How can a language learning model (LLM) assist essay planning in the topic of 'Coming of Age' Genre in a year 12 Media Studies class to increase engagement and learning outcomes?

Westlake Boys High School
Te Kura Tuarua o Ngā Taitamatāne o Ururoto

The Westlake Boys Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

As Leader of AI Integration and a passionate classroom teacher, I initiated this Action Research project to critically examine how artificial intelligence; particularly large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT can meaningfully support student learning in the classroom. The research focused on the question: *How can a language learning model assist essay planning in the topic of the Coming-of-Age Genre in a Year 12 Media Studies class to increase engagement and learning outcomes?*

In my role, I frequently encounter polarised discourse around AI in education. Some educators embrace it enthusiastically while others reject it outright and, increasingly, many sit cautiously in the middle, acknowledging its potential while expressing concern about ethical use, workload, and educational depth. Despite all the conversations around AI, there remains a distinct lack of classroom-based evidence to support either side. This project sought to fill that gap by exploring, in a structured and research-informed way, how students respond to AI when it is embedded within a curriculum context.

NCEA Level Two Media Studies provided the perfect subject area for this exploration. The course's focus on analysis, genre understanding, and structured essay writing, aligned well with

the support that LLMs can offer. My goal was not to test the limits of what AI could do, but rather to see whether it could enhance and not replace, good pedagogy, and whether students would meaningfully engage with the learning process when supported by this new tool.

This project has given me insight not only into the affordances and limitations of AI in learning, but also into the behaviours, needs, and mindset of our students when faced with emerging technologies.

Introduction

At Westlake Boys High School, we are actively embracing the opportunities that artificial intelligence can offer in education. As part of our strategic direction, we have developed AI policy, appointed staff to lead integration efforts, and established systems to guide ethical and purposeful use of AI in the classroom. However, much of the enthusiasm around AI is still driven by instinct, optimism, or concern. We simply don't yet have the classroom-based evidence to back up many of our assumptions.

This Action Research was designed to address that gap. It aims to generate data that can move us beyond "hunches" and help inform future decisions about how AI is used in teaching and learning, not just at Westlake, but across the wider sector.

The Level 2 Media Studies class involved in this research was a small, cohesive group of 22 students with a strong classroom culture. Students were engaged with the content and consistently demonstrated a willingness to participate in open discussions. The cohort included a mix of students, some had been studying Media since Year 10, while for others this was their first experience in the subject. As a result, academic ability varied widely across the group, with students spanning the full range of the achievement scale. This diversity of experience and confidence made the class an ideal environment for trialling AI integration, as it provided an opportunity to observe how different learners interacted with the tools and the extent to which AI could support personalised learning pathways.

Nationally, the approach to AI in education is currently more hands-off. While the Ministry of Education has released broad guidelines, the responsibility for interpreting and applying them sits largely with schools. In this context, research-led inquiry at the classroom level becomes essential. This project contributes to that need by offering a grounded example of how AI can support student learning and where its limits lie.

Literature Review

Engaging in this literature review process has significantly deepened my understanding of both the possibilities and the complexities of integrating large language models (LLMs) into classroom practice. Initially, I was optimistic about the potential for tools like ChatGPT to enhance essay planning, particularly in the context of the Coming-of-Age genre in Media Studies. However, through critical reading and annotation, I came to recognise that meaningful use of AI depends less on the tool itself and more on the pedagogy that surrounds it.

Research by Volante et al. (2023) affirmed that LLMs can scaffold higher-order thinking when students are guided to critique and revise AI-generated text. Their findings aligned closely with my own observations during the Action Research process, particularly when students were prompted to interact with AI outputs rather than passively consume them. Conversely, literature from Gillani et al. (2023) and Scott (2021) challenged me to think more critically about the ethical and philosophical risks of AI, including the potential for bias, the erosion of teacher agency, and the "black box" nature of algorithmic decision-making. These works introduced the concept of "AI literacy" not just as technical fluency, but as an awareness of the systems, limitations, and social implications of generative AI.

My annotations across the literature reflected an increasing awareness of the need for human-centred, blended learning approaches that preserve student voice, agency, and creativity. Rather than seeing AI as a replacement for teacher instruction or student effort, the most effective frameworks positioned it as a thinking partner- one that still requires teacher mediation and ethical guardrails. I also found support for the view that AI use should be paired with explicit reflective practice, prompting students to evaluate, question, and adapt the outputs in ways that deepen their understanding.

Ultimately, this review has not only refined my understanding of effective AI integration but also reshaped my thinking about what constitutes authentic engagement and deep learning in a digital age. While AI can enhance access to content and boost confidence, it does not eliminate the need for critical thinking, synthesis, and effort. These findings directly informed the design of my intervention, reinforcing that **tools don't teach, teachers do**, and pedagogy must lead the technology.

Research Question

How can a language learning model (LLM) assist essay planning in the topic of 'Coming of Age' Genre in a year 12 Media Studies class to increase engagement and learning outcomes?

Pre Action and Action (Methodology)

My Pre Action questions were done through a Microsoft form. These questions were designed to assess student confidence in essay planning, perceived usefulness of the AI tool, and current attitude towards the use of AI before the action started. These answers were not anonymous and included a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions. The answers gave me a good indication of general attitude and understanding towards AI. Because of this, I was able to plan my scaffolded prompt diary (the action) accordingly. One point to note, due to absentee of students, total response was at 15 students. The questions and prompt diary are included in the appendix.

The research took place at the end of the unit on the Coming-of-Age genre, once all core content had been taught and students were beginning to prepare for their mock examinations.

Implementation in the Classroom

The intervention began after the content delivery phase, ensuring that the use of AI was seen as a tool to support and reinforce existing knowledge, not a shortcut to avoid learning. The rollout was structured over several lessons:

1. Lesson 1 – Essay Structure & Expectations
   I reintroduced the expectations of a genre essay and reminded students of what makes a strong response, focusing on structure, responding to the statement and clear analysis.

2. Lesson 2 – Introducing the AI Prompt Table
   Students were introduced to the AI Prompt Diary, which included a structured table to guide their interaction with a language learning model (LLM). Students were to use this 'diary' when completing the task, by copying and pasting all information. We unpacked what effective prompts looked like, how to critically assess AI responses, and how the tool could be used to support planning.

3. Lesson 3 – Practice & Implementation
   Students engaged with the assigned prompts with scaffolded support. They were then encouraged to experiment with phrasing, refining, and critiquing AI-generated content, and began aligning those outputs with their own Coming of Age unit ideas. Students had to keep a record, in the 'prompt diary' of everything done on the LLM. This was done by copying and pasting all AI content into to the relevant sections in this diary.

4. Lesson 4 – Reflective Supplementation
   A follow-up session was required as students struggled with the most cognitively demanding part of the prompt table:*"How could I use my class notes to supplement these ideas?"* This required them to bridge the AI-generated material with their own learning; something they found difficult, as it required them to move beyond passive acceptance and towards active integration.

Data Collection

Data was collected via a Post-Action Student Feedback Microsoft Form administered after students had completed their mock examination and received feedback. Like the pre action data collection, this form included a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions designed to measure:

- Student confidence in essay planning after using AI,
- Perceived usefulness of the AI tool,
- Intent to use AI for revision and in other subjects,
- Levels of engagement and reflection on the process.

These responses were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention of AI in essay planning and triangulate findings with insights from the literature review.

Data Analysis

The student feedback gathered through the post-action reflection form provided clear insight into the impact of the AI intervention. Every student reported feeling more confident in their essay planning as a result of using AI tools, indicating that the structured support and generated content had a reassuring effect on their preparedness. This aligns with earlier observations that while students may not always engage deeply with AI content, having access to material that resembles model answers can significantly boost their sense of readiness. Additionally, the majority of students expressed a desire to use AI in other subjects, suggesting they see potential for wider application of these tools. However, it's important to note that enthusiasm for AI does not necessarily equate to increased independence; many students still required considerable guidance, particularly when asked to integrate their own notes into the AI output. These findings support the notion that AI can be a valuable educational support, but it is most effective when combined with strong scaffolding and teacher-led strategies that prompt critical thinking and deeper engagement. Data tables can be found in the appendix.

Findings

While the data from the post-action questionnaire suggests that students felt more confident with essay planning through the use of AI, my personal reflection reveals a more complex reality. Students may *feel* empowered by having access to structured ideas or completed models, but this does not always equate to *engagement with learning* in the deeper sense.

In practice, I observed that students were still drawn to the path of least resistance. Whether the information was coming from a textbook, Google, or ChatGPT, many students wanted the *answer*, not the process. Despite building in clear prompting scaffolds, including our prompt diaries and the use of the ICE Model (ideas, connection and extension, as a way to evaluate how students moved beyond passive use of AI and into meaningful engagement), many students found the volume of AI-generated content overwhelming. The task of refining, integrating class notes, or synthesising new ideas often felt like "extra work" rather than core learning. This highlights a significant tension: AI can accelerate access to information, but it doesn't automatically build agency, curiosity, or critical thinking.

The hardest part for students was not generating content through AI but engaging meaningfully with it. Specifically, asking students to go beyond the AI response, to add their own class knowledge, interpretations, or insights, proved to be the most challenging. Had I not embedded the explicit question, *"How could I use my class notes to supplement these ideas?"*, I believe many students would have disengaged from the content entirely and defaulted to copy-paste behaviours.

Yet, ironically, even with these surface-level engagements, students still reported feeling more confident. This leads me to a key insight: confidence may stem not from deeper understanding, but from the comfort of having access to answers. In this sense, AI might act similarly to a comprehensive revision guide, it removes the cognitive load of “where do I start?” and offers a starting point that feels safe and structured. Yes, this may also reflect a broader literacy issue. It stems back to the age-old challenge of teaching students to "skim and scan" effectively, something we have been battling long before the arrival of AI. The question then becomes: Do we continue to teach the same comprehension strategies, or do we need to evolve our literacy instruction alongside the tools we’re using? Regardless, what remains unchanged is the need for students to actively process and make meaning from content, not just consume it.

This raises a pedagogical question: Is providing highly scaffolded, answer-rich tools inherently bad? Perhaps not. But it does signal a need to explicitly teach students *how* to move from passive consumption to active processing, especially in the AI age. The next step may not be to abandon AI scaffolds but to evolve how we train students to *use* them.

Conclusions

The impact of this Action Research was significant in shaping both student engagement and teacher reflection around the integration of AI tools in the classroom. While students overwhelmingly reported increased confidence in essay planning, deeper analysis revealed that this confidence often stemmed from having content "provided" rather than from engaging critically with it. This signals a need for more intentional teaching practices if AI is to truly enhance learning. At Westlake Boys High School, where the adoption of AI is being actively supported through policy and staff development, this research offers timely and relevant insight. It confirms that the presence of AI in education is not inherently transformative, its value lies in how we, as educators, design learning around it.

Moving forward, there are several practical implications for teaching and learning at WBHS. First, explicit instruction in synthesis (and not just with AI) must become a core component of our pedagogy, not an optional add-on. It is clear that students struggled most with the task of integrating their own ideas with AI-generated content. To address this, prompt diaries should include mandatory student commentary or reflection before they are allowed to proceed with further AI-assisted tasks. Without this pause for contribution, students risk bypassing critical thinking altogether. Moreover, teachers must model what it looks like to merge AI output with class-based knowledge. This needs to happen repeatedly and across multiple contexts so that students develop a mental model of how AI can be a thinking partner, not a shortcut.

This project has also reinforced the idea that AI will be treated as a shortcut unless we explicitly teach otherwise. The technology is fast, responsive, and can produce vast amounts of data but students need help navigating that abundance meaningfully. Teachers must intervene with intentional scaffolding and structure, ensuring AI is used to promote depth rather than speed. If this mindset becomes part of school-wide teaching practice, AI can support not just content knowledge but also the development of higher-order thinking and learner agency.

In terms of what I would do differently; I would front-load the project with more scaffolding around synthesis and more modelling of the merge between AI and student knowledge. I would also embed reflection prompts more frequently within the task and not just at the end, so that students are constantly nudged to think critically and add their own ideas. Ultimately, the success of AI in education at WBHS will depend not on the tool itself, but on how well we support students to use it with purpose, discipline, and voice.

Where to now? I will be working closely with my colleague who leads the AI curriculum to develop a guiding framework that centres on core literacy competencies, particularly 'skimming and scanning' critical engagement with information, and synthesising ideas (as noted in the reflections). As noted in my literature review, authors such as Volante et al. (2023) and Gillani et al. (2023) emphasise the need for human-centred pedagogy that leverages AI not as a shortcut, but as a scaffold for deeper learning. Without deliberate instructional design, the risk is that AI simply reinforces surface-level behaviours, something I saw in my trial. I believe that building this framework will help ensure AI tools are used in a way that supports and does not replace, authentic student thinking.

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- *My final report was co-written with Chat GPT*

Appendix:

Pre Action Questions- Microsoft Form.

1.What do you know about AI tools such as ChatGPT? (written response)

2. Have you used AI (like ChatGPT) for schoolwork before? (yes, no maybe scale).

3. Explain how you have used it. (written response)

4. How confident are you in your ability to use AI tools in a responsible way? (5 star rating)

5. I understand what is expected in a Media Studies essay on the Coming-of-Age genre. (strongly agree to strongly disagree rating).

6. I feel clear about the learning goals for this unit. (strongly agree to strongly disagree rating).

7. I understand how to plan and structure a strong essay. (strongly agree to strongly disagree rating).

8. I feel confident identifying key features of the Coming-of-Age genre. (strongly agree to strongly disagree rating).

9. I know how to link ideas to genre conventions and society. (strongly agree to strongly disagree rating).

10. I can explain my ideas clearly in writing. (strongly agree to strongly disagree rating).

11. I enjoy experimenting with new tools to help my learning. (strongly agree to strongly disagree rating).

12. I feel comfortable asking for help when I'm unsure. (strongly agree to strongly disagree rating).

13. I feel more motivated when I have tools to guide or scaffold my thinking. (strongly agree to strongly disagree rating).

Through these questions, I was able to judge and assess the level of understanding of AI and how the students will interact with it.

Prompt Diary

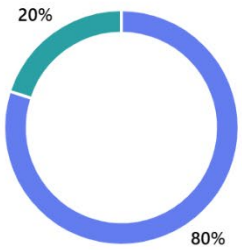
Prompt Diary.docx

Data Analysis

4. Would you like to see tools like this used more in other subjects?

More details

Yes	12
No	0
Maybe	3



2. Did the use of AI help you feel more confident in essay planning?

More details

Yes	15
No	0