#285 — AI and the 4 Cs: Communication

13 min
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Paul Beckermann 0:01
Welcome to Tech Talk for Teachers. I'm your host, Paul Beckermann.

Student 0:06
Check it out. Check it out. Check it out. What's in the toolkit? What is in the toolkit? Check it out.

Paul Beckermann 0:16
The topic of today's episode is AI and the 4 Cs: Communication. This episode of Tech Talk for Teachers is part one of a four part series exploring how artificial intelligence can be used to strengthen the transferable life skills, often referred to as the four Cs: communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. Today's focus is communication. First off, I want to acknowledge the concern by some that artificial intelligence might actually hinder student development of communication skills. It's true that generative AI chatbots like ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Anthropic's Claude, and Microsoft Copilot can produce writing for us. And it can be tempting for students to simply have the chatbot write for them. This temptation is real for both students and adults, and it's not going away. If this particular concern is preventing you from exploring AI with your students, I encourage you to check out our two previous podcast episodes, Academic Integrity in the Age of AI and Writing With Integrity in the Age of AI. Both can be found at AVIDopenaccess.org or on your favorite podcast platform. For the sake of this episode, I'm going to ask you to set aside any concerns for a moment and embrace the idea that leveraging AI tools can help your students become better communicators.

Student 1:42
How do I use this? Integration inspiration, integration ideas.

Paul Beckermann 1:49
Let's take a look at writing first. When you think about it, we've been using AI to help us with writing for quite a while now. Spell checkers and grammar checkers are built into almost every word processor. And I'm not sure about you, but I don't want to get rid of those. In fact, I find that having my mistakes flagged immediately as I write them helps me learn from those mistakes and correct them on the spot. It's like having an editor looking over my shoulder and spotting my mistakes in real time. It's really helpful. In addition to these checkers and word processing programs, there are several highly reviewed AI powered writing apps that can take this editing assistance to the next level.

Student 2:30
What are some cool tech tools I can use? Instructional technology.

Paul Beckermann 2:38

Here are four them. The first one is Grammarly. Grammarly is probably the most well known and popular virtual editor and proofreader available. While there's a premium version that offers advanced writing assistance, the free version will help you with the grammar, spelling, punctuation, conciseness, and tone detection. There's a free browser extension that integrates the Grammarly feedback tools into online platforms and word processors like Google Docs. When you're using it, a little number will appear in the Grammarly icon when it has suggestions for you. You can pin it to your browser toolbar for quick access.

The second one is the Hemingway app. The Hemingway editor can also be used to improve your writing. While Grammarly focuses largely on grammar checking and proofreading, Hemingway is more focused on helping writers improve their clarity and readability. The app identifies potential issues with things like sentence complexity, word choice, and passive voice. The free version provides a readability score, and highlights areas of concern for readability and style. The free version does not suggest corrections with AI, however. And this limitation might actually be desirable in some cases, since it requires students to consider the flagged areas and decide if the edit is warranted. They have to use their own critical reasoning to make the decision.

A third option is Quillbot. This website allows students to use most of its integrated writing tools without actually having to set up an account or logging in. The free version includes quite a few options, including a paraphraser, grammar checker, summarizer, citation generator, and translator. For most of these applications, students paste in their writing sample and then choose an action from the menu. In some places, students can upload a document as well. There's a free Chrome extension available which is quite handy. One potential drawback is that while this tool provides suggestions for writers to consider, it does allow users to simply accept all suggestions without really thinking about the impact of those suggestions. If you use this with students, you might want to set your expectations with them.

The fourth option is Quill. This tool is a little different. It doesn't use AI to edit and proofread for you. Rather, it uses AI to teach you how to edit and write better yourself. Quill is a nonprofit whose mission is to help all students become strong writers, readers, and critical thinkers. In that context, the website provides free literacy activities that build reading comprehension, writing, and language skills for elementary, middle, and high school students. Currently, there are 817 independent practice activities, 16 diagnostic assessments, 43 collaborative full-class lessons, and more. That's a lot of stuff. And Quill is both COPPA and FERPA compliant.

Next, I want to take a look at an area of communication that often gets overlooked; accessibility. Sometimes, students simply cannot access the words, and AI can be an incredibly powerful partner in opening the accessibility doorway for them. Here are a few examples you might want to explore. Voice to text. There's two examples of voice to text I want to share. The first is Otter. This is a great transcription tool, you drop in an audio clip and Otter will transcribe it into text. For those with hearing loss or those who need to translate words into another language, this can be a lifesaver. You currently get three 30-minute uploads per month with the free version. The other voice to text tool is Google Voice Typing. Rather than uploading an audio file, this

option lets you speak in real time and have your words converted into written text on a Google Document. This is really helpful for students who process better verbally than in written form. It can also be a really fast way to get student ideas down on paper without overly editing them.

The next type of accessibility is text to speech. Here, I want to feature Speechify. This program does the opposite of Otter and Google Voice Typing. It turns written text into spoken language. This is really powerful for students who have difficulty reading. There are other products on the market that do this as well, but Speechify is a great place to start.

The third area of accessibility I want to focus on is translation and language access. Google Translate is a good option here. Now there's quite a few translation tools out there, but Google Translate is probably the most well known. You input text in your native language, choose an output language, and then click to have the passage translated. It's really quick and easy. These translation tools can improve communication by breaking down language barriers. Another option is to use AI chatbots. So as an alternative to Google Translate, students can paste text into generative AI chatbots, like ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, and Copilot, and then ask it to translate that content into another specified language. You'll find that different chatbots have access to different languages, but almost all of them do translations quite well. Third option here is Duolingo. Now this is not a translation tool per se. But if students want help learning a new language rather than simply translating text, AI powered tools like Duolingo can be excellent learning partners.

Next, let's look at speaking as a form of communication. Historically, if you wanted feedback on your speaking skills, you'd need another human being to listen to you. AI is changing that. Here are a few examples. The first is ReadM. This application helps students learn to read. It listens to them, and provides real time feedback to students as they read aloud passages on the screen. When they get it correct, they're congratulated. The second example is Microsoft PowerPoint Presenter Coach. This AI tool is integrated into PowerPoint. Users select slideshow from the top menu, and then click Rehearse with Coach. From there, users practice their presentation and the assistant provides feedback in real time with a summary at the end. It provides feedback on things like pacing, filler words, you know, when you say um, or you know, repetitive language, pronunciation with follow up practice, inclusiveness, originality, and pitch. Pretty powerful stuff. The third example under speaking is something called Yoodli, Y-O-O-D-L-I. Yoodli is another speech coach, but it's not dependent on PowerPoint. With this tool, you record video and audio of yourself speaking. Based on that recording, you're given suggestions and analysis on things like word choice, and even delivery skills like eye contact. Yoodli says it's not intended for users younger than 16 and you get five practice sessions with the free version.

Finally, I'd like to highlight to two tools that offer multiple use functionality, and can be helpful in developing communication skills. The first is MagicStudent. This is the student-facing partner to MagicSchool for teachers. It offers over 30 different tools powered by generative AI. These tools are COPPA and FERPA compliant, and even allow teachers to push out and monitor selected options for their students. A number of these options focus on communication applications. Some of those include Raina for students, an interactive chatbot, writing feedback, language

learning tutor, translate it, idea generator, summarize it, and sentence starters. There are really a lot of options here. The second option is to use generative AI chatbots. So these include popular tools like ChatGPT, Google, Gemini, Anthropic's Claude, and Microsoft Copilot. They can do all the same things that MagicStudent can do, but they do require users to enter their own custom prompt into the program rather than relying on the guiding prompts of MagicStudent that are already built in. There are many ways to use these chatbots to practice communication skills. For example, you can use them for editing and proofreading by pasting in your writing and then asking for specific types of feedback, like how might they improve the fluency of this writing or what additional supporting details could strengthen my argument? The key is asking the right questions about your writing. And that's a great skill for students to practice to. You can even use the chat bot to practice having a conversation. Simply cue it to respond to your questions and statements in conversational form. It'll talk to you.

With any of these tools, it's important to check the Terms of Use and school policy and make sure it's okay to use them with your students. Communications are a really big umbrella topic. And I've really just scratched the surface of how AI might help you and your students further develop communication skills. While I encourage you to consider some of these ideas and tools as starting points, don't stop there. Use your own imagination and creativity to come up with additional ways to leverage these powerful tools. Oh, and one more thing. Before I close, I do want to offer a strategy for those of you who are still nervous that AI will simply do the work for their students, rather than helping them grow their skills. I suggest having students share how they use these AI tools in the creation of their work. Rather than just turning in a final writing sample, have students explain their process, what they learned, and how AI helped them improve their work. This puts the focus on the process and analysis, rather than just the final product and reduces the benefits of using AI to cheat. With this strategy, students are rewarded for their honesty, and self analysis.

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