

## **Using a Custom GPT to Support Theory Application and Reflective Practice in a Graduate-Level Organization Theory Course**

Stefan Perun

*Villanova University*

I decided in the summer of 2024 to integrate generative artificial intelligence (A.I.) into my graduate-level organization theory course, which enrolls mostly early career professionals, to address the problem of students outsourcing their course project to A.I. rather than grappling with the course material and its application to their leadership roles.

The three-part course project required students to identify operational problems in their work and apply theories surveyed in the course to write a comprehensive organization change plan. Since the advent of ChatGPT, many students were submitting course projects that simply summarized theory and, at best, applied them in very platitudinous ways (e.g., “leaders need to communicate better”).

The post-A.I. revised academic integrity policy at my institution provides me with plenty of cover to pursue integrity violations in these cases; but the idea of embarking on the next 20 years of teaching by policing students and grading papers with suspicion struck me as both exhausting and antithetical to fostering pedagogical relationships built upon trust that the literature demonstrates is central to facilitating meaningful learning (e.g., Felten & Lambert, 2020).

It occurred to me that my objection was not that students were using A.I. to write their course project. The central course objectives were to use theory to understand and address operational problems, which are achieved through cogitation. Cogitation has historically been exercised through writing, but the final product only needed to demonstrate the habit of mind of a competent leader; it was less important whether the demonstration was articulated by the student or by a student’s manipulation of a machine. Additionally, I also started to imagine the possibilities of A.I. serving well as a co-intelligence (Mollick, 2023) in the workplace, helping students think like competent, ethical, leaders of change.

Purposeful A.I. integration in the course to support these objectives required three major changes. First, I structured the students’ A.I. use in the course project to support cogitation and

develop creative leadership. Accordingly, Part 1 requires descriptions of “problems in the student’s organization sufficiently detailed and supported to understand exactly how they manifest in day-to-day operations” and “enough context to understand how these problems emerged and persist.” These two central requirements together account for 80% of the grade on Part 1, effectively rendering A.I. useless.

As the project progresses, the rubric heavily weights using theory to identify the issue(s) underlying the problems reported (40% in Part 2), and what the theories identified suggest would be the unique solution for the student’s organizational context (60% in Part 3). In these parts, students can use their insights written in Part 1 to engage A.I. as an endlessly patient creative leadership partner, thinking through the application of theory to what they are observing, recommending theories to consider, providing feedback on alignment of theory and observed problems, suggesting theory-based solutions for their context, and even helping draft theory aligned SMART Goals for their project.

Second, I built a custom GPT for the course. While any general-purpose model can be used, a custom GPT allowed me to equitably structure the students’ use of A.I. in ways that focused on learning the habits of mind required to lead change. It also allowed me to largely avoid having to teach prompt engineering. To these ends, I “trained” a GPT on the course text, step-by-step theory application process I teach students, and guidance on how to respond (e.g., inquire about context, invite students to explore application of theory, use a supportive and professional tone, etc.).

Creating a custom GPT was straight forward as it creates itself with conversational prompts, and the training described here was iterative and completed over the course of 25 minutes of interacting with it. I was impressed with the ability of the GPT to potentially help students deepen their understanding of a theory (tutor) or give them feedback on the specificity of their context and alignment of theory for insights (mentor), and to give them ideas on what theories might better apply or ideas on actionable items a theory would suggest (creative partner/teammate/coach) (Mollick & Mollick, 2023).

Third, to reinforce the course’s emphasis on ethical and reflective practice, I developed a course-specific A.I. policy that both encourages and guides responsible use. The policy communicates that A.I. can be a valuable aid in the work of creative leadership by supporting research, analysis, idea generation, insight development, and giving feedback. However, the policy also clearly emphasizes that A.I. should not replace intellectual effort or critical thinking as overreliance upon A.I. undermines both the learning process and the development of professional judgment. The policy states clearly how such dependency in the course as in a real-world leadership context constitutes an abdication of responsibility. Further, as in their professional roles, students are accountable for the work they submit, including its integrity, accuracy, contextual relevance, and originality.

## Observations

I have taught 46 students across three sections since integrating A.I. When introducing the GPT, I review the A.I. policy and explain its training on the course’s text and theory application process, emphasizing that it cannot report the nuanced observations required for Part 1. Conducting a demonstration, I discuss with students how using Part 1, the accumulated directed reading worksheets for applying theory, and their own developing conversancy in the theories surveyed in the course, A.I. can serve as a valuable partner by generating tailored feedback, offering critical insights, helping them refine their analysis, and ultimately enhancing their ability to synthesize theoretical frameworks and apply them meaningfully to their organizational context.

The GPT has been very well received by students. There were over 100 chat sessions in the first section with just 14 students. Across all sections, students have discussed the GPT in class and provided positive feedback on its role in the development of their insights and course project.

Their engagement with the tool is also obvious in the course projects. One of the perennial challenges for students in the course is to iterate, applying multiple theories to objectively frame and reframe what they see in their organization. While the course project might be considered an authentic assessment, it differs in that it is a solo academic exercise, when in the workplace, there would be a cross-functional team identifying and addressing problems. In the course, students must make their way through volumes of reading and many applications of theory to identify those that provide insight and direction in their context. Under time constraints of course due dates, many go with theories they have worked with in class or developed just enough to meet the expectations of the assignment regardless of how aligned the theory might be with the problem.

The GPT interactions seem to encourage deeper engagement and critical thinking as there is notably more alignment between theory and problems. I suspect the significantly increased alignment between theory and application is a result of the GPT allowing students to efficiently “test” theories and consider the implications in their organizational context. Indeed, several students have reported using the GPT to refine their ideas multiple times, resulting in deeper analyses, sharper insights, and more creative approaches to change in their organization.

Compared to previous semesters, the projects generally demonstrate improved clarity, originality, and contextual relevance; however, the grade distribution has not changed. While the A’s now tend to be very high, with several projects approaching “perfect,” and most B’s, now high B’s (and in some cases A’s), the accountability of the rubric has produced about the same number of C’s.

It seems the C’s result from students outsourcing to the GPT, submitting highly polished, generic, disjointed narratives, with properly cited, clear articulations of theory from the course materi-

## An Uneasy Integration

The C projects aside, I worry that the ease of A.I. use may inadvertently constrain the kind of imaginative, divergent thinking that leadership often demands (e.g., Meincke, Nave, & Terwiesch, 2025). Students may become overly reliant on the first suggestion provided by the A.I., mistaking early ideas for final answers, and failing to engage in the iterative, exploratory process that understanding and critical engagement requires (Lee, et al., 2025).

Still, many students reported that they were surprised by the insights they arrived at through back-and-forth exchanges with the GPT that they might not have achieved through solitary reading or writing alone. In this way, the tool seems less crutch and more catalyst for higher-order thinking.

## References

- Felten, P., & Lambert, L. M. (2020). *Relationship-rich education: How human connections drive success in college*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lee, H.-P., Sarkar, A., Tankelevitch, L., Drosos, I., Rintel, S., Banks, R., & Wilson, N. (2025, April). *The impact of generative AI on critical thinking: Self-reported reductions in cognitive effort and confidence effects from a survey of knowledge workers*. In *CHI '25: Proceedings of the 2025 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (Article No. 1121, pp. 1–22). ACM. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3706598.3713778>
- Meincke, L., Nave, G., & Terwiesch, C. (2025). ChatGPT decreases idea diversity in brainstorming. *Nature Human Behaviour*. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-025-02173-x>
- Mollick, E. (2024). *Co-intelligence: Living and working with AI*. Penguin.
- Mollick, E. R., & Mollick, L. (2023). *Assigning AI: Seven approaches for students, with prompts*. SSRN. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4475995>