Rewriting knowledge: a qualitative study of students' personal epistemology and writing practices in the age of AI

Luzia Jelinek

Universität Wien
Universitätsring 1, 1010 Wien
luzia.jelinek@univie.ac.at

1 Introduction

Personal epistemology—the beliefs people hold about the nature of knowledge and knowing—develops over time as learners encounter new challenges and contexts. Research in the field has focused in particular on the epistemological development of students over the course of their studies. While resulting models are heterogeneous, a common throughline traces a progression from viewing knowledge as absolute truth guaranteed by authorities to a more complex, relational conception of knowledge Römmer-Nossek (2017).

Recent work has begun to connect these frameworks to academic writing. Römmer-Nossek proposes that because the act of writing requires continual commitment to concrete positions, academic writing practices foster epistemological development, and personal epistemology is interdependent with the development of a strong authorial voice Römmer-Nossek (2017). This aligns with the enactivist view that writing is not merely a vehicle for pre-formed ideas but a cognitive, developmental activity through which knowing is enacted—suggesting that writing and knowing are mutually constitutive rather than separable skills. As Menary puts it, "Writing is thinking in action" Menary (2007).

The widespread adoption of LLMs is reshaping both writing and knowing (in universities and in society at large), sparking debate about the nature of this "epistemic shift" Shin (2026) and its potential consequences.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines how LLMs are being integrated into students' personal epistemologies and how this integration may influence their developmental trajectories as writers and knowers. The core question is whether existing models of epistemological development adequately accommodate AI-mediated practices or whether a distinct dimension is emerging that theories and pedagogy must address.

2 Methods

The goal of this study is not to produce generalizable results, but to gain an understanding of students' subjective experiences. Therefore I interviewed 6 students from different disciplines in 30 min sessions each. Of these 6 students, 3 were currently enrolled in a BA and 3 in an MA-programme at the university of vienna and all of them had already at least written a bachelors thesis. The relatively small number of interviewees will allow for in-depth analysis while still being feasible for the scope of this project. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on students' beliefs about knowledge, writing and AI in separation and also in their relation to each other. Questions about their experiences, practices and routines in these domains were integrated, as well as their views about the utility and ethicacy of LLM-usage in academic contexts. A few questions about their own epistemologic development (in retrospect) were included, but the primary focus was on their current personal epistemology.

Interview transcripts will be analyzed using thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke. The goal of the qualitative analysis is to identify patterns linking conceptions of knowledge, perceived epistemic authority and writing practices. Coding will proceed iteratively, combining deductive codes grounded in prior literature on epistemological development and academic writing with inductive codes interpreted from the data.

The interview participation was voluntary and all data will be pseudonymized in the transcripts.

3 Discussion

The findings of this study can illuminate students' views on AI in relation to writing and knowledge, showing how AI is embedded in their practices and personal epistemologies from an enactive perspective. These insights are valuable not only theoretically but also for universities (and writing centers) adapting to the AI era.

References

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