# Transcript

Teresa Valais

Hi, I'm Teresa Valais, senior instructional designer with the Faculty Academic Center of Excellence at Towson University FACET. The purpose of the faculty success, higher Ed Conversations Podcast is to engage faculty and conversations to support professional growth with the aim of enhancing faculty and student success. In today's episode, we're going to talk about being human in an AI world. We're thrilled to be joined by two distinguished faculty Fellows. Guests, let me introduce you to Sam Collins, professor of anthropology, specializing in urban studies, social media design, anthropology and information technologies in the United States and South Korea. Among other books and articles, he is the author of All Tomorrow's culture anthropological engagements with the Future and co-author, with Matthew Durlington of Network Anthropology. He is one of the founding fellows of FACET and has served in a variety of capacities. Over the past three years.

Samuel Collins

Hi, Teresa, how you doing?

Teresa Valais

Hey, Sam, thanks for joining us. Glad to have you. And Kelly Elkins Kelly has been with Towson for the last 11 years. She's a full professor of chemistry. She has over 20 years experience in higher education as a researcher professor. Principal investigator and author, she specializes in project management, mentoring, publishing and service to the profession. Kelly is serving in her second year with the FACET Fellows program and is currently the FACET Scholarship Fellow. Welcome.

Kelly Elkins

Thanks, Theresa. I'm glad to be here.

Teresa Valais

Well, we are certainly happy to have both of you with us today as we talk about ways to lean into chat and GPT with our human superpowers.

Kelly Elkins

We're happy to take it on.

Speaker

OK.

Teresa Valais

So I think as we get started into this conversation, it's probably good to just really talk about it from a standpoint of automation. So automation changes how humans work well, today AI is reorganizing or resetting how we learn and we. Work so you know. Can you remember processes for work or personal communication before e-mail, cell phones or social media?

Samuel Collins

Yes, yes I can.

Kelly Elkins

Yes, just talking to a student this morning about how you know, it used to be more effective to walk to the next room or. Pick up a phone to contact. Someone than send.

Teresa Valais

An e-mail? Yeah, for sure. How about waiting till the end of the day to hear? The breaking news?

Samuel Collins

Yes, or or maybe the next day to hear the breaking news. You're not. Watching TV news.

Kelly Elkins

Right. Or reading in the late run newspaper.

Teresa Valais

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Uh-huh. How? About waiting in line at the. Bank to cash your. Paycheck before direct deposit capability existed.

Kelly Elkins

Yeah, you had to catch it Saturdays before they close.

Teresa Valais

Well, all all of these are examples of leaps in technological capability. Prior to ChatGPT at our doorstep. Now one of the biggest advancements in technological capability in our lifetimes. Next to the Internet was the launching of the World Wide Web into public domain, which interestingly enough occurred 30 years ago this week.

Samuel Collins

My research on information technologies actually began. At that moment I was doing research on the advent of the digital library and it was right there in the mid 1990s that of course, whatever the NCSA. Was first introduced and later supplanted by Netscape, and then by Google and all that stuff. And yeah, I was witnessed to something that was utterly transformative and, you know, moved us from. Something that was more interesting to hobbyists, but I would say something that was more academic, like Gopher clients and stuff like that to something that had huge popular appeal.

Kelly Elkins

And like our college students who are coming to college with Jet GPS emerging this year, I had just gone off to college and and that's when the World Wide Web launched to the public domain. And so I think it's exciting to see those parallels there. It's different. Other similarities there for that that change that experience.

Samuel Collins

Well, I think one of the one of the. The biggest parallels which accompanies any new technology, and I can tell you going all the way back to the advent of the railroad, new technologies mean some people are utopian and their predictions of of what that technology will mean. Others are dystopian and see, you know, all the problems that might occur back in the railways. Believe it or not, the railroad. Was supposed to bring. World Peace by allowing people to easily move between countries. That's not what happened.

Teresa Valais

Connect and the.

Kelly Elkins

US and the US roadways are tied to national security, so we can consider that.

Samuel Collins

So looking at the world right now with. Dinner to the AI clients, you can see a lot of the same kinds of discourse going on. It's like very much about modernity and technology, the kinds of opinions that people have over what's going to happen.

Teresa Valais

So many of us have had the opportunity to listen to or participate in discussions about artificial intelligence, and much of that in higher Ed has been centered on ChatGPT. So I wanted to hear from you about how ChatGPT is defined and and basically. What is it?

Samuel Collins

So First off, there are a whole number of GPT clients out there and that's one for class of generative agents there are. Others, and maybe you've already been using some of them to do. Things like draw. Or make music and stuff like that. Let me give. Just a bit of a definition here. Chat generative pre training transformer or ChatGPT is an AI application that allows machines to write and respond. And human like waves. And I have a little more of a technical definition. I I don't. Want to be? Like super techie? Because you know, frankly, I'm not sure that I understand the technology all that well, but this one is just from a recent article, just came out a couple months ago from Alejo, Susan and Company. Writing in the article chapter BT more than a weapon of mass deception and they write quote. As we've seen GPT is an auto regressive model that estimates the probability of the next word based on the conditional probability distribution of the. Critically, the model needs to be trained on fair data sets and by fair human enforcement learning process, so all decisions are conditioned on that data that it has been trained on. So two things here. Number one, this idea that what's going on with these generative AI agencies. That they are. Using a variety of statistical tools in order to predict the next word after the word. That it's just general. And #2 that all those words are coming out of pre-existing data and those data sets of course originate where with us come from not only all the different training data that was. Raped. So Chad DBT was trained on data that was scraped up through 2021. It continues to be trained, although we're not quite sure, keeping in mind that the ChatGPT is proprietary and we don't indeed know the inner workings of either the AI algorithms, nor do we know about the training data. But we do know that as more and more people utilize. That GBT they are also providing ChatGPT with more training data.

Kelly Elkins

Right. It'll even train on our props, right?

Samuel Collins

Absolutely. And of course all those prompts, all the data scraping all the different places that data may have originated from, are not credited in the ChatGPT app or in open AI. Which is the the the company that produces ChatGPT. And more. Do we know? How they've been used? So it raises a lot of questions for us. And maybe that's. Just one source out of a whole number of concerns that people have.

Kelly Elkins

Right. But it is. Probabilistic as you said, so I mean. There are rules. And it follows these set rules as described in in the paper and what's been disclosed and it's similar to us learning perhaps grammar when we're kids learning grammar and syntax. But it. It just it. It's not creative and it's in its application right to do poetry. It just follows that probability.

Samuel Collins

Right. Yeah, it's not, I mean. Fighting anything and it has no semantic knowledge, and I think that's that's the big difference. Is that it? It it knows nothing. It's simply putting things together in in a way that we, as the ultimate end user, recognizes as. A semblance of writing or speech or conversation. We want to use. It as a chat bot. AI agents are content generators, not creators, and I think that's one of the key differences, which is also one of the reasons why so many of us in higher education have been concerned and perhaps also excited. As I talked about before, I I prefer to see tools like this in terms of other forms of automation that have originated over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries. There's a very useful idea that has been around for some time. This scholar, Harry Braverman's, take on it. This is the deskilling thesis. This is called. What it means is that when some task has been automated in some way, that the people who were heretofore laboring to do that task are replaced by people. Who are doing it for less money and basically that job is effectively then de skilled. Why that's important, I think it's not because I necessarily feel like chat CBT is going to be an agent of descaling. I wouldn't turn it around and suggest that what actually happens with automation is a descaling process that precedes.

Teresa Valais

Tell us more about.

Samuel Collins

That so let's go. Back and think about something like. I help desk. So a help desk for your technology needs. You have all kinds of problems with your computer and you know you might want to go someplace and talk to people and figure out how to solve that problem. And those places? Is this you? Can you can go. To Best Buy or other places and indeed talk to actual humans. So on or you can call various numbers and talk to people you are talking to people, but those people are following very structured scripts.

Kelly Elkins

Right. Like, did you plug your computer in?

Samuel Collins

Right. And they have, they have an algorithmic. Threat that they're. That they're following and that's what they're being paid to do. How easy for it? A chat bot to do the same thing quite easy, but what needed to happen, at least from the position of the employer, was that job that was all about, you know, working with consumers and helping them. Their problems had to be replaced by an algorithm, that script. That be skilled their labor into a pre-existing structure then that pre-existing structure then can be automated phone trees do the same. Thing you know you. Used to actually go and buy plane tickets, and now you're going through a very tedious nobody likes phone trees, but they have become ubiquitous, of course, because. They're so much cheaper. So when we're looking at ChatGPT.

Kelly Elkins

But you can override them. Right, to get back to.

Teresa Valais

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Kelly Elkins

A human. Which? You know, I think is the essence here as well.

Teresa Valais

Or you can use your human predictive skills, though what button, what keyword do I? Need to say to get. Back to that live person.

Samuel Collins

You know, that's a really interesting. Point I think, I think to the extent that. We live in a Society of AI agents. Not only have they replaced many of the functions that were here to form them by humans, but to the extent that we interact with them, we have to adopt many of the same characteristics of the AI agent. So interact to interact with them correctly, right?

Kelly Elkins

Right.

Samuel Collins

To find that that that magic word to answer correctly to some kind of a phone tree coming up with that with that correct monotone that will be readily understood. By the by the little poetry AI agent and send us. Where we want to go. We become much like the machine as well so. To go to chat DBT. Yes, there's a process of. Automation going on, in other words, automation of content generation. But the distilling part happened before. I think it happened when we started to discount creativity and to think about. Writing as an exercise in the generation of content, when we think about writing and communication that way, and it becomes a lot easier for us to replace that human generated content with AI generated content.

Teresa Valais

So what I. Hear you saying is that in essence we have to become aware of how the AI agents think or predict. And that's a a skill to hone.

Samuel Collins

Well, well, I see. I see. Two ways, I mean I. Think that. Humans have. Created chapter CBT to generate content in a certain way, but that's based on an understanding of what content should be. Which we can also question and we should question. So I think I think yeah, understanding needs to be both adaptive but also critical.

Teresa Valais

I wanted to share with you something that's related and it is a recent publication from Forbes, written by Jamie, Mary Sotus and. The title of the. Publication is in the age of artificial intelligence. We need our human skills. To keep it real. Don't you love that? So there's an excerpt from this publication that caught my eye. And it says in a world of interactions increasingly mediated by machines. The durable skills that define human contribution, such as creativity, empathy and critical thinking, among others, become increasingly important. Colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to help students develop their skills through course, work on writing and communications. Problem solving and stem applications and. Other areas. Interestingly enough, in this article the author asks ChatGPT for advice on ChatGPT using chat GP and the chat. Yeah, yeah.

Kelly Elkins

And then let's say.

Teresa Valais

So the chat bot responds training people to work with artificial intelligence in the future will require a combination of a. Certain technical knowledge and durable skills, so it's not a one or the other, right. And as AI increase. Impact society. It is important for individuals to have an understanding of ethical considerations and the potential for bias in AI systems, said the check.

Kelly Elkins

We need diverse data sets for sure to avoid bias. Otherwise you know these things are just. Predictors and generative tools and and certainly their their. They're prone to to bias. If we don't train them. On large data sets with diverse viewpoints.

Speaker

Right.

Samuel Collins

Well, that, that of course has been one of the big critiques of other AI algorithms and about chat bots. And you know, with the race to the bottom about how long it takes for that chat bot to start parodying horrible, you know, racism. Heterosexism or whatever, because you know garbage in, garbage out, right. And is that the case with Chapter Boutique? Well, again, one of the the problems is we don't really know. So we imagine that there were. You know, very diverse and robust data sets that were utilized in training. We do know, although not unproblematically, but a a small group of of Kenyan programmers have been instrumental in producing safeguards for chat TBT. So it's not going to, you know, do things like. Advocate mass killing or something like that. But there are. A lot of question marks.

Kelly Elkins

I like the point here that the that the author makes about durable skills. You know, we're setting up today. We're talking about skills and I think one skill that we've been talking a lot about in the last couple of years is perhaps the loss of chances for for students. To engage in developing communication skills and anxiety surrounding presenting themselves and engaging with people and not wanting to, you know, to. Be thought of as different. Or or be ostracized but by. How they are? And I think that, you know, we still we still need the need to develop skills and I think there's still a role for the university and and what we're. Doing with our. Class is to be able to to be able to develop skills that are. Absolutely meaningful in today's society.

Teresa Valais

One of the in working with a lot of faculty, the notion of bias and in in artificial intelligence, I've actually been working with faculty who have commented how they have students do activities in the classroom that breakdown bias in some of the responses they get. From chat, TPC.

Kelly Elkins

For some students.

Teresa Valais

So that's very.

Kelly Elkins

This is the most diverse environment they've ever encountered, right? And a chance to hear from. People that didn't grow up in. Your communities, as in perhaps if they you know, haven't gotten a chance to travel much outside of Baltimore or outside of their religious communities or ethnic group communities and you know, the university is a great place for bringing people together for conversation. MHM, MHM.

Teresa Valais

So I wanted to shift a little to the continuity. Here Kelly and and what? What can you? Say about that.

Kelly Elkins

So we've been talking a lot about continuity and how these tools can add or make or increase the pace of some of our research even and augment that. So we've been talking about translation tools and now how we can translate. News broadcasts in real time. These AI tools will translate in real time, and so we can be. To get the diverse content from right from the source, we. Don't have to wait for. We can use that in research too, for we have interviews and would have before transcribed that by hand to do a kind of a qualitative quantitative. Work out of a qualitative interview. That certainly has saved us a lot of time and cost, and being able to conduct this research, you know, we don't have to pay a a graduate student all this time, just sit and transcribe and then check that.

Teresa Valais

Sean, Sean.

Kelly Elkins

So certainly we're still checking things, but it's certainly saving time. As far as some administrative tests that people loathe, like writing FAQs for university web pages that, obviously. With some of these jobs. So in a way, it is distilling. As Sam was talking about. But some of these tests were.

Speaker

You know.

Kelly Elkins

More of a mundane task, and so to be able to focus on other work that is a bit more creative and where the human it gets to put a bit more input in. I think people are relishing in the idea that they, their job has transitioned to some of these. Other. Tests from the faculty side we've been talking about how these tools are great for writing lists, and I'm a list. I'm a list maker and I like checkboxes my. Husband would love to check things. Off my list, but it's great for. Letting us know if we. Forgot something off of our list too. So we can ask it to generate a list and compare it to a list we've already created and make sure that we're thinking. Think about all of the different sides and ideas. We can even ask it, and there's some discussion in the academic community. Whether this is ethical or not, but for it to to write summaries or abstracts from our own papers, and certainly if we have an internal database, we could ask it to write our report from our own internal data and that could be really useful, especially since we've. We created the data and the research and we're just looking to put in that end of the year report documentation or information which again many of us find to be not that exciting when the research is done and the papers are published to generate that short paragraph. So I think there's some exciting new things that can come, I mean. It's a much fancier autocomplete that my e-mail gives me all these suggestions all the time. And certainly though. It provides new opportunity.

Teresa Valais

What I hear you talking about, Kelly, is the reduction of mundane tasks, right?

Kelly Elkins

I think so.

Teresa Valais

That frees you up in the responsibilities and requirements, for example, of being a professor.

Kelly Elkins

Right, right.

Teresa Valais

In your department.

Kelly Elkins

I mean, I think. A big part of our. Our , I don't know if I want to say value, but what we can bring to the table is being human, right? And we started out with being human. And you know, our students want to interact with us and. And be guided by a professor. So this leaves me more time to spend time one-on-one with students in the. Lab working on writing projects and tutorials with tasks that can't be automated.

Samuel Collins

Or starting with a task that you've automated, but then augmenting that? With with your human creativity, I think that's also something that that we want to bring to our students as a one, you know, very. Use for these kinds of tools where they can start with the kernel or something, and the goal for them, whether they're writing or reporting. If they start with that, then their goal is to exceed it.

Kelly Elkins

Yeah, I like how you're talking about bringing it back. Like you know, the researcher has the kernel. The idea. To start with. And maybe they conduct the interviews, but then the AI tool can be. Used to you know. Translate and put that into an analyzable form, and then even help with the statistics that in the end. The human will do the. And look at those values and I think that's certainly, you know, when I do research, I love to look at the numbers at the end and start interpreting. That's the fun part, right. And so sometimes if you can skip some of these middle steps.

Speaker

Brave. Brave.

Kelly Elkins

I will say that I don't know that I'll, I'll regret it.

Teresa Valais

So I wanted to circle back to where you started, Sam, on the notion that you will invariably have folks who perceive new technology, automation and major leaps like we are doing working with right now with chat. GPT as the sky is falling. So where do you? What do you have to say? About that is the sky falling Sam?

Samuel Collins

Right. So. The sky could be falling if employers broadly decide that tools like HBT can be used to reduce their workforce and to pay people less.

Kelly Elkins

We've certainly seen it in this country, right, with automation and how that.

Speaker

That that could.

Kelly Elkins

Change the workforce and change communities.

Samuel Collins

But is this particular? Does generative AI, you know, pose some kind of existential threat to humans or or to our labor? No, right, I mean we're, we're looking at possibly useful tools, but I think one of the take homes is that these are not about human creativity. And if we miss recognize generative AI as actually creating. Writing and meaning. Well, we have. Only looked into what exactly is going on with these tools and that kind of misrecognition I think would lead to perhaps and employer like BuzzFeed News thinking that that, that that generated news story was just as good as the. One that was written by a journalist.

Teresa Valais

So for educators, what would be helpful for educators to look at or consider or how for educators? Is artificial intelligence going forward?

Samuel Collins

Right. I mean, I think there's so many interesting ideas and activities that people are already doing right here at Towson. And you know, we've had a couple of workshops now through FACET that have explored critical issues with tax CBT and people have said, oh, I'm doing this, I'm doing that. I think the first step for US educators is to understand what these tools are and what they can do. What they can't do, and that has to be the first step. If if you then decide in your classrooms that you want nothing to do with that, then you know that is your classroom. That's, that's about it. Freedom. But just.

Kelly Elkins

No, I mean it's changing perhaps how? Students are going. To view some of our assignments right and so our. Assessments may need to change. And you know, I think a lot of what we want. The students to learn is the process. And how we do work?

Speaker

Right.

Kelly Elkins

You know, I teach a writing course and we want the students to be able to not read content to learn, but they want. We want them to write. And we had a reason, a panelist. Talk about writing to learn. You know, maybe this just brings it back to. The things that you can't do online, like discussions in person with controversial topics, where sometimes I find online even with adult commenters on my favorite newspaper articles that you know they get, there's some animosity there and they get pretty content. It's just and I think it's great to demonstrate that we can be civil and have hard discussions and do group projects have students through presentations. So much of. Work nowadays is working in teams and working in groups, and the university is a great place to practice those skills. For entering the workplace and to make mistakes, right? Sometimes we don't spend enough time on. It's OK to make mistakes. It doesn't have to be perfect the first time. You do it and this is a a great place to be able to make a mistake and a lot of our assessments now are actually formative. And so the whole point is to give feedback. And then you could. Do it again before you get the. We're here to.

Teresa Valais

Absolutely, absolutely.

Kelly Elkins

Help you right. We're not here to.

Teresa Valais

The shaping of learning, absolutely.

Kelly Elkins

Just right. We're just right, absolutely.

Samuel Collins

I mean, I mean, if nothing else, these tools point to the necessity of formative assessment over the kinds of some of this. Stuff that that. You know, perhaps we grew up with where that one essay. For that one test was the be all end all and we've known for a long time that that's not the best way to teach people, and certainly having a tool that could write. A convincing, if mediocre, essay at the end of the semester points to the necessity of not going in that direction. In our classrooms.

Kelly Elkins

Right. Or asking a multiple choice exam question on an, especially on a hybrid or or an online course where it can easily be. You know, googled. Or searched in a search engine or. Input it into this kind of. Generator like chat, GTP. GP and I think that I think we can revisit right revisit what? Are these skills we want?

Teresa Valais

And that's really the where you begin, I mean.

Kelly Elkins

And I and I think you. Know we had a conversation recently, Theresa. About how it can also. Help people with skills that maybe are just hard for them, right? So if if English is not your first language. And and you need. Some help cleaning up some text. This could be a great. Tool right or or if a student is not very? Good at spelling. This could basically be a very fancy spell checker or grammar checker, right?

Teresa Valais

It's a note it's it's.

Kelly Elkins

We've had other tools already, you know that. Are and we could. Talk about some of them here by name, but there are other. Tools that are you can find on the Internet that will do these kinds of things. So I think it just brings it maybe one step further.

Teresa Valais

Absolutely. And in particular, my background is in language acquisition. So I've certainly worked with many students, in particular in English as non-native speakers of English. And that notion of noticing activities, well, absolutely noticing the accuracy of forms. Through the use of. GPT would be a fabulous activity and a formative type of low, low risk, low stakes assessment, absolutely.

Kelly Elkins

It would be yes. And using it to evaluate. Frequent this is.

Teresa Valais

Well, we certainly have opened up and discussed quite a bit about the ongoing dynamicism of chat TBT in our world and in even at the FACET, we have had several or couple panel discussions and invited the faculty. FACET also is supporting faculty with ChatGPT through our one stop shop. As a matter of fact, we have a go to resource for faculty with sample syllabus language. If you are choosing to allow some. Use of chat TPT in. Your class or. Even if you are not. Using it so please check that out. Also there are helpful considerations for assessment just as Kelly spoke about.

Kelly Elkins

And you know, and you do every day and fast interested in. Faculty, faculty needs and serving, serving, and working with the. Faculty. So we're going. To survey faculty, continue to provide faculty support and training and workshops. Sam and Sam and I are endeavoring to to work on this a bit this summer. Work on a workshop. For faculty, and we'll be reaching out to some of you who are indicated interest in this area for sure.

Samuel Collins

And I I think. We might use the opportunity to also invite people to. Talk to us. And let us. Know what you're. Thinking about doing. And you know, there's no reason why you yourself can't be a leader in your department or College in terms of what's going on. At the very least. Had that conversation with yourself and your colleagues had that conversation with your students and talk about, you know what this might mean and ways to navigate it, what might be the best practices from your perspective?

Kelly Elkins

Right. And we never would have imagined, right? The World Wide Web when? It was first. Generated or conceived that we'd be doing? A lot of. Our shopping on it, a lot of our communication on it. Among other things. Using it as a news source. So I think I. Think that some of these things you know. We don't know where it's going.

Speaker

To go so.

Kelly Elkins

It's it's really important for us to stay abreast of the changes. And you were right, agreed.

Teresa Valais

So before we wrap things up, I wanted to invite you to speak about anything more you'd like to add.

Samuel Collins

So you know as. An educator that's been around for. A while I can tell you. That we will. Continue to see. Earth shaking changes of 1 sort or another and you know our our reaction to them can be sky is falling, they can be look at this potential. They can be, you know, this is going to be the end of our classroom or not. But you know, ultimately the world around us does not stay the same. That does not mean that we need to. To be accepting of everything that develops. I think that it's that combination, you know, we we have to, we have no other choice but to adapt to the world in which we live and teach the. Students who come to our classes. On the other hand, we can still be critical and you know going forward we can try to to demand that whatever. AI agents may be introduced that they. Be human centered AI agents.

Kelly Elkins

And please use them ethically. They've got new guidelines coming out every day from our universities and professional organizations and so. We just want. To make sure that we're using ethically as.

Teresa Valais

OK. Well, we certainly want to thank our podcast guests, Professor Sam Collins and Professor Kelly Elkins, for today's being human in an AI world. Episode your contributions and body are FACET by faculty for faculty tagline. And to our audience, we would like to thank you for tapping into our faculty success, higher Ed Conversations podcast series. The FACET Podcast series generates conversations on important topics that support faculty, professional growth, and student success at Towson University.