



IN CONVERSATION

Using metaphors about Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) to start the difficult conversation

Dr Elisa Brewis: Richmond American University London, brewise@richmond.ac.uk;

Dr Svitlana Tubaltseva: Richmond American University London;

Dr Jane Norris: Richmond American University London

ABSTRACT

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is reshaping higher education by prompting renewed debate about pedagogy, literacy, assessment, and academic responsibility. In this "In Conversation" piece, we explore how to start "that difficult conversation" with colleagues about the place of GenAI in higher education by using metaphors. We present the key lessons learned from six conversations with librarians and colleagues from Academic Literacies, International Relations, Communications, and Science and Innovation. The metaphors themselves are interesting. Some see GenAI in a utilitarian sense as a "combine harvester" or "intergenerational bridge". Problematic and threatening metaphors were also described, such as GenAI content as "plastic pollution" and "a reflection of human faults". Finally, we reflect on the usefulness of metaphors as a way to approach and research the topic of GenAI in an open and non-judgemental way. We plan to extend this approach in future research with students.

KEYWORDS

GenAI, metaphor, pedagogy, faculty development



© Copyright: The Authors. This article is issued under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License. This license enables reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator. The license allows for commercial use. **Peer review:** This article has been subject to a double peer review process

Brewis, E., Tubaltseva, S., & Norris, J. BALEAP Journal of Research and Practice, 2026, 142-153.

To cite this article:

Brewis, E., Tubaltseva, S., & Norris, J. (2026). Using metaphors about Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) to start the difficult conversation. *BALEAP Journal of Research & Practice*, 2(2), 142-153. <https://doi.org/10.31273/baleapjrp.v2.n2.2206>

Introduction

“Hi. We need to talk about ...”

How would you react to your colleague approaching you in the staff kitchen with that conversation opener? Panic, dread, hesitation? Perhaps your mind would start racing through last week’s to-do-list, trying to remember which important document you’ve forgotten to upload to the VLE, or which important marking deadline you’ve missed. Or is this about that student who complained about something or other?

Difficult conversations are, well, difficult to have, and even more difficult to start. And there’s one incredibly difficult conversation we all need to have as higher education faculty right now:

“What is the [appropriate and ethical!] role of GenAI in an undergraduate education?”

We need to talk about this. Obviously. At this point, we won't proceed with a 500-word literature review of facts and figures to convince you. (Your own experiences of teaching, marking, staff meetings and casual chats in the staff kitchen have probably alerted you to this need). Suffice to say that in the context we (the authors) work in, i.e. the UK higher education sector, one survey found that 92% of students are using artificial intelligence (AI) in their studies and 88% for their assessments (Freeman, 2025). We're guessing you are trying to start this conversation about the role of GenAI with your colleagues as well, wherever in the world you are. But how do we do it without triggering panic, dread, and hesitation? Without creating enemies, instigating a shouting match or hurting egos? Without ignoring what everyone in Department X over there are doing? Instead, could we start the conversation in a way that creates a space for mutual learning – between and across subject specialisms, linguistic and professional identities?

This article showcases our own attempt to do just this, by using metaphors as the conversation starting point with our colleagues within the Academic Literacies department and beyond. We took inspiration from the way metaphors have been used in education research to depict teachers’ “cultural” or even “moral” models of literacy (Bialostok 2014). In this view, metaphors are understood as an essential feature of the human thought process (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, 6). In preparing for our conversations, we read up on recent studies that use metaphors to articulate GenAI use by institutions, staff and students (Lucas & Lioy 2025; Corbin, Dawson, & Liu, 2025; Roe, Furze & Perkins, 2025; Jin et al, 2025). As Corbin, Dawson & Liu (2025, 1094) point out:

“When faced with novel challenges that demand immediate action, metaphors serve as powerful and comforting cognitive tools, helping us navigate unfamiliar territory by mapping it onto known domains.”

We wanted to start the conversation with people outside our own “bubble” of Academic Literacies/English for Academic Purposes; to hear different voices. We hoped that metaphors could be an especially useful conversation starter precisely because they are quite open – not a black and white definition or declaration, but rather an idea that has to be visualised and interpreted. To cite Corbin, Dawson & Liu (2025, 1094) again:

“metaphors cannot be true or false – they can only be apt or inapt, and as such their value lies not in their truth conduction but in their utility for action.”

How we started the conversation

Two researchers (co-authors 1 and 2) from Academic Literacies organised interviews (Dec 2025 –Jan 2026) with colleagues at the same institution (Richmond American University London) from a range of departments: two librarians (who teach information literacy workshops in the university’s compulsory research and writing modules); one professor from Science, Innovation and Technology; one from Communications; one from International Relations, and one more colleague from Academic Literacies. We pitched these interviews to colleagues as “conversations that aimed to arrive at mutual learning on the role of GenAI in higher education”, thus trying to create a less formal atmosphere. We did, of course, still stick to institutional ethics protocols: seeking written consent; providing debrief information including data protection measures; agreeing what levels of anonymity we wanted. We also circulated the first draft of this submission to the whole group for feedback and participant validation of the interview extracts and conclusions.

To ensure uniformity, each conversation followed a similar structure. First, we invited colleagues to comment on the relevance of three visual metaphors of GenAI to stimulate the discussion: two cartoons from Tom Gauld’s collection *Physics for Cats* (2025)¹ and an AI-generated image which our co-author produced based on personal experience (see Fig 1). We also shared two journal articles which used the following metaphors for GenAI: *digital plastic* (Roe, Furze & Perkins, 2025), *high heels, compass, spider-man* and *drug* (Ji et al, 2025). We did not *require* colleagues to read these articles in advance, but many did, and even provided related articles from their own subject areas (see Appendix - Further Reading). After responding to these metaphors, we then invited our colleagues to offer their own metaphors to capture the role of GenAI in higher education, asking them to follow up with examples from their classroom experience.

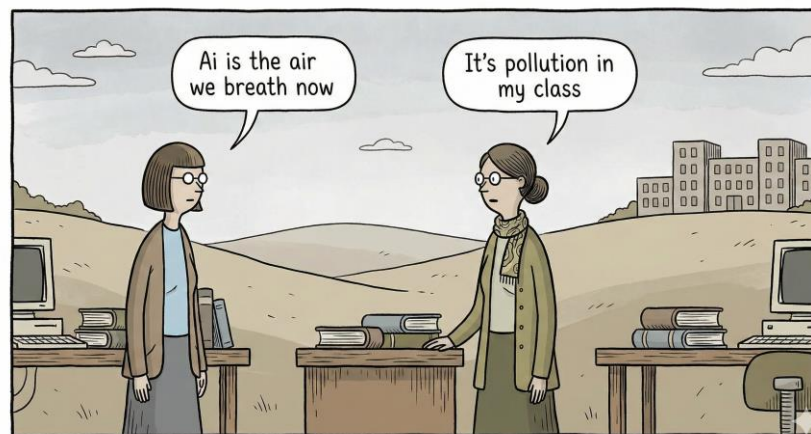


Figure 1: ‘Air/Pollution’. Gemini, generated by Jane Norris, Dec 2025

¹ We have not received permission from the copyright holder to reprint these cartoons. The first depicted a fictional AI-powered robot “Artbot Version 2.0” which generated abstract art and a non-sensical description of it. The second cartoon depicted AI as human going through stages of child development, with the AI in its teenage stage refusing to come out of the bedroom and shouting “I hate you”.

Metaphors for the role of GenAI

Below we present the metaphors discussed in our conversations, organised under three main themes: GenAI as a tool; GenAI as a problem/threat; GenAI as a mirror/spotlight. With permission from our colleagues, we have provided a few interview extracts below the description of the metaphors to help clarify their meaning. Finally, as a kind of visual postscript, we end each sub-section with an AI-generated image of the key metaphors, together with the specific prompt our colleague wrote for Gemini. The aim here is to invite our readers to see both the practical uses and *limitations* of AI-generated content in action. Thus, they provide a springboard for further discussion and reflection.

Theme 1 GenAI as a Tool

The first theme was the instrumental nature of GenAI. It is just another tool to add to the toolbox of learning. Librarians highlighted the integration of AI tools into modern library search systems, like the GenAI summary feature in EBSCO, Dimensions, and in-built AI search assistants on platforms like Mintel and the Financial Times. Interestingly, one librarian described GenAI as a bridge between generations, allowing the “Google it” generation to penetrate unfamiliar keyword-based databases:

I think that's kind of the way in which they think this works, that there's some kind of inbuilt.. That somehow ... the machine will interpret that question for them and deliver what they need ... But yeah, I think that is how it's going to be if this generation of students are growing up with the paradigm of ... the way to search is natural language queries. I think in a way, you can't re-educate a whole generation to think in terms of keywords. I think we've moved past that, so we need to actually now... Perhaps help them bridge those gaps in knowledge. (Librarian)

Subject teachers also highlighted GenAI's role as a teaching tool, albeit a complex one which requires skill and careful thinking. Using the metaphor of a combine harvester, one professor pointed out that the user must learn to control and manipulate this powerful tool:

"...a sort of machine that processes things. And then produces a finished item like the bale of hay. But you have to be quite skilled to do that. You know you have to ...Driving a straight line, you have to lift it up, put it down, make sure you've got enough twine, all the rest of it you've got. It's a multitask thing (Professor, Science Innovation & Technology)

When reflecting on how GenAI works as a teaching tool in the classroom, all subject teachers were comfortable using GenAI explicitly in class as a tool to interrogate or visualise complex academic theories, highlight biases, and stimulate critical thinking. Only the Professor in Academic Literacies highlighted GenAI specifically as a *linguistic* tool, namely as an articulator that outperforms previous generations of machine translation software:

Some students who have been using translation software because their English is quite weak ... from an English language point of view, it's almost impossible to process sometimes. ... Whereas

with AI, I'm beginning to see that actually ... it's really helpful in formulating ideas and sentences in a manner for British, American English which is ... what they're being graded on. (Professor, Academic Literacies)

As an advanced illustrator, using the style supplied, please produce an illustration of a Gulliver's Travels type of landscape where a student and professor / guide are on a path to the summit (graduation) but are assisted by AI using the images of co-driving a complex combine harvester and AI acting as a generational bridge.

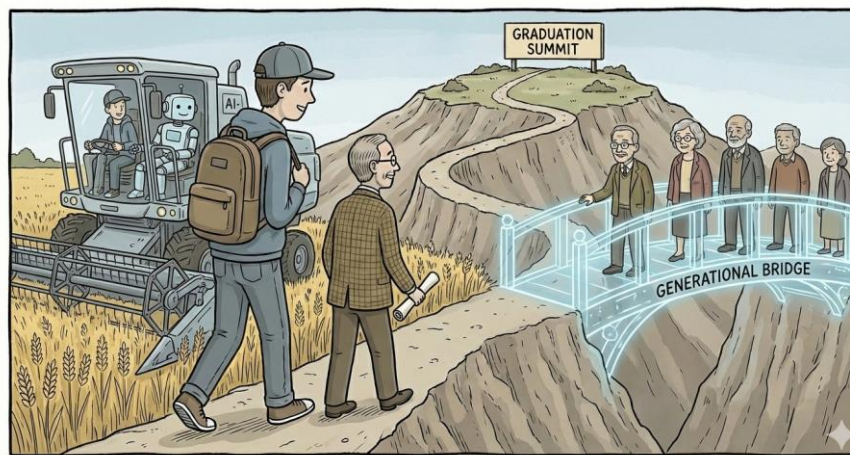


Figure 2: 'Tool'. Gemini, generated by Jane Norris, Jan 2026

Theme 2 GenAI as a Problem/Threat

Across all the conversations, staff also highlighted GenAI as a problem, and even a threat. Responding to Tom Gauld's comic "Artbot v2.0", one subject professor likened GenAI output to "word salad". The student-generated "threat" metaphors in Jin et al's (2025) study also resonated with staff, particularly the image of GenAI as "politician's empty words", "fast food" and an "iceberg". The central problem in these scenarios was GenAI disrupting or circumventing the learning process. A quick fix now, a big failure around the corner. One professor also extended the discussion to assessment and grading, likening it to "a minefield":

"I mean, we do have a variety of assessments which I think is great. So yeah, presentations, they do have to explain stuff, and in class assessments and all sorts of things. So yeah, that's really helpful. But the research paper, it's a minefield to try and grade it fairly." (Professor, Academic Literacies)

While these scenarios are in theory still possible to remedy via pedagogical interventions or redesigning assessments (see Theme 3 Reflection and Conclusion below), some staff also described GenAI as a more far-reaching, sinister, threat, namely as “digital plastic” (Roe, Furze & Perkins, 2025) or “pollution” (Jin et al 2025). These metaphors highlight harmful consequences of GenAI use for humankind and the planet:

Our Colleague: *I'm very concerned about the environment. I'm trying to maintain with [head of department's] leadership a positive engagement with AI because I think we have to positively engage with it because it's here. But yes, plastic ... does absolutely sum it up because it does the most amazing things, but it also is, yeah, polluting. ... We are indeed breathing it in.*

Author: *Do you think ... this kind of suffocation image.. are we suffocating on ...*

Our colleague: *We don't think we're suffocating yet, but we are ingesting it and we don't know what the effect is going to be. So I think plastic is actually a very good metaphor. It's found, found in all sorts of bodily tissues. Now we can't escape it wherever you are. ... So the idea of, like, the synthetic nature of it, that you can't tease it out, separate it out (Professor, Academic Literacies)*

As an advanced illustrator, using the style supplied, please produce an illustration of a Gulliver's Travels type of landscape where a student and professor / guide are on a path to the summit (graduation) but are surrounded by the dangers of AI. Please produce the following specific items as threats in the landscape: Plastic pollution, an Iceberg, politicians with empty words, cheating the journey by getting a lift, Frankenstein, fast food, noise cancelling headphones.



Figure 3: 'Problem/Threat!' Gemini, generated by Jane Norris, Jan 2026

Theme 3 GenAI as Reflection/Spotlight

The final occurring theme is Reflection or Spotlight. It implies that GenAI is not anonymous, it just reproduces patterns, language, and structures it has been trained on, which essentially implies that it mimics or mirrors human knowledge and practices. This position aligns with the previous discussion. If GenAI only reflects our actions and does not contain agency, it has an instrumental nature (see discussion of Theme 1. Tool). On the other hand, this theme is more multifaceted. The second layer of this metaphor is interconnected with a famous story *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (written by Oscar Wilde, 1890) which emphasises the duality of appearance versus reality – our actions are manifested in the portrait which in the modern terms equate to GenAI content. This reframes responsibility for GenAI output as human rather than technological.

'... Like we're the monsters and AI is just what comes out of that and whenever we get a bad result from AI at the micro level is because we prompted it incorrectly. It's not because it's stupid, it's because we prompted it incorrectly because of the collective knowledge that it's been trained on for the past. I don't know how long it's been bad knowledge that it's been trained on. That's on us. So that's all on us...' (Professor, International Relations)

In other words, GenAI is a so called 'Frankenstein monster' - we have created it ourselves and we cannot blame GenAI as it does not operate independently. Here, it intertwines with Theme 2 GenAI as a Threat – but it is not a threat of dominant robotic technology but rather a threat of human intentions.

Poor GenAI content as a result of human actions has also been highlighted by librarians and Academic Literacies faculty. This directly takes us to the pedagogical context and highlights problems in the current education system; a major concern is the inequalities between between students proficient in English and digital skills (most likely to use GenAI adeptly and critically), versus students new to English medium instruction and less proficient in digital skills. In this

instance, the mirror's reflection also operates as a spotlight revealing and sometimes amplifying all existing higher education problems in the UK. Two Academic Literacies professors referred to their teaching experience where many students, especially international students are stressed because of working nights, long distance commutes to campus, no laptops at home, which lead them to search for shortcuts such as AI-generated/assisted assignments. As a result, GenAI does not represent assistance but rather an obstacle or a substitute to the learning process. However, we cannot fully blame students - but rather the current economic and political climate which is a result of collective human actions. As one professor pointed out, validity of assessments in UK higher education have long suffered from problems like contract cheating, essay mills, plagiarism (hence the proliferation of Turnitin/SafeAssign), and of course unofficial help from family members or friends. Here the image of the spotlight in the opening sequence of the Mr Bean TV show was cited:

'that is my image I think, and the higher education sector is like Mr. Bean kind of bumbling around at the bottom.' (Professor, Academic Literacies)

As an advanced illustrator, using the style supplied, please produce an illustration of a Gulliver's Travels type of landscape where a student and professor / guide are on a path to the summit (graduation) and AI is a Mirror of human faults - loosing the generational bridge and replacing it with an AI spotlight - that shows problems such as inequality in our current HE educational system.

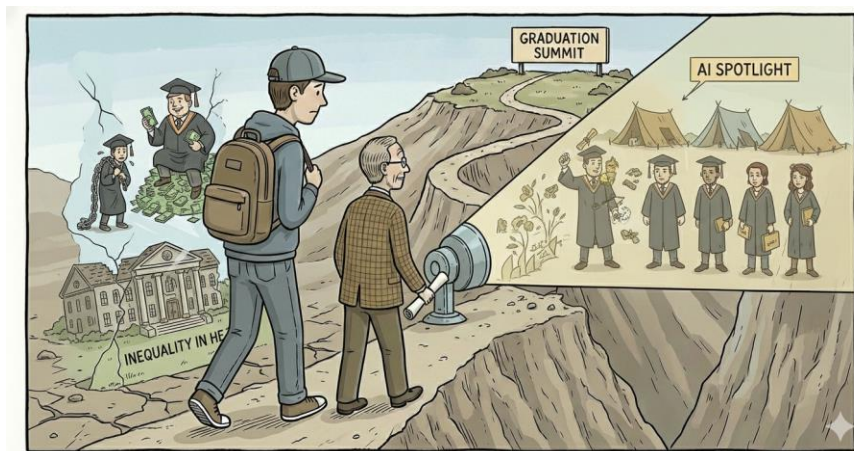


Figure 4: 'Reflection/Spotlight'. Gemini, generated by Jane Norris, Jan 2026

Conclusion

This brings us to the final conclusive section – what is the future of higher education in the GenAI-era? According to all our interviewees, higher education represents a journey

students embark on which can be quite messy and full of noise but still involves a character-forming process. In this picture, GenAI plays the role of headphones which cut out the noise in an effort to produce something crisp and clean, while ‘the noise’ is needed with all the dirty, gritty learning process. The noise also comes from collaboration and communication, so valued in the modern world. The danger of overexploitation of GenAI at the higher education level can lead to students working in an isolated, noise-free environment, which is contradictory to the pedagogical values of the staff we interviewed.

This brings us to the role of the teacher in the GenAI-era. Both faculty members and librarians agreed that teachers cannot hide their heads in the sand but rather need to act proactively. As mentioned before, teachers must ‘tear off the noise-cancelling headphones’ and let other noises (not GenAI generated) come through. There is a paramount necessity to train students how to drive the ‘GenAI combine harvester’ - students will struggle learning it themselves otherwise. Sometime, teachers might work as filters or personal protective equipment (PPE) to filter out GenAI pollution (inaccurate, biased ‘polluted’ GenAI content); they not only direct students to more credible sources of information but also teach students critical reading skills and AI literacy. GenAI can be attractive as fast food (cheap and tasty) but it is the role of faculty and librarians to give students ‘slow food’ instead of ‘fast food’, in other words, give them what they need, not what they want. Finally, both teachers and students must reclaim agency and take control over GenAI – do not let GenAI happen to you and at you.

Thus, our conversations highlighted the need for a more complex framing of the role of the teacher in the GenAI era of higher education. As Lucas & Liroy (2025, p.8) point out, many GenAI frameworks position the relationship as “GenAI = tool / student = creator / teacher = guide”, but this breaks down when we acknowledge that GenAI can also be a problem, a threat, and mirror of human inadequacies. For instance, none of us would say that our job is to guide students to create more pollution or to guide students to amplify biased stereotypes!

Overall, the project reveals that despite different subject areas and experiences with GenAI application in the classrooms, there are many similar messages, concerns and pleas in Faculty’s perception of GenAI. The project serves as a pilot and does not claim to be fully representative of university staff attitudes. We are aware that adding conversations with different faculty members would raise alternative viewpoints that are missing here. However, what the project does demonstrate is the importance of more dialogue between different schools and departments – GenAI is a reality we all share and we need to talk to each other to find the best possible approach which benefits both educators and students. In our experience, using metaphors and AI-generated images can be a helpful way to “start the difficult conversation”. It is worth mentioning that we have had a very positive experience with our colleagues – everyone was happy and grateful to be contacted and asked what they think of GenAI. This highlights how many voices in higher education are unheard yet and how much communication we need between policy makers, university management, educators and other university services. Moving forward, we aim to expand the project to include more voices, especially students as equal participants of the learning process.

References

- Bialostok, S. M. (2014). Metaphors that teachers live by: a cultural model of literacy in the era of new literacies. *Language and Education*, 28(6), 501–520.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2014.905591>
- Corbin, T., Dawson, P., & Liu, D. (2025). Talk is cheap: why structural assessment changes are needed for a time of GenAI. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 50(7), 1087–1097.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2025.2503964>
- Freeman, J. (2025, February 26). *Student Generative AI Survey 2025*. HEPI. Available at:
<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/02/26/student-generative-ai-survey-2025/> [Accessed 28 January 2026]
- Jin, F., Sun, L., Pan, Y., & Lin, C. (2025). High heels, compass, spider-man, or drug? Metaphor analysis of generative artificial intelligence in academic writing, *Computers & Education*, 228, 1-20.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2025.105248>
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2003). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lucas, K.A. & Liroy, A. (2025). Mapping AI Literacy Frameworks: An Analysis of the Evolving Metaphorical Relationships between Students, Teachers, and AI. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, (1) 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.5334/jime.974>
- Roe, J., Furze, L., & Perkins, M. (2025). Digital plastic: a metaphorical framework for Critical AI Literacy in the multiliteracies era. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 185-199.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1554480X.2025.2557491>

Appendix - Further Reading

Recommendations from Library Studies

Kavak, A. & Yılmaz, E. (2024). Information Professionals' Metaphorical Perceptions of Artificial Intelligence Concept, *Journal of Library Administration*, 64(6), pp. 695–718.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2024.2371276>.

McCrary, Q. D. (2026). Are we ghosts in the machine? AI, agency, and the future of libraries, *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 52(1): <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2025.103181>

Roe, J., Perkins, M., & Furze, L. (2025). Reflecting Reality, Amplifying Bias? Using Metaphors to Teach Critical AI Literacy. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 2025(1): 18, pp. 1–15.
<https://doi.org/10.5334/jime.961>

Recommendations from Communication/Sound specifically around Noise

Attali, J. (2011). *Noise: The political economy of music* (11. print). Univ. of Minnesota Press.

Hainge, G. (2013). *Noise matters: Towards an ontology of noise*. Bloomsbury.

Kennedy, S. (2015). *Chaos media: A sonic economy of digital space*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Malaspina, C., & Brassier, R. (2020). *An epistemology of noise*. Bloomsbury Academic.