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Prompting, privilege, and pedagogy: A decolonial position on Generative AI in the university

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In the era of generative AI, prompting has become a ubiquitous, often invisible pedagogical act. As educators and students increasingly rely on gen-AI systems, prompting functions as a primary interface through which knowledge is sought, structured, and legitimised. This shift reconfigures pedagogical authority, agency, and epistemic legitimacy often in ways that reinforce epistemic injustice. Grounded in critical and postcolonial theories, the paper examines how prompting mediates access to knowledge and reinforces existing systemic inequalities. We argue that pedagogical interactions with gen-AI become a form of epistemic gatekeeping, privileging certain forms of language, logic, cultural and ontological norms. We articulate our position that the wholesale adoption of gen-AI demands a critical reckoning with its epistemic consequences, particularly the ways it automates and obscures inherited hegemonic and colonial knowledges. We call for a decolonial approach to gen-AI in curricula, beginning with the relational work of deep listening to the scholars and communities who have long imagined otherwise, and a commitment to act on what they have already asked for. We challenge higher education to resist the seductive efficiencies of gen-AI and confront the epistemological stakes of its choices.

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence; decolonisation; critical education; teaching and learning

The rise of generative AI (gen-AI) in higher education marks a profound shift in how knowledge is produced, disseminated, and validated. Since massification in late 2022, gen-AI tools have seen ubiquitous integration into the higher education sector (Wu et al., 2023), with McDonald et al.'s (2024) study of academic and professional staff in Australian universities finding that over seventy per cent have used gen-AI for their work. These uses are not simply stylistic and linguistic editing; rather, there is an overt application of gen-AI in knowledge generation (McDonald et al., 2024), validated by the wealth of articles from reputable sources explaining how gen-AI can be used for knowledge-based tasks (Lui, 2023). As such, prompting has become a new pedagogical interface through which knowledge is sought, structured, and legitimised in the university.

While research on gen-AI often frames it as a positive technological advancement (Hodges & Kirschner, 2024; Tacheva & Ramasubramanian, 2023), gen-AI is deeply entangled with broader systemic inequities that risk reinforcing existing injustices rather than democratising knowledge (McInnes, 2025). These injustices manifest in multiple ways, including through the privileging of dominant, Western-centric epistemologies in gen-AI training data (Worrell, 2024) and the marginalisation of alternative or critical perspectives (Ferrara, 2023). This is driven by the combined forces of techno-solutionism (Selwyn, 2013), colonial logics (Tacheva & Ramasubramanian, 2023), and the commodification of knowledge in market-driven institutions (Giroux, 2014). In this landscape, gen-AI is not a tool for expanding access to knowledges but as the site of technocratic colonialism and oppression (McInnes, 2025; Tacheva & Ramasubramanian, 2023).

In this position paper, we argue that gen-AI is a techno-epistemic force reshaping higher education in ways that warrant urgent scrutiny. Our analysis is grounded by drawing together education-focused, postdigital, postcolonial and critical theories (Fawns, 2019; Freire, 2005; Pande, 2023) as a decolonial framework to scrutinise the influence of gen-AI on pedagogy. Examining how gen-AI influences teaching and learning, specifically, what is considered legitimate knowledge, whose perspectives are valued, and the ways that this is rendered increasingly invisible and unaccountable. By privileging dominant knowledge systems, marginalising alternative perspectives, and reconfiguring the university's role in knowledge production, gen-AI risks deepening epistemic injustices. Without a critical, decolonial, and equity-focused lens, universities' wholesale adoption of gen-AI risks unravelling the progress made through postcolonial and critical theory frameworks—the very efforts that seek to diversify knowledge sources, recognise their contested nature, and genuinely

ASCLITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

embed a plurality of voices. In their rush to adopt gen-AI, universities may ultimately reinforce existing hierarchies and weaken their role as spaces of independent thought and intellectual plurality.

Throughout this paper, we call for transparent, situated, and reflexive approaches to knowledge. In keeping with this approach, we encourage the reader to engage with our positionality, to better consciously situate themselves with the ideas and arguments we put forth in this position paper. We wrote this paper on the unceded lands of Kaurna Yarta (Kaurna Country). I [Author 1] am a cis-hetero white male educator with a hidden disability who is a Scottish-born immigrant to Australia. I [Author 2] am a neurodivergent, cis bisexual white female educator. We acknowledge our privileges and the limits of our understanding and see it as a moral obligation to use our position to critically challenge how gen-AI reinforces inequities shaped by existing power structures, walking alongside, rather than leaving that burden to those most affected.

Prompting as pedagogy

Gen-AI is increasingly used by students and staff (Lee & Palmer, 2025; McDonald et al., 2024) for knowledge seeking, generating, and validating. This has elevated prompting to a central pedagogical act that shapes how knowledge is formed, framed, and legitimised. While approaches to prompting are pedagogically driven (Eager & Brunton, 2023; Lui, 2023), the discourse surrounding it is rarely accompanied by critical epistemological scrutiny (Tacheva & Ramasubramanian, 2023). In contrast to the deep, situated, and transparent practices of academic knowledge-building, when prompting becomes pedagogy, it reduces inquiry to the extraction of surface-level outputs, often detached from genuine source attribution or positionality (Bouderbane, 2024), privileging efficiency over critical interrogation. While approaches to improve prompting (Lee & Palmer, 2025) or build critical awareness (Walter, 2024) are pedagogically motivated, these efforts are constrained by the commercial platforms and logics that define the tools themselves. This reflects a broader structural condition and the way that gen-AI has been introduced into higher education through the lens of platform optimisation, market logics, and techno-solutionist discourse. To understand prompting as pedagogy, we must move beyond individual technique and into systemic critique. Drawing on education-focused postdigital, critical, and postcolonial perspectives (Fawns, 2019; Freire, 2005; Pande, 2023), prompting has become the new epistemic interface in gen-AI-mediated education; appearing individual and skill-based but fundamentally shaped by structural conditions where knowledge is filtered, legitimised, and erased by the opaque infrastructures that underlie gen-AI systems. While prompting may appear to be a neutral or empowering practice, this reframing highlights its role in sustaining the political, commercial, and cultural structures that reinforce how knowledge is accessed, whose knowledge matters and whose knowledge remains invisible.

Epistemic injustice in prompt-mediated pedagogy

When prompting becomes the means to access, structure, and legitimise knowledge in the university, it exposes a fundamental threat of how these tools, and those in power behind them, contribute to epistemic injustice (Kay, et al., 2024) through cognitive imperialism perpetuated by both their datasets and algorithms (Ofosu-Asare, 2024). Large language models derive their predictive capabilities from training conducted on publicly available text (Feng, 2024), with the source data for gen-AI systems overwhelmingly reflecting Western, white and male perspectives (Agarwal, et al. 2025; McInnes, 2025) whilst systematically excluding or appropriating and homogenising Indigenous, decolonial, and non-Western epistemologies (Ofosu-Asare, 2024; Worrell, 2024). The systemic bias embedded in gen-AI means that the knowledge produced is neither neutral nor comprehensive but systematically reflects and reinforces the ideological assumptions of dominant cultures and institutions, creating a form of digital colonialism that benefits those with privilege and further marginalises those without (Tacheva & Ramasubramanian, 2023).

Beyond being embedded in training data, these injustices are sustained by the larger technological and economic systems within which gen-AI operates, which are bolstered by their engagement in platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017). As users engage with gen-AI tools, they do so through systems owned and controlled by a small number of powerful tech companies that monopolise the means of knowledge production (Nyaaba et al., 2024). Prompting, therefore, becomes a way of navigating systems designed to optimise engagement and profit rather than epistemic diversity or justice. The apparent user agency in crafting

ASCLITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

prompts obscures the structural conditions that limit what can be known and whose knowledge is valued. This dynamic reinforces asymmetries in whose voices are represented, which epistemologies are legitimised, and who benefits from the commodification of knowledge in the gen-AI era (Tacheva & Ramasubramanian, 2023).

This has significant implications for higher education, where knowledge production has been shaped by colonial legacies that persist in devaluing or rendering invisible Indigenous knowledge systems (Shay & Wickes, 2017) and reinforcing dominant hegemonic perspectives (Tikly, 2004). The idea that universities privilege certain knowledge systems is well-established in postcolonial and critical theory (Pande, 2023); what is new is how gen-AI automates and legitimises these exclusions, thus becoming an active agent in amplifying testimonial injustice, contributing to hermeneutical injustice (Kay, et al., 2024), and strengthening structural injustices. Testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007) manifests through algorithmic mechanisms driven by data that reflects existing power structures, whilst comparatively, hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007) manifests through the exclusion of non-dominant epistemologies from training data. This problem is compounded by the feedback loop between generated content and future training data: as AI models continue to prioritise dominant knowledge systems, the space for alternative epistemologies shrinks, further entrenching asymmetries in knowledge production. While these epistemic injustices are well established, what makes gen-AI in higher education different is how it obfuscates these problems, creating a form of socio-technical blindness (Johnson & Verdicchio, 2017, McInnes, 2025). By actively promoting gen-AI adoption in learning and teaching, universities reinforce these injustices, making exclusion seem inevitable rather than constructed and thereby harder to challenge or even perceive.

Decolonising gen-AI in the curriculum

Identifying and articulating the problem space of gen-AI in universities is relatively straightforward; proposing meaningful solutions, however, is far more complex. There is a tendency towards countering techno-solutionism with superficial interventions that assume the system is neutral and can be tweaked, rather than contested (Tacheva & Ramasubramanian, 2023). This creates the illusion of resolution, whether through explicit teaching of critical thinking (Walter, 2024) or prompt engineering (Lui, 2023), but fails to interrogate the intertwined challenges of the underlying structural mechanisms producing the injustice. The issue is not that educators are using these techniques, but rather that critical prompting as praxis—a critical, reflexive, and relational approach to gen-AI—will only succeed if universities adopt a decolonial approach to the dual problems of epistemic injustice and cognitive imperialism embedded in gen-AI systems rather than capitulate to the techno-solutionist convenience these technologies offer.

The groundwork for a decolonial approach to gen-AI has already been laid by scholars and communities who have articulated and practised non-hegemonic ways of knowing, being, learning, and relating. What is needed now is not the invention of new strategies, but a serious commitment to deep listening, learning, and shifting power. By centring relational work and community-led methods, we can begin to engage more meaningfully with the possibilities that already exist. When existing decolonial approaches are applied to gen-AI, three key areas of focus emerge: developers, institutions, and educators. For gen-AI developers, the initial steps towards decolonising the current approaches to gen-AI involve developing positionality and identifying how this is reinforced through tools (Hendawy, 2025) and operationalising critical technological practice and decolonial thinking in AI development (Mohamed et al. 2020). From here, the next step is to move from theory into practice in an active effort to decolonise gen-AI tools, supported by respecting Indigenous data sovereignty and meaningfully engaging Indigenous peoples in the design, development, and maintenance of gen-AI tools (Worrell, 2024), adhering to Indigenous frameworks for AI development based on participatory design, co-creation, and Indigenous data sovereignty (Ofosu-Asare, 2024), and centring community-led initiatives, design and development of gen-AI based on Indigenous Knowledge Systems to reframe epistemologies and ontologies as relational, contextual, and multidimensional (Lewis, et al., 2024).

Looking at educational institutions, there is already a need for the decolonisation of knowledge, pedagogical strategies and curricula; of which the key first steps are recognising, critiquing and challenging colonial approaches, and in their place centring Indigenous knowledges (McLaughlin et al, 2010). For a truly meaningful and holistic approach towards decolonising education institutions, these steps need to be applied to gen-AI

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

tools by institutions, to critically inform genuine connections between pedagogical innovation and decolonial policies and frameworks. For universities to ensure that decolonial actions are part of cultural and lasting change, decolonisation work needs to be recognised as a priority with clear responsibilities and accountability associated, with staff providing the time and resources to engage (Larkin, 2024). On an institutional level, decolonial gen-AI work needs to be recognised as a priority with clear workload, responsibilities and accountability. In practice, this could include actions such as creating a dedicated committee for decolonial AI policy, allocating specific funding for community-led AI initiatives, or embedding decolonial principles into institutional AI ethics frameworks.

Lastly, on the most individual level are areas of focus for educators, with the foundational steps including developing knowledge of the legacy of colonialism as a context to work within, identifying and acknowledging one's positionality and its influences, and engaging in regular reflection and contemplation in preparation to move from theory to practice (Lambert & Hunter, 2022). Likewise, as an initial step, educators need to invest time in understanding how gen-AI tools perpetuate colonial approaches, privileges, and knowledge to inform meaningful actions. Although decolonial efforts can look greatly different depending on each educators' context, one key approach that all educators can take is to look critically at their curriculum, including the use of gen-AI, and to reflect on how colonial structures may be perpetuated or privileged (Larkin, 2024; Kamp, 2022); with an informed approach, educators can begin to take targeted actions to embed Indigenous knowledge and perspectives, whilst also unpacking colonial legacies and influences to empower students in engaging in the same critical reflection (Askland et al, 2022).

Fundamentally, the wholesale adoption of gen-AI in higher education demands a critical reckoning with its epistemic consequences. Prompting, while appearing to be a neutral act, functions as a new pedagogical interface that risks deepening epistemic injustices by automating and obscuring inherited colonial knowledges. The seductive efficiencies of gen-AI must not blind us to the epistemological stakes of its integration into our institutions. The only way to move forward with gen-AI in higher education begins with a decolonial approach, one that centres relational work and deep listening to the scholars and communities who have long envisioned different possibilities. It is about recognising that strategies to decolonise the curriculum, embed situated knowledges and epistemic plurality already exist; what is lacking is whole-scale uptake, redistribution of power, long-term commitment to action, and the centring of community-led, co-created knowledge systems.

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ASCLITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

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ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

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