RUN LEARNING AND TEACHING AWARDS 2025

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Title: Crisis to Innovation Learning WITH AI, Not FROM AI: Transforming Higher Education

Abstract: The rapid emergence of AI in higher education created an academic integrity crisis but also presented an opportunity for innovation. Across two first-year nursing cohorts, totalling around 420 students, substantiated AI-related breaches dropped from 82 cases before structured AI integration to 8 afterwards. That's a 90% reduction.

Rather than banning AI or allowing unrestricted use, we chose a third way: reframing AI as a scaffold for learning. Guided by Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, we positioned AI as a cognitive partner to foster critical engagement and independence. Drawing on the scaffolding principles of Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), we developed a three-stage model in which students first explored AI's capabilities, then engaged in practice using AI ethically with guidance, and finally reflected on its role in academic and professional contexts.

Eight focus groups involving 48 students revealed six themes that showed growth in digital literacy, writing confidence, and academic integrity. These gains were notable for students using English as an additional language, highlighting AI's potential to bridge language and learning gaps. This theory-driven, evidence-based approach offers a scalable model for higher education, showing how AI can be integrated ethically and effectively to enhance student learning while maintaining academic integrity.