes that creativity involves "breaking out of familiar conceptual spaces". If AI generates output that stays within familiar conceptual spaces – generic loglines, conventional character arcs, enthusiastically positive but undiscriminating feedback – then the struggle to transcend that output becomes the creative act. An AI that produced mediocre ideas might serve creative education better than an AI that produced nothing at all, because it provides something to react against. The resistance to AI's output, the refusal of its conventionality, the articulation of what we want instead – this is where creativity happens.

This reframes how we should think about AI in creative education. We should not seek systems that generate good creative ideas. Rather, we should develop pedagogical approaches that help students and teachers recognise the limitations of AI's output and use that recognition as a catalyst for more precise, authentic thinking.

There is a structural reason for this, and it is one that predates the current generation of tools. Writing in 2011, the media theorist Roberto Simanowski observed of early text generators that any idiosyncratic style is "perceived as a failure of the program" (p. 91). The point is not merely descriptive but structural: text-generating machines are engineered away from the idiosyncratic and towards the statistically plausible. What Simanowski observed of small combinatorial systems applies with considerably greater force to contemporary LLM's whose entire training objective is the production of statistical plausibility. The averaging tendency my students encountered – the clichéd Chinese cultural elements, the generic editorial notes, the undiscriminating praise of weak work – is not a bug that will be engineered out as the technology matures. It is, in Simanowski's terms, the design imperative itself. The pedagogical consequence follows: if a creative writing classroom understands this, then the encounter with AI's conventional output becomes a reliable occasion for students to articulate the alternative. The machine is engineered to produce the average; the student's work, in response, is to articulate the specific.

The question of authenticity

A theme runs through all six experiments. Across every cohort, students were not simply evaluating GenAI's outputs for technical competence. They were measuring them against an implicit standard of authentic creative practice and registering – often without naming it – the gap between the two. When Student 1 rejected ChatGPT's clichéd Chinese cultural elements, they was not merely correcting a factual error; they were asserting what authentic cultural specificity meant to them. When Dr Truelove observed that Copilot's feedback "lacked personality, warmth and authenticity," he was identifying not a technical deficiency but the absence of what makes feedback an act of human attention rather than information transfer. Unintentionally, this exploration has become a study in authenticity under pressure.

Simanowski's work on computational creativity offers a useful philosophical framework for what is at stake. He proposes a thought experiment: what if we find a great line of poetry in the text of a rather mediocre poet who just experimented with words and came up, in the midst of many bad lines, with one very good one? Would that line carry the same weight for us if we knew it was produced by a machine rather than a person? (p. 100) Simanowski argues that when we read computer-generated text, "we actually do not read the text, but the machine" (p. 108). The text becomes a means of evaluating the program rather than an utterance to be received. This reframes the authenticity question with some precision. The issue is not whether the output is good or bad. The issue is what kind of reading relation the output invites.

Crucially, Simanowski argues that what the reader actually requires is not a guarantee of the author's suffering or sincerity behind a great line, but rather the author's existence "as the

potential addressee of our own reading" (p. 108). A reader of a poem reads towards someone. A student receiving feedback reads towards the tutor who wrote it. When that addressee is absent – when, as Simanowski puts it, the reader is no longer confronted with "the specific self-conception and perspective of an author" (p. 54) – the reading relation collapses, and with it the possibility of the feedback functioning as feedback.

This is, I would argue, what the editorial and assessment experiments revealed. It was not that ChatGPT's or Copilot's notes were technically wrong. The assessments were broadly aligned with human grading. The editorial feedback identified real issues. What was missing was the condition that makes feedback meaningful: a reader to whom the writer could respond. The students who rejected AI-generated notes were not being technophobic. They were identifying, without necessarily having the vocabulary for it, the absence of an addressee. The same dynamic accounts for the rejection of ChatGPT's clichés in the collaborative tool experiment: the students were not just producing better alternatives, they were locating themselves as the authors whose creative intentions had been refracted in distorted form, and correcting accordingly. This is authenticity not as a property of the text, but as a property of the relation between writer, reader, and utterance.

The pedagogical implication is important: if authenticity in creative practice is fundamentally relational – if it depends on the existence of a genuine addressee and a genuine sender – then the encounter with GenAI's output does something valuable precisely because it stages the absence of both. Students clarify who they are writing towards and who they are writing as, by discovering what is missing when neither is present.

The equity question: scaffolding or substitution?

One finding deserves more attention. When I reviewed final submissions weeks after the scaffolding experiment, those students who had most visibly relied on AI-generated loglines and synopses rather than using AI as a learning tool were predominantly students for whom English was a second language. This created a pattern I had not anticipated: while AI provided genuine support and built confidence for these students, there was a risk that it became a substitute for developing language facility rather than a scaffold for developing it.

This is not an indictment of using AI with international or ESL students. But it reveals a potential two-tier system emerging within education. Some students – those with confidence in English and in digital interfaces – used AI strategically: as a tool to explore possibilities, then discarded most, retaining only what served their vision. Other students – those for whom English composition required more cognitive effort – used AI as a workaround, accepting more of its output and relying on it more heavily.

Over time, this divergence could widen considerably. Strategic users develop prompt engineering skills and critical AI literacy. Dependent users fall further behind in the development of writerly voice and linguistic fluency. What appears to be a tool providing equal access actually produces unequal outcomes. This reflects Habib et al.'s (2024) findings:

> The speed of "thinking" provided by AI can be a great tool for seasoned problem-solvers. For those who are still developing divergent thinking skills and lack creative confidence, there is a danger of AI hindering human thinking, as some participants expressed difficulty in coming up with ideas beyond what the AI offered, showing a concerning potential for cognitive fixation and reduced self-efficacy. (p. 5)

This demands explicit pedagogical attention. If we use AI, teachers must be aware which students are scaffolding and which are substituting and intervene accordingly.

Where AI actually belongs

Of all the experiments, the 'AI as research facilitator' experiment showed genuine, unambiguous value. The translations of Chinese narrative theory opened possibilities that would otherwise have been closed. The students discovered what it feels like to write from their own cultural traditions rather than through an inherited Western frame. For them and other students, AI is an enabler of more pluralistic storytelling landscape.

This points toward a genuine role for AI in creative writing pedagogy. Not as a creative partner, an editor or an assessor, but as a research tool: translating texts, accessing information, summarising scholarship. In my 'AI as collaborative tool' experiment, we charted the fossil record of Little Red Riding Hood but were constrained by our focus on Eurocentric/Western interpretations. With GenAI, the scope for exploring the fossil record of any archetypal narrative has suddenly expanded.

Rather than asking 'how can we integrate AI throughout the curriculum?', a more useful question might be: 'in which specific, bounded moments might AI provide genuine value without replacing human judgment or eroding what we value in creative education?'. The answer is far more limited than current discourse suggests. And that limitation is not a failure of AI, it is clarity about what creative education is actually for.

Limitations

This research has clear limitations. The cohorts were small (except for the scaffolding experiment), and most participants were students in London-based institutions. The findings may not transfer to other geographic contexts or institutional types. Most experiments were single-session interventions; I did not follow students over time to investigate whether their relationship with AI deepened or changed. The free versions of ChatGPT and other tools I used have different capabilities than paid versions, which may have affected outcomes.

I also did not conduct interviews or extended conversations with students about their experiences; most data came from questionnaires, which are necessarily limited in what they can capture. A deeper qualitative inquiry might have revealed dimensions I missed.

Additionally, AI capabilities are evolving rapidly. The experiments in this article were conducted with ChatGPT 4.0 and other models available in 2024 and early 2025. Newer models

may have different capacities and limitations. As we enter 2026, Google has made its Gemini Pro free for a year to all students; how might the capacity to create short video clips impact students' storytelling?

Finally, I am aware that my own position as a critical, somewhat sceptical user of AI may have shaped what I looked for and what I found. A researcher more enthusiastic about AI's potential might have framed the same experiments differently or emphasised different results. At the 2025 AI in Education conference at King's College, London, I met many STEM academics and students who had embraced AI integration into pedagogy enthusiastically. When I told them about my research their eyes lit up as they imagined a myriad of potential uses of GenAI in the creative writing classroom. My hesitancy is not a flaw unique to this research, but it is worth making explicit: all research is shaped by the researcher's positionality.

Conclusion

The students I worked with over the course of these experiments were engaged, thoughtful, and cautiously critical. They used AI when it seemed useful and resisted when it seemed unhelpful. They understood the ethical complexities. They were not waiting to be told what to do; they were already thinking seriously about these questions.

What they needed and what this research has attempted to provide is not a prescription ("use AI this way"), but rather a set of concrete examples of what happens when AI is deliberately integrated into specific pedagogical moments. They needed to see that AI has particular uses and limitations. They needed to observe their teachers thinking through these questions seriously rather than either embracing or dismissing AI wholesale.

If there is a lesson for creative writing pedagogy more broadly, it is this: the integration of new technologies need not happen at the pace technology companies or institutional innovation agendas demand. It can happen thoughtfully, experimentally, with explicit attention to what we value in creative education and whether a particular tool serves those values. Sometimes it will, often it will not. In contradiction to Edwards and Fenwick's (2010) conclusion that "To be human is to be cyborg" (p. 84), the creative writer – the practitioner, the teacher and the student – will always be "becoming-cyborg" in Gough's terms: questioning, exploring, resisting, never arriving, constantly travelling. Because it is in transition that the most fascinating stories reside.

This research also suggests something further. The students described here were not passive recipients of a technological shift. They were active, critical, and already theorising their own practice in relation to it. Their resistance to AI's generic outputs, their discomfort with AI-generated feedback, their insistence on the difference between authentic creative attention and computational approximation – these are not symptoms of technophobia. They are evidence of a creative intelligence that knows what it values and will not easily surrender it. On the journey to becoming creative cyborgs we are, in our encounter with GenAI, becoming more

authentically human. That is perhaps the most serious finding of this research – and the one most worth taking back into the classroom.

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