POTOMAC
DEBATE ACADEMY
FIND YOUR VOICE

AI in Debate: Responsible Use for Thinking Students



with Matt Stannard
Director of Debate



Since 2014, Potomac Debate Academy has served THOUSANDS of students, and they have won HUNDREDS of awards at speech & debate competitions

potomacdebate.com

U.N. Seeks Relevance on A.I. as the U.S. and China Race Ahead

Artificial intelligence is a race solely between two rival powers with the rest of the world largely on the sidelines, foreign policy experts said.

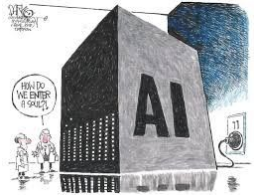
Yahoo Finance

The future of AI growth rests on Big Tech's cash flow tripling to $2 trillion: Chart of the Day

How China's Leader Plans to Win the Future With A.I.

A decade ago, Xi Jinping asked if China could master A.I. His push is remaking the economy, challenging the U.S. and keeping society under control.

9 MIN READ





AI is appearing everywhere, shaping our economic and political world.



CNBC

AI is killing the grunt work, forcing companies to rethink entry-level hiring

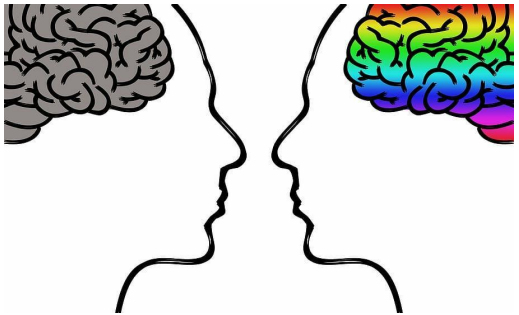


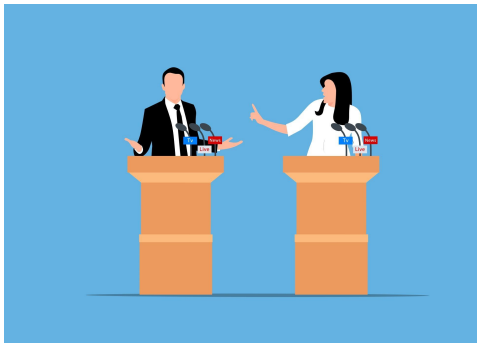


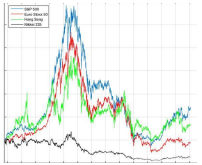
It's also shaping education

. . . in predictable and unpredictable ways.

Many educational metrics, including those used in speech and debate, are based on different success criteria than those driving R&D decisions around AI development.







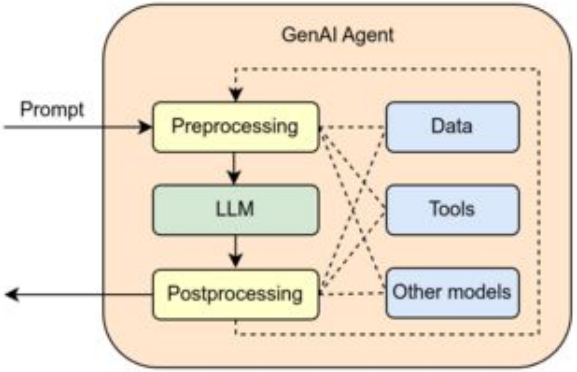


LLM Overreliance

…when students default to AI for thinking, writing, or decision-making, weakening their independence, judgment, and ability to struggle productively with complex tasks.



Large Language Models (LLMs)



LLM: Large language model that generates human-like text from learned patterns.

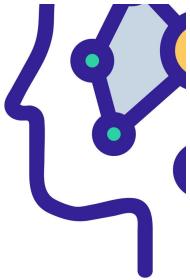
Hazards of LLM Use in Education

Cognitive Surrender: Students offload core intellectual tasks to LLMs, impairing independent recall and personal academic agency, according to a MIT Research Report.
Loss of Deep Processing: Students mistake grammatically flawless machine outputs for true underlying logic, substituting statistical text prediction for genuine critical reasoning and deep processing, according to the Stanford University SCALE Initiative.
Metacognitive Laziness: LLMs eliminate the challenging, intentional phase of information processing, creating a false illusion of mastery, according to pedagogical research by Aru & Laak.
Fabricated Content: Because LLMs prioritize linguistic probability over factual accuracy, students inadvertently absorb and propagate entirely fabricated content, according to the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.
Educator Burnout: Teachers are left to manage all this, often without any guidance but under pressure to conform to expectations of AI integration into classroom tech. Massive teacher burnout occurs, according to the Cornell Ann S. Bowers College of Computing and Information Science.



…but some unexpected benefits…

There have also been some unpredicted benefits to LLMs. In some cases, it helps students engage more, encourages risk-taking and curiosity, strengthens meta-cognition, and pushes some learners toward higher-order thinking.



Journal of Intelligence MDPI

J Intell. 2025 Dec 5;13(12):160. doi: 10.3390/jintelligence13120160

Does Generative Artificial Intelligence Improve Students' Higher-Order Thinking? A Meta-Analysis Based on 29 Experiments and Quasi-Experiments

Yan Zhao [1], Yuhe Yue [1], Zhonghua Sun [1,*], Qiang Jiang [2], Gangsheng Li [3,*]

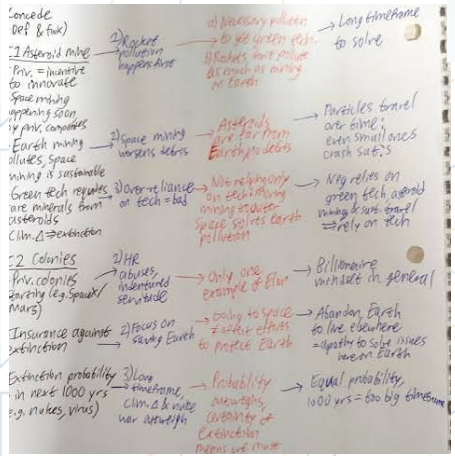
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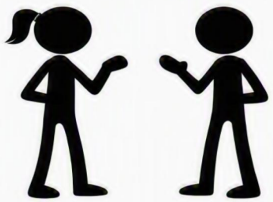
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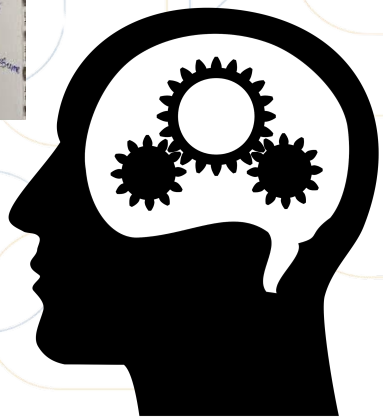
Abstract

The widespread application of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen-AI) is transforming educational practices and driving pedagogical innovation. While cultivating higher-order thinking (HOT) represents a central educational goal, its achievement remains an ongoing challenge. Current evidence regarding the impact of Gen-AI on HOT is relatively fragmented, lacking systematic integration, particularly in the analysis of moderating variables. To address this gap, a meta-analysis approach was employed, integrating data from 29 experimental and quasi-experimental studies to quantitatively assess the overall impact of Gen-AI on learners' HOT and to examine potential moderating factors. The analysis revealed that Gen-AI exerts a moderate positive effect on HOT, with the most significant improvement observed in problem-solving abilities, followed by critical thinking, while its effect on creativity is relatively limited. Moderation analyses further indicated that the impact of Gen-AI is significantly influenced by experimental duration and learners' self-regulated learning

The Role of Speech and Debate







Potomac Debate Academy's Role

Our Role at PDA is to be ADVOCATES for our STUDENTS

Teach independent critical thinking

Caution on hazards of relying on AI technology

Teach & demand responsible AI use (which sometimes means non-use!)

Potomac Debate Academy's Role

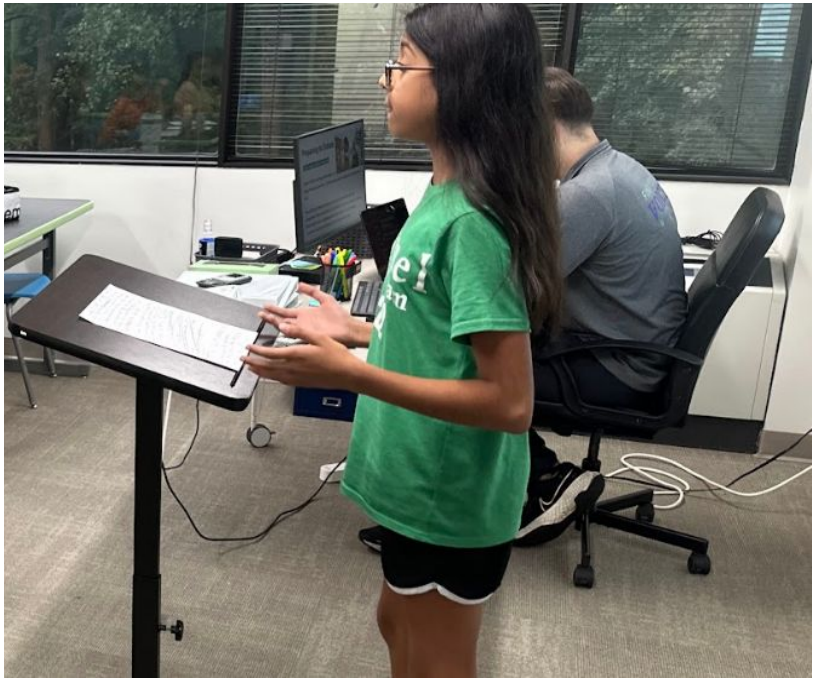
The PERFORMATIVE and INTERACTIVE foundations of Speech & Debate make it a vital tool for students to navigate this world.

Teach independent critical thinking

Caution on hazards of relying on AI technology

Teach & demand responsible AI use (which sometimes means non-use!)

Speech & Debate is ITERATION



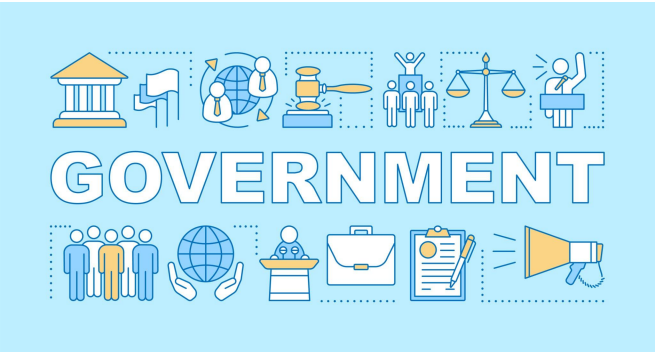
Speech and Debate maximize student agency and voice by focusing on ITERATION, or the public presentation of argument.

Debate CLASH = Productive Friction

- Debate is a cycle of: prepare → clash → collapse → rebuild → weigh → defend. Confront what didn't work and try again.
- Crossfires and Speech Q&As require internal understanding of subject matter.
- Students experience productive discomfort.
- LLMs can generate content, but they can't choose what to prioritize, what to drop, or how to frame a round. Strategy is struggle.



Speech & Debate RESEARCH builds awareness of politics & economics of AI



- Students often debate topics, or write speeches, that lead them to research large SYSTEMS of our economic, political, and ideological structures.
- The current NSDA Public Forum topic is on hyperscale data centers, and whether there should be a moratorium on new builds.
- Debate teaches critical thinking, institutional analysis, and large-scale scenario thinking.
- Understanding AI as a *product* and *social phenomena* leads us to view it more critically and objectively.
- Students will think about how laws are made and changed.

Speech & Debate: Checks on LLM Overreliance

- Speech and Debate contain checks (judges, opponents, audience) to raise issues where it looks or feels like AI is being misused.
  - not always hard, fast, dire rules; sometimes it can be feedback and conversation
  - but leagues and official tournaments do have rules that students must learn and adapt to or face disqualification

NSDA
AI-Generated Text: Not allowed
AI as Evidence: Prohibited
During Rounds/Prep: No live AI use
AI can help locate human-authored sources; students must provide the original article.



NCFCA
AI-Generated Text: Not valid evidence
AI as Evidence: Prohibited
During Rounds/Prep: Electronic/AI tools banned (Rule A4)

UDCA (Utah)
AI-Generated Text: Not allowed
AI as Evidence: Prohibited
During Rounds/Prep: No AI use

OSDA (Ohio)
AI-Generated Text: Not allowed
AI as Evidence: Prohibited
During Rounds/Prep: No AI use
AI may guide research; original human sources required.

PDA's direct curriculum on AI/LLM Use in Debate includes:

Informing students that judges consistently report that AI-written speeches:

- Sound flat and over-polished
- Lack real weighing
- Don't respond to the arguments in the round
- Feel "off" in tone and pacing

And judges don't like it. It signals disengagement and shortcuts.
It feels like cheating.



Discussing the nature of the tech itself:

- LLM-generated "debate" sounds like debate that lacks understanding of itself, *because AI & LLMs don't really "understand" anything.*
- LLMs aggregate all the text inputs and then come up with the "typical" content. Why be typical?

Listening to our most successful students…



A Supplement, Not A Replacement

- Katherine: PDA Coach and former successful debater
- Veer and Anthony: High School debaters for PDA who qualified to Silver Tournament of Champions (TOC) as frosh.

"I've honestly never seen a good team use AI in a round and do well."
"...they end up almost never succeeding on the circuit."
"...the quality that comes out of [ChatGPT] is not very good."

Let's listen to them in their own words!

Curricular Policies & Best Practices

AI & LLM Best Practices for Debate

PDA Curricular Policy

- Everything a speaker/debater says in their speeches should either be their own words or the cited words of a verified source.
  - *No LLM is a legitimate source*
- Students should never directly read from LLM-generated text in a debate.
- Classroom coaches and speech & debate judges should tell students when it sounds as if they are doing so.
- Judges should not use LLMs to write decisions/feedback or substitute AI for their own engagement with the round.

Curricular Best Practices

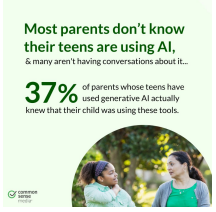
- Reward original drafting, revision, and live adaptation.
- Train our judges to provide comparative and specific analysis with their decisions.
- Require evidence tracing and source verification to avoid inaccurate data/misinformation.
- Emphasize natural consequences and conversational approach to correcting students' misuse of AI.

Resources for Families



Resources







- Common Sense Media offers a comprehensive Parents' Ultimate Guide to Generative AI alongside targeted advice on how AI is altering student thinking.
- The Brookings Institution published a foundational set of Tips for parents: Raising resilient learners in an AI world.
- The Center for AI in Education FamiliesHub focuses entirely on keeping human judgment at the center of learning. It provides 10 highly practical sub-guides designed to stop AI from replacing effort
- AI for Education provides a comprehensive guide focused on academic integrity, teaching families to differentiate between "helper tools" and "shortcut tools".


Thank You!