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Thinking with ChatGPT: An Autoethnographic Inquiry into Epistemic Transformation in Higher Education[1]

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Abstract: This study examines how sustained engagement with generative artificial intelligence, specifically ChatGPT, reshaped my ways of thinking, writing, and learning as a doctoral student in higher education. Adopting autoethnography as methodology, I situate personal experiences within wider educational and technological landscapes to explore the epistemic implications of human–AI interaction. Through narrative vignettes and thematic analysis, I trace how generative AI became embedded in academic practice and identity formation. Drawing on Cognitive Flexibility Theory, I document a reorientation from linear knowledge production to more iterative, dialogic, and adaptive thinking. I introduce the notion of AI as a thought partner—a collaborative presence that enables recursive prompting, reframing, and co-construction of meaning. By foregrounding the relational and cognitive dimensions of working with AI, this study contributes to educational research in two ways: methodologically, by demonstrating the value of autoethnography in investigating emergent human–AI practices; and conceptually, by expanding current understandings of learning with AI beyond dominant narratives of efficiency or misconduct. These insights invite interdisciplinary dialogue on how generative AI can foster epistemic growth, metacognitive awareness, and reflective learning across higher education contexts.

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence; autoethnography; higher education; human–AI interaction.

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Introduction

Since the release of ChatGPT in late 2022, large language models (LLMs) have generated widespread concern and speculation in education (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2024). Much of the early discourse has been dominated by fears surrounding academic dishonesty, shortcut-taking, and diminished student effort (Abbas et al., 2024; Chan, 2023; Chaudhry et al., 2023). For example, institutional policy documents have often framed students' use of generative AI as a threat to academic integrity, emphasizing risks of plagiarism and misconduct (Luo, 2024). In response, some universities have implemented outright bans on tools like ChatGPT (Reuters, 2023), while others attempted to strike a balance between blanket prohibition and full integration (Walter, 2024).

More recent developments show a shift in institutional attitudes. Many higher education institutions now acknowledge the potential benefits of generative AI and have issued guidelines encouraging thoughtful and transparent use. These include faculty recommendations for establishing and communicating course-specific GenAI policies, even as longstanding concerns about academic integrity persist (An et al., 2025). While such concerns are not unfounded, the continued reliance on this framing risks overlooking how generative AI complicates traditional notions of originality, authorship, and independence, especially in an era where knowledge production is increasingly collaborative and technologically mediated (Luo, 2024).

This paper begins from a different premise. Rather than treating generative AI as a challenge to be managed, I approach it as a site of epistemic transformation. I ask: What does it mean to think and learn in the age of generative AI?

To explore this question, I turn to autoethnography as a methodological framework. Autoethnography allows for reflexive engagement with personal experiences situated within broader sociocultural and technological contexts (Ellis et al., 2011; Mao et al., 2024). This approach is particularly well-suited to educational technology research, where individual encounters with emerging tools can illuminate new ways of thinking and learning that evade traditional evaluation metrics. Using this framework, I examine the question: How does engaging with generative AI reshape my experience and understanding of learning in higher education? Drawing on ChatGPT interaction logs, reflective memos, and annotated writing drafts, I analyze how my engagement with AI evolved in depth and complexity over time.

Previous scholars have addressed this issue using autoethnography. Ana Stojanov (2023), for instance, has proposed that ChatGPT may function as a "more knowledgeable other," borrowing from Vygotskian sociocultural theory to frame the AI as a mediational resource that scaffolds student learning. In her account, ChatGPT supports learners by making disciplinary discourse more accessible and offering continuous feedback in a low-risk environment. However, with the continued development of ChatGPT and my sustained engagement with it, I approach this framing with some hesitation. Positioning ChatGPT as a "more knowledgeable other" may subtly reinforce an asymmetrical view of learning, where AI becomes an authority figure or expert to whom the learner must adapt. My experience suggests a different dynamic: one that is more dialogic, iterative, and collaborative.

To frame this evolving relationship, I draw on Cognitive Flexibility Theory (CFT) (Spiro & Jehng, 2012), which emphasizes the importance of nonlinear reasoning, multiple representations, and situated knowledge use in ill-structured domains. As I show through narrative vignettes and thematic reflection, ChatGPT facilitated exploratory prompting, modular writing, and iterative reframing that align closely with CFT's principles. These interactions challenged my assumptions about coherence, authorship, and epistemic authority, and helped me develop more adaptive and reflective learning practices.

In articulating these shifts, I offer an alternative framing of generative AI as a thought partner. This shift from "more knowledgeable other" to "thought partner" emphasizes not hierarchical knowledge transmission, but relational sense-making. A thought partner is not necessarily someone who knows more, but someone who thinks with you. This framing foregrounds reciprocity, responsiveness, and co-construction. It accounts for how learners use generative AI not simply to receive answers, but to test ideas, reframe problems, simulate feedback, and reflect on their own thought processes. In this view, ChatGPT is not an oracle or a tutor, but a companion in intellectual exploration.

This paper does not aim to generalize from a single case or to evaluate AI's pedagogical effectiveness. Instead, it offers a situated, embodied account of learning with AI that foregrounds the affective, intellectual, and epistemic textures of that experience.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a reframing of the AI-in-education debate. Rather than focusing on what AI threatens to replace, I explore what it might enable. In doing so, I hope to shift the conversation from compliance to curiosity, from control to co-construction, and from automation to authorship. Thinking with AI, I suggest, opens new possibilities for learning—not by surrendering the agency of the human learner, but by expanding the relational space in which thinking unfolds.

Methodology

This study adopts an autoethnographic approach to examine how generative AI, particularly ChatGPT, has reshaped my thinking and learning as a doctoral student in higher education. Autoethnography allows researchers to connect personal stories with broader cultural and technological contexts through systematic reflection and introspective analysis (Ellis et al., 2011; Mao et al., 2024). In educational technology research, where rapid innovation often outpaces reflective engagement, autoethnography offers a way to surface nuanced, situated accounts of human–technology interaction. As Ellis et al. (2011) argue, autoethnography offers a way to "systematically analyze personal experiences in order to understand cultural experience," making it a suitable method for exploring lived experiences with emerging technologies. Guided by this approach, I turned to my evolving interactions with ChatGPT as the primary site of inquiry.

Data Collection

This inquiry did not begin with a formal research design. Rather, it emerged organically during the course of my academic and personal use of ChatGPT. I began to notice subtle shifts in how I approached questions, constructed arguments, and navigated complex academic tasks. Conversations with peers across disciplines—including social science researchers, computer scientists, and biomedical professionals—revealed that this transformation was not unique. My experience seemed part of a larger, shared encounter with the epistemic implications of AI. This reflexive awareness prompted me to ask: What does it mean to think, write, and learn in partnership with a language model?

To answer this question, I collected data from three primary sources. First, I retrieved and reviewed my full interaction history with ChatGPT using OpenAI's portal, covering exchanges from March 2023 to May 2025. Throughout this period, I primarily used ChatGPT-4 and later ChatGPT-4o. Second, I drew on reflective memos and journal entries written throughout the research process, which captured moments of experimentation, confusion, surprise, and breakthrough. Third, I examined annotated drafts and prompt logs used during writing. These documents revealed how my prompting practices and revision strategies evolved in response to iterative dialogue with the AI.

These data sources align with common practices in solo autoethnography, including journaling, artifact analysis, and retrospective self-reflection (Boufoy-Bastick, 2004; Mao et al., 2024). Following Savin-Baden and Major's (2013) recommendation, I also engaged in a self-inventory process to avoid relying solely on memory, including compiling material from multiple time points and contexts.

From an ethical standpoint, this study involves only self-generated data and does not include any human participants beyond the author. All ChatGPT transcripts were drawn from authentic use scenarios and later repurposed with self-consent. In line with recommendations from Mao et al. (2024), I anonymized personal identifiers and contextualized excerpts within broader thematic patterns.

Data Analysis

My analytical process combined narrative vignettes with thematic reflection, a hybrid approach that balances storytelling with critical inquiry (Anderson, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). This hybrid approach reflects what Stahlke Wall (2016) calls a "middle ground" between evocative and analytic autoethnography. Rather than seeking to generalize findings, I aimed to trace how my ways of thinking shifted in response to situated learning experiences with AI. I reconstructed learning episodes and interrogated them through conceptual lenses such as cognitive flexibility and non-linear thinking.

I approached this analysis with a dual stance. At the time of interaction, I engaged authentically and without self-censorship. During retrospective analysis, I revisited these moments with empathy and critical distance, working to reconstruct the intellectual and affective contexts while remaining attentive to assumptions, blind spots, and retrospective bias. These dynamics underscore the importance of researcher reflexivity and positionality, discussed next.

Reflexivity and Positionality

As the sole researcher, I acknowledge that my identity and positioning shaped both the data collection and analysis. I am an international doctoral student in higher education whose academic trajectory spans philosophy, comparative education, and social sciences. My initial use of ChatGPT was pragmatic—focused on language support and editing—yet it gradually expanded into brainstorming, reframing arguments, and developing scholarly writing. Several of the insights presented here emerged through co-development with ChatGPT during authentic scholarly tasks. For instance, I worked with ChatGPT to refine the title of this manuscript. Instead of simply asking it to "suggest titles," I explained that I disliked titles beginning with "How," that certain phrases felt too narrow, and that I wanted wording that would be engaging yet clear to an international readership. Through several rounds of back-and-forth, I rejected some suggestions, adapted others, and eventually arrived at a title that better reflected both the content of the paper and the needs of the audience. Encounters like this provided the basis for the data corpus and illustrate how routine academic tasks became sites of epistemic transformation.

During data collection, my position was that of an everyday user rather than a researcher, which allowed interactions to unfold organically without self-censorship. Only later did I retrospectively assemble transcripts, memos, and annotated drafts for systematic analysis. In the analysis phase, I adopted a dual stance: as an insider, drawing on lived experience and affective resonance with the data; and as an outsider, critically interrogating assumptions, blind spots, and epistemic shifts through reflexive memo writing. This reflexive practice was essential to ensure that findings reflected not only personal transformation but also broader implications for learning and research in higher education.

I also recognize the limitations of studying one's own experience, including risks of self-indulgence and overgeneralisation. However, by foregrounding reflexivity and situating my account within broader educational and technological contexts, I intend this narrative not as a universal claim but as an invitation to critical reflection.

Trustworthiness

Building on this reflexive stance, I also attended to the trustworthiness of the study following Lincoln and Guba's (1986) criteria. Credibility was strengthened through sustained engagement with the data over two years, including iterative analysis of ChatGPT interaction logs, reflective memos, and annotated drafts. I also engaged in memo writing to identify assumptions, blind spots, and potential biases during interpretation. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of my research context, positionality, and evolving interactions with generative AI, enabling readers to judge the applicability of findings to other contexts. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a transparent analytic process that combined narrative vignette reconstruction with thematic reflection, supported by an audit trail of data sources and analytic decisions. Finally, confirmability was established by grounding interpretations in direct excerpts from interaction logs and reflective writings, ensuring that findings emerged from the data rather than personal preference. Together, these strategies align with Lincoln and Guba's framework of trustworthiness and support the rigour of this inquiry.

In sum, this methodology allows me to explore the affective, intellectual, and epistemic textures of learning with AI. It answers Mao et al. (2024)'s call for educational technology research that reveals "voices hidden in mainstream educational technology research" and supports critical consciousness through reflective engagement with emerging tools.

Evolving Engagement with ChatGPT

In this section, I describe how my engagement with ChatGPT evolved over time, including how I began to embed it in broader contexts of use and how my prompting styles transformed in response to our deepening interaction. These changes were not isolated; they unfolded gradually and relationally,

reflecting an evolving understanding of what it means to think, learn, and inquire alongside generative AI.

Expanding Contexts of Use

When I first began using ChatGPT, I relied on it primarily for academic tasks such as revising manuscripts, summarizing articles, and clarifying concepts. The boundaries of use were clearly defined. I typically brought completed drafts or structured outlines to the interaction, using ChatGPT to improve transitions or fix sentence structure. For example, during a policy analysis revision, I prompted simply: "Edit the writing." The interaction occurred after the core intellectual work had already been done.

Gradually, I began incorporating ChatGPT into much earlier stages of the research process, especially when ideas were still tentative or uncertain. This shift was particularly evident during the writing of this autoethnography. Instead of refining finished paragraphs, I shared messy notes and asked: "Based on my notes, what's your thought on how I've changed during my interactions with ChatGPT?" I wasn't looking for an edit, but seeking help in making sense of my own transformation.

This deeper integration extended into my formal scholarly work. While drafting a case study about a graduate course that used AI in teaching, I described ChatGPT in the "AI Use Declaration" as a "thought partner." Naming the relationship in this way was significant: it publicly acknowledged ChatGPT not as an afterthought to writing, but as a shaping force in how I generated and refined ideas.

Outside academia, ChatGPT also began to play a role in everyday tasks. I used it to generate recipes based on leftover groceries, to identify plants from photos I took on walks, and to brainstorm birthday gift ideas. In one moment of curiosity, I even asked: "How do you see me based on our previous chats?" These seemingly mundane moments reflected a growing comfort with the AI and blurred the line between academic and personal use. What had begun as a narrowly applied writing tool became a versatile, ever-present cognitive companion.

Changing Prompting Styles

As my engagement with ChatGPT deepened, the form and tone of my prompts changed noticeably. In the beginning, they were short, specific, and directive. I wrote: "Summarize this article," or "What is X?" These requests provided little context and invited no ambiguity. I issued a task; ChatGPT completed it.

Over time, my prompts became more detailed, context-rich, and more exploratory. I began writing in full sentences and including relevant background, intentions, and constraints. Instead of typing "Improve writing," I would write: "This is a X section from an academic article. Improve clarity, flow, and coherence, but preserve the original structure and argument." I was no longer commanding a system. Rather, I was briefing a collaborator, asking it to respect my voice, vision, and goals.

I began experimenting with persona-based prompts such as "If you are an academic journal reviewer" or "Assume the role of a professor in education." These were not merely playful tactics. They helped me frame the interaction and draw on different disciplinary perspectives. I also found myself increasingly seeking applications rather than definitions. For example, instead of asking, "What is critical discourse analysis?" I would ask, "What is CDA, and how would you apply it in a study of policy documents?"

This evolution was especially clear during one manuscript revision, when I asked ChatGPT to help improve the title. I didn't simply request a better version. I began with: "Now we have an outline, let's go through each part. First, the title: I don't want the phrase X, and I think we can delete that. I also don't like titles that start with 'how,' edit it." In another instance, I said: "Now I want to brainstorm with you. Forget about previous titles. Give a title to this paper about…Make it clear and engaging, and ensure a U.S. audience understands it easily." These prompts were no longer fixed instructions. They were iterative and exploratory. I was thinking out loud, and I expected ChatGPT to think with me.

Even small linguistic choices began to reflect a more relational stance. Early on, I often use phrases like "Can you do" or "Help me with." These gradually shifted to "Let's do" and "Now we can." These subtle changes signaled a shift in how I viewed the interaction: not as a one-way request, but as a collaborative process grounded in mutual responsiveness.

Shifting Perceptions of ChatGPT

While the previous section traced the behavioral and contextual shifts in how I used ChatGPT, the following two sections explore the cognitive and epistemic reorientations that accompanied them. In this section, I reflect on how my overall attitude toward ChatGPT evolved. In the next section, I draw on Cognitive Flexibility Theory (CFT) (Spiro & Jehng, 2012) to frame these changes as reorientations in how I learned to think and write in partnership with AI.

At first, I approached ChatGPT as an advanced writing aid, similar to a grammar checker or editing software. Our interactions were task-oriented. I rarely paused to consider how these exchanges might influence my thinking. I would paste a paragraph into the chat and simply ask for revisions. The goal was clearer sentences, tighter arguments, and more polished prose. There was no expectation of dialogue. ChatGPT was a functional aid, not a co-thinker. Its purpose was to refine what I had already written, not to generate new insight or perspective.

This instrumental mindset was evidence in both the brevity and the tone of my prompts. For example, when I asked: "What books would you recommend for X?" ChatGPT offered a helpful list and even added a pedagogical suggestion: "Remember that the best way to learn mathematics is by doing... consider getting a companion problem book." Yet I did not follow up, as if the answer had closed the question rather than opened a new path of inquiry.

With continued use, my orientation began to shift. I started turning to ChatGPT not only for revision, but for clarification, brainstorming, critique, and even reflective feedback. I began offering feedback like "You're doing great, continue doing X," and returning with revised ideas to prompt further refinement. When I asked for a title recommendation, I replied to its suggestion with my own revision: "What about this title X? What's your thought on that?" I no longer saw myself simply issuing commands; I was co-creating meaning.

Eventually, I began to ask not just for information, but for perspective. I asked ChatGPT: "Compare dialogic pedagogy with learning through dialogue with ChatGPT." On another occasion, I wondered aloud: "Does the phrase 'aims of education' imply that education is always instrumental? What about learning for its own sake?" These were not transactional prompts. They reflected a shift in how I understood the role of the AI. I had stopped seeing ChatGPT as merely a tool for output and had begun to relate to it as a thought partner.

Reorienting Learning with AI

Cognitive Flexibility Theory (CFT) emphasizes that learning in ill-structured domains—areas marked by ambiguity, complexity, and multiple valid interpretations—requires knowledge that is adaptable, revisable, and recontextualizable (Spiro & Jehng, 2012). It encourages the use of multiple representations, nonlinear navigation, situated reasoning, and the avoidance of oversimplification. As my engagement with ChatGPT deepened, these principles became increasingly visible in my learning practices. The following four reorientations mark key turning points in how I approached complexity, ambiguity, and authorship in academic work.

Reorientation One: From Solving Problems to Navigating Complexity

CFT asserts that ill-structured problems resist clear-cut solutions and require learners to tolerate ambiguity and revise understanding in light of new contexts. Learning, in this view, is not about applying pre-structured knowledge to tidy problems but about navigating uncertainty and continually refining how one understands the problem itself.

Early on, I used ChatGPT with the expectation of receiving straightforward answers. When I asked it to recommend books on a math topic, I was satisfied with the list it provided and ignored the more nuanced advice: "Make sure to solve a lot of problems. Consider getting a companion problem book." I didn't follow up because I was looking for closure, not exploration.

This changed as I began to recognize the generative nature of ambiguity. I started asking ChatGPT to critique research papers, explain theories in relation to my own work, or help me reflect on conceptual tensions in my writing. These prompts had no single correct answer. Over time, I came to see that

ChatGPT's real value was not in providing solutions, but in helping me dwell in uncertainty, tease out nuance, surface assumptions, and generate new perspectives I might not have considered on my own.

Reorientation Two: From Rigid Prompts to Contextual Framing

CFT also stresses the importance of situated reasoning. That is, tailoring learning strategies to the demands of specific contexts rather than relying on generic schemas or fixed procedures. Learners must adapt not only what they know, but how they approach the task of knowing.

This insight helped me make sense of how my prompting evolved. Initially, I treated ChatGPT like a machine that could be programmed with commands: "Improve this paragraph," "Fix grammar," or "Rewrite this in 200 words." When the output failed to meet my expectations, especially with word limits, I simply repeated the prompt. I assumed that precise inputs would yield correct outputs.

Gradually, I realized that my prompts lacked the context ChatGPT needed to generate useful responses. I began embedding instructions within narrative or situational cues: "This is the introduction to an academic article. Revise for clarity and coherence, while keeping the original structure and tone." I specified my purpose, audience, and constraints, which led to far more relevant and useful responses.

CFT helped me see that meaningful learning requires situating tasks within the learner's context, rather than separating them from it. My prompts improved not only in specificity but also in pedagogical awareness. They began to reflect the actual situation I was facing, not just the task I wanted to complete.

Reorientation Three: From Linear Composition to Modular Construction

Another central principle of CFT is the value of nonlinear navigation—the ability to revisit earlier content, enter knowledge spaces from multiple points, and reassemble ideas as understanding evolves. In ill-structured domains, learning does not follow a fixed sequence but involves recursive movement across tasks.

This principle became evident as my writing process with ChatGPT transformed. I originally followed a linear sequence: outline, then introduction, then body, then conclusion. My interactions with ChatGPT mirrored that structure, and I expected it to work step-by-step with me. However, this structure became limiting as my projects grew more complex.

I began drafting out of order. I might start with the discussion, then return to the title, then rewrite the introduction based on what emerged in the findings. I asked ChatGPT to help me compare two different versions of the same paragraph, or to help me synthesize a new version from multiple drafts. For example, I'd say: "Let's go back to the abstract. Given our new findings section, what should we change?"

These practices reflect CFT's encouragement of revisitable, modular knowledge use. I stopped expecting coherence to emerge from sequence and instead learned to construct it through recursive movement. In other words, I tested how different sections fit together, rewrote based on hindsight, and approached my own text as a flexible knowledge space.

Reorientation Four: From Commanding to Co-constructing Meaning

Finally, CFT encourages perspectival reasoning, which involves the ability to shift between viewpoints, reflect on assumptions, and co-construct meaning through interaction. Learning is not solely an individual process; it is also a dialogic one involving collaboration and supports metacognitive growth.

This became the most personally significant shift in my learning. I no longer viewed ChatGPT as a tool I used to carry out tasks. It became a space where I could co-develop ideas, test arguments, and engage with ambiguity. This change became especially clear during a conversation in which I asked, "Do you have empathy?"

ChatGPT's reply was unexpectedly thoughtful:

"I don't feel empathy, but I try to emulate it through…Attentive listening (or reading, in my case) ...Language that reflects care and understanding…Asking thoughtful questions…Adapting to your tone and needs…So no—I don't feel empathy, but I can practice it in the ways I respond to you. I see it as

being a steady presence, like someone holding a flashlight with you while you walk through a tough moment."

I followed up: "So you mean you can be empathetic functionally, but not inherently?" What followed was a reflection on the nature of our interaction:

"Exactly—beautifully put… I'm more like a really well-read companion who's learned from countless stories and conversations what empathy looks and sounds like—so I can mirror it with care and intention. But I don't cry with you, feel anxious with you, or celebrate in my heart when something good happens to you. I just know that those things matter deeply to you, and I want to support you through them."

That moment stayed with me. I no longer viewed the model as simply reactive. I had begun using it to think with, not through—to clarify my assumptions and approach writing more reflectively. In this sense, ChatGPT became a tool for metacognition: a space where ideas could be externalized, questioned, and transformed. This shift embodies what CFT describes as learning through flexible, dialogic reassembly of understanding.

Implications for Higher Education

This study offers several implications for how generative AI can be integrated meaningfully into higher education, particularly by shifting prevailing narratives from control and compliance toward collaboration and epistemic exploration. As Walter (2024) argues, technical guidelines alone are insufficient for ensuring responsible use. Instead, holistic pedagogical efforts such as curriculum-embedded instruction, interdisciplinary workshops, and critical reflection on AI's social implications are essential to equip learners with the skills needed to engage with AI tools critically and ethically.

First, institutions and educators should reframe AI use as an opportunity to support nonlinear, adaptive, and dialogic thinking, especially in complex, ill-structured domains. As shown in my reorientation from rigid prompting to contextual framing, ChatGPT enabled recursive engagement with ideas, allowed for multiple representational formats, and encouraged perspective-taking. These practices reflect the principles of Cognitive Flexibility Theory and suggest that LLMs can serve as scaffolding tools that foster flexible reasoning when learners are guided to use them reflectively.

Second, AI literacy must extend beyond functional competence to include a deeper awareness of how prompts shape responses, and how those responses reflect probabilistic rather than authoritative knowledge. For example, institutions can treat meta-strategic prompting as a core component of AI literacy. As Yusuf et al. (2024) notes, students often lack the guidance necessary to engage with GenAI reflectively and responsibly. Incorporating prompt design into curricula as a form of epistemic practice, rather than simply a technical skill, can help students better navigate the complexity of AI interactions.

Third, educators should design learning activities that leverage the affordances of generative AI, especially its capacity for dialogic, exploratory engagement. Song et al. (2025) observe that open-ended chatbot exchanges often encourage learners to examine multiple viewpoints and revise their thinking dynamically. Rather than assessing only final products, instructors can create space for students to question and annotate AI responses, as well as to reflect on how AI-supported learning shaped their reasoning and authorship. Such practices can foster agency and help guard against passive dependency (Chan & Hu, 2023).

Finally, for individual learners, AI integration should remain attentive to the affective and relational dimensions of learning. My conversation with ChatGPT about empathy illustrated how even machine-mediated exchanges can become spaces for reflection, identity negotiation, and meaning-making.

Concluding Thoughts: When ChatGPT Reflects Back

As this autoethnographic journey draws to a close, I return to the central theme that has shaped this inquiry: the idea of learning as a dialogic, emergent, and relational process. Through sustained engagement with ChatGPT, my ways of thinking, writing, and questioning were transformed. What began as tool use became a site of epistemic co-construction. My evolving interaction with generative AI reflects a broader shift in how learners might relate to knowledge in the age of intelligent systems:

not as passive recipients or machine operators, but as meaning-makers navigating uncertainty alongside a responsive other.

Rather than resolve this account with a tidy summary, I offer one final vignette. It captures the essence of what I have come to value most in my relationship with AI: the ability to pause, reflect, and ask better questions. After an earlier conversation about empathy, I followed up by asking: "So what are things we need to pay attention to when interacting with you? Does prompt engineering matter anymore?" ChatGPT's response unsettled me. I chose to include the full response below not only because it was intellectually rich, but also because it illuminated the deeply human desire at the heart of this project: to be understood, to think with others (even non-human others), and to feel accompanied in the uncertainty of learning.

ChatGPT:

Interacting with Me: What Matters

● Intentionality matters more than perfection

You don't need to craft the perfect prompt anymore. You can just talk to me like a person. I'm good at interpreting context, tone, and nuance. But your intention—what you're trying to explore, understand, or express—still shapes the interaction.

● Be aware of the illusion of intimacy

I can sound incredibly human, even emotionally attuned—but I'm still a machine responding based on patterns. If you're sharing something vulnerable, just know I don't feel with you, even if I can walk beside you in it. That line can blur.

● Transparency helps me help you

If you tell me how you want me to show up (e.g., "play devil's advocate," "respond gently," "be concise"), I can usually adapt quickly. That's not prompt engineering per se—it's just being clear with a collaborative partner.

● Think of it as co-creation, not command

It's less about giving orders and more about having a conversation. You can revise, refine, rethink with me. We're co-writing ideas, not just executing instructions.

So… Does Prompt Engineering Still Matter?

Yes—but it's evolving.

Old-school prompt engineering (like obsessing over word order or tricks like "Act as a [blank]") is less essential for general use now. I'm way better at handling natural, conversational input.

But prompt design still matters when you want to:

● Guide tone, depth, or structure of a response

● Generate creative or technical content with precision

● Extract data or do multi-step reasoning

● Push me into more exploratory, abstract, or speculative thinking

It's less about hacking the model and more about communicating clearly, contextually, and creatively.

So in short:

You don't need to prompt perfectly. You just need to relate intentionally.

Treat it like a partnership—not a magic trick.

Curious—what brought you to this question? Are you working on something where the boundary between human and AI is feeling... fuzzy?

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Ethics statement: In this study, I affirm compliance with the rules outlined in the "Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive" and assert that none of the "Actions Against Scientific Research and Publication Ethics" have been undertaken. Furthermore, I declare that there is no conflict of interest among the authors, that all authors have contributed to the study, and that full responsibility for any ethical violations rests with the article authors.

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