

# Authority and inquiry in the age of generative AI: A Networked Learning Perspective

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## **Abstract**

*This study examines how generative AI (GenAI) is taken up in students' academic work and how its use reconfigures authority, inquiry, and legitimacy within networked learning environments. The study adopts a qualitative case study design situated in the Bachelor of Architectural Technology and Construction Management programme at University College of Northern Denmark (UCN), where third-semester students engaged with GenAI tools, including ChatGPT, Copilot, and Primo Research Assistant, while completing an academic assignment. The empirical material comprises reflective process reports and screenshots of students' interactions with GenAI, collected from 28 project groups across three course iterations. Guided by a networked learning perspective, the analysis focuses on how human and technological actors are positioned within students' inquiry processes. The findings show that students primarily engaged with GenAI through short, instrumental exchanges used for idea generation, language refinement, and structural support. While GenAI was frequently described as a collaborator, mentor, or "fifth group member," its role remained largely peripheral to deeper processes of exploration, reasoning, and collective meaning-making, which unfolded through peer dialogue, supervision, and writing outside the AI environment. The study further demonstrates that students selectively delegated linguistic authority to GenAI, valuing its fluency and efficiency, while retaining analytical and epistemic authority over judgment and interpretation. These findings suggest that, rather than displacing human authority, GenAI becomes part of the learning network in ways that reshape how inquiry is initiated and linguistically performed, while leaving core processes of reasoning and collaboration human-centred.*

## **Keywords**

*Networked Learning, Authority; Inquiry; Higher education; Generative AI (GenAI)*

## **Introduction**

Generative AI (GenAI) is not simply entering classrooms as a convenient new technology; it is unsettling the very foundations of how authority in education is produced and recognized. Traditionally, epistemic authority in education has been associated with the teacher's role as a trusted source of knowledge, but GenAI now increasingly enters this position by offering confident, seemingly expert responses that rival human instruction. In networked learning, authority has never rested solely with the teacher while students were producing the work. It has always been distributed across people, practices, and technologies (Jones, 2014; Hodgson & McConnell, 2019). What is new, and potentially disruptive, is the way GenAI now speaks with a confidence that rivals human expertise. Its outputs carry not only information but also the tone of certainty, subtly shifting who, or what, gets to define knowledge.

The release of ChatGPT in late 2022 marked the beginning of a new era for GenAI in education. Within months, GenAI tools entered classrooms and professional practices, sparking intense debates about their role in learning. Early contributions alternated between enthusiasm about AI's potential and fears of disruption (Haleem et al., 2022; Sharma & Yadav, 2022; Kasneci et al., 2023). Beyond questions of efficiency or support, the presence of GenAI raises deeper concerns: (1) What happens when authority in knowledge creation is redistributed between humans and algorithms? And (2) How is academic integrity redefined when students co-create with systems whose outputs carry persuasive confidence, yet lack transparency? Thus, as GenAI becomes increasingly embedded in teaching, it does more than provide new technical possibilities (Cotton et al., 2023; Hassan et al., 2022). For both educators and students, the demands are no longer limited to acquiring technological proficiency but extend to cultivating judgment, critical reflection, and ethical awareness (Upadhyaya & Vrinda, 2021). In settings where learning is inherently relational and distributed, students must evaluate not only the reliability of

GenAI outputs but also their own agency within the complex interplay between human and machine thinking. To treat GenAI as a neutral tool is to ignore its role as an active participant in learning processes. It does not merely provide support, it shapes the flow of dialogue, elevates certain perspectives over others, and reconfigures collaborative practices (Johri, 2022). When students defer to AI-generated answers, or when educators feel pressured to legitimate or resist GenAI's presence, the distribution of authority in education is no longer just a matter of pedagogy, it becomes a struggle over trust, legitimacy, and power.

If networked learning has always been about connections (Jones et al. 2017; Hodgson & McConnell; 2019; de Laat & Ryberg, 2018; Goodyear, 2021) then the arrival of GenAI forces us to ask: who, or what, is now at the center of those connections? And perhaps more provocatively, are we ready to admit that authority in education is no longer exclusively human? Networked Learning has historically been concerned with interconnections between human relationships, inquiry as an exploratory, reflective, and often uncertain process of meaning making, and digital technologies (de Laat & Ryberg, 2018; Hodgson & McConnell, 2019; Jones et al., 2017). From the early manifesto (Beaty et al., 2002) through to the more recent collective redefinition (Networked Learning Editorial Collective, 2021), the field has consistently highlighted that learning is not simply the transfer of knowledge, but a process shaped between people, ideas, and technologies. While pedagogical and relational aspects have been thoroughly theorised, rapid advances in digital technologies challenge the community to examine more closely how technological infrastructures reconfigure collaboration between human and Gen AI itself. From a networked learning perspective, GenAI must, therefore, be understood as an actor that actively participates in the learning process (Barad, 2007). Through its linguistic fluency, confident tone, and speed of response, GenAI reconfigures how authority circulates in classrooms, shaping what is taken as credible knowledge and what becomes sidelined. In networked learning environments, where knowledge has always been co-produced across human and technological connections (Jones et al. 2017; Hodgson & McConnell; 2019) the arrival of GenAI destabilizes the balance and authority no longer emerges solely through dialogue among teachers and students, but also through the algorithmic outputs that intervene in these dialogues.

This development directly challenges a central tenet of networked learning, namely, that learning emerges through collaborative inquiry and knowledge creation supported by human-centered technologies, not by technologies that can present themselves as persuasive and human as GenAI (Networked Learning Editorial Collective, 2021). When GenAI tools deliver polished and seemingly authoritative answers, they risk undermining the slow, uncertain, and exploratory processes that reflective, inquiry-driven learning depends on (Sharma & Yadav, 2022; Kasneci et al., 2023; Tlili et al., 2023). Rather than acting as companions to exploration, such systems can produce the illusion of understanding without substantive insight, tempting students and educators alike to outsource judgment to the machine.

Seen through this lens, the integration of GenAI is not just a technical or pedagogical matter but a struggle over trust, legitimacy, and the very meaning of learning. For networked learning, this means that future research and practice must attend not only to how humans connect, but to how human-machine co-construct the possibilities for dialogue, exploration, and authority in education.

### **Positioning GenAI Within the Ecology of Networked Learning**

The case study in this article provides empirical material that offers an insight into how students engaged with GenAI in their academic assignments. Although students were free to integrate GenAI into their work, the interactions captured in the data largely consist of short, instrumental exchanges, questions asked, and answers accepted without further elaboration. Meanwhile, more extensive and exploratory aspects of the assignment process, such as brainstorming, literature review, argument development, took place outside the GenAI environment. These patterns draw attention to how GenAI is positioned within students' broader workflows and raise new questions about the role of authority, inquiry, and collaboration when generative GenAI enters networked learning.

From a networked learning perspective, this distribution of activity is interesting, as authority and knowledge-making in networked learning are always the result of connections between people, practices, and technologies (Jones et al., 2017; de Laat & Ryberg, 2018). Yet in this case, GenAI appears as a peripheral actor in the network as a useful technology for discrete tasks, but not deeply integrated into the collaborative, inquiry-driven processes that define learning. The interactions between student and GenAI may not simply be a matter of individual choice, but also a result of how the learning environment was framed. Seen through the lens of networked learning, this is not simply a matter of students "under-using" GenAI. It is a sign of how authority and responsibility are being negotiated across a wider assemblage of actors: supervisors, peers, institutional frameworks, academic conventions, and GenAI systems. The polished confidence of GenAI outputs may position the technology as

authoritative in isolated moments, but in the broader learning ecology, trust and legitimacy continue to be grounded in human dialogue and established academic practices.

This leads to a key research question: *How do students engage with and position GenAI within their academic inquiry processes, and how are authority and exploration negotiated across human–technology interactions?*

Addressing this question requires moving beyond evaluating GenAI’s technical capacity to examining how it is positioned within networked learning practices, and how pedagogical framing shapes the balance between human and machine contributions to inquiry.

## Methodology

This study explores the research question through a case study situated in the Bachelor of Architectural Technology and Construction Management program at University College of northern Denmark (UCN). The case focused on third-semester students who worked with GenAI tools, including ChatGPT, Copilot, and Primo Research Assistant, while completing an academic assignment. The purpose of the course design was to provide students with the opportunity to engage deeply with a chosen, profession-relevant topic and to further develop their expertise within this area. The learning sequence extended over three weeks and aimed to strengthen students’ academic competencies through a combination of lectures, supervision, and independent work. The teaching included activities such as literature search, brainstorming and mind mapping, formulation of research questions, application of philosophy of science and argumentation, as well as review and feedback processes.

Students were free to incorporate GenAI into their work as a dialogue partner providing guidance and for text construction. Besides their academic assignment they were also required to submit a reflective report describing how they had made use of GenAI in the process. Although students worked collaboratively in project groups, their interactions with GenAI tools combined both individual and collective practices. All group members had individual access to GenAI tools and used them independently for tasks such as literature exploration, idea development, and drafting text. In addition, each group designated one member to initiate a shared chatbot interaction, in which ChatGPT was prompted to adopt the role of a teacher or academic mentor. This shared interaction was used collaboratively during group discussions to support inquiry, reflection, and decision-making. The GenAI tools employed in the study included the free, non-subscribed version of ChatGPT and an institutional version of Microsoft Copilot provided by the university. No paid or premium versions of ChatGPT were used. Students’ interactions with these tools were documented through reflective process reports, which included written reflections and screenshots of selected prompts and AI-generated responses illustrating both individual and group-based use.

### Research design

Over the course of three semesters, 28 project groups, each consisting of four students, participated in the study. Each semester represented an iteration building on the previous ones, with new student groups introduced in each cycle. This iterative process generated insights that informed and refined subsequent iterations. Both the course design and the research evolved iteratively, shaped by early observations and empirical data on how students engaged with GenAI in their academic work. In the first iteration (group A-J), students were simply allowed to use GenAI tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot, or Primo Research Assistant at their own discretion. The aim was to observe how students integrated GenAI when no explicit pedagogical framing was provided. In the second iteration (group K-T), students received a dedicated lecture introducing key concepts for working critically with GenAI, including strategies for prompting and evaluating outputs, and maintaining academic integrity. This iteration emphasized awareness and skill development in the use of AI for academic purposes. In the third iteration (group U-Ø), the pedagogical framing shifted more deliberately toward exploring AI’s potential as a mentor within students’ inquiry processes. Students were encouraged to prompt GenAI to adopt this role and to use it as a reflective discussion partner rather than as a source of ready-made answers. This iteration enabled a closer examination of how GenAI entered the relational and epistemic dimensions of learning, particularly how it influenced students’ perceptions of guidance, authorship, and authority.

### Data collection and interpretation of data

This study is situated within an educational context in which the researchers occupy both insider and outsider positions. Two researcher was directly involved in the educational setting as a lecturer. This insider role enabled a nuanced understanding of contextual dynamics, pedagogical tensions, and students situated use of AI tools that would be difficult to access from an external position alone. At the same time, this proximity required ongoing

reflexive attention to issues of power, familiarity, and potential bias in interactions with participants. To address these challenges, the study was designed to balance insider engagement with analytical distance. To mitigate potential insider bias, a third researcher with no direct involvement in the educational setting assumed a clear outsider role in the analytical process. This researcher critically reviewed the coding and interpretations, explicitly questioning underlying assumptions, category constructions, and emerging patterns. These analytical discussions enabled the research team to surface and challenge interpretations that could otherwise be influenced by proximity to the field. By combining insider knowledge with an explicit outsider perspective, the study employed a shifting and reflexive positioning that aligns with research traditions viewing knowledge production as relational and situated rather than neutral or detached.

Data collection was embedded within the teaching sequence and aligned with students' work on the academic assignment. The primary data source consisted of students' written reflective process reports, which were submitted together with the academic assignment at the end of the three-week course. In these reports, students were instructed to describe and reflect on how they had used GenAI tools during their inquiry process. As part of this documentation, students included screenshots of their actual interactions with GenAI tools, such as prompts and AI-generated responses, in order to illustrate concrete examples of use. In addition to the process reports, observational notes from lectures and supervision sessions, as well as informal dialogues between lecturers and students during the course, provided contextual insight into how GenAI was integrated into students' ongoing academic work. Together, these data sources enabled an examination of both students' reflective accounts and their situated use of GenAI in practice.

The students' written reflection reports formed the primary qualitative data for this study. These reports provided insight into how students experienced and evaluated their use of GenAI in academic work, and how they positioned the technology within their inquiry processes. In addition, screenshots of students' actual interactions (prompts and responses) with GenAI tools were included to illustrate specific patterns of use. The data collection was primarily exploratory, aiming to capture how GenAI became embedded in students' learning activities and to generate theoretical insights informed by Networked Learning theory. Across all three iterations, data collection and analysis followed the same procedure, allowing for comparison and gradual theoretical refinement of how GenAI became positioned within the networked learning environment.

### **Ethical considerations**

The study was conducted in accordance with institutional and national guidelines for educational research ethics. As the research was embedded within ordinary teaching activities and did not involve sensitive personal data, formal ethical approval was not required under Danish regulations. Nevertheless, careful attention was given to ethical considerations throughout the research process. Participants were informed from the outset that their lecturer would also act as a researcher and that their engagement with GenAI tools during the course could form part of the study. Participation in the research component was voluntary and clearly separated from assessment. To avoid any perceived coercion or influence on students' academic performance, written consent for the use of research data, such as reflective reports and selected screenshots of AI interactions, was obtained only after course examinations had been completed. All empirical material was anonymised prior to analysis, and strict confidentiality was upheld. Given the inherent power asymmetries associated with lecturers also acting as insider researchers, particular attention was paid to safeguarding students' autonomy through transparent communication, delayed consent procedures. Ethical considerations were thus closely intertwined with the studies insider/outsider research design, informing both data collection and analytical decisions to ensure ethical robustness while enabling the study to generate situated insights into students' academic use of GenAI.

## **Analysis of Human–Technology dynamics in learning**

The following analysis examines how authority, legitimacy, and inquiry unfolded as students engaged with GenAI across three course iterations. The discussion is structured around the three interconnected perspectives developed from the data. The section ends with a comparative reflection on how these iterations collectively reconfigured, yet ultimately reaffirmed, human-centered authority in learning.

The analysis followed a continuous thematic coding process (see table one) that combined descriptive and interpretive elements (Boyatzis, 1998; Saldaña, 2016). The purpose was to identify and categorize patterns, themes, and concepts that shed light on how authority, legitimacy, and inquiry are negotiated in students' engagements with GenAI tools such as ChatGPT and Copilot, particularly in relation to how knowledge and judgment emerge within distributed human–machine networks.

**Table 1: Overview of Empirical Material and Networked Coding Categories. The table shows the number of data units per iteration and the corresponding percentage of each code category, corrected for the number of groups per iteration. The percentages indicate the relative weight of each category within each iteration.**

Iterations	1st	2nd	3rd		
Number of groups	8	10	8		
Activity	Number of data-units			Code category	Description
Brainstorm and Mindmapping	3	3	5	<i>Intra-action and meaning-making / Emergence</i>	GenAI's linguistic suggestions and sequencing influence the direction of ideas, creating new connections between human creativity and machine patterns; knowledge emerges through interplay rather than individual control.
	28%	23%	48%		
Literature review	27	36	18	<i>Configuration of actor-networks, authority, and trust</i>	GenAI acts as a co-actor in analytical processes, shaping what becomes visible and legitimate as data, and how credibility and relevance are established through its persuasive formulations.
	37%	39%	24%		
Literature coding	2	8	5	<i>Materiality in language and interaction</i>	GenAI's linguistic style and textual "smoothness" materialize a form of professional authority, shaping how the materiality of language influences what is perceived as professional.
	15%	48%	37%		
Writing process	79	40	16	<i>Translations and negotiations</i>	GenAI's contribution to translating unstructured ideas into academic form as a negotiation of meaning and responsibility.
	62%	25%	13%		
Text translation	14	3	0	<i>Authority, legitimacy, and negotiation of trust</i>	GenAI's authoritative outputs challenge and reshape what it means to know and judge; students negotiate trust, authenticity, and ethical responsibility as professional judgment is reconstructed in dialogue with the machine.
	85%	15%	0%		
Concept clarification	12	4	0	<i>Relational configuration and positionin</i>	GenAI functions as a mentor-like actor that reconfigures the teacher's authority and becomes part of the relational field between humans and technologies. Within these social learning networks, AI participates in dialogue by amplifying, interrupting, or reorganizing interactions, thereby reshaping how authority and collaboration are enacted.
	79%	21%	0%		
Development of problem statement	15	16	10	<i>Relational configuration and positionin</i>	GenAI functions as a mentor-like actor that reconfigures the teacher's authority and becomes part of the relational field between humans and technologies. Within these social learning networks, AI participates in dialogue by amplifying, interrupting, or reorganizing interactions, thereby reshaping how authority and collaboration are enacted.
	40%	34%	26%		
Professional judgment	6	3	5	<i>Relational configuration and positionin</i>	GenAI functions as a mentor-like actor that reconfigures the teacher's authority and becomes part of the relational field between humans and technologies. Within these social learning networks, AI participates in dialogue by amplifying, interrupting, or reorganizing interactions, thereby reshaping how authority and collaboration are enacted.
	45%	18%	37%		
Process understanding	4	2	1	<i>Relational configuration and positionin</i>	GenAI functions as a mentor-like actor that reconfigures the teacher's authority and becomes part of the relational field between humans and technologies. Within these social learning networks, AI participates in dialogue by amplifying, interrupting, or reorganizing interactions, thereby reshaping how authority and collaboration are enacted.
	61%	24%	15%		
Reflection about AI	6	18	9	<i>Relational configuration and positionin</i>	GenAI functions as a mentor-like actor that reconfigures the teacher's authority and becomes part of the relational field between humans and technologies. Within these social learning networks, AI participates in dialogue by amplifying, interrupting, or reorganizing interactions, thereby reshaping how authority and collaboration are enacted.
	20%	49%	31%		
AI as mentor	1	4	22	<i>Relational configuration and positionin</i>	GenAI functions as a mentor-like actor that reconfigures the teacher's authority and becomes part of the relational field between humans and technologies. Within these social learning networks, AI participates in dialogue by amplifying, interrupting, or reorganizing interactions, thereby reshaping how authority and collaboration are enacted.
	4%	12%	84%		

The analysis builds on a close reading of the empirical material, focusing on how students described and enacted their use of AI across the three course iterations. Through a combination of descriptive and interpretive analysis informed by Networked Learning theory, patterns were identified that illuminate how human and non-human actors co-shaped moments of inquiry, writing, and collaboration. These patterns were then developed into three overarching analytical themes that reflect distinct configurations of authority within the learning process.

The three themes correspond broadly to the evolving design of the course: (1) From prompt to possibility examines how students initiated short, instrumental engagements with GenAI as a tool for idea generation; (2) The materiality of language and the performance of authority explores how GenAI's linguistic output shaped perceptions of professionalism and authorship; and (3) Reconfiguring authority in human-GenAI collaboration investigates how students negotiated GenAI's mentor role and the boundaries of human judgment. Together, these analyses reveal how authority, inquiry and legitimacy where the latter describes what comes to be recognized as credible, acceptable, or trustworthy knowledge within a given learning situation, are continuously enacted and re-stabilized across human-GenAI interactions.

### **From prompt to possibility**

Networked learning often assumes that learning emerges through sustained engagement across networks of human and non-human actors. The pattern identified in this theme complicates this assumption, as students' engagements with GenAI are typically brief, instrumental, and episodic rather than dialogic and sustained. In the initial stages of the assignment process, students' engagements with GenAI were short, targeted, and instrumental. They used GenAI primarily to expand brainstorming processes or to clarify early directions, rather than to sustain reflective dialogue. One group described how they:

Have used ChatGPT a lot as a sparring partner throughout the process. When I ran out of ideas in my brainstorm, I used it, among other things, to come up with new suggestions [...] where I gave it my existing brainstorm as context, which it then continued from. (Group D).

Another entered their brainstorm notes into the tool *"to get more possibilities within the same areas and more relevant keywords (Group P),"* explaining that this helped them progress toward their problem formulation. These short interactions demonstrate how GenAI was positioned as a source of inspiration and linguistic variation like a generative extension of the students' own thinking processes. However, a closer look at the data reveals a striking pattern where students did not engage in sustained dialogue with the GenAI. While they used the tool to generate new insights or reformulate text, they rarely responded to or elaborated on its suggestions within the same interaction. The conversation ended where the answer appeared. The subsequent reflection, discussion, and integration of ideas took place outside the GenAI environment (in supervision, peer discussions, and individual writing). As one group noted, *"AI functioned as a fifth member and mentor to structure our thoughts and create an overview of complex problems"* (Group W), yet their actual prompts remained single-directional. This tension points to an important distinction between discursive positioning and practical participation within learning networks. While GenAI is described as a collaborator or mentor, its role in inquiry remains peripheral, highlighting the limits of its integration into sustained meaning-making processes. In this sense, GenAI acted less as a genuine dialogue partner and more as a temporary mediator that students consulted before returning to established modes of academic inquiry. This reveals a clear gap between how students described their engagement with GenAI as *"collaborative and mentor-like"*, and how they actually used it in practice, which was instrumental and limited in scope.

From a Networked learning perspective, this pattern indicates that the locus of inquiry remains predominantly human, even as GenAI enters the process. The interaction is intra-active (Barad, 2007), meaning that ideas emerge through the entanglement of human input and algorithmic output, but the relationship lacks reciprocity. Authority and interpretation continue to be stabilized through human conversation and judgment, not algorithmic exchange. Students used GenAI to open a space of possibility, but they closed that space through conventional academic practices, where epistemic legitimacy is still collectively negotiated among people. Seen through the lens of networked learning, this asymmetry reveals how GenAI occupies a peripheral yet catalytic position in the ecology of inquiry. It participates in generating possibilities but not in sustaining them. While the first theme highlights GenAI's limited role in sustaining inquiry, the next theme shifts attention to how authority nonetheless materializes through GenAI's linguistic form, even when dialogic engagement remains limited.

### **The materiality of language and the performance of authority**

Across the dataset, students primarily used GenAI to refine the *form* rather than the *content* of their academic writing. Several groups described how they drafted text independently and then turned to GenAI for linguistic polishing and a more professional tone. This pattern suggests that by delegating surface-level language work to the technology, students may be freeing cognitive and temporal resources to concentrate more fully on developing and structuring the substantive content of their assignments. While this was not explicitly stated by all groups, several reflections indicate that GenAI's support with language allowed students to focus their efforts on analytical depth and argumentation. One group wrote:

Several of us used ChatGPT as a tool to structure and rephrase our selected text sections. This turned out to be an effective way to optimize the writing process while maintaining a professional and clear presentation of our work. The tool helped to ensure that our assignments were both well-structured and written with a high degree of precision and professionalism. (group A)  
Furthermore, we used AI to structure and formulate our assignment. We used AI to generate drafts of sections and templates that helped us build a clear thread throughout the paper. AI also

functioned as a proofreading tool [...] to ensure a professional and well-formulated assignment. (Group P)

Similarly, another explained that they used GenAI “*to fine-tune the language in the text we had written, so it sounded more academic and correct,*” emphasizing that the language became “*more precise and better structured*” through this process (Group T). Others described using GenAI as “linguistic support” and for text improvement

In addition, we used AI as linguistic support. It was used to read through texts for spelling and grammar errors so that the language appeared more professional and in accordance with the academic level of the assignment. (Group V),

AI has also helped improve the quality of our existing texts by correcting grammatical errors, suggesting better formulations, and ensuring that the text is coherent and easy to read. (Group M).

From a networked learning perspective, this suggests that authority is not only negotiated through dialogue, but also performed through material features of language. GenAI’s fluent and polished output produces an affective sense of legitimacy that shapes what is perceived as academically credible. Taken together, these examples show that students positioned GenAI as a stylistic editor rather than a co-author. From a Networked Learning perspective, these practices demonstrate how authority in writing is performed through the materiality of language. The confidence, rhythm, and syntactic smoothness of AI-produced text carry an affective sense of credibility, making the output sound academically legitimate. Professionalism here becomes a linguistic effect enacted through tone and form rather than disciplinary reasoning. However, this performative authority also produced ambivalence. Several students expressed concern that the GenAI-generated text risked erasing their own voice, emphasizing the need to actively write and edit the texts that GenAI generated

Since the use of AI is part of the assessment basis, we were particularly attentive that we did not end up with a product that could resemble plagiarism or where our own voice disappeared. This consideration has been central to our process and contributed to the fact that we have continuously and actively written and edited the texts that AI generated. (Group U).

Their reflections reveal a fine line between assistance and authorship. While GenAI was trusted to elevate linguistic form, epistemic legitimacy remained anchored in human judgment. This balance shows that trust and authority develop through small, situated interactions and material features, not through explicit conversation and verbal negotiation.

Viewed through the lens of networked learning these findings suggest that students one-directional engagements with AI are less about conversation and more about alignment with recognizable academic forms. In delegating aspects of linguistic tasks to AI, students momentarily borrow its rhetorical confidence while maintaining control over meaning through revision and reflection outside the tool. In practice, authorship becomes shared, where AI contributes with polished language that signals professionalism.

### **Reconfiguring authority in Human–AI collaboration**

In networked learning, relational authority refers to how epistemic trust and guidance emerge through relationships rather than fixed roles. This theme examines how such authority is simulated, negotiated, and constrained when GenAI is positioned as a mentor-like actor within students’ collaborative practices. In the third iteration of the course, students were encouraged to engage with GenAI as a mentor, using prompts that invited dialogic exploration rather than one-directional support. In practice, however, only three out of eight groups adopted this mentor-oriented approach, while the remaining groups continued to use the technology in more instrumental ways. However, when examining the data more closely, this intended relational framing only partially materialized in practice. Students frequently described GenAI in mentor-like terms, yet their actual interactions remained largely instrumental. The data reveals the same pattern where the student asks questions, receive answers, and then continue their analytical work outside the GenAI environment through traditional academic activities. One group explained that: “*AI has functioned as a fifth member and mentor to structure our thoughts, streamline information searches, formulate the assignment, and create an overview of complex issues*” (Group W), while another described using it “*as a kind of supervisor*” to help “*structure the project and develop*

*search strings*” (Group V). These descriptions portray GenAI as a supportive, almost with a pedagogical presence, yet the pattern of use remained one-directional. As seen in Group U’s reflection:

We therefore chose to refine our prompts and, among other things, give it our framework description for the VUE and ask it to take on the role of a mentor for a construction management student. In this way, we could use AI as a kind of professional discussion partner that could make suggestions, we could then evaluate ourselves. (Group U)

This gave us the idea to use AI as a kind of supervisor who could support us in working with both, for example, search strings and structuring the project. ... It created the experience that AI could function more as a guiding resource rather than just a general reference tool. (Group V)

Thus the involvement of GenAI ends at suggestion-making, with critical engagement and decision-making taking place beyond the digital interface. From a Networked Learning perspective, these dynamic highlights how authority is simulated but not fully enacted. The material properties of GenAI (its confident tone, rapid output, and linguistic fluency) perform an authority, but the collaborative dimension of mentorship remains limited by the platform’s design and by students’ own epistemic norms and scepticism. Rather than developing sustained dialogues, students tended to treat GenAI’s responses as authoritative inputs to be processed elsewhere. The dialogue as something iterative, interpretive, and socially negotiated, was thus displaced, with AI occupying a temporary advisory role but not a participatory one. Even when prompted to position GenAI as a mentor, students maintained a clear boundary between technological assistance and human authorship. One group emphasized that:

Although AI contributed valuable input, it is important to emphasize that we worked critically with the material. ... This critical approach is crucial to ensure that AI does not become a replacement for our own professional reflection but instead a tool that supports learning and analysis. (group X)

Similarly, another group described AI as

Overall, our experience has been that ChatGPT can be a valuable support when used consciously and critically. ... It has clarified the importance of taking responsibility for the content ourselves. We therefore see AI as a useful tool in our work, but not as a replacement for the professional effort involved in developing, discussing, and reflecting together. (Group Y).

Taken together, these findings suggest that while GenAI was discursively framed as a collaborative partner, it remained functionally peripheral to the deeper inquiry processes. Students described AI as a mentor and guide, but their actual engagements reveal a boundary between automated suggestion and human interpretation. Its confident tone and fluent language may momentarily perform authority, but this authority is fragile and dependent on students’ willingness to evaluate, translate, and recontextualize its outputs within the GenAI platform. The confidence and structure GenAI provided were valuable but ultimately folded back into human-centred reflection and collective reasoning.

At the same time, this pattern reveals an underlying ambivalence. The students’ trust in GenAI’s linguistic fluency and apparent authority coexisted with hesitation to let it participate more fully in their inquiry processes. The data suggest that while GenAI’s presence prompted reflection and efficiency, its potential for sustained dialogue, creative exploration, or epistemic experimentation remained largely untapped. In this way, students’ cautious approach limited the possibility for deeper collaboration as a collective negotiation of meaning, responsibility, and judgment across networks of human and technological actors, like GenAI. Authority was not transferred to the technology but instead continually reaffirmed through human practices, that both protected existing academic norms and, at the same time, restricted how far the relationship with AI could evolve.

## **Discussion: What Generative AI Means for Networked Learning**

Networked learning has long been grounded in the assumption that learning emerges through collaborative inquiry and the co-construction of knowledge across networks of people, practices, and technologies (de Laat & Ryberg, 2018; Hodgson & McConnell, 2019; Jones et al., 2017). Within this tradition, authority is understood as relational

and distributed, and technologies have typically been conceptualised as human-centred infrastructures designed to support interaction, communication, and shared exploration. As Goodyear (2021) argues, such infrastructures offer landscapes of affordances that shape how connections are made and sustained, while remaining open to reinterpretation and reconfiguration through practice. A central implication of this perspective is that technology is never neutral but always entangled with how learning unfolds.

The findings of this study invite a reconsideration of these assumptions in light of generative AI. Rather than functioning solely as a mediating infrastructure, GenAI enters learning networks as an actor that produces confident, fluent, and seemingly authoritative contributions. These challenges established understandings of how authority circulates in networked learning environments. Where authority has traditionally been negotiated through human dialogue and collective inquiry, GenAI introduces a form of performative certainty that can momentarily recentre epistemic authority around algorithmic outputs.

Importantly, the empirical material does not suggest a simple displacement of human authority. Instead, it points to a more nuanced reconfiguration in which GenAI becomes part of the learning network without fully assuming a central role in inquiry. While GenAI's linguistic confidence and speed enable it to influence how ideas are framed and articulated, deeper processes of exploration, judgment, and meaning making remain anchored in human interaction. In this sense, GenAI reshapes the conditions under which inquiry takes place rather than replacing inquiry itself.

Seen from this perspective, the challenge GenAI poses to networked learning is not primarily technical, but conceptual. It raises questions about how uncertainty, exploration, and dialogue can be sustained in environments where technologies increasingly offer immediate and authoritative-seeming responses. Rather than bypassing inquiry, the presence of GenAI foregrounds the importance of pedagogical and institutional framing in shaping how technologies are taken up, resisted, or repurposed within learning networks.

The study therefore suggests that the integration of generative AI does not diminish the human role in networked learning but makes that role more visible and consequential. Authority is not transferred to the machine; it is continuously renegotiated through students' practices, reflections, and collaborative work. For educators and researchers, this underscores the need to attend carefully to how learning designs support students in engaging with GenAI not merely as a source of answers, but as a participant whose contributions must be interpreted, challenged, and situated within collective inquiry.

## Conclusion

This study set out to explore how GenAI reconfigures authority, inquiry, and collaboration within networked learning. The findings show that while GenAI has the capacity to speak with confidence, fluency, and a tone that can recentre epistemic authority around algorithmic outputs, students do not fully hand over authority to the tool. Rather than a wholesale transfer of authority, the analysis suggests that students selectively delegate linguistic authority, related to formulation, structure, and academic tone, while retaining analytical and epistemic authority in relation to reasoning, judgment, and decision-making within their inquiry processes.

The analysis shows that while students increasingly incorporated GenAI into their academic practices, its role remained largely peripheral to the deeper processes of exploration and reflection. Across all iterations, students engaged with GenAI through short, instrumental exchanges that supported idea generation, language refinement, and structural guidance. These brief interactions do not necessarily indicate a lack of engagement or dialogue. Instead, they point to a pragmatic use of GenAI, where an initial response was often considered sufficient, irrelevant, or useful for moving inquiry forward, thereby reducing the need for extended interaction with the chatbot.

Instead, they position GenAI at the margins of their inquiry processes, consulting it in short, instrumental prompts before returning to peer discussions, supervision, and their own analytical reasoning. This tension between GenAI's capacity to reshape epistemic authority and students' actual practices is central. Although the technology can bypass the dialogic and negotiated processes on which networked learning depends, the empirical material suggests that students actively contain its influence. They borrow its linguistic fluency and efficiency, but they do not let it replace their collective meaning-making. This selective engagement highlights both a disruption in how inquiry is initiated, framed, and linguistically performed, and a reaffirmation of human-centred authority in relation to analysis, reasoning, and collaborative meaning-making.

What was initially framed as a potential theoretical rupture thus emerges in practice as something more complex. The data did not reveal a straightforward shift of authority to the machine, but a renegotiation of its boundaries. GenAI's persuasive language and algorithmic black boxing still have the power to influence what is foregrounded

and what is silenced in inquiry processes, but this influence is filtered through learners' epistemic practices and social norms. For networked learning theory, this underscores the importance of attending closely to how students actively position and negotiate AI within their learning networks. The challenge is not only that GenAI can recentre authority but how learners respond to, resist, or accommodate this potential. Returning to the theoretical concern, the findings reveal a dynamic interplay between technological affordance and human agency. This interplay will likely intensify as GenAI tools become more deeply embedded in educational infrastructures. The study therefore suggests that the integration of GenAI does not diminish the human role in learning but reshapes it. Rather than replacing authority, GenAI becomes part of the network. For educators and researchers, this calls for renewed attention to how pedagogical framing can support students in transforming AI from a source of answers into a partner in reflective, collaborative inquiry.

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