

Elevating student success with Alethea: A faculty perspective

In this enlightening chat about her use of the Alethea Academic Coach, we learned the unique perspectives of a faculty member who is a classroom instructor, active researcher, and advocate of the educational uses of AI.



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A wearer of two hats, Dr. Chrissann Ruehle is a Management Faculty member at the Lutgert College of Business at Florida Gulf Coast University and served as the Provost Faculty Fellow for AI.

In the latter role, she designed and led "AI for Everyone - A Community Needs Based Initiative" at the university. She also recently took a professional development leave to explore emerging research on novel uses of AI.

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In your experience, do students recognize the importance of engaging with academically written text as part of their coursework?

I have talked with a lot of educators, and at every undergraduate level — freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors — consistently, that seems to be an issue. Students do not necessarily want to read before they come into class. This is a flipped classroom approach. Some faculty are not always comfortable with that pedagogy.

Does this lack of preparation limit students' capacity to succeed?

It is important that we teach students critical reading skills. But we also want them to develop this mindset and discipline of preparing. My students are seniors, so they are preparing to transition to the workplace. Before they enter meetings, they should review the materials. Also, they need to learn how to formulate questions. Without this education, they face the risk of walking into the workplace only to find out they have not developed the requisite skills.

Alethea: A Teaching Assistant at Scale

Academic success is rooted in students' ability to read and critically understand scholarly content. Alethea creates meaningful student engagement with academic texts through proven learning methodologies and the guidance of an AI-powered Academic Coach. It divides academic texts into bite-sized pieces and organizes them according to meaningful categories, while the chat-based coach asks questions and pushes students to think deeper and work smarter as they progress through their readings. Alethea provides the support that students need while promoting deeper understanding and critical, systematic, and reflective thinking.

How do you see Alethea come into play in this space?

I thought that Alethea would be a great way to help students acquire workforce development and academic skills. I like to think of Alethea as the training wheels on a bicycle. We are giving students skills and knowledge, and helping them "pedal" and develop confidence in their own abilities. We are training them to think, read and analyze critically.

We also teach them the meta-cognitive aspect, which is thinking about your own learning and your learning process. Alethea helps with all those elements.

Tell us about your own experience with using Alethea in your classroom.

We have a business strategy course that is the final stop for all our undergraduate business students where they synthesize and apply all the knowledge that they have acquired over the past four years. It has three components. The first one includes management theories and strategy development tools that we have to discuss. Then, the second one is case studies — seven different case studies that reinforce those management theories and strategies. The third component is the BSG (Business Strategy Game simulation), where teams of students apply their strategy knowledge and compete with students across the United States. Teams of three or four students work on managing an athletic footwear company. They receive data on operational performance, marketing, sales, human resources, production and finance, and every week they have to make a series of decisions across all those different disciplines. During the competition, I started receiving notes from the BSG faculty stating that one of our teams was in the top 100.

Congratulations! Was Alethea of any help to them in the games?

I reviewed our student perception of instruction surveys and there were questions like, "What educational resources are valuable for you? How did the instructor help your learning?" They wrote, unprompted, "Alethea really helped me to digest this information. Alethea helped me to better understand and apply this information."

After the competition ended, the teams gave a summary presentation of what they accomplished through the BSG game and at the end, I asked them, "Were you able to take any of the knowledge and experience that you gained through the industry case studies and apply them to the athletic footwear industry?" Five out of the seven teams confirmed "Yes", they could! As a follow-up, I asked, "Can you cite specific case studies where you were able to make that transference of knowledge?" They were able to recall, right there on the spot, specific case studies and concepts from the cases that helped them specifically in the BSG simulation. We believe that we have observed some transference of learning, which is really exciting.


How was Alethea leveraged in this process?

Alethea supports a three-step process for answering the critical thinking questions that are part of the assignment. One, the students log into Alethea and review the case studies and the highlights using the SQ3R method (survey, question, read, recite, and review). Two, they circle back, review each one of the critical thinking questions, identify the supporting evidence for each question, and highlight it within the case. Once they've identified the supporting evidence, they collaborate with Alethea on developing a final response to each one of those questions.

What, for you, is the main benefit of conversing with our Academic AI coach?

After reviewing the anonymized transcripts, it was apparent that many of my students were working on their cases at 11 o'clock at night or 1 o'clock in the morning. I'm in my PJs or in bed! I am not available to help them then! It is important to be able to have an entity to have dialog with and Alethea is there 24/7, and they can do it in the middle of the night when I'm fast asleep.

Now, my students still met with me during office hours, but they had already done the preliminary work with Alethea, and they wanted to take the conversation to the next level. So, I found it to be very helpful for them because they had reviewed many of the baseline facts and fundamental analysis. Then they came to me with follow-up questions, so there was a place for Alethea and I to collaborate. It was a triangulation of learning: student-bot, student-to-faculty, faculty-bot.

A young man with glasses, wearing a green sweater, is sitting at a desk in a library. He is looking down at an open book in his hands. In the background, there are bookshelves filled with books. A computer monitor is visible on the right side of the desk.

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Florida Gulf Coast University

Location:
Fort Myers, Florida

Established:
1991

Students:
16,000

What about in-class participation? Do you feel any difference in terms of engagement?

Yes. The engagement level is much higher than what I have seen previously. A significant factor is that they have read through the case before class; they have done some preliminary homework, and when they come to class, they are much more confident speaking up. That is key. They have already worked through the basics, "I do not understand this concept or I am not sure how this relates to the critical thinking question" through their interaction with Alethea. It allows them to engage at a higher level.

Alethea includes heatmaps, data reports and metrics. What insights do you gain from using these?

I want the seniors to get the experience of leading a conversation, so they are tasked with presenting some of the foundation information about a case study to kick off a conversation that they then facilitate. To help in their preparation I encourage them to use the heatmap to see how the class is assimilating or processing the case. If there are areas that students are missing, the facilitators can use that information to design discussion questions.

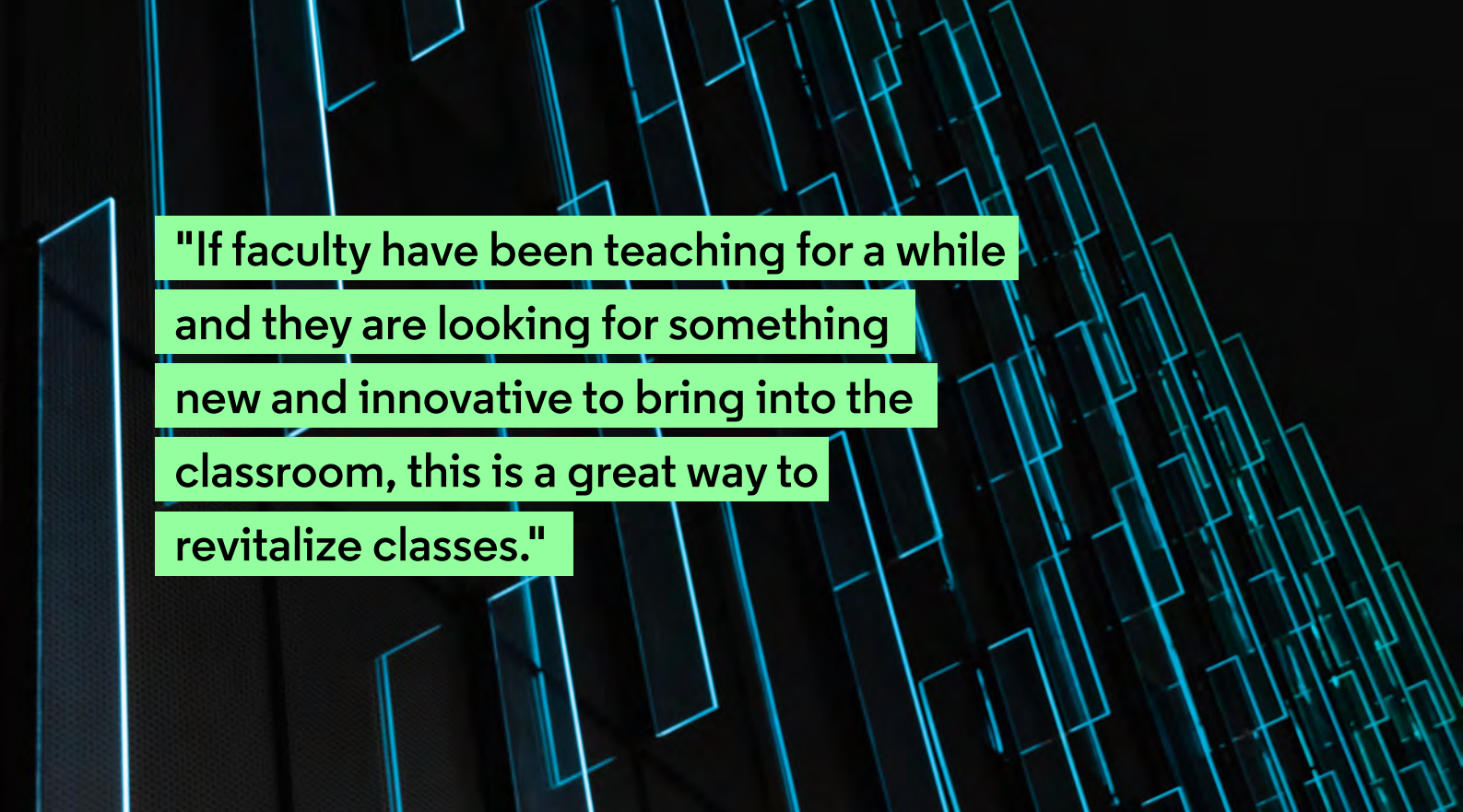
You mentioned Dr. David Jaeger, your Director of Digital Learning, is helping with your analysis of Alethea.

The Alethea team sent us all the student-coach transcripts, which were anonymized. We are reviewing these student-coach transcripts to identify any communication patterns that offer insights into the student learning process when interacting with these coaches. One of the hidden benefits of using these tools in the classroom is that the backend analytics provides valuable data for scholarship of teaching and learning research projects. When faculty have heavy teaching loads, these initiatives can present research opportunities.

We have always been champions and allies of research that relates to the education sciences, so that's great to hear.

Alethea really does pull back the blinders and helps you as a faculty member to understand how learning actually happens with your students. There is a lot of data that is captured on the student-coach interactions that can be used for research purposes. That is a big benefit for faculty that have pressure to publish.

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What about the faculty? What are you telling them, in your role as Provost Faculty Fellow for AI?

Some want to be actively involved with AI. They know that's the future and want to help prepare our students. Otherwise I say, we need to focus on raising the level of AI literacy around the university. This is a great tool for doing that and introducing AI into the class. If faculty have been teaching for a while and they are looking for something new and innovative to bring into the classroom, this is a great way to revitalize classes. Faculty do not need to be programmers. It is fairly easy to set up and become familiar with the coach. The return that faculty receives on their setup efforts is good.

You also have an active role in overseeing the AI strategy of FGCU. How do you see the role of AI in Higher Education going forward?

Yes, as Provost Faculty Fellow for AI, I had a taskforce that is primarily focused on helping our faculty learn how to teach by utilizing AI inside the classroom. We have been working diligently to recruit other faculty onboard. We have seen so much success with Alethea and have been gradually expanding our pilot into other areas. I would love to see us use it in more classes, especially courses with high DFW figures (percentage of students in a course or group of courses who receive a D or F grade, or withdraw from the course). That's a really good fit for this technology because it is a great way to engage our students. It helps them to develop study skills, critical thinking skills, and hopefully, that will keep them engaged in the courses, and motivate them to complete their degrees at Florida Gulf Coast University.

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