

TEACHING AT THE TURNING POINT: LEGAL RESEARCH AFTER CHATGPT

At the end of my first MLIS semester, I turned in a research paper about how artificial intelligence (AI) was a tool to be used by librarians, not one to replace them. This was fall 2022. Little did I know that ChatGPT would have its wide release shortly thereafter and change the digital landscape. Accordingly, this new and exciting tool for engaging with information carried the specter of professional obsolescence.

I started teaching Advance Legal Research: Computer-Assisted Legal Research about a year ago. Having had the joy and privilege of experiencing billable hours, I hoped to convey to students the benefit of navigating legal research platforms with both accuracy and efficiency. Key Numbers and Boolean searches and citators, oh my! “Time is money” seemed like a pithy theme to pique students’ interest in keyword searches despite ever-improving natural language processing systems. Then GenAI creep began. Janky at first, it steadily improved and has now been injected into all things digital. Yet . . .

Hallucinations and fabrications and sanctions, oh my! Today, I am still convinced—if not even more so—of the importance of teaching students how to effectively craft searches, identify and use legal resources, and, of course, check citations. I do wonder whether that will be enough for current students, though.

Viewing GenAI work product as something akin to a first-year or junior associate’s work product serves as a worthwhile analogy, provided you have had that experience. I did, and it makes sense to me. Moving forward, first-year attorneys will have access to ChatGPT, among other GenAI models, both inside and outside subscription-based legal research platforms, from the get-go. Could there be a legal/scholarly writing renaissance to account for the editorial and experiential void new lawyers will face? Maybe.

I pivoted to the profession of librarianship from a career in litigation. Since I started down this path, there has consistently been the notion lurking in the shadows that libraries and librarians are accelerating toward extinction. Students even wonder whether GenAI will replace lawyers. I do not know what the future will bring for either profession or what challenges future attorneys will face. Nonetheless, I do know what I bring to the table today in the form of experience and education.

While sitting down with a student discussing how GenAI is a powerful tool to be utilized, its current shortcomings, and the specific implications of those shortcomings for attorneys, I was graced with a moment of lucidity.

All that to say, I couldn’t help but smile a little inside when I talked about how being able to craft searches, navigate various legal research platforms, and validate citations (read: conduct computer-assisted legal research) is still, at this juncture, an important skill for attorneys. Bad lawyering is still bad lawyering, and time is still, arguably, money.

Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.

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