



Student Assistants' Perceived Leadership Impact of Artificial Intelligence on the Reading and Writing Landscape

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Abstract. This study explores learners' adaptation to blended learning using a Artificial Intelligence (AI), with its concomitant rapid development, is most likely to heavily influence the order of business in Higher Education. Among other spheres, academic support will undoubtedly be impacted as students can easily present AI generated works as their own personally generated works. This paper researched on perceived leadership influence of AI on the reading and writing (R&W) support given by Language Consultants (LCs) at one university in South Africa. LCs are senior students appointed through the university's Students Employment Policy working in the Reading and Writing Centre (RWC). These appointees, equipped through various training, assist the university community on R&W matters. As such, the LCs become leaders on R&W among their peers. However, given numerous available AI related word-based applications, and the fact that the majority of the potential RWC users are the Gen Zs, one wonders if these digital natives (i.e., Gen Zs) will continue using the services of RWC. With this in mind, LCs were asked in a leadership workshop to respond to questions on possible AI influence on their R&W leadership platform. This paper presents responses emanating from that engagement. In brief, an analysis of questionnaire responses of 44 respondents indicated the following: (a) with exception of a few, most LCs do not see AI as a threat that may make them redundant; (b) although appreciation of generative AI is acknowledged, LCs are note that much reskilling is needed on their part to take full advantage of AI abilities; and (c) most LCs lament the disabling nature with regards to creativity and critical thinking among students, and the promotion of laxity and plagiarism.

Keywords: Language Consultants, Reading & Writing, Artificial Intelligence, Gen Z, Leadership

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1 Introduction

In this 21st Century, the presence and ever advanced rapid development of generative technology such as Grammarly, English Editor, Language Tool, Grammar Check, Grammatica Grammar & Spelling Checker, etc., in the epoch of Gen Z (digital natives) entering the HE landscape. One cannot help but wonder if Reading & Writing Centre services will remain relevant henceforth, or will their agency be rendered obsolete by concomitant realities of Gen Z assistance preferences. The knowledge of AI is presently gaining momentum and the use of it by teachers and learners in the teaching space in infrequently discussed [1]. Thus, the significance of Language Consultants, students and teachers being equipped is highly implored, as it will upsurge the effectiveness/quality of reviewing documents through technological techniques in the teaching space. Consequently, to ensure quality of reviewed documents by Language Consultants using AI tools, both advantages and disadvantages of AI must be weighed and tackled through trainings as Artificial Intelligence has progressively gained prominence in education [2].

Much of the research accentuates the worth of students' observations on the advent of the new technological techniques prior usage [3]. Hence, this article explores AI related perspectives of senior students who serve as Language Consultants. Focus is on what their take is regarding the potential impact of AI on their duties as document reviewers in the Reading & Writing Centre of a rural based University in the Republic of South Africa.

The present research embarked on this study with the intention to meet the following objectives:

- To understand the LCs' perceptions of leadership.
- To investigate the LCs' perceptions of AI and how it affects their rendered services.
- To understand the LCs' views of AI and offer/arrange relevant training to better equip them.
- To assess the effective of AI tools on LCs' roles.

2 Literature Review

Since the March 2023 when ChatGPT4 was launched, much interest, talk, excitement mixed with trepidation ensued in the world-wide. These unsettling waves of potential

change shook diverse areas of operation, warranting physical protest from scriptwriters and actors in Hollywood (the USA) to generating much debate in academia. Just as adoption of new inventions shake the traditional norms of operations, generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) has also caused a lot of commotion of late. For Higher Education Institutions (HEI), the new hype of AI coincides with the new entrants being members of the Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2010), to whom technology is their only known reality, without which they are not the wiser. The literature review that follows below explores the realities of the Gen Zs as they operate within the context of higher education.

2.1 AI influence on Students

Firat [4] observes that:

Recent advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) have led to growing interest in understanding its potential applications and implications across various domains.... AI technologies, such as ChatGPT powered by GPT-4, have demonstrated significant potential to transform how students learn and interact with information. As these AI-driven tools become increasingly sophisticated and accessible, it is essential to explore their impact on students and educational institutions, particularly universities.”

It is along these lines that:

“Chatbots are potentially beneficial tool for increasing learning interests and engagement. Chatbots are computer programs that can converse verbally or in writing with humans to make them feel more human.... Similarly, ChatGPT was used as a teaching assistant in a study to provide individualized feedback and assistance to online students. The use of chatbots, specifically ChatGPT, can dramatically enhance student motivation and engagement. These chatbots can increase students’ motivation and attention by providing immediate, personalized feedback.” [5]

It therefore makes sense that it would not be prudent for anyone in academia to deny the encroachment and potential heavy impact that AI has on academic realities. Obviously, academics, policy makers and managers in academic setting have to accept the presence of AI and proactively make room to accommodate it as a permanent role player in academia.

2.2 Students’ Written Works Now Doubted

During previous times before the latest advancement of technology, more especially generative language models, it was relatively easy for the faculty to authenticate the authorship of a student’s written work.

However, the use of ChatGPT in education has raised potential concerns and risks.... One concern is the ethical implications of ChatGPT's ability to write scientific essays...which may compromise the authenticity and originality of research.... Another issue is the use [of] ChatGPT by students to outsource their writing...which poses a challenge for academic institutions that rely on plagiarism detection tools to maintain academic integrity...and [thus] potentially undermines students' writing development.[6]

The complication is not only constrained to teaching and learning but also spills over into the assessment component.

In the past, papers were graded on the assumption that students had completed the tasks themselves, with plagiarism being the primary concern. Today, services like ChatGPT enable (semi)automated paper production, bypassing the need for students to complete the tasks themselves. By solely examining the paper as an artifact, it is no longer possible to confidently determine whether a student has engaged in the tasks required for skill development. The use of tools like ChatGPT in completing assignments allows students to (semi)automatically achieve tasks that would otherwise serve as evidence of their learning and gradable efforts.[7]

This calls for the change of practice from the traditional way of operation that might fall prey to the advancement of technology, to new ways that will help circumvent AI misuse and creatively come up with robust and engaging practices of teaching, learning and assessment. University policies should henceforth consider addressing realities of AI before the welfare and relevancy of HEIs become questionable.

2.3 AI Rewiring Students' Brain

The foregoing is a reality of recent HE entrants, the Gen Z (born 1995-2010). It is along these lines that Rothman [9] comments thus:

Some research has shown that the brains of Generation Z (Digital Natives) are structurally different than those in earlier generation.... The brains of Generation Zs have become wired to sophisticated, complex visual imagery. As a result, the part of the brain responsible for visual ability is far more developed, making visual forms of learning more effective. Auditory learning (lecture and discussion) is very strongly disliked by this age group. Interactive games, collaborative projects, advance organizers, challenges, and anything that they can try and see are appreciated.... Many sources say that Gen Z is good at 'multitasking'....

2.4 AI Turning Students into Addicts

The Gen Zs may consider theirs to be an advanced world with lots of conveniences. Unfortunately, all that literally comes at a high cost in relation to their psyche. What complicates the matter for the Gen Z with regard to maintaining healthy reading practices is that:

Smartphones are seen as an inseparable part of daily life since they can connect to the Internet and include several mobile applications that make individuals' lives more comfortable.... However, the excessive and problematic use of smartphones [screen time] causes physical and psychological problems.... One of these problems is smartphone addiction and is defined as non-chemical impulsive disorder. Due to smartphone addiction, students are known to experience sleep disorders, problems in their social life, physical and psychological problems, and a decline in their academic achievement. [10]

2.5 Cocurricular Engagements Turns Students into Leaders

The core curriculum of institutions of higher learning are not solely responsible for the honing of leadership skills among learners. "When colleges and universities provide intentional, high-impact, and immersive leadership opportunities for the students, they are fostering learning experiences that are transformative rather than transactional in nature" [14]. It thus become more beneficial rather than a distraction to have students involving themselves in cocurricular activities as that provides an opportunity to practice leadership. Lozada and Johnson [15] echo the sentiment when they write thus: "Out-of-the-classroom experiences, such as serving in a student leadership role, can lead to the actualization of transformative learning opportunities, which may materialize in a heightened development of skills that are transferable to future academic and professional aspirations." It is from this stance that Language Consultants are viewed as student leaders in the aspect of linguistic matters, particularly with regard to reviewing of written documents for academic appropriacy.

2.6 Reading & Writing Centres' Contribution to Making Students Leaders

Most often than not in institutions of higher learning, there are student support and development establishments, one of them being Reading and Writing Centres. The "[Reading and] Writing centers play a complex and multifaceted role in South African higher education: they provide a safer space for students who are developing their academic voice; and a route for students to access academic discourses" [16]. In a dissertation for a Master's degree focusing on the effectiveness of a Reading and Writing Centre in a rural-based university, Khalo [17] writes that:

A writing centre is a learning space where students can meet with peer tutors and receive immediate feedback on their work. Furthermore, such an environment may allow students to pose questions on confusing points that they might not have had the courage to ask in lecture halls, thereby improving students' overall performance.

Given the foregoing, viz., Gen Z's learning style preferences; their overreliance on AI; and Advancements of AI, one cannot help but become inquisitive to even ask whether AI has the potential to eventually replace humanity and thus render Language Consultants obsolete. Apparently, there seems to be no consensus among scholars with regards to an appropriate response to the foregoing question. There are two schools of thoughts pertaining to this. On the one hand, Futurists consider the advancement of AI, as evidenced recently by ChatGPT4 and its sister counterparts, to be well on its way to supersede human intelligence. On the other hand, traditionalists argue that AI tools simply merge diverse products of human intelligence and pretentiously present the final concoction as "new".

3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that informs this study is eclectic in that (a) it appeals to the logic of phenomenological approach in as far as understanding the Language Consultants' perception of the phenomenon of AI encroaching into their language review world [11]; (b) harnesses what Activity theory espouses as important, namely, the Human Computer Interaction, as Language Consultants, being mostly Gen Zs, relate to their gadgets [12]; and (c) Grounded theory as it makes a provision of generating an informed approach once the phenomenon of the interaction between Gen Zs and AI in the linguistic world is understood, albeit at a micro level given the scope of this study [13].

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Design, Population and Sampling

This study adopted a qualitative approach. A population of Language Consultants (LCs) at a 3-day Leadership Workshop of a Reading & Writing Centre (RWC) in June 2023, was requested to respond to a short survey chiefly meant to explore their perspective on the impact of Artificial Intelligence on their duties as LCs. Purposive sampling, also called judgmental sampling [13], was adopted in that all the 44 LCs in attendance were invited to anonymously respond to the survey tool with the agreement that their respective individual identities and responses will remain untraceable.

4.2 Data Collection

Their identification was replaced by numbers which they assigned to self as the researchers requested them for each, to consecutively and loudly, take turn to call out a number and note the same on the survey-response sheet. Data were collected through a survey tool bearing the following questions:

- What is the one (1) chief purpose of leadership?

- What is the one (1) major challenge of leadership?
- As a language Consultant, you are a leader in assisting students on reading and writing matters. Therefore, what will you say is the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on your role (benefits, threats and challenges)?

Notwithstanding the foregoing, the implied Main question was, namely: do you foresee AI replacing you as Language Consultant?

5 Findings and Discussion

5.1 Demographics

Detailed demographics, such as gender, age and level of study and nature of degree of all the participants are illustrated in Appendix A.

With the exception of those who did not disclose their age, only two respondents (#s 35 & 43) were beyond the Gen Z age range of ≤ 28 years; at 29 and 30 years of age respectively.

5.2 Participants' Understanding of Leadership

Most of the participants correctly understood the chief goal of leadership as "Influence" (Maxwell, 2007:16), something which can be observed in the following quotations:

Participant #1: *"To influence and inspire the individuals to contribute towards the organizational success."* [Female (24) _4th yr]

Participant # 11: *"Leaders influences human behaviour towards a certain goal."* [Male (25) BA Honours]

Participant # 28: *"One chief purpose of leadership is to encourage and motivate followers of an organization to reach a common goal."* [Female (25) BEd 4th yr]

Participant #44: *"To influence people."* [Female (28) MEd]

However, some of the participants incorrectly understood the chief goal of leadership. This is reflected in the following:

Participant #24: *"To give instruction or to show a way to others."* [Female (21)]

Participant #14: *"Coordinate an interaction of resources towards accomplishing a task."* [Male (24) BA Honours]

Participant #6: *"Leadership is a vital management function that helps to direct an organization's resources for improved efficiency and the achievement."* [Female _____]

Participant #43: "*Leadership helps to direct an organization resources for improved efficient and the achievement of goals.*" [Female, (30) PhD]

According to the foregoing, it would seem like some respondents mistake management, which is about control of resources, for leadership, which has to do more with influencing human resource towards a bigger goal. When defining and commenting on management and leadership, Smit and Cronjé [9] write that "management can be defined as a process of planning, organising, leading and controlling the resources.... [Whereas leadership] means making use of influence and power to motivate employees to achieve organisational goals."

Participants' opinions were diverse on what constitutes as major challenge of leadership. And that is reflected in the following responses.

Participant #42: "*The major challenge of leadership is when people that a chief/leader is leading to not listen to him/her.*" [Female (21) BSc 4th yr]

Participant #39: "*Includes lack of self-confidence and also fear of failure.*"

Male (23) BEd 4th yr]

Participant #30: "*Lack of information and resources to offer can limit one to practice their leadership skills and also create a non-conducive environment.*" [Not Self-Identified]

5.3 Participants' perception of AI in Relation to their duties

Given the fact that the Gen Zs basically know no other reality except that of technology, however, even on how AI has the potential to influence their responsibilities as Language Consultants, participants' responses varied.

Participant #10: "*Instead of us helping students with feedback about their document AI does that.*" [Dems Undisclosed]

Participant #1: "*It will it easier for us to get the work done. Will make it easier for us in terms of decision making.*" [Female (24) 4th yr]

Participant #3: "*Reduces workload. Might help in figuring what to do. **Might end up doing all our work.** Not always up to the required standard.*" [Female (23) LLB 4th yr]

Although others appreciated the usefulness of AI with appropriate skilling, some respondents unfortunately looked at AI as a negative influence as students can either use AI to generate their written assignments which will come with less grammatical errors or use AI to personally review their written works; both cases having the potential to make their duties as Language Consultants redundant.

The evidence procured points to the realities that, although most of the participants displayed a healthy understanding of both the concept of AI and their leadership role as literacy champions, the majority is, however, either oblivious of the abilities of generative AI and Large Language Models (LLMs). In addition, the possible impact of such on their duties as Language Consultants; or downplay the impact of such.

Participant #30: *“AI cannot analyze everything so at times the statistics may not match with reality.”* []

Participant #41: *“The challenges of AI is that it does not give extra information, it is limited and it is plagiarisable (sic). It is effective but not efficient. AI does not acknowledge authors of certain information.”* [Female (20) BSc 4th yr]

Participant #4: *“AI is one of the most innovative tool to come out of this century, it allows easier assess (sic) to information, it does more work, leaving us humans with less to stress about. However, it threatens the creativity that human need to be naturing and exploring. It hinders critical thinking & creativity. It is not always reliable with facts!”* [Female (20) BSc 4th yr]

Participant #5: *“Challenges includes limited knowledge as if a task it to be done on a computer and one is less knowledgeable about it, one will find it hard to cope with. Network poses as a threat for message sending and recieval (sic) between communicators.”* [Female (22) BA Honours]

Participant #42: *“The challenge with AI is that sometimes it does not highlight all the errors that may appear.”* [Female (21) BSc 4th yr]

As per the foregoing, even the Gen Zs are conflicted when it comes to technology and its use, particularly in the context of language review. Although the presumptions at the onset of the study were that the Language Consultants will be overwhelmingly in support of AI, the responses were rather in conclusive on that score. Just because the Language Consultants are mostly Gen Zs, it was rather a pleasant surprise to observe a rather peculiar stance of indifference. This makes one wonder if maybe the rurality of both the origin of most of the respondents and the context of their Higher Education Institution might have anything to do with their mixed emotions towards AI. Further research might be necessary to explore as to whether or not the purported universal attributes of Gen Zs hold sway regardless of socio-economic realities.

6 Conclusion

In sum, with exception of a few, most LCs do not see AI as a threat that may make them redundant. Although appreciation of generative AI is acknowledged, LCs note that much reskilling is needed on their part to take full advantage of AI abilities. Most LCs lament the disabling nature with regards to creativity and critical thinking among students, and the promotion of laxity and plagiarism.

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Appendix A: Participants' Demographics

#	Sex	Age	De- gree	Level
1	F	24	–	4 th
2	F	24	Honours	PG
3	F	23	LLB	4 th
4	F	20	BSc	4 th
5	F	22	Honours	PG
6	F	–	–	–
7	F	25	Honours	PG
8	F	27	PhD	PG
9	–	–	–	–
10	–	–	–	–
11	M	25	Honours	PG
12	M	23	LLM	PG
13	F	23	–	–
14	M	24	Honours	PG
15	M	25	MDev	PG

#	Sex	Age	De- gree	Level
31	F	22	MA	PG
32	F	23	BA	3 rd
33	F	20	BA	3 rd
34	F	20	BA	3 rd
35	M	29	PGCE	PG
36	M	–	–	–
37	M	21	BA Honours	PG
38	M	23	MSc Agric	PG
39	M	23	BEd	3 rd
40	F	22	BA	3 rd
41	F	20	BSc	4 th
42	F	21	BSc	4 th
43	F	30	PhD	PG
44	F	28	MEd	PG

#	Sex	Age	Degree	Level
16	M	24	BEd	4 th
17	F	23	Honours	PG
18	F	23	Honours	PG
19	F	21	BA	3 rd
20	M	20	BDev	4 th
21	M	–	–	–
22	M	–	–	–
23	–	–	–	–
24	F	21	–	–
25	F	24	PGCE	PG
26	F	25	BSC Hons	PG
27	F	–	–	–
28	F	25	BEd	4 th
29	–	–	–	–
30	–	–	–	–

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