

FACULTY CASE STUDY

Using AI to Build Judgment, Not Replace It

How one university library rebuilt its research teaching around AI — and what it changed about the skills students actually leave with.

FEATURING

Megan Heuer

Director of Educational Initiatives, Southern Methodist University Libraries

Megan Heuer has spent her career teaching students to find and evaluate information. She is the Director of Educational Initiatives at Southern Methodist University's libraries, the liaison to its political science and public policy programs, co-designer of the university's Information Literacy Certificate, and author of a forthcoming research paper on how students read while they search.

On the topic of AI in the classroom, accuracy matters to her. But she sees a bigger problem, one that predates AI: research tools were already failing students before it showed up.

What AI Search Is Actually For

Heuer can walk into any library database and get what she needs, but only because she has spent a career learning to think the way the machine thinks. Most students never will. "We could teach until the end of time," she says, "and students will still not know how to find things." Instruction cannot scale to every freshman, and the students who struggle most are the ones drowning in results from searches they did not know how to run.

That reframe is why she adopted Consensus in her teaching. Her image for it is a student throwing a dart at a dartboard: rather than train them to aim from a distance, she moves the target closer.

> **"I just brought the dartboard closer, so they can think a little more about what's actually relevant, because they're less overwhelmed by everything else."**
>
> MEGAN HEUER

The payoff is not less teaching but different teaching. Cutting the time students spend fighting search syntax frees class time for the work she considers central: teaching students how to evaluate sources, judge relevance, refine their topics, and understand how a body of research fits together. This is especially important in the early stages of the research process where discovery is more fluid and open-ended, and you can still move to traditional databases when you require more specificity and control.

The Assignment: From Broad Topic to Concept Map

Her core assignment asks students to develop a research question on a broad topic, say gerrymandering in the United States. Before writing any question, the student has to learn the shape of the existing research, because, as she puts it, "ideas don't come out of a vacuum. They can't come up with some great focused research question out of nothing."

The deliverable is a concept map: a diagram the student draws by hand, with the field's subtopics as nodes and lines showing how they connect. Building one forces students to categorize what they find and to see the field as a structure rather than a list.

The problem was that novices rarely got far enough to start. Inferring a field's structure from pages of unsorted database results is an expert skill, and first-year students would stall on it, spending the session fighting the interface and scrolling lists of results instead of thinking about the field.

So the assignment now opens with a sequence of prompts in Consensus. She starts students broad, then makes them iterate: ask a narrower question, then narrower again, until they are working inside a subtopic of a subtopic.

> **Map the field.**
> `"What are the areas of research within gerrymandering in the United States?"`

> **Drill for specificity.**
> `"How does gerrymandering affect voter turnout?"`
> `"Does gerrymandering reduce turnout among young voters specifically, and do studies disagree?"`

Then come two lessons a traditional database cannot demonstrate. The first is disagreement. Students take a claim and prompt for the studies that contradict it. "That, particularly in databases, is impossible," she says, and it solves a problem she sees constantly: the student who cannot find counterevidence for their argument.

> **Hunt the counterargument.**
> `"Show me studies that disagree with this."`

The second is time. She prompts for how research on a topic has changed, which teaches the concept the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy calls scholarship as conversation: knowledge as an ongoing exchange rather than a stack of isolated facts. Colleagues who teach first-year writing use the citation graph to put that conversation on screen to show how papers connect and reference each other.

> **Trace the conversation.**
> `"How has research on this topic changed over time?"`

Then choose a paper and show the citation graph in Consensus, to demonstrate how previous papers are connected to new ones.

> **"It's like seeing the visualization of the conversation. I use that as a teaching point."**
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> MEGAN HEUER

Preventing AI from becoming a crutch

Heuer will not blame AI for the reading problem. Students' reading skills were declining before these tools arrived, driven by phone use, internet reading habits, and what they carried up from K to 12. What AI adds is a way to fake the reading.

> **"AI becomes a crutch for students not reading."**
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> MEGAN HEUER

Students who once skipped course readings can now pretend to have done them by dumping the text into a chatbot. Her answer is not a ban but a drill she runs in class: read the abstract, decide whether it is relevant, defend the decision. "No matter what the AI does," she tells students, "you still have to be able to read the summary and judge it." An abstract has always demanded the same evaluative reading an AI summary does now; the underlying skill has not changed.

Her larger argument is the one faculty can build a syllabus around: evaluation cannot be delegated to a machine by someone who has not developed it, because using AI well consists of evaluating what it returns.

> **"You ultimately don't know anything. You have to develop those evaluative skills to begin with."**
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> MEGAN HEUER

Consensus fits this classroom because it works in the same direction as her teaching. It does not write the paper; it searches peer-reviewed literature and returns targeted summaries of what the research says, with every claim linked to its source. For a student, that summary is not a way around the reading but a way into it: a short, readable account of the state of the research that points them to the specific papers worth their attention. It strengthens the judgment it depends on; it does not replace it.

Designing the Assignment So It Holds

Heuer also runs a faculty cohort program, with a $1,000 stipend, to redesign research assignments that chatbots cannot fake.

Its most transferable finding is about assessment: if you want students to read, the reading has to be graded and verified.

> **"It has to be in the assessment, and you have to check it."**
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> MEGAN HEUER

In practice, the cohort's faculty require students to turn in the annotated source itself, a PDF marked up with their own comments; they require page numbers; and they require a direct connection between every claim and the passage that supports it. The design does not fight AI with detection. It makes faking engagement more work than doing it.

A tool that helps students find the right peer-reviewed source is doing what libraries have always wanted, and several faculty at SMU now write Consensus into their assignments as a sanctioned way to use AI in research.

It is also how use spread on campus: faculty training other faculty and librarians teaching it in class took SMU from near zero to about 2,000 Consensus users in the tool's first year on campus.

Heuer's ambition is not that students search better. It is that they read more, argue more carefully, and learn to weigh evidence, skills that were under strain long before AI arrived. The tool she reaches for is the one that clears the busywork and then gets out of the way of the judgment and real learning.

Consensus

Got an idea for a resource? We'd love to hear it.

Read this alongside **Thinking Critically with AI**, a collection of classroom resources for faculty. These guides are shaped by what faculty tell us they need — if there is a topic you would like covered, or feedback on this one, get in touch.

daniel@consensus.app