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Expertise First: Reflections on Informal Artificial Intelligence Mentoring in an Asynchronous Nursing Faculty Community

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Abstract

The integration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) into higher education has arrived faster than the support structures designed to help faculty navigate it. This article reflects on one faculty member's experience providing informal AI integration mentoring to nursing colleagues at Walden University, a fully asynchronous online graduate nursing program, where clinician-educators with deep disciplinary expertise often struggled to recognize that expertise as an asset in their interactions with AI tools.

Drawing on Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations theory, the article describes the mentoring approach that emerged from practice, the central insight that faculty are not failing to integrate AI because they lack technical skills but because they do not yet see their own knowledge as precisely what AI requires, and the principles that guided subsequent mentoring conversations. It also examines the limits of informal practice as a source of generalizable knowledge and describes the formal research study that grew from those limits. I argue that effective AI integration support must be grounded in faculty expertise rather than faculty deficits, asynchronous mentoring requires deliberate design, and the distance between reflective practice and systematic inquiry is one that scholar-practitioners are uniquely positioned to close.

Keywords: *generative artificial intelligence, faculty development, nursing education, asynchronous online learning, diffusion of innovations, mentoring*

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Introduction

When generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools, including large language models such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, and Microsoft Copilot, entered the mainstream of higher education in late 2022, they arrived not with a roadmap but with a disruption. Within months, university faculty across disciplines confronted

questions their training had not prepared them to answer: How should AI be addressed in course policies? What does academic integrity mean when a student can generate a competent essay in seconds? And, perhaps most unsettling, what is the value of expertise when a machine can approximate it? These questions emanated with particular force in graduate nursing education, where faculty are primarily advanced practice clinicians—deeply expert in their fields, accustomed to navigating complex and evolving knowledge domains, but often not positioned at the leading edge of educational technology adoption.

This article reflects on my experience as a faculty member in an online, asynchronous graduate nursing program, where informal mentoring conversations with nursing faculty became an unexpected laboratory for understanding how expert professionals encounter and ultimately integrate AI into their teaching practice. It is not a research study. It is a report of practice—a practitioner's account of what worked, what failed, what surprised, and what could not be answered through mentoring alone. That final point, the limit of practice as a source of generalizable knowledge, is what ultimately motivated the development of a formal research study, now under review with an institutional review board, designed to produce the kind of systematic, transferable understanding that reflective practice alone cannot generate.

It is worth noting that the online, asynchronous environment is not incidental to this story. It is central to it. All the mentoring described here occurred without face-to-face contact—through email exchanges, short instructional videos, and occasional video calls. The absence of hallway conversations, shared office spaces, and the informal proximity that facilitates mentoring in residential settings meant that every mentoring interaction had to be deliberately initiated and carefully constructed. In this sense, the challenges of mentoring faculty on AI integration and the challenges of online mentoring more broadly are deeply intertwined. Both require building trust at a distance, communicating clearly without the benefit of nonverbal feedback, and finding ways to make vulnerability feel safe across a screen.

This article addresses four areas. First, it situates the mentoring context and describes the faculty population. Second, it describes the mentoring approach and the central insight that emerged from it. Third, it examines the gap between what mentoring could accomplish and what remained unknown. Finally, it introduces the research study that grew from that gap and reflects on its implications for faculty development and online mentoring practice more broadly.

Context: Who These Faculty Are

To understand why AI integration presents distinctive challenges in graduate nursing education, it is necessary to understand the faculty. In the program in which I work, nursing faculty are overwhelmingly clinical experts first and educators second. Many hold between 25 and 30 years of advanced practice experience. Their professional identities are rooted in clinical judgment, evidence-based practice, and direct patient care, domains in which expertise is hard won, methodical, and consequential. They teach in a fully asynchronous online environment, which already places considerable demands on technological fluency; many describe themselves as not being tech savvy and acknowledge difficulty navigating the learning management systems and digital tools their teaching requires.

This profile is not unusual. Research on faculty technology adoption consistently finds that (1) prior confidence with institutional technologies predicts willingness to explore new ones and (2) where a faculty member is in their career shapes both their motivation and their sense of urgency about adoption (Mah & Groß, 2024; Rogers, 2003). Faculty approaching retirement may reasonably calculate that the investment required to integrate AI does not yield sufficient return within their remaining career horizon. Faculty earlier in their careers may feel the pressure to adopt but lack access to the kinds of mentoring structures, including formal one-on-one pairings, peer mentoring, group mentoring, and virtual or distance formats, that support

successful navigation of new technologies in academic settings (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019).

Furthermore, faculty at all stages may experience what Ertmer (1999) identified as second-order barriers to technology adoption (i.e., the internal, belief-level obstacles that resist change even when logistical conditions are favorable). These are not the practical problems of access and time but deeper ones: professional identity, pedagogical values, and beliefs about what teaching is fundamentally for (Mah & Groß, 2024). For clinician-educators in particular, these belief-level barriers often intersect with a professional identity built on hard-won expertise, making the perceived threat of AI tools feel less like a logistical inconvenience and more like a challenge to the foundations of their professional self-concept.

For clinician-educators, these second-order barriers take a specific form. A faculty member who has spent decades developing sophisticated clinical reasoning, learning to ask the right questions, interpret complex data, and make high-stakes judgments under uncertainty may experience AI tools as threatening precisely because the tools appear to perform some of those functions automatically. What creates the friction is the gap between what they know expertise requires and what AI appears to offer effortlessly. This perceived threat, I would come to understand, is the central problem that AI integration mentoring must address. It is not primarily a technical problem. It is a problem of professional identity and pedagogical confidence.

The Practice: Informal Mentoring in an Asynchronous Environment

Although Walden University provides faculty with clear AI requirements and structured professional development, including a formal Ethical AI Use Framework and a growing series of required AI literacy modules delivered through the Commons, beginning with Module 1001: Walden University Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policies and Ethical Use, with additional modules planned throughout the year (Walden University, 2026), my mentoring practice originally developed organically, without institutional mandate or formal structure. It began with individual conversations, email exchanges, brief instructional video messages, and occasional synchronous check-ins during which colleagues raised questions or concerns about AI, often tentatively and sometimes dismissively. The mentoring was responsive and relational, shaped by what each faculty member brought to the conversation and by the moment of institutional change.

My own relationship to AI was not one of effortless mastery. Although I arrived with genuine technological confidence, a characteristic that distinguished me from many of my colleagues, I encountered my own learning curve in developing effective AI prompting skills. Learning to prompt well, I discovered, required more than familiarity with the tools. It required knowing how to be specific, how to convey context, how to guide a conversation rather than simply query a database, and how to push back on AI responses using domain knowledge. This learning happened through sustained practice, deliberate experimentation, and engagement with emerging guidance on prompt design. My willingness to acknowledge this process in mentoring conversations proved to be one of my most effective tools. Normalizing the discomfort and iterative nature of early AI adoption reduced the shame that faculty often attached to their own uncertainty.

Over time, several patterns emerged from mentoring interactions. Faculty rarely resisted AI in the abstract; they resisted it in the specific. The concern was less often “I don’t believe in AI” than “I don’t see how this fits what I do” or “I’m worried my students will use it to cheat,” and those specific objections created real entry points for conversation. The academic integrity concern, for instance, opened a discussion about what it means for students to learn, which is, at its core, a pedagogical question about the relationship between process and product, effort, and understanding. Resistance, I came to see, was not an obstacle to mentoring but a resource for it.

One extended interaction proved particularly instructive. A faculty colleague maintained for a considerable period that she would not use AI in her teaching because students needed to learn as she had learned, through effort, struggle, and the gradual accumulation of knowledge through sustained practice (Bjork & Bjork, 2011). My initial approach was to demonstrate AI's utility by showing how I used it in my own work. This had a limited effect. Demonstration without application rarely moves someone whose resistance comes from values rather than ignorance (Ertmer, 1999). What eventually shifted the conversation was a different kind of question—not "Look what AI can do," but "What are you trying to accomplish in your course, and how might a tool like this serve that goal?" Starting from purpose rather than capability reoriented the conversation so the faculty member could engage with it on her own terms.

Even after this colleague began experimenting with AI, however, I observed something that became the generative insight of my entire mentoring practice. The faculty member was using AI but not using it well. Her prompts were generic. She was asking AI to produce things rather than asking it to think alongside her. The depth and precision that characterized her clinical reasoning, the very qualities that made her an exceptional educator, were largely absent from her interactions with AI. She was, in effect, treating a sophisticated intellectual collaborator like a simple search engine.

This pattern—skilled and experienced faculty underutilizing AI not because of resistance but because they were not bringing their own expertise into the interaction—was replicated across multiple mentoring conversations. It became the problem around which my practice would ultimately reorganize itself.

The Central Insight: Expertise Must Lead

The insight that emerged from practice is straightforward: faculty are not failing to integrate AI because they lack technical skills. They are failing to integrate it well because they do not recognize that their subject matter expertise is precisely what the tool needs to be useful. GenAI is not a replacement for expert knowledge. It is an amplifier of it. The quality of AI output is substantially shaped by the quality of the input, and the quality of the input depends on the ability to ask precise, contextually grounded, disciplinarily informed questions—exactly the type of questions that experienced faculty are trained to ask in their domains.

The nurse practitioner who understands the clinical landscape of a given condition, the evidence base for current treatment guidelines, the common points of patient confusion, and the pedagogical goals of a particular course unit is extraordinarily well positioned to guide an AI conversation about those topics in ways a novice simply cannot. The tool needs her knowledge. The challenge is helping her see that and trust it enough to put it to work.

A useful analogy emerged from practice and proved consistently effective in mentoring conversations. Faculty who entered the profession in the 1990s will remember the transition from keyword searching to Boolean logic in electronic database searching. Learning to search well in that era required understanding the structure of knowledge in one's field: which terms were synonymous, which were hierarchically related, which searches would be too broad or too narrow. Good searching was never a generic skill; it was always a disciplinary one. The same holds for AI prompting. The faculty member who can articulate what she knows, what she needs, and what constraints and contexts should shape the AI's response is doing something fundamentally disciplinary. Framing it that way, connecting AI prompting to skills faculty already possess and value, consistently shifted the tenor of mentoring conversations from apprehension to engagement.

This observation is not unique to nursing education. Writing from outside academia entirely, Andrey (2026) argued that AI has shifted the professional bottleneck from production to evaluation: that the scarce skill is now knowing which outputs are worth pursuing and why, a form of judgment built through years of consequential decisions. As he put it, AI is a multiplier, and multipliers are only as useful as the input. For

experienced nursing faculty, that judgment already exists, accumulated through decades of clinical practice and teaching. The task of mentoring is helping them deploy it.

From this insight, I developed a set of informal mentoring principles that guided subsequent conversations. First, meet faculty in their resistance. Resistance is informative; its specific form reveals something important about a faculty member's values and priorities, which are the raw material of effective mentoring. Second, anchor AI in purpose rather than capability. Starting with what a faculty member is trying to accomplish and working toward tools from there produces more durable engagement than starting with tool demonstrations. Third, make the expertise visible. Many experienced faculty do not recognize their own knowledge as an asset in AI interactions; helping them articulate what they know often reveals the raw material of highly effective AI collaboration. Fourth, model productive failure. My own iterative learning process with AI prompting was a genuine resource in mentoring conversations, not a vulnerability to be managed.

The Limit of Practice: What Mentoring Could Not Answer

Informal mentoring, by nature, is limited in what it can produce as knowledge. My practice generated insights, hypotheses really, about why faculty resist AI and what conditions facilitate productive integration. But those insights could not be generalized beyond the specific relationships in which they arose. I did not know whether my colleagues' experiences were representative of nursing faculty more broadly. I did not know which forms of resistance were most prevalent across the population, which faculty characteristics predicted successful integration, or what institutional structures would need to be in place for a scaled faculty development effort to succeed. I did not know, in short, what I did not know.

These gaps became increasingly apparent as my role on the AI committee brought me into conversations about program-level policy and faculty development planning. Designing support structures for AI integration, training programs, policy frameworks, and mentoring models requires knowing what faculty actually experience across a range of contexts, not what a single practitioner hypothesizes from a nonrepresentative sample of informal conversations. The distance between what informal practice can tell us and what institutional decision-making requires is precisely the space that systematic research occupies.

Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations theory provides a useful conceptual frame for this gap. It identifies the characteristics of innovations that predict adoption, relative advantage, compatibility with existing values and practices, complexity, trialability, and observability and describes the social and communication processes through which innovations spread through communities. Applied to AI integration in faculty communities, diffusion of innovations suggests that adoption is shaped not only by individual faculty characteristics but also by peer influence, institutional communication, and how compatible AI tools feel with existing pedagogical values and professional identities. My mentoring practice had, intuitively, been working on several of these dimensions, addressing complexity by reframing what AI prompting requires, improving trialability by reducing the stakes of early experimentation, and leveraging my own visible adoption as a form of observability. However, without systematic evidence about which dimensions mattered most or how they interacted within the specific population of nursing faculty in asynchronous online programs, the practice remained exactly that—practice, not policy.

The recognition of these limits coincided with a conversation with a colleague whose research expertise in AI and higher education complemented my practice-based knowledge. That conversation opened the possibility of moving from reflection to research, of taking the questions that informal mentoring had generated and pursuing them with the rigor and systematicity that institutional decision-making and scholarly contribution require. It also offered a model for the kind of collaboration that the mentoring practice itself had been advocating, bringing different knowledge domains together to produce something neither could generate alone.

From Practice to Research: The Study

The formal research proposal that grew from these mentoring experiences moves from reflective practice to systematic inquiry, framed theoretically by Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations theory. The choice of theoretical framework was a natural one; the same conceptual lens that helped make sense of individual mentoring conversations also provides the scaffolding for examining AI adoption patterns more broadly across a faculty population. What informal practice generated as hypotheses, formal research pursues as answerable questions.

I co-led this study with a research colleague who has complementary expertise in AI and higher education, a pairing that itself reflects one of the central lessons of the mentoring practice—that productive AI integration benefits from collaboration across different knowledge domains.

The pivot from informal practice to formal research represents more than a methodological shift. It represents a claim about the kind of knowledge that responsible institutional decision-making requires. The mentoring conversations that preceded this study were valuable; they generated the questions the study now pursues and informed the theoretical lens through which the data will be interpreted. However, they are not a substitute for systematic inquiry. This article, in that sense, is a provenance document—an account of how a research study came to be and why the questions it asks matter to people beyond the institution in which they arose.

Implications for Faculty Development and Academic Leadership

The trajectory described in this article, from organic mentoring practice to formal research, carries several implications for faculty development and academic leadership in higher education contexts navigating the AI transition. These implications extend beyond the specific context of nursing education, speaking to any discipline in which faculty are primarily practitioners who bring deep domain expertise to teaching but may lack the institutional support structures needed to integrate rapidly evolving technologies into their practice. At their core, they reflect a broader argument: that the most effective responses to AI in higher education will not come from top-down mandates or one-size-fits-all training programs but from the kind of grounded, relational, expertise-centered approach that informal mentoring, at its best, already models.

First, informal mentoring relationships are an underused source of research questions. The questions that most need answering in faculty development are often not generated by the literature alone but by practitioners in the middle of real institutional challenges. Academic leaders who occupy both practitioner and researcher roles are well positioned to bridge these domains, but doing so requires deliberately treating observations from practice as intellectual resources rather than anecdotal data and having the structural support to pursue those observations formally when they warrant it.

Second, AI integration support needs to be framed around faculty expertise rather than faculty deficits. The dominant discourse around faculty technology adoption tends to emphasize resistance as a problem to be overcome and skill gaps as deficiencies to be remediated. This framing misses what my mentoring experience consistently showed: experienced faculty already possess the knowledge that productive AI use requires, and the real work of support is helping them recognize and trust that knowledge as a resource. Faculty development programs that begin with what faculty already know and build explicitly on that foundation are likely to be more effective and more sustainable than programs that begin with what faculty do not know about technology.

Third, the transition from informal to formal faculty development structures requires evidence. Many institutions are currently designing AI integration programs based on general technology adoption literature, vendor recommendations, and practitioner intuition. Research that examines the specific experiences of

faculty in specific disciplinary and institutional contexts is essential for designing support structures that are genuinely responsive to what faculty actually need. The study described in this article is one contribution to that effort; it points toward a broader need for practice-based, context-sensitive research in this space.

Finally, the pace of AI development means that faculty development in this domain cannot be a one-time event. The tools are evolving, the pedagogical implications are shifting, and the institutional policy environment is in flux. What faculty need is not a training program but an ongoing community of inquiry that supports continuous learning, peer exchange, and reflective practice. The informal mentoring relationships described in this article functioned imperfectly but productively as a nascent community of inquiry of this kind.

Formalizing and scaling that model, informed by systematic research on faculty needs and experiences and responsive to the evolving landscape of AI tools and applications, represents a significant opportunity for academic leadership in the years ahead.

A final implication is specific to the online context. Mentoring faculty in a fully asynchronous environment requires intentional design. The absence of physical presence means that mentors must work harder to signal availability, build rapport, and create the conditions under which a colleague will admit uncertainty or ask for help. The 1-minute instructional video, the carefully worded email, the well-timed check-in—these are the instruments of online mentoring, and they require skill and deliberateness that in-person environments sometimes allow mentors to take for granted. Programs seeking to support faculty AI integration in online settings should invest in developing those instruments and in training faculty developers to use them effectively.

Conclusion

The integration of GenAI into higher education is not primarily a technological challenge. It is a human one, a challenge of professional identity, pedagogical values, institutional culture, and the structures through which knowledge about practice is generated and shared. This article has traced one practitioner's path through that challenge: from confident early adoption, through the humbling experience of learning to prompt effectively, through mentoring conversations that revealed how much experienced faculty have to offer AI and how little they recognize it.

That path led, ultimately, to a research question: What do nursing faculty actually experience when they encounter AI integration in their teaching? The question is deceptively simple. Answering it rigorously, in a way that can inform not just one program's decisions but a field's, requires the discipline of systematic inquiry. The research study described here is an attempt to bring that discipline to bear on questions that practice generated but could not resolve.

It is also, I hope, a demonstration of the kind of scholar-practitioner integration this journal exists to support—research that grows from practice and practice made accountable by evidence. In a period of rapid technological change, the distance between what we observe informally and what we can claim to know formally has rarely mattered more. Closing that distance, one study at a time, is among the most pressing tasks in higher education today.

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