“Just a tool”? Troubling language and power in generative AI writing

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to share findings from empirically driven conceptual research into the implications for English teachers of understanding generative AI as a “tool” for writing.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper reports early findings from an Australian National Survey of English teachers and interrogates the notion of the AI writer as “tool” through intersectional feminist discursive-material analysis of the metaphorical entailments of the term.

Findings – Through this work, the authors have developed the concept of “coloniser tool-thinking” and juxtaposed it with First Nations and feminist understandings of “tools” and “objects” to demonstrate risks to the pursuit of social and planetary justice through understanding generative AI as a tool for English teachers and students.

Originality/value – Bringing together white and First Nations English researchers in dialogue, the paper contributes a unique perspective to challenge widespread and common-sense use of “tool” for generative AI services.

Keywords Pedagogy, Metaphor, Discourse analysis, Curriculum, Social justice, Feminism, Artificial intelligence, Professional learning, Writing, Generative AI writing tools

Paper type Research paper

Introduction: is technology for communication “just a tool”? 

In a famous interview on the British Broadcasting Corporation program BBC Archive (2021), multimodal composer and popstar David Bowie disagreed with presenter Jeremy Paxman about whether the internet is “just a tool”:

I think the potential of what the internet is going to do to society, both good and bad, is unimaginable. I think we’re actually on the cusp of something exhilarating and terrifying.

It’s just a tool, though, isn’t it?


This interview is again being quoted in news articles (see, for example, Curtis, 2023) about generative AI, which is trained on the web and hosted by the internet. In the interview, Bowie welcomes and fears the disruptive, collaborative, democratic impulses of online
creativity. Unfortunately, it is not possible to hear what he may think of generative AI and its potential impacts on creative industries, as he died in 2016. The 2023 USA-based screenwriters’ and actors’ strikes suggested many artists have held grave concerns; members of these unions struck for the right to write, to speak and to participate as humans in social and professional life. This has implications for the pedagogies and practices of English and Language Arts teachers who work with young people creating, designing, writing, filming, editing and composing in all media, in school classrooms.

This article draws on conceptual analysis of the “tool” as metaphor for generative AI content creation. This analysis has emerged from a 2022–2024 Australian Research Council-funded project exploring the teaching of digital writing in secondary English. Lucinda, a white Australian with British heritage, is lead researcher, and Wiradjuri/Welsh woman Cara is the First Nations Representative on the project’s National Relevance Group. Lucinda lives and works on Wurundjeri lands, and Cara lives and works on Kombumerri lands; we pay our respects to the traditional owners of these lands, where we write and honour all Elders. Lucinda is also a former English teacher, while Cara is currently Head of Senior School at Silkwood School, Queensland. Our cross-cultural collaboration offers a unique perspective on the implications of understanding generative AI as a “tool” and as a neutral producer of language that purports to speak for all. We support literacy teachers and students to engage critically with the rhetorics and discourses promoting generative AI as a simple word-calculator facilitating digital writing.

Teaching digital writing study
The Teaching Digital Writing in Secondary English study consists of three stages:

(1) archival analysis via Australia’s National Textbook Archive of technologies in English since 1960;

(2) a national survey of how English teachers are conceptualising digital writing (aiming to provide snapshots of practice, not statistically valid claims); and

(3) the development of digital writing labs in schools.

The study received ethical clearance from Deakin University (reference no. HAE-23-041), and the survey link was distributed via local subject associations, through emails and social media. The survey aimed to “find out teachers’ attitudes and practices in relation to “digital writing”. Little is known about how English teachers are using generative AI, with the whole field of AI writing still emerging (McKnight, 2021; Robinson, 2023).

The first two stages of the study are now complete. In the documents in the archival study, and national survey responses, as well as in contemporary media like the example cited above, digital technologies for writing are described as “tools”. In survey responses to the initial survey question “What does the term ‘digital writing’ mean to you?”, teachers wrote responses such as “composing written texts using digital tools”, “using digital tools to support the creation of writing” and “composing using any digital tools”. When specifically asked about “learning to write with generative AI tools” being part of their digital writing pedagogies, 86 of the 220 teachers who responded said it was already, or potentially, part of their practice in 2023. In her academic writing, Lucinda has used “tools” for generative AI content creators (McKnight and Hicks, 2023), and since the release of ChatGPT in November 2022, the phrase “AI writing tools” has become widely circulated and recognised, currently returning over a billion results on Google.

However, as an enactment of the feminist poststructuralist framing of the project overall, this part of the study notices words that are repeated through data and seeks to trouble
them. We therefore consider the word “tool” as “a site for the construction and contestation of meanings” (Baxter, 2003, p. 6), to open it up for questioning and scrutiny. As in the David Bowie example cited above, “tool” as a metaphor can be a “site for struggle” (Baxter, 2003, p. 187), where discourses compete. Teachers in the study, while describing generative AI as a “tool” also provided responses suggesting that its broader impact might be much more than that of a mere “tool”, for example, resulting in “the demise of authentic voice”. Intersectional feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis and related forms of critical posthumanism ask what the gendered and raced power relations of digital writing “tools” may be. While part of a research study, this work also prefigures the kind of deconstruction and mapping that might take place in English classes of the future to maintain a critical orientation to the adoption of generative AI.

**Are “tools” neutral? Exploring definitions**

Dictionary definitions can provide initial insights into common sense usage of terms that discourse analysis can trouble. Collins (2023) Dictionary defines a “tool” as “any instrument or simple piece of equipment that you can hold in your hands and use to do a particular kind of work. For example, spades, hammers, and knives are all tools”. Merriam Webster (2023) similarly describes “a something (such as an instrument or apparatus) used in performing an operation or necessary in the practice of a vocation or profession”. It also says tools can refer to “a means to an end”, to “one who is used or manipulated by another”, to “a foolish or unlikeable person”.

Tools emerge from these definitions as apparently simple, neutral, obvious, (hu)man-controlled, efficient, separate (with the grasping hand the *locus* of attachment and detachment) and yet simultaneously devalued. “Tools”, when the word is used for people, are also gullible, ignorant fools. What is manipulated by, or weaker than, man serves as a metaphor for people who are perceived as inferior and who therefore deserve to be denigrated and despised. Gender is also evident in the examples, if the pronouns are noted: “A scholar’s tools are his books” [authors’ emphasis] (Merriam Webster, 2023). “Tool” can also be used as slang for “penis”.

The masculinist trappings of “tool” also play out in the title of Audre Lorde’s (1984) essay, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”. Lorde asks, “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?” (1984, p. 110). As First Nations adviser on the National Relevance Panel, Cara’s input to the *Teaching Digital Writing* project highlights that what functions at the level of discourse for (often white) researchers is much more material for many First Nations students. These students may not have access to the digital “tools” that form the basis of assumptions made by the study about what is possible for teachers of “digital writing”. This extends into communities much more broadly, too, with one survey respondent stating:

[Where] I teach, there are a significant number of students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and they do not have access to the same technologies [for] digital writing.

When better internet access and the provision of software and hardware are needed, whether in remote schools or in homes where students may experience financial disadvantage, conversations need to be about funding before pedagogy. If you do not have a keyboard or monitor, you cannot learn to type, let alone explore how voice-to-text can instruct a generative AI writer. Lorde’s essay flags what may be missed if race is not foregrounded as an intersectional site for justice and dominant Eurocentrism and whiteness are not critiqued. None of the tools suggested in the dictionary definitions, for example, is a tool connected specifically with an enduring indigenous culture, such as a shield, tomahawk or boomerang. The hand that grasps the tool, whether hammer or pen, is a white one. In teacher resources on writing in the National Textbook Library, without exception, the
student hands shown holding writing implements, on covers or in illustrations, are white. While we note that skin colour does not necessarily determine race, the absence of diversity in the students portrayed as writers is significant.

In the Australian context, writing commenced without tools through longstanding and diverse practices over at least 40,000 years. Such practices include, for example, drawing in the sand or on the ground with a finger (Yunkaporta, 2019) or creating images on cave walls by blowing through hands as stencils. Sticks seem likely to have been Australia’s first writing tools. Since 1788, colonisation has brought quills, inkpots, desks and chairs and a system of government in which writing was and is a means of sustaining and validating the theft of First Nations land and children and a means whereby harmed families could and can seek redress (Harkin, 2020). The 2002 film Rabbit-proof Fence (Noyce, 2002), set in 1931, shows Mr. Neville, the Chief Protector of the Aborigines, at his desk, pen in hand, presiding over the maps and legal documents of systemic colonisation. The camera lingers on closeups of his fountain pen nib, signing away lives in copperplate script.

This context for any national Australian research project on writing led Cara to note, in an early round of National Relevance Group feedback, that “inequity in the education system needs to be addressed as a priority, especially relating to digital access, and that Anglo-style ‘writing’, in Australia, is inevitably (?) a (post)colonial action”. This applies just as much to writing with generative AI as to writing with a fountain pen and points to the need to think deeply about what English as a language is, and what writing is, as decolonising questions, along with prioritising issues of access and equity.

**Analysing tool as metaphor**

Analysis of metaphor provides useful opportunities for researchers and English teachers and students to engage critically with generative AI. In metaphor, one thing (the tenor) is said to be another (the vehicle). Generative AI is said to be a tool. Speakers and writers know generative AI is not an analogue tool like a hammer or spade, as per the dictionary definition, but there are enough similarities for this to seem a useful linguistic act. Dead metaphors are those in which “usage has become so common, we have ceased to be aware of the discrepancy between vehicle and tenor” (Abrams, 1981, p. 64); these are common in relation to technology and include the “mouse”, the “window” and the “screen”. To some extent, generative AI as tool is also a dead metaphor, as the statement “generative AI is a tool” makes no figurative impact through striking juxtaposition. Yet such metaphors can still carry entailments (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), the linguistic, discursive and affective clouds of meaning that cling to any utterance.

There is something down-to-earth, earnest, honest and open about the writing “tool”. It has integrity; it enacts a Protestant work ethic. It conjures, however distantly, the tradesman, and in Australian parlance, the “good bloke”, the smith, the mason and the carpenter. These trades have all been busy, since convict days, in the labour of colonisation. On the 26th of January, 1788, immediately on landing, British colonisers took to country with tools, “in one place, a party cutting down the woods; a second setting up a blacksmith’s forge” (Tench, 1789/1976, p. 14). Opinions of Indigenous “tools” were dismissive, well into the twentieth century. In Technology in Australia 1788–1988 (1988/2020), W.H. Algar (1988/2020) writes of “the Aboriginal people” that:

[…] there was very little evidence of technological ingenuity […] in spite of tribal wanderings for centuries over vast mineral resources, they had neither identified deposits of copper or iron, nor developed the techniques for using these materials. It is surprising, also, that they had not learned how to use the country’s virtually unlimited supplies of fossil fuels for heating purposes.
This quotation demonstrates the broader, colonial discursive context of what we initially called “white man’s tool-thinking”. However, reflecting on the need to avoid essentialising, we have modified this as “coloniser tool-thinking”. Algar articulates how the destructive and extractive impetuses of this thinking, writ large, have led to unsustainable practices, environmental harms and to the global climate crisis; these harms are also related to the use of generative AI writing tools (Stokel-Walker, 2023). Algar fails to understand what “tools” might be in diverse Indigenous cultures. The metaphor of the “tool” for generative AI in common usage relies on coloniser tool-thinking, not much richer and more nuanced notions of what objects are and can be. To further unpack a problematic of the “tool”, Indigenous art, objects and thinking provide valuable resources.

I, Object: indigenous understandings of “tools”
In 2019, the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art (QUAGOMA) mounted an exhibition of Indigenous art, created by curators including Kullilli/Yuggera woman Katina Davidson; the exhibition was titled I, Object, and explored “the many complex relationships Indigenous Australian artists have to objects: from the histories informing their creation, to the social and cultural consequences of their collection” (Queensland Art Gallery Board of Trustees, 2023).

The exhibition text expands on this:

Many Indigenous people consider their cultural objects akin to family or a part of themselves – a physical, tangible product of their cultural inheritances. Throughout the world many museums hold important Indigenous cultural material. These are considered ancestors by many, and are a great source of pride and inspiration. However, their multi-generational housing in public and private collections, is also a great source of cultural loss and trauma.

View works that celebrate the survival of sculptural traditions, works that witness a revival of regional Queensland mark making traditions that has its roots in collected objects, and works that mourn the loss of cultural strength or life when objects are removed from their origin communities. Together, these works and artists help to reshape the ways we relate to objects and a history of objectification. (Queensland Art Gallery Board of Trustees, 2023).

Katina led a tour for 2019 Australian Association for Research in Education annual conference participants interested in the intersection of posthumanist, new materialist and Indigenous thinking, and this tour has informed Lucinda’s thinking ever since. Its messages are already familiar to Cara. Material objects that white people might think of as mere “tools”, in the binarized Cartesian thinking that separates man’s creations from nature, are understood in entirely different ways in Indigenous cultures. While being careful not to make invalid generalisations across diverse cultures and country, I, Object suggests that Indigenous objects are intimately connected to their origins in country – these are not hidden or forgotten, like the tree that provided the hammer’s handle or the water that cools generative AI’s server farms. Colonisers’ tools are not so open and honest after all.

Indigenous objects, such as shields, carry inscribed narratives of history, identity, sociality and spirituality. The complexities of tools and the stories of their makings and usage are foregrounded. If, thinking with Lorde (1984) and her invocation to make our author differences “a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic” (p. 1), we contemplate what thinking like this about all tools might mean, we can suggest new ways of engaging with generative AI. This is to move beyond a binarized discussion of “ways in which generative AI is or isn’t a tool”, and to reassert the materiality and complexity of all tools, digital and otherwise.
For example, the impacts of the mass-produced, disposable plastic ballpoint pen cannot be underestimated, with more than 1.6 billion going to landfill each year in the USA alone (Dowling, 2020). We aim to rearticulate tools and their makers, users, origins and destinies, healing the colonial split between nature and culture. A recent newspaper article titled “More than a tarrang (tree): The dark history of collecting Indigenous materials” (Latimore, 2023) cites Yorta woman and Museum Victoria curator Kimberley Moulton. “With much of the early First Peoples collections,” she says:

[...] the Country where they are from, the maker, their story and cultural narratives were unrecorded by collectors and [that] speaks to the early colonial practice of dislocating cultural belongings from people and their systems of knowledge.

The colonisers viewed people and context as separate, and the material, the “tools”, as impersonal, interchangeable and discardable. These attitudes continue to drive Northern/Western capitalist consumption, and the planned obsolescence built into the hardware that powers generative AI today. All of the above can inform critical engagement with generative AI in the writing classroom as teachers and students develop more nuanced, sustainable and culturally responsive understandings of the materialities and impacts of what discourse calls “tools”.

**Analysis of “tools” for media production**

David Bowie was not the first person to problematise the notion of the mediatised tool. The archival research informing the study involved a genealogical engagement with textbooks from the 1960s through the 1990s. This work repeatedly threw up the name of Marshall McLuhan, a media scholar who had significant impact on early thinking about technology in English and on teaching materials from the 1960s and 1970s. John Culkin (1967, p. 70), glossing McLuhan’s work, famously summed up his message that “we shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us”. While McLuhan referred to the electrical rather than the digital, he describes a social, reciprocal relationship with media-creation tools and their impact on identity. McLuhan suggests that tools are not discrete, uniform or fixed, that they are capable of adapting and that we are involved with them in their processes of becoming. He suggests an agency for tools that chimes readily with Indigenous and new materialist thinking about the capacities of objects and non-human bodies (Bennett, 2010). All these beliefs reject the notion of “just a tool”.

If “tools” are more than the simple instruments of coloniser tool-thinking, how can generative AI writing tools be imagined? If they are understood to form and acquire embodiment and meaning through complex discursive-material assemblages, they are always already more than “just” tools. Tools form in relation to articulation with enfleshed bodies, to forces such as electricity and gravity, to policy and social practices, incorporating metals and minerals, subscriptions and programs, algorithms and other code, hardware and furniture, light and air. Tools, even virtual tools, are inevitably of the earth and reliant on the earth for manufacture, articulation and circulation, for example through embodied breath, trees pulped for paper and the fossil fuels powering technologies and modern civilisations. Kate Crawford (2021, p. 8), in her Atlas of AI, speaks of “a massive industrial formation that includes politics, labour, culture and capital”. She describes AI specifically as not a “singular black box” but “a multitude of interlaced systems of power” (p. 12). These systems extract value from the earth via manufacturing industries, transportation practices, physical work, data centres, undersea cables, personal devices, raw components, transmission signals, data sets and more (p. 48).
Such phenomena echo the harms of colonisation in Australia’s last nearly 250 years. In decolonising education and seeking to avoid recolonising moves, teachers and students need to form sound understandings of what generative AI is before deciding whether to use it. We argue also that they need to consider the dangers of coloniser tool-thinking and what it shuts down. In the following section, we suggest ways a broader understanding of what objects and tools can be orientates learning towards social and planetary justice.

Understanding generative AI as more-than-tool
This is a fundamental understanding for a more-than-tools approach to teaching about and with generative AI. Generative AI writing tools are formed through "vast systems of extractions and logistics, with supply chains that wrap around the entire planet" (Crawford, 2021, pp. 18–19). This precious planet and the costs to it of developing, training, maintaining and expanding large language models need to be acknowledged and mapped, so they are at the forefront of education policymakers', school leaders', teachers' and students' minds. English teachers have opportunities here to design pedagogy empowering students to research, debate and describe these costs. Students can use imaginative fiction to personify and to speak with the voices of the earth and of other matter, investigative journalism to uncover the workings of power in generative AI and visual literacies to create diagrams of interconnectivities. They can study the rhetorics of extractive logics and their resonances with the fictions of colonisers.

These extractive concepts also apply to the way large language models have been trained on other “global” non-human bodies, in particular materials on the World Wide Web, published via the internet. Those humans whose writing, art, music and thought have been used to train these models have not been paid for or acknowledged. And the outputs of large language models inevitably reflect, to some extent, the racial, gender and other biases and toxicities of the training corpus, giving them potency and the potential for harm.

Generative AI: tool or weapon?
Humans, often black and brown humans, have been harmed in the creation of generative AI writing tools. This is a disclaimer that needs to be stated in every lesson plan requiring students to compose with generative AI. Generative AI writing tools do not just "do stuff" that human writers want them to do, such as provide ideas, feedback, text, commentary, editing and proofing. They ruin the lives of real human workers in developing countries who are training them; the news media provide an ongoing commentary about these tragedies.

As we are writing this article, the latest exposé is titled “It’s destroyed me completely”: Kenyan moderators decry toll of training AI models” (Rowe, 2023) and describes the psychological trauma of hours spent viewing graphic physical violence, sexual violence and child abuse. This work is performed in east Africa, India, the Philippines and by refugees in Kenya and Lebanon. It is also often in the form of “digital piecework” (Crawford, 2021, p. 15), based on microtasks that give systems the illusion of intelligence and require human workers to be surveilled and treated like robots. Users of generative AI writers need to interrogate the obscene logics of who is harmed to keep first-world people “safe”; thinking with Indigenous understandings of the power and resonance of objects, we can only wonder what spiritual hauntings and traces of horror might be inscribed in these more-than-tools that we may require students to use in English.

Given the above, large language models are more like weapons than tools, and this is even before considering the potential harms of deep fakes, fake news, hate speech at scale
and other content outputs. Generative AI writing tools, like all tools, are made of human labour. While this tool-making labour might be black, brown or various colours, those in positions of power and reaping profit are largely white males. The racism and sexism of the industries creating these tools are legendary, along with their gender and racial homogeneity (Crawford, 2021); the code underpinning generative AI’s algorithms is even couched in the language of “master” and “slave” relations, a powerful invocation of the masculinist and racist DNA of the technology industry. It has taken rebels and outcasts from the tech industry to warn that generative AI risks “amplification of a hegemonic world view” (Bender et al., 2021, p. 616). It is important that English teachers do not ignore or elide these facts and provide opportunities for students to consider them. Pedagogy then needs to allow conscientious objectors to avoid the use of generative AI writers and be offered meaningful alternatives.

**Generative AI: relations of power**

Coloniser tool-thinking posts man as the master of the tool, able to pick it up and put it down at will. The tool is subservient to him; power flows from him, through the tool and into what he is creating. Yet while humans can hit the buttons that switch desktop computers, tablets or phones on or off, and click or tap to open software applications, it is not clear that the humans are in charge. A Foucauldian understanding of power perceives it as flowing in many directions at once and involving many actors and agencies. While tools may seem to be things users take up to achieve their own purposes, generative AI writing tools are extracting data from their human users. These users receive no remuneration, although their data train large language models, improve them and increase the profits of tech billionaires, supercharging global inequality. Complicating matters further, these billionaires, and their programmers, struggle to articulate exactly how artificial intelligence actually works (Yampolskiy, 2019).

If English teachers have commitments to social justice, these truths cannot be ignored. Students are entitled, in every interaction their schools and teachers make with generative AI, to know where their data goes and how it is used. This is of particular importance for First Nations students, as is the principle of colonised peoples retaining data sovereignty and control of Indigenous Knowledge (IK). Yet the practicalities of this digital human right are difficult to ensure in the classroom. In relation to what generative AI writing tools take from users, it may be more accurate for them to be called data exchange services or even data extraction services.

In effect, humans are being farmed by generative AI writing tools; this metaphor is particularly apt given how white man’s farming methods have homogenised, denatured and exhausted ecosystems, soils and waterways in Australia and more broadly (Shiva, 1993). Humans are not in pens like intensively farmed pigs but sat at computers, at desks and in chairs, in the postures modelled by Mr. Neville, the Aboriginal Protector, in *Rabbit Proof Fence*. They may ape him, but they are not in power. They do not enjoy the embodied freedoms of First Nations peoples before 1788; if generative AI writing tools lead to a further intensification of labour, as email did (Newport, 2021), then human bodies may be ever more oppressed by the “microtasks” (Crawford 2021, p. 15) of monitoring and correcting vast digital outputs. Different terms and metaphors, and their rhetorical and pedagogical power, can be discussed and debated with English students.

**Generative AI: beyond the word-calculator**

Diminishing the power of objects and tools through “just a tool” thinking is common and allows for humanist fictions of man’s dominance in the world. Even a hammer speaks back
to its user, creates a callous in his palm or creates a splinter in his finger. A hammer changes over time, can warp and split, detach parts and develop distortions in its metal face. Generative AI writing tools, however, are much more complex and volatile. ChatGPT is one example. OpenAI initially decided not to release its early GPT model, believing it to be a potential threat to democracy and to humanity.

While this reticence did not last, serious concerns remain and are repeated by tech experts who have left companies such as Google, for example, Timnit Gebru and Geoffrey Hinton. Italy banned ChatGPT. Schools in many countries have banned it. Governments worldwide are scrambling to respond. Using ChatGPT means entering a binding legal contract and signing away rights. Content entered into ChatGPT can be viewed by third parties, including trainers, and is not private. OpenAI (2023a) advises that using ChatGPT to assess student work is harmful [this has now been removed]. The legal parameters of engaging with language models are constantly changing as court cases play out globally in relation to intellectual property (IP), copyright, privacy and the theft of human endeavour over centuries: perhaps the greatest ever heist. Perhaps it is no surprise that it is forbidden to try to work out how ChatGPT works. The terms and conditions OpenAI (2023b) state:

[...] users must not (ii) reverse assemble, reverse compile, decompile, translate or otherwise attempt to discover the source code or underlying components of models, algorithms, and systems of the Services.

Generative AI writing tools are often compared to calculators. Given all we have said about the complexities of all tools, we do not wish to diminish the calculator as object and tool. It carries its own histories, stories, elements of the earth in its batteries and capacities to shape humans. However, the claim that AI content creation is just another calculator must be challenged. This is another metaphor deserving of rigorous interrogation.

Returning to Cara’s powerful reminder that many students do not have access to basic technologies for writing and learning, it is important to remember what is taken for granted in opening up ChatGPT and putting in a writing prompt. This requires, in most educational instances, (transport to) a school, a secure building, a classroom, electrical infrastructure and reliable supply, lighting, hardware including hard drives, cables, plugs, monitors, keyboards, mice, software licences, software such as operating systems, accounts, internet access and bandwidth, servers for storing data safely, assistive technologies (for those with learning needs), desks and chairs and more. The costs of all these things, for individuals, schools, systems and the planet, are enormous. Using ChatGPT safely and ethically also requires the capacity to read and agree to complex and lengthy legal documents. This is much, much more than what is required to use a calculator.

With integration into word processing software, generative AI writing tools will become ever more naturalized, difficult to deconstruct and critique and all too easy to think of as just extensions of spellchecking and other editing functions. Yet the capacity to outsource thought to these tools and have them produce whole texts, displacing human capacities at scale, requires educators to retain criticality. This may, however, not be easy.

The ELIZA effect: chatbots’ impacts on humans
If objects and tools are acknowledged to have power and agency, generative AI writing tools have a particular advantage in this respect. They facilitate what has been described as the ELIZA effect. ELIZA was the first chatbot, an expert in reflecting to people what they said to “her” – we note the gendered nature of many bots and the antecedents of this in white history, via Pygmalion and Galatea, and even Dr Frankenstein and his monster. What the
ELIZA effect does, however, is shut down criticality (Weizenbaum, 1966). Humans want to believe in, and trust in, the bot.

Yet for many of the reasons we have outlined above, humans need to be careful ceding thought to these commercial and proprietary entities that have been trained yet retain biases and omissions. One of Lucinda’s colleagues on a panel recently, a white lecturer, proudly described how they had asked ChatGPT to pretend to be the author Roxane Gay and speak with her voice as a guest in their classroom. Through discussion, the deeply problematic cultural appropriation, identity theft, potential copyright infringement (in the process of the tool being trained to speak as Roxane Gay), and other issues became apparent; these include shutting down potentials for engaging with authors and, in Australia, with First Nations peoples. Yet the lecturer, with the best of intentions, had somehow been lulled by the performativities of ChatGPT into thinking of this as cultural inclusion, of inviting diverse voices into her classroom.

In her reference book for English teachers, Cara references the Sovereign Stories exhibition at the State Library of Queensland, which showcases 10 years of black and write!, a publishing project where First Nations writers interact with First Nations editors and publishers throughout the entire process. This initiative has been hailed by authors as leading the way in culturally responsive and responsible treatment of First Nations’ IP. But it is not just about IP: First Nations’ art and storytelling are bound up in identity, connection to Country, Dreaming, self-determination, de-colonising and, ultimately, the health and well-being of First Nations people (Shipp, 2023, pp. 83-84). For too long, First Nations people were spoken for and about, and non-Indigenous people determined how they would be represented; now, there is increasing sovereignty over their voice and how they use it (Shipp, 2023, p. 83). AI threatens to undo this work, becoming the new outsider that manages First Nations voices and determines how First Nations people are represented. In doing so, it may repeat and reinforce old colonial approaches.

There are already myriad examples of these complexities, which, in time, will provide protocols for interacting with these tools. Another example is that ChatGPT currently refuses to speak in First Nations languages (for reasons related to IK ownership). Yet if ChatGPT becomes the default for producing text rather than collaborative human writing between white and First Nations Australians, these languages may become less heard and read. What these more-than-tools displace is as important to consider as their actual outputs.

Avoiding technological determinism

While we have described some potential harms above to emphasise that generative AI is more than “just a tool”, we also want to avoid technological determinism. Hopefully, better and more ethical and inclusive large language models may be developed. Anthropic is training a model that apparently does not harm humans in its development process. In considering protocols for working with such models in the culturally responsive space, many Australian cultural and educational institutions have already developed clear protocols that could be adapted and applied to generative AI. These include the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resource Network (ATSILIRN) and the Australia Council for the Arts First Nations’ Cultural and Intellectual Property protocols, as well as most museum and art galleries and departments of education (Shipp, 2023, pp. 29-37). Most protocols centre around protecting the hard-won sovereignty over voice and representation referred to earlier, within the context of First Nations’ self-determination.

Used purposefully within set protocols, generative AI writing tools could have potential to enhance First Nations students’ access to and success in, Western education. There is growing discussion among literacy educators about the potential for generative AI writing
tools to support reluctant writers by helping them organise their ideas, clarify their thinking through crafting good questions and commands for the bot to action, and draft and edit their work. New apps based on large language models will provide many potential tools to support students with low proficiency in Standard Australian English and those who use English as an Additional Language or Dialect. Cara discusses the notion of “two-way” learning in Aboriginal communities where students speak their First Nations language/s, English and variations to English such as Aboriginal English and Kriol (Shipp, 2023, pp. 101-102). She notes that communities express a desire for their students to be proficient in both “worlds” and to be able to “code-switch” to have access to as many opportunities as possible (Shipp, 2023, p. 102).

Therefore, the function of AI-powered writing assistance, if used within the context of protocols to protect Cultural and Intellectual Property and digital literacy/safety protocols to keep students safe, may have affordances that support the de-colonising journey by increasing First Nations’ empowerment and engagement within schools. Acknowledging the complexities of these “more-than-tools” and how Indigenous ways of knowing can assist in this process can also be part of this journey.

Conclusion: back to the master’s tools
In this article, we have sought to do as Lorde advises, and “take our differences and make them strengths” (1984, p. 2) via intersectional feminist discursive-material analysis of the word “tool” in relation to generative AI content creation. Generative AI writing tools are not the aliens imagined by David Bowie. They are not tools like hammers and spades. They are not calculators. They are not oracles, as people believed the first chatbot, ELIZA, to be. Above all, they are not “just tools”, if tools are understood through coloniser tool-thinking. Instead, they are very much entangled with people and with the earth.

We have suggested and modelled ways English teachers and students can begin to explore this, through challenging the notion of the “tool”. We also point to the need to unpack the raced and gendered power relations in the development of generative AI writing tools and in the technology industry more broadly. Part of becoming a writer in a more sustainable and more just world needs to be understanding what is involved in composing with any tools, rather than taking them for granted. We have also highlighted that it is easy to take access to “tools” for granted. Anticipation of AI ingenuity may also act as a proxy for digital discourse, obscuring the facts of the real and enduring digital divide. Access to generative AI is part of an expensive bundle of privileges that is not available to all. If access is available, as a precursor, then one of the key recommendations emerging from this study is that teachers and students need time in planning and in the curriculum to explore the implications of all we discuss above, just as time is needed for inclusive education in general (Shipp, 2023).

Above all, we have asked, echoing Lorde (1984), if the master’s tools can be used to dismantle the master’s house. This means asking whether writers can use generative AI writing tools to achieve goals of social justice. Is this possible when users are inevitably compromised by the tools’ implications as much more-than-tools? This includes: the tools’ foundations in stolen materials; the physical and emotional violences of data labelling and content moderation; environmental consequences; legal risks of copyright and privacy infringements; job losses and stolen futures; biases, hallucinations and omissions; and financial or other inaccessibilities. Our intersectional feminist positioning acknowledges that the harms of all the above will be felt more by those peoples whose diversities position them in non-dominant ways in societies. We hope that English teachers take this urgent question to their classes to debate and discuss with those whose futures will be most affected by the rapid evolution and uptake of generative AI writing tools.
References


**About the authors**

Lucinda McKnight is an Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Research Award Fellow in the Research for Education Impact centre at Deakin University. She is currently researching how teachers are conceptualising digital writing, including generative AI content creation. Lucinda is a former secondary English teacher and has been extensively involved in the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English. Since 2021, her article Electric sheep: Humans, robots, artificial intelligence and the future of writing has positioned her as a thought leader on the influence of generative AI on writing education. Lucinda McKnight is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: l.mcknight@deakin.edu.au

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