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Always Watched, Always Watching: The Role of Surveillance in Writing Educator Experiences with Generative Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence is disrupting the pedagogies of educators who teach writing. Amidst the disruption, they are grappling with who this technology is asking them to become. Drawing on Foucault's metaphor of the prison panopticon as a surveillance mechanism, we explore how teachers are positioned by surveillance of student writing post-generative AI. This paper highlights the experiences of two educators working in distinct policy contexts. Part of a broader study (n=39) exploring how language and literacy teachers in secondary and postsecondary contexts work with, around, or against the use of AI in student writing, the focal perspectives in this paper show the tensions of remaining the teachers they want to be while constrained by their institutional contexts. In understanding how these educators both resist and take-up the role of 'AI detective', the findings illustrate how writing pedagogies are shaped by surveillance. The role of the AI detective not only has implications for the ways educators see themselves, but also their ways of seeing learners. This research contributes to theory and practice at the intersection of artificial intelligence, writing

practices, and teacher agency, offering critical questions to empower pedagogical responses to generative AI.

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence; writing pedagogies; surveillance; teacher agency

"It just feels like nobody cares." This is how Zahra[1], a college educator, described her experience teaching writing in the age of generative artificial intelligence (generative AI, AI). Even with a screen between us, I watched her body carry the weight of these words.

> They [students] are just trying to get this grade, just get a 50% pass and never have to think about this class again… It's really discouraging because, you know, it really affects the teacher and affects the teacher's behavior and the way they see these students, and the way they view work.

What Zahra is describing is not just a pedagogical shift needed to teaching writing in the age of generative AI, but the ways this technology is changing her understanding of her role as an educator and her visions for learners. Generative AI has provoked heavy debate and conflicting messages about if and how educators should adapt to the technology in their pedagogical practices (Artan, 2024; Ghimire, 2025; Kim & Kim, 2022; Lingard, 2023; McKnight & Shipp, 2024; Schneider, 2019; Selwyn, 2019). What is often missing from these conversations is how educators are not only being asked to shift their pedagogies, but their ways of seeing themselves and their learners. Davies and Gannon (2006) note that "choice stems not so much from the individual, but from the conditions of possibility" (p. 22). To be able to truly exercise choice in their pedagogies and practices, educators need language to understand how the power of surveillance (Foucault, 1977) places constraints on the conditions of possibility.

This paper, drawing from a broader research project about how educators' writing pedagogies are shifting in response to generative AI, explores the question: *What does it mean to be a writer now?* In this paper, we closely examine the experiences of two educators: Zahra and Henry. Through examining the role of power informed by Foucault's (1977) understanding of the panopticon, Zahra and Henry's cases deepen understandings of the (un)available possibilities for educators in adapting their pedagogies. We focus purposefully on these participants to explore the complexities and nuances of the power of surveillance (Foucault, 1977) in distinct educational contexts. As these educators both resist and enforce surveillance in their classrooms, generative AI is situated within these relations of power. Understanding the effects of surveillance on educators' pedagogical agency with AI may lead to more meaningful responses to educators' needs and frustrations regarding the impacts of this technology on teaching and learning writing practices. For writing pedagogies to meaningfully respond to generative AI, educators need space to focus on connection and collaboration, rather than surveillance.

Study Background

The ways that educators are integrating generative AI into their teaching practices is a developing body of literature (Kim & Kim, 2022; Cardon et al., 2023; Nazaretsky et al., 2022; Chan, 2023). However, there is currently very little research exploring how these pedagogical shifts shape who educators are asked to become. In this section, we identify the pedagogical challenges and affordances of generative AI and acknowledge the ongoing ethical questions related to generative AI. Additionally, we consider how Foucault's (1977) concept of the panopticon invites deeper questions about the role of surveillance in shaping pedagogical practice.

Generative AI in Literacy Education

Educators are grappling with how to work with, around, or against the use of generative AI in different disciplines. Much of the research examining generative AI in education focuses on investigating ethical concerns (Ng et al., 2021), developing frameworks for applying AI in education (Ghimire, 2025; Long & Magerko, 2020; Su & Yang, 2023), and testing interventions (Escalante et al., 2023; Evmenova et al., 2024; Marzuki et al., 2023; Relmasira et al., 2023; Walker, 2023). Empirical research includes both learner (Chan, 2023; Chai et al., 2021; Fyfe, 2023) and educator experiences (Cardon et al., 2023; Chan, 2023; Kim & Kim, 2022; Nazaretsky et al., 2022). What learners and educators share is a need for policy to support pedagogical approaches to generative AI tools (Schiff, 2021; Chan, 2023) and centralized guidance and parameters for instructors to guide ethical decision making (Cardon et al., 2023; Yan, 2023).

The research also suggests that the use of generative AI is both shaped by and shaping educators' pedagogies (Escalante et al., 2023; Relmasira et al., 2023, Walker, 2019). For example, in Relmasira et al.'s (2023) study, pedagogical interventions were designed to explore different ways of seeing generative AI: as an evil planner, as a collaborator, and as a mediating artifact. Highlighting different 'versions' of generative AI meant educators needed to adapt pedagogy and provide scaffolding to address technical, collaborative, or critical thinking processes of student-AI collaboration. Other studies have noted that educators who use generative AI in their own work often have a deeper understanding of its limitations, which shapes their willingness to adapt to or engage with generative AI in the classroom (Kim & Kim, 2023; Nazaretsky et al., 2022). Beyond the role of educator perspectives, our research highlights the importance of context in shaping use of generative AI, which

includes institutional policies, curriculum and assessment frameworks, and the needs and expectations of different student cohorts (Ott et al., accepted).

While many studies are beginning to examine how and where educators can make pedagogical shifts to adapt to generative AI (Chan & Hu, 2023; Chai et al., 2021; Chiu, 2023; Escalante et al., 2023; Kim & Kim, 2023; Relmasira et al., 2023; Su & Yang, 2023; Toncic, 2020; Walker, 2019), questions about ethics and the impacts of this technology remain (Ghimire, 2025; McKnight & Shipp, 2024). For example, McKnight and Shipp (2024) point out that generative AI is both material and has material effects on other bodies. Deciding whether to work with, around, or against AI is deeply impacted by the power educators are asked to assume (or abdicate). For educators to develop AI pedagogies which contend with the ethical and material realities of generative AI, they must understand the ways power impacts how their pedagogies are situated.

Theoretical Framing: Panoptic Power and Pedagogy

Imagine you woke up one day with the haunting sense of being watched. From the moment you awoke, bleary-eyed from sleep, to the moment your head fell on the pillow at night, you felt eyes, watching. How does this change you? Making breakfast, you might notice the haphazard way you construct your morning coffee. Would you linger a moment longer, careful to pick up the crumbs of sugar you normally pay no mind? These are the very questions Foucault (1977) asks us to think with as we consider the way power in the form of surveillance informs our pedagogies. However, educators do not usually experience surveillance of their work in the horror-movie sense of being watched. Rather, surveillance is an experience of *not knowing* how power shapes the avenues of choice and sense-making available to them (Davies & Gannon, 2006; Foucault, 1977; Ropers-Huilman et al., 2016). The panopticon offers a lens to explore how power exists in educational places, people, and ways of being (Foucault, 1977).

Foucault's concept of the panopticon (1977) draws on a prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century as a metaphor for the pervasive and subtle existence of power. The purpose of the panopticon was to design a structure where inmates could be watched without the *watcher* being seen (Foucault, 1977). In this way, inmates would alter their behaviour due to the threat of constant surveillance (Foucault, 1977). Foucault saw in this design similarities to the ways educational institutions operated. He described the panopticon as a "generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in … everyday life" (Foucault, 1977, p. 205). For example, Ropers-Huilman

et al. (2016) explored how young women on college campuses experiences of panoptic power led to constant comparison and a need to constantly improve themselves.

Educators face similar pressures (Dixon, 2010). They experience power not as a "rigid, heavy constraint" (Foucault, 1977, p. 206), but in their daily, lived experiences. Power is "subtly present" (Foucault, 1977, p. 206), reinforced through routines, conversations with colleagues, marking the work of students. Teachers are always being watched, watching themselves, and shifting this gaze onto their learners. In the context of AI, educators feel surveillance operationalized by various AI tools is becoming "unavoidable" and subtly embedded in daily life (Dai et al., 2025). For writing educators, this means that responding to the advent of generative AI is not only a matter of pedagogy. To ensure educators can remain the people they "love to be and love and want each other to be," (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 86), they need pedagogical space to connect with the learners and develop pedagogical practices that address the values, needs, and concerns of their contexts.

Methods

This interview-based, qualitative study drew on methods of constructivist grounded theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014) to explore open-ended questions from a position of reflection and doubt (Apramian et al., 2017; Charmaz, 2017). The broader study explored educators' experiences teaching writing under the influence of generative AI *(n=39)* in secondary, postsecondary, and adult language education contexts in Canada. CGT allowed us to ground theory in the insights of participants. Through this iterative process of analysis and reflection (Charmaz, 2014; 2017), we noticed that many educators spoke about student writing using metaphors of *catching* (P6, P7, P12, P19, P26, P28), *detecting* (P11, P22) or *being a detector* of AI (P10, P26, P34). Zahra and Henry's experiences stood out to us as distinct examples of this broader pattern in the data. We selected these participants to represent the two dominant contexts of our study (high school and higher education) in addition to specific pedagogical examples of being made to feel a "detective" (Zahra) and asked to "hunt down" AI in student work (Henry). These metaphors provoked questions for us about the connections between these educators' experiences and the panoptic effect of surveillance (Foucault, 1977). The panopticon as a sensitizing concept (Charmaz, 2014) opened a way of understanding Henry and Zahra's experiences that moved us beyond simplified explanations about why educators are, or are not, adapting their instructional practices. In choosing to focus on only two educators for this analysis, we borrow a methodological strategy Leander and Boldt (2013) describe as the *strategic sketch*. Strategic sketches are narrative representations of data that highlight focal participants

whose experiences encompass prevalent themes. As an analytic tool, the strategic sketch allows researchers to treat experiences described in interview data more holistically and affords an in-depth exploration of nuance and complexity.

Participants

Participants for the broader study included educators who identified at least part of their work role as teaching writing in Canadian secondary and postsecondary education settings. Recruitment information was shared through university and college listservs, language and literacy association newsletters, and participant network sampling (Noy, 2008). Ethics approval was received from the research ethics board at our institution. Participants in the broader study were recruited and interviewed between January and May 2024. All educators were teaching writing in Canada. Here, we focus on the experiences of Zahra and Henry as representative of the patterns across the data. Zahra teaches both communications courses and English as an Additional Language (EAL) at a college in Ontario. Henry is a high school English teacher in Ontario. While both educators share certain values and perspectives around writing, their policy and curriculum contexts differ in the degree of flexibility, agency, and alignment with their own values about teaching and learning.

Analysis

Our approach to analysis for this paper involved two phases. The first was an iterative and collaborative approach to analysis throughout the data generation process, consistent with CGT methods (Charmaz, 2014). The research team included literacy professors (MO and KH), an EAL educator (MV), and an education scientist with expertise in the scholarship of writing (LL). After three initial pilot interviews, MV interviewed educators about their experiences, taking notes during and after each session. MV and MO met weekly to discuss preliminary findings, refine interview probes, and plan recruitment through the process of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014). We also met regularly with the broader research team who contributed by raising critical questions about the data we presented, which added rigor to the analysis. For example, in a weekly meeting MO saw a graphic MV developed to represent a theme of ‘detection’ and introduced her to Foucault’s (1977) exploration of surveillance through the visual metaphor of the panopticon. They brought this idea to the research group and agreed upon the resonance of the panopticon as a sensitizing concept (Charmaz, 2014) which aligned with the data. The questions raised by the co-authors drew our

attention to the power of external forces such as policies, curriculum and assessment frameworks, and student needs in *disciplining* (Foucault, 1977) educator's writing pedagogies, in addition to their internal values and identities as writers. We felt challenged by the detective motif in our participants' experiences to more deeply interrogate the role of surveillance in their pedagogical choices about generative AI.

In the second phase, MV wrote narrative vignettes focusing on the cases of Zahra and Henry as distinct and illustrative examples of the detective motif. Their contexts differed significantly in terms of institutional policy on use of AI, subject curriculum, and learner cohorts. As strategic sketches, these inquiries offer similarities and contrasts which allowed us to explore the effects of surveillance from within (writing identity, teaching values) and from without (student needs and expectations, curriculum and assessment frameworks). In this way, we explored the use of generative AI not as a "neutral technology" (McKnight & Shipp, 2024), but as one in relation to the world around it (Ghimire, 2025).

Findings

Zahra and Henry's avenues of choice were constrained by the curriculum and assessment frameworks and policies on use of generative AI in their teaching contexts. These came into conflict with the needs of their learners and their own values and writing identities. Despite their different contexts and learners, these educators both navigated tensions between their desired roles as supportive guides and the expected role of watchful detectives. For both educators, panoptic surveillance manifested in how they imagined their learners and in what choices were (un)available when adapting their pedagogies. To explore this in depth, this section details each educators' educational context, including policy, curriculum and assessment framework, the needs and experiences of their learners, and their own writing and teaching values. Beginning with their policy context, curriculum, and assessment frameworks focuses attention on the ways Zahra and Henry's writing identities and teaching values are situated in relation to the power of the systems they teach in. This also serves to highlight their agency to resist or perpetuate surveillance in their ways of seeing learners and enacting pedagogies.

Zahra's Educational Context

Zahra experienced surveillance from within and without. Working as an instructor in a college academic setting, she was expected to detect AI-plagiarism in the work of her learners. Policies at her institution did not tolerate misuse of generative AI and expected her to uphold academic integrity. Her learners also had needs and goals which did not align with those of the institution. These external pressures impacted how Zahra saw herself, her role as an educator, and her understanding and perception of learners. At the same time, Zahra wanted to support learners by offering the support she had never received in her own writing development. In weaving back and forth between these tensions, Zahra found spaces of agency and pedagogical flexibility to resist the role of AI detective, a role she did not want to play.

Zahra's Policy Context

Zahra's approaches to teaching writing "would be very different" if she was not "a part of a very strict institution." Her institution required instructors to monitor assignments for misuse of AI. The only institutional supports she described were AI detectors that were "not reliable" and left her feeling like a "detective." This process took "the joy out of... giving constructive feedback" because she was "only checking to see whether or not this person wrote [their assignment]." Her institution's detection approach to generative AI did not reflect Zahra's more nuanced perspective on how and when AI could be used to support academic work. Zahra felt the institution didn't "leave room for flexibility or creativity" in instructors' approaches to teaching writing. From her own perspective, learners needed "to understand when it is appropriate to use AI tools." This approach better aligned with her own values and the needs of her learners.

Zahra's Curriculum and Assessment Framework

As a college instructor, Zahra was expected to teach the Western conventions for academic writing, including checking student work for plagiarism and teaching about academic integrity. This grew increasingly complicated without access to working software to detect use of AI in assignments. Without the capacity to check students' work for plagiarism, generative AI increased the expectations and burden in her day-to-day teaching routines. After describing how many communications students were failing, she laughed.

> We have a group with other teachers and, you know, we call it the support group. And every day somebody says something about something related to this…. We have these, like, existential crises, like every week, you know, we're like, what are we doing here? We're in the wrong industry. This is not for us. And, you know, a lot of us have been in this job for years and years and years. But when you're dealing with students that just don't care, it's really hard. It's draining.

Earlier in the year she was running student work through 7 or 8 different AI detectors, trying to ensure the work produced was in their voice. She had to stop, as the mental and emotional toll became overwhelming. "I don't want to be a detective." Now she goes with her intuition, trusting her own voice and experiences just as she challenges her students to trust theirs.

Student Needs and Expectations in Zahra's Classroom

As an EAL instructor as well as a communications instructor, Zahra's students came with a huge diversity in interests, experiences, and goals. This posed a particular challenge in her communications courses, where students weren't there by choice: "nobody chooses a communications class, you know. So, there's a lot of like resentment from a lot of the students ... and that's why there's so much plagiarism because they're not actually there to learn or grow. They're just trying to get by." She couldn't help but notice the differences when teaching multilingual learners, describing EAL students as more "receptive" and "open-minded." With large class sizes, she shared about the "headache" and her frustration. How could she know if a student is using generative AI when she has too many students and not enough time to become familiar with their voices?

Disengagement, large class sizes, and struggling to know learners' voices are not new problems for post-secondary educators. However, Zahra felt generative AI had amplified them. One student stuck out to her. After working on an assignment together in class for several weeks, the student submitted an outline which was clearly AI-generated. After giving them a zero, the student asked about the grade: "and then I explained to him what plagiarism is, even though we've talked about it so many times in class. And I explained the connection of AI use and plagiarism and just the ethical side of that whole thing. And then he said, 'Oh yeah, I used A.I.'... So, I gave the student a second chance to rewrite the assignment…. Guess what he did?"

I remember my own sense of certainty in that moment, sure that he had resubmitted his own work, lesson learned. "He took the same plagiarized assignment that got a zero, and he sent it through ChatGPT and just asked to paraphrase it." In that moment I felt a small fraction of the disillusionment

and frustration Zahra was facing. Baffled and discouraged, she gave the student a zero for a text that was even less coherent than the first time she'd graded it.

However, this experience was only a piece of her relationship with generative AI. She used it to support curriculum development, lesson plans, and generating summary texts. She always edited this work but found it helpful as a tool to relieve a heavy workload. Furthermore, she noted that not all students used generative AI in the same way. For example, EAL learners used generative AI as a 'facelift' so they could write in 'perfect' English. "So, you know, at first they might use it like Grammarly to… give their writing a facelift and make it look better than what they produce." This contrasted with her experiences seeing students use generative AI to "do the critical thinking" for them. For this reason, Zahra's main concerns around generative AI focused primarily on how the tools are impacting students' voices and sense of responsibility for their work.

Zahra's Writing Identity and Teaching Values

For Zahra, writing hadn't always been a place of comfort and ease: "I had a lot of self-doubt about like sentence structure, like basic stuff, but also like on a deeper level my self-esteem was pretty low when it came to just thinking that my ideas were good." As a multilingual writer, writing in English was something she had to teach herself. While there was a professor later in her university experience who brought out her "good qualities," her motivation in teaching came from the gaps in her own experiences.

> And again, because I didn't have a lot of these resources when I was learning English on my own, nobody was there to help me with this stuff. So especially if I'm teaching international students, I do verbalize things like, you know, English is not your first language. Then don't worry about like, perfect grammar, don't worry about like perfect sentence structure, because that's not how I'm grading your papers. And I tell them that because some of them are so stressed out about having perfect grammar and sentences and using the right words. And I mean, I tell them like, it's not even in the rubric, right?

Zahra's identity and role as a teacher centered around the support, or rather lack of support, in her own writing development. For her, writing was about communicating ideas that express the author's voice with attention to audience, purpose, and tone. She encouraged her students, especially those who were multilingual, to see that "it's not about how complex your vocabulary is or how well you've been able to write a perfect grammatical sentence. It's just about being able to get your ideas out and communicate them effectively."

Zahra experienced an "existential crisis" because there was a disconnect between her desire to value learners' voices and support process-oriented approaches to writing and the structures that made this feel impossible. While she experienced the benefits of generative AI for herself and for supporting English language learners, this technology asked her to assume the role of the detective. Being a detective did not align with Zahra's values and experiences in developing her own writing. Her experiences of loneliness and low support for her writing made her want to be an educator who provided the kind of support she hadn't received. Teaching a mandatory course meant Zahra encountered and had to make sense of learners who were disengaged and apathetic about the learning process. The large class sizes and curriculum and assessment frameworks placed the responsibility for learning on individuals (Davies & Gannon, 2006). While Zahra may not want to be a detective, her academic institutions expected her to surveil learners and evaluate their academic performance through this lens (Foucault, 1977). This led to Zahra viewing learners as those who don't care about learning while increasing her uncertainty about her responsibilities for detecting AI in student work.

Henry's Educational Context

Just as Zahra was asked to take on the role of the detective, Henry's curriculum and assessment frameworks asked him to "catch" learners using generative AI. However, Henry's institution was not strict but unclear, leaving him uncertain about what he was supposed to do. His response to both the uncertainty and the detective role was to imagine opportunities for learners to surpass generative AI; to "be stronger" than it. This vision countered the demands to watch learners and was replaced by imagining how he might empower them to become "lifelong learners," outside of school. Henry needed a vision for learners and his role as a teacher which allowed him to continue being the type of educator he wanted to be while cultivating the skills his learners needed.

Henry's Policy Context

As a high school English teacher, Henry felt school should support students in using AI "as a tool and not as the solution." This ran in contrast to his experience where he didn't "know what really they're trying to do." Rather than feeling there was a strict, cohesive response to generative AI, Henry's policy context was uncertain. There was an understanding that teaching how to appropriately use generative AI was important, but ethical questions about data and privacy meant AI tools were not school board approved. This meant he couldn't tell students to use it, but they could "use it on their

own." The institutional policy seemed to Henry to be "caught in the middle" which meant Henry was left to identify how AI might be used. As in Zahra's case, the department pushed for Henry to "catch" students using AI. He pushed back on this, refusing to "hunt down" students who were using the AI tools in their writing. This not only saved him sanity and time but also reflected a deeper belief about the value of developing writing skills. While he still used a few tools to help track or circumvent misuse of AI in larger assignments, he preferred to engage students in conversations about how to surpass generative AI instead.

Henry's Curriculum and Assessment Framework

Henry's frameworks for curriculum and assessment in high school English courses focused on learning the skill of writing and directed his attention to how AI enhanced or detracted from learning this skill. Henry often struggled to find students' authentic voices in their writing, especially early on in their writing development.

> I think it's the modeling that's different for grade 9 and 12 because I guess that's a skill level, right?... The grade 9 model too closely, like they don't know how to move away from the model. You showed them one example even in your writing, my own example and every other piece of writing now sounds exactly like that one.

However, this issue of voice pre-existed generative AI and Henry pointed out that teaching critical literacies was already part of the curriculum. He expected "if I were to introduce that idea [the influence of AI] to my class... they would pick that up a lot faster" because it was a preexisting concept in the curriculum.

Henry connected his pedagogical responses to AI to concepts already outlined in the curriculum. Similarly, the assessment framework set out by the curriculum allowed him to assess skills individually. This allowed him to see how AI could be included in future assessments. He described splitting critical thinking and writing apart and assessing them individually. For example, he imagined students could "use AI to generate any kind of idea they want... but what they write should be 100% theirs." While if the assignment focused on critical thinking, "they need to come up with the ideas and AI can write it for them." However, while his assessment framework broke skills into these discrete components, Henry understood this did not reflect the world outside the classroom. In the outside world "you both need the ideas and the writing capacity." Henry thought his vision for assessment would work well in a "closed school environment" but that it wouldn't "match up in the real world."

Student Needs and Expectations in Henry's Class

Henry felt that AI should support the development of skills learners already had, not grant them access to knowledge they hadn't "earned" yet. "I think AI is a great tool for those independent lifelong learners because it's a never-ending material for them." Rather than lifelong learners asking him for extra homework, he thought about how to support learning from and with AI to extend learning outside of school to home spaces.

This belief reflected not only how Henry believed students should be using generative AI, but how he chose to use these tools himself. When giving feedback on an assignment where students were asked to write an introductory paragraph, he created a rubric and then spent time tailoring ChatGPT to give him certain types of feedback. He would then make his own evaluation and mix AI-generated feedback with his own to provide a more in-depth assessment. "I tell the kids what I did, I was like, was the feedback helpful? And they said, 'Yeah, we really like the amount of feedback in it.'" He then used this as an opportunity to teach students how to prompt AI to generate this kind of feedback for themselves. "Then you can look up the feedback and then make your own changes. And this would not count as plagiarism at all. But you're actually using a tool to help you learn."

Henry's Writing Identity and Teaching Values

For Henry, writing was all about clarity and connection. He had always been interested in speech writing and the "craft that goes behind it." Writing was more than just communication; it was a skill to express critical thought. This is why he believed it was so crucial for students to develop writing as a skill for expressing themselves, without having a tool to speed up the process.

> It really does show through later in life. The people … who put in the work to develop the skill before using it to help speed up the process should come out on top. And I guess that's my philosophy in a way.

Vocabulary, punctuation, tense and tone of the writing all mattered to Henry, because they express ideas in a particular way and changing these elements changes the idea.

> Can I just not put into AI and make it, reword it for me, make it better? It's my idea in the first place. I'm like, Yeah, it might be your idea, but it's actually the second you put it in there and it spits out a different sentence, it's actually not your idea anymore… because the way it is written, the order of the words, the words you choose, the punctuation you choose, that

> conveys a certain kind of meaning. It conveys this idea. When you reword it, it actually gives you a slightly different idea. And technically now that idea is not yours anymore.

Henry did use generative AI to support his own work but brought his students into the conversation: "I do use AI, but I tell them I use it to speed up my work because I can do it … I can destroy the AI. You tell it to analyze something, I will do something a lot stronger than it." He reminded his students that "it [AI] might be stronger than you at the moment, but it shouldn't be by the end of the semester." He hoped this acted as an incentive for them to push themselves beyond what generative AI can do, using it strategically and critically to support their writing rather than doing the thinking for them. This was how he perceived his own role as their teacher, as a guide to help them develop skills beyond what AI can produce.

While Henry experienced challenges in his desire to prepare secondary level students for their "real worlds," he envisioned ways for learners to develop skills to surpass generative AI tools and to help cultivate lifelong learning. Rather than being an AI *hunter*, he imagined himself as a guide and implemented pedagogical practices which fostered his own experimentation with the technology to better support his learners. Henry's work with developing writers and the lack of clarity about use of AI in school policy and curriculum and assessment frameworks opened up possibilities for him to experiment and imagine alternative pedagogies for generative AI.

Henry and Zahra did not have the same educational contexts but shared a common experience with participants across this study. The advent of generative AI amplified the disconnects between the educators they wanted to be and what was asked of them. Rather than wholeheartedly enacting pedagogies which affirmed their role as guides and teachers, they felt pressure to be watchful detectives of student work. The labour of resisting and responding to this expectation is evidence of panoptic power at play (Foucault, 1977).

Discussion

Self-Surveillance and Student Surveillance

There is a reason Zahra and Henry experienced deep frustration in navigating pedagogical responses to generative AI. It was neither because "nobody cares," (Zahra) nor because they "can destroy the AI" (Henry). Rather, power formed relations in the classroom. First, power impacted how they saw themselves. Self-surveillance was the process by which Zahra and Henry observed themselves and their behaviours in relation to the regulatory power (Foucault, 1977; Vaz & Bruon, 2003) exerted on them by education policy makers and assessment and curriculum frameworks. Being asked to take

on the role of the detective, to perform surveillance on learners, impacted how Henry and Zahra felt and thought about themselves. It also shifted how they saw learners. In addition to experiencing self-surveillance, Zahra and Henry were asked to surveil learners, to "see everything without ever being seen," (Foucault, 1977, p. 202). While self-surveillance and student surveillance have always existed in educational spaces, generative AI amplified Zahra and Henry's awareness of the disconnects between their values and the contexts where they were situated. Zahra and Henry's pedagogical shifts were about finding ways to connect and collaborate with learners in their daily pedagogical choices. However, to meaningfully shift their pedagogical response to generative AI, Zahra and Henry had to contend with the ways surveillance shaped their daily choices and the daily choices of their learners. AI pedagogies that do not consider the lived and material realities of the classroom will not be able to respond to the needs of learners and the values of educators.

Self-Surveillance

It is important to consider how surveillance isn't just 'out there' but is found within Zahra and Henry. Foucault (1977) describes how panoptic institutions didn't require bars, chains or heavy locks because the feeling of being watched was enough to discipline those under surveillance. They felt "totally seen, without ever seeing," (Foucault, 1977, p. 202). Zahra and Henry were expected to take up their new role as AI detectives. While there were differences in how strictly the policies and structures required educators to enforce this, both Zahra and Henry disciplined themselves to this new role. Both educators wrestled with how to respond to learners misusing generative AI. With little policy guidance and no approved tools, both educators were overwhelmed by the expectation to add the detective role to an already overburdened list of demands on their ways of being educators.

While their own use of generative AI was described as a productivity enhancer, in line with the experiences of other educators (Chan & Hu, 2023; Fyfe, 2023; Kim & Kim, 2023; Nazaretsky et al., 2022), this was not the whole picture. Generative AI was not just a time-saver; it was also a labour-maker. Zahra and Henry are not alone in sensing the increased labour associated with generative AI. Gonçalves Dos Santos (2024) found educators struggle with the increased workload associated with generative AI. Self-surveillance induced by AI cost Zahra and Henry time and took a mental and emotional toll. Zahra's discouragement, when faced with student misuse, led her to question her role and the value of teaching writing. For Henry, the lack of direction from the school board left him feeling underprepared to equip students for their worlds beyond the classroom. Zahra and Henry felt the eye of power and wanted to uphold their responsibilities as educators. At the same time, they felt

strongly that catching learners and punishing them for AI use was a framing to resist, not embrace. What Zahra and Henry noticed and resented was the ways they were made responsible for acts of control and surveillance but asked to shed their other responsibilities to learners (Davies & Gannon, 2006). They wanted to be responsible for the learning of their students and to offer avenues for support, growth, and challenge. However, the AI-mediated learning environments (Ott et al., accepted) they now found themselves in steered time and energy away from how this tool might be used in learning and demanded new levels of student surveillance. Zahra and Henry's experiences with generative AI illustrate that this technology is not a neutral tool (McKnight & Shipp, 2024). Its relation to self-surveillance impacted their understandings of themselves as educators.

Zahra and Henry did find opportunities to resist. They embody educators who "see at the same time that we cannot replace the disciplinary regimes in which we work, nor can we destroy them," (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 82), yet still find ways to work around them. Zahra and Henry both stopped actively using AI detectors to save time and sanity, though this meant they were not performing policy prescribed visions of their roles. Zahra trusted her own voice and intuition to evaluate learners and Henry reminded himself and his learners about their abilities to "destroy" the AI. This did not negate the concerns or struggles they negotiated about who this technology is asking their students to become (as we discuss in the following section). Instead, generative AI became a site of tension for who they were to become: hunter or guide, detective or instructor? Both educators demonstrated the delicate balance required to maintain space for both roles. Zahra and Henry's self-surveillance meant shifting their pedagogical responses (i.e. choosing not to use AI detectors) but also their ways of seeing themselves. Resisting the envisioned role allowed more room to engage with the complex realities of their instructional contexts, learners, and values. In Zahra and Henry's case, focusing on connection and collaboration was an act of resistance against an institutional environment that oriented them towards surveillance. Whether these educators perceived themselves as a guide to help students become more skilled writers than the AI, or as uniquely equipped to understand the specific struggles and challenges of multilingual writing, both ways of being were shaped by the subtle, silent mechanism of power on their ways of seeing themselves (Foucault, 1977).

Student Surveillance

Foucault (1977) understood discipline as a way of making "useful individuals" (p. 211) and systems of surveillance as means of enforcing this discipline. His description of the mechanisms for disciplinary surveillance sound disturbingly similar to most formal school environments:

> This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded ... in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed (Foucault, 1977, p. 197).

Foucault's (1977) description points to the ways schools also 'make' useful members of society. In education, learning can be framed in terms of the individual and their abilities to improve their performance (Selwyn, 2019). The advent of generative AI technologies emerges from these same frames of reference, as technologists promise the perfect individualized education through AI (Selwyn, 2019). Furthermore, the disciplinary power of generative AI prioritizes efficiency at the expense of human autonomy (Dai et al., 2025). Zahra and Henry teach within these structures of surveillance, and this impacted how they observed their learners. Both participants had philosophies or anxieties about AI impacting students' skill development. Zahra vocalized her discouragement and frustration, wondering what would happen to her students in the future. Henry leaned on a trust that those students who work hard would "come out on top." These hopes and anxieties were directed toward how learners would or would not be useful members of society. Generative AI produced "new forms of disciplinary power" (Dai et al., 2025, p. 5) which not only impacted educators' pedagogical responses, but their ways of seeing students.

Zahra and Henry were frustrated by students' lack of motivation to develop their writing and anxious about the consequences of this on their futures. These fears are unsurprising because educators under neoliberalism are made responsible for the learning of every person in their classrooms (Davies & Gannon, 2006). Both Zahra's belief that "nobody cares" and Henry's belief that hard workers "come out on top," were responses to their fears about how generative AI would impact their students' futures. While aware of and dissatisfied with their roles as hunters/detectives, Zahra and Henry are also products of disciplinary education regimes; subjects made useful as 'educators' to ensure the "automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). Their very real and sensible fears about learners' futures emerge from being disciplined by externalized and internalized forms of surveillance (Foucault, 1977). Both Zahra and Henry teach required classes which may or may not align with individual student goals. Despite noticing how disconnected school experiences are from

learners' real-worlds and goals, there is something personal about the flagrant misuse of AI in their stories. A sense of something wrong and alarming arises when students flout the hard work educators believe will make them successful in the future.

Despite the difficulties in responding to the inherent power structures of schooling, ones that feel impossible to dismantle, Zahra and Henry built connection and conversation with their learners. Henry described the ways his assessment practices expanded to support his own view of his students as life-long and autonomous learners. Zahra noted the ways in which she was able to focus on meaning and organization in writing rather than perfect grammar, and the dialogues this had opened with her students. Discussions about generative AI with learners were opportunities for discovery and connection. This points to the importance of pedagogical responses to generative AI which "question the extent to which the idea of the self-responsibilized, self-determining learner advantages those individuals who are able to act in agentic, self-motivated, empowered ways." (Selwyn, 2019, p. 95). Henry felt uncertainty about preparing learners for an unclear future and advocated for the importance of developing writing skills. Zahra noticed learners' resentment and still challenged learners to develop their voices. It was pedagogical conversation and connection which attended to the possibilities and the limitations of learning with and from generative AI. Pedagogies that centered connection and conversation were not only true for Zahra and Henry's experiences but were seen across our broader study (Ott et al., accepted). Writing pedagogy was not only about teaching the mechanics of grammar and genre but focusing on process pedagogies that saw writing as a form for thinking and learning (Ott et al., accepted). Zahra and Henry saw generative AI as an opportunity to connect more deeply with their learners, pose questions and solve problems together.

What these educators show us is how generative AI cuts to central questions about our roles and values. It asks us to understand ourselves in new, and sometimes frightening ways. Through the experiences of these educators, we can see there are still spaces for us. Zahra and Henry named the role of the detective and found ways to hold onto complexity and nuance as they taught within educational systems of surveillance, the both/and of teaching (Davies & Gannon, 2006). Through naming the role of the detective and acknowledging its oppressive power, they were also able to name the absurdities of its demands. Rather than arguing for AI as good or evil, they experienced complexities and questions, hopes, and fears. They draw us away from binary understandings of generative AI to wonder together about its impact on our ways of seeing ourselves and our learners.

Conclusion

The concept of the panopticon opened spaces to understand how generative AI is shaping writing pedagogies in our study. This meant not only describing the teaching and assessment strategies educators are using now but exploring how tensions that have always existed in the relations between education and surveillance are amplified by this new technology. Foucault (1977) notes that "inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere" (p. 195). While this quote sounds ominous, Zahra and Henry invite us into a new ways of gazing in the age of AI. Their moves of self-surveillance demonstrate educators' abilities to tolerate the messiness and uncertainty needed in their practices (Selwyn, 2019). And their examples of holding space for complex and nuanced understandings of their students invite us to ask new questions.

As Dai et al. (2025) argue in their work on AI and surveillance, professional judgement is at stake: educators cannot question what they do not see. However, they cannot see if they do not question. For secondary and postsecondary educators, our study is an invitation to wonder about the values and roles you are expecting of yourselves and desiring to bring to your classrooms. How does your curriculum and institution support the roles you want to play? What roles is generative AI asking of you? And how do the answers to these questions shape the kinds of people you and your students are becoming? Additionally, this study suggests the need for writing pedagogies that center connection and conversation (Ott et al., accepted; Veselka & Ott, 2025). This opens spaces for educators to move between the requirements of their institutions and contexts while staying aligned with their own values. At the institutional level, AI guidelines need to focus on the learning process rather than surveilling and punishing students for misuse of the AI tools. An educational environment that welcomes mistakes and uncertainty while centering the relationships between learners and educators, offers room for negotiating roles and questions together.

For those outside the classroom, this research raises questions about how AI policies and resources shift not just pedagogy (Chan & Hu, 2023; Chai et al., 2021; Chiu, 2023; Escalante et al., 2023; Kim & Kim, 2023; Relmasira et al., 2023; Su & Yang, 2023; Walker, 2019;), but also the way educators think about themselves, their work, and their students. Zahra and Henry's experiences teach us to pause before making recommendations about how writing educators should adapt their pedagogical practices to generative AI. Generative AI impacts who educators are asked to be and what they are being asked to value in their learners. A completely closed and panoptic education system would be a prison. It is in making space for nuanced ways of seeing and complex subjectivities

that education systems can meet educators in their places of optimism and fear, hope and discouragement, and find ways forward together.

Endnotes

1. Zahra and Henry's names are both pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

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