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The Shift in Epistemic Authority in Higher Education in the Era of Artificial Intelligence: A Theoretical Analysis through Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy

Ihsanulhaq Fadhlurohman*[1], Erfanda Andi Mada Arectya[2], Kenneth Sulthon Alafi Al Hallaj[3], Eka Firmansyah[4]

[1](Universitas Muhammadiyah Surabaya, Indonesia, ihsanulhaq.fadhlurohman-2024@fkip.um-surabaya.ac.id)

[2](Universitas Muhammadiyah Surabaya, Indonesia, erfandaandi99@gmail.com)

[3](Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia, elaphy07@gmail.com)

[4](Universitas Muhammadiyah Palu, Indonesia, ekafirmansyah689@gmail.com)

*corresponding author: ihsanulhaq.fadhlurohman-2024@fkip.um-surabaya.ac.id

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ABSTRACT: *This study theoretically examines the shift in knowledge authority within higher education during the Artificial Intelligence (AI) era through the lens of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. The widespread use of generative AI among university students raises concerns regarding learner passivity and the relevance of Freire's framework in understanding this epistemic shift. Utilizing a qualitative conceptual analysis, this study examines Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed alongside indexed scientific literature from 2023-2026. The findings reveal three main patterns: a shift in epistemic authority from lecturer to AI, a transformation of learning interactions into a triangular lecturer AI student relationship, and two potential educational trajectories strengthening critical dialogue or reproducing banking education through technology. The discussion demonstrates that while generative AI cannot serve as a conscious dialogue partner, it can function as codified material or a generative theme to be critically examined. Thus, Freire's approach remains highly relevant provided AI is positioned as a spark for human dialogue rather than its final product. Ultimately, this study proposes the concept of 'shifting epistemic authority' as a new analytical framework for higher education.*

Keywords: *Epistemic Authority, Critical Pedagogy, Paulo Freire, Artificial Intelligence, Higher Education*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) technology as a learning reference has become an increasingly widespread phenomenon among university students [1]. In one survey, 82.5% of respondents agreed that AI chatbots save time in completing academic tasks, while only 17.5% disagreed [2]. Beyond this, such technology also offers lecturers the opportunity to intensify learning interaction, accelerate the delivery of feedback, and support the personalization of learning according to each student's individual needs [3].

A descriptive analysis found that the degree of student dependence on generative AI based on Large Language Models (LLMs) currently sits at a moderate level [4]. This finding sits uneasily alongside Freire's warning that oppressors make use of science and technology as a powerful apparatus for achieving their own ends, sustaining an order of oppression through manipulation and suppression [5]. In the same book, Freire insists that any political action taken on behalf of the oppressed must be genuinely educational, and for that reason must be carried out together with the oppressed themselves, not merely on their behalf [5].

Building on this warning, a recent critical study argues that generative AI has the potential to weaken learning autonomy and the critical dialogue that lies at the heart of Freire's thought, while simultaneously calling into question the assumption that technological efficiency is equivalent to learners' intellectual freedom [6]. In Indonesia specifically, the use of AI in learning continues to intensify alongside the growth of online and hybrid learning. University students increasingly turn to AI to make sense of complex material, search for academic references, and improve their study productivity. Even so, the integration of AI into learning still faces a range of obstacles, including gaps in digital literacy, uneven readiness of technological infrastructure, and concern over students' growing dependence on the technology itself [7]. Freire's humanist vision of education, meanwhile, is oriented less toward technological efficiency than toward structural and socio-political liberation [8].

This tension is not unique to Indonesia. Since the public release of ChatGPT in late 2022, universities around the world have found themselves negotiating a similar

set of questions: how to preserve academic integrity, how to redesign assessment, and more fundamentally how to understand what happens to the teacher and student relationship once a third, non-human interlocutor becomes routinely available to students at any hour, on any device, for any question. Much of the resulting scholarship has approached this problem from the standpoint of policy, ethics, or instructional design, asking what universities should permit, prohibit, or regulate. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the deeper epistemological question of what generative AI does to the authority that has traditionally underwritten the lecturer's position in the classroom: the presumption that knowledge properly flows from someone who knows to someone who is coming to know. It is this epistemological question, rather than the narrower question of policy compliance, that the present study takes as its point of departure.

Freire's critical pedagogy offers a particularly apt lens for this inquiry, precisely because it was never primarily a theory about classroom technique; it is a theory about power, voice, and the conditions under which education either humanizes or dehumanizes those who participate in it. Reading the AI-mediated classroom through Freire therefore does more than describe a new technological arrangement it asks whether that arrangement expands or forecloses the possibility of dialogue, and whether the "banking" tendencies Freire diagnosed in the traditional classroom might simply migrate to a new, more efficient host. Building on this background, the present study seeks to theoretically examine the shift in the authority of knowledge in education in the era of Artificial Intelligence through the lens of Freire's critical pedagogy in Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1972), situating higher education and university students as its principal focus of discussion.

II. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach using a conceptual analysis technique. A qualitative design was selected because the problem under study is not yet clearly bounded; it is holistic, complex, dynamic, and rich in meaning, such that the relevant social phenomena cannot adequately be captured through quantitative instruments such as tests, questionnaires, or structured interview guides [9]. The researcher's intention in this study is not to measure the extent of a phenomenon numerically, but rather to understand a social and educational situation in depth,

to identify emerging patterns, and to build a theoretical argument grounded in the tension between Freirean pedagogy and the presence of generative AI in higher education. Sugiyono further notes that a theoretical framework used as the foundation of research of this kind must satisfy three criteria: relevance to the phenomenon studied, currency of the supporting literature, and authenticity in how the framework is applied to a new empirical context [9] criteria this study has attempted to satisfy by pairing a foundational, decades old pedagogical theory with strictly contemporary (2023-2026) empirical literature on generative AI in learning.

Conceptual analysis, as operationalized here, does not proceed through the collection of new field data (such as interviews or classroom observation), but rather through the systematic examination, comparison, and synthesis of concepts drawn from a primary theoretical text and a body of secondary empirical literature, in order to construct a coherent theoretical argument that answers the study's research questions. The unit of analysis is therefore conceptual rather than behavioral: what is being analyzed is the relationship between concepts (epistemic authority, dialogue, banking education, codification, generative theme) rather than the behavior of any specific group of students or lecturers.

This study draws on two main categories of data sources. The primary source is Paulo Freire's own work, particularly Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1972), which functions as the principal theoretical foundation for analyzing the dialogical relationship among students, lecturers, and AI in higher education [5]. The secondary sources consist of indexed scientific journal articles discussing generative AI in higher education, in both international and national contexts, most of which were published between 2023 and 2026, reflecting the intensified scholarly attention to generative AI following the emergence of ChatGPT in late 2022.

The literature search was conducted systematically using combinations of keywords such as "generative artificial intelligence," "higher education," "critical pedagogy," "epistemic authority," and "student passivity," across academic databases and journal repositories accessible to the researcher. Systematic literature searching of this kind is a crucial first step in constructing a coherent

literature map: when a researcher begins with a clearly formulated research problem, the search process becomes more directed and less prone to drifting into tangential areas [10]. Following this principle, the inclusion criteria applied in this study were: (a) the source discusses generative AI in the specific context of higher education or student learning; (b) the source was published between 2023 and 2026, in order to capture the post-ChatGPT period; and (c) the source is available through an indexed and traceable academic outlet. Sources were excluded if they discussed AI in education only in passing, without direct relevance to the question of epistemic authority or the lecturer and student AI relationship, or if they could not be traced to a verifiable, citable publication.

Once relevant literature had been gathered, the data were analyzed through three interrelated stages, adapted from the general logic of qualitative data analysis. The first stage, data condensation, involved selecting and organizing the material extracted from the literature according to the two research questions above, discarding material that was descriptive of AI use in general but not specifically relevant to the question of epistemic authority. The second stage, data display, involved arranging the condensed findings into three descriptive patterns the shift in the source of epistemic authority, the change in the structure of learning interaction, and the emergence of two potential pedagogical directions which are presented in detail in the Results and Discussion section below. The third stage, conclusion drawing and verification, involved repeatedly returning to Freire's original text to verify that each interpretive claim about "dialogue," "codification," "generative theme," and "banking education" remained faithful to Freire's own conceptual definitions, rather than being loosely or metaphorically applied to the AI context. Throughout this process, Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed functioned not merely as one source among many, but as the interpretive lens through which every empirical finding drawn from the secondary literature was read and evaluated.

Because this study relies on conceptual and literature-based analysis rather than field data, its trustworthiness rests on two safeguards rather than on statistical measures of reliability. The first safeguard is source triangulation across contexts: the secondary literature synthesized in this study spans both international and

Indonesian sources, and both disciplinary settings within higher education (for instance, biology instruction and general academic writing), so that the patterns identified are not artifacts of a single national or disciplinary setting. The second safeguard is conceptual fidelity to the primary source: at every stage of interpretation, claims about what would count as "dialogue," "banking education," "codification," or a "generative theme" were checked directly against Freire's own definitions in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, rather than against secondary paraphrases of Freire found in the AI-in-education literature. This procedure was intended to guard against a common risk in theory driven qualitative work, namely that a classical theory is invoked only in name while its substantive claims are quietly diluted to fit a contemporary phenomenon. Where the fit between Freire's original argument and the AI context was imperfect as in the question of whether AI can be considered a dialogical partner this study treats that imperfection as an analytic finding in its own right, rather than smoothing it over.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Students and the Use of Generative AI in Higher Education

Based on the search and synthesis of literature on generative AI in higher education, this study identifies three main patterns describing how the presence of AI is reshaping the authority of knowledge in the learning process, while simultaneously providing the backdrop against which forms of student passivity the central concern of this study can be understood.

The first pattern concerns the shift in the source of epistemic authority itself. A number of studies report that excessive dependence on ChatGPT can diminish critical thinking ability, encourage reliance on instant answers, and heighten the risk of academic integrity violations [11]. This pattern remains largely descriptive: it demonstrates that a shift is occurring, but does not by itself establish whether that shift is accompanied by a passive or an active disposition on the part of students.

The second pattern concerns a change in the structure of learning interaction. The linear lecturer to student pattern (Lecturer → Student), which forms the basic structure of the conventional "banking" model of education as Freire describes it

[5], has developed into a triangular relationship involving AI as an intermediary (Lecturer ↔ AI ↔ Student). Structurally, this new configuration opens space for students to consult AI, verify its answers with their lecturer, or compare the explanations offered by each. However, this space for verification remains potential rather than automatic: students may realize it only if they consciously choose to re-verify AI's output, and they may just as easily forgo it altogether once an AI-generated answer is judged sufficient for completing an assignment.

The third pattern concerns the emergence of two possible directions arising from this new relationship. On one hand, AI has the potential to strengthen dialogue and critical awareness if it is positioned as a trigger for further questioning. On the other hand, AI has the potential to reinforce a new form of banking education when its answers are accepted at face value, without critical reflection [6].

This second direction appears closer to the condition of today's students: research on student dependence on LLM-based generative AI places current usage in the moderate-to-median range [4], an early indication that the consumption of AI-generated answers has not yet been matched by a comparable degree of critical verification. Within the classroom context, this tendency toward passivity manifests in at least three concrete forms: students accept AI's answer as final without confirming it with their lecturer; the answer is copied or adapted directly into an assignment without any process of restructuring; and follow up questions to the lecturer are foregone because the AI's answer is already deemed sufficient.

Taken together, these three patterns suggest that student passivity is most visible precisely where the structurally available space for verification (the second pattern) goes unused, and where AI's output is treated as a final decision rather than as material for further reflection (the third pattern) two conditions that are examined in greater depth through the lens of Freire's critical pedagogy in the following section.

Codification, Generative Theme, and the Distinction of Dialogue: Freire's Concept of Banking Education

The first pattern identified above shows that AI has begun to assume part of the epistemic authority function that was previously attached exclusively to the educator. This condition can be read through Freire's concept of the education of

the oppressed, which positions teacher and learner as equal subjects who jointly construct knowledge through dialogue, rather than through the one directional transfer of information from a knowing party to a passive one what Freire terms banking education [5]. The relevant question is therefore not merely who serves as the source of information, but whether the process of obtaining that information still leaves room for dialogue and critical reflection, or whether it instead reduces the learner once again to a passive recipient only now from a different source.

This tendency is further illustrated in a related discussion of the broader forces driving instructional innovation in higher education, which shows that the use of digital technology, including AI, is a primary catalyst behind more personalized learning systems built on the analysis of student learning behavior, immersive learning (AR/VR/MR) for grasping abstract concepts, and flipped classroom and blended learning models that provide flexible, time and place independent access to material [12]. This finding is relevant to the present study insofar as it shows that technology functions not merely as a source of benefit, but also as a material indicator of the condition underlying the shift in epistemic authority at the heart of this discussion: once access to knowledge becomes more personal and no longer necessarily flows through the teacher as a single intermediary, the teacher's position as the sole epistemic authority shifts as well [12].

Rather than settling for a verdict of AI as simply "good" or "bad" for education, this study proposes the concept of shifting epistemic authority to describe this phenomenon with greater precision. Before the presence of AI, epistemic authority flowed in a relatively linear and centralized manner from teacher to student. With AI now present, that authority becomes more distributed: AI appears as a third point directly accessible to the student, such that the teacher and student relationship is no longer the sole channel through which knowledge is legitimated. This argument does not imply that the teacher is replaced by AI, rather, it means that the relations of epistemic authority become more fluid and dispersed.

This very shift lies at the heart of the argument needed to answer the study's second research question: does this distribution of epistemic authority strengthen Freirean dialogical pedagogy, or does it instead give rise to a new form of banking education, in which AI is treated as an unquestioned source of answers? Freire

insists that genuine dialogue is an encounter between two conscious subjects who remain mutually open, in a spirit of humility and confidence in human beings' capacity to humanize themselves [5]. In this strict sense, generative AI however responsive it may appear is not a conscious subject and possesses no existential engagement in the process of "becoming" that Freirean dialogue requires; describing the Teacher–AI–Student relationship as "dialogue" in the pure Freirean sense therefore risks becoming a forced and inappropriate category.

This limitation, however, does not by itself invalidate the relevance of the Freirean framework for reading the present phenomenon. Freire never required that the material being dialogued about possess the status of a conscious subject; within his own pedagogical method, codification in the form of images, situations, or texts is used as a representation of reality that becomes the object of joint critical reading, without the codification itself acting as a subject of the dialogue [5]. By the same logic, AI's output can be positioned not as a partner in dialogue, but as a generative theme or new codified material: content that needs to be "read" critically together by teacher and student. Genuine Freirean dialogue thus continues to take place between human subjects teacher and student with AI's output serving as one of the materials being discussed, rather than as a party doing the discussing.

From this vantage point, the answer to the study's research question becomes more precise: the shift in the authority of knowledge in the AI era can indeed be read through Freire's approach, provided that AI is positioned as codified material that sparks human dialogue, rather than as a participant in that dialogue itself. Whether this shift, in practice, strengthens critical pedagogy or instead reproduces banking education in a new guise depends on the design of the pedagogical relationship that accompanies it: whether AI's output is treated as material that triggers further questioning and discussion between teacher and student (problem posing), or as a final answer that is accepted and "deposited" without critical reflection (banking).

Implications for Pedagogical Design in Higher Education

The distinction developed above between AI as a would be dialogical partner and AI as codified material or generative theme carries concrete implications for how

lecturers and institutions might design learning around generative AI, rather than simply reacting to its presence.

The first implication concerns assessment design. If AI's output is treated, as this study argues it should be, as material for critical reading rather than as a finished answer, then assignments that merely ask students to produce a correct final response are structurally vulnerable to the passive pattern described in Section 3.1: the student has little reason to engage critically with an AI-generated answer if the task rewards only the answer itself. Assignments redesigned around problem posing for instance, asking students to generate an AI response and then interrogate its assumptions, identify what it leaves out, or compare it against a lecturer's own account restore precisely the dialogical space that a purely output oriented assignment forecloses.

The second implication concerns the role of the lecturer within the triangular relationship identified in the second pattern of Section 3.1. Rather than positioning the lecturer as a competitor to AI for the position of "authoritative source," Freire's framework suggests that the lecturer's distinctive and irreplaceable role is to convene dialogue to ensure that whatever material AI introduces into the classroom becomes an occasion for students and lecturer to think together, rather than a substitute for that joint thinking. In this sense, the lecturer's authority does not disappear under conditions of distributed epistemic authority; it is relocated from being a source of answers to being a facilitator of the critical reading of those answers, a role Freire's pedagogy in fact anticipates in its emphasis on the teacher as a co-investigator alongside students rather than a depositor of knowledge [5].

The third implication concerns institutional policy. Universities responding to generative AI have tended to focus on detection and prohibition, treating AI primarily as a threat to academic integrity to be policed. The analysis offered here suggests a complementary institutional task: cultivating classroom norms and assignment structures that make the dialogical use of AI the path of least resistance for students, rather than leaving critical engagement as an optional extra that only highly motivated students are likely to pursue. Digital and AI literacy training for both students and lecturers, of the kind already being piloted in a number of Indonesian universities, is one practical mechanism for supporting this shift,

provided such training addresses not only the mechanics of using AI tools but also the epistemic question of how to read their output critically [11].

IV. CONCLUSION

Even so, describing the Teacher, AI, and Student relationship as "dialogue" requires careful scrutiny. Dialogue in Freire's sense is fundamentally an encounter between two conscious subjects who remain mutually open in a spirit of humility, trust, and hope in humanity's capacity to humanize itself [5]. Generative AI, however responsive it may be, is not a conscious subject and has no existential involvement in the process of "becoming" that Freirean dialogue requires. This absence of consciousness has a direct bearing on how banking education can take on a new form among today's students. When AI's answer is treated as a fixed and unquestionable "deposit" of knowledge, the resulting relationship is not, in truth, dialogue, but rather a newly structured form of banking education one that may even be more efficient than its traditional counterpart, since the "recipient" of knowledge can now obtain it instantly, without any human mediation between lecturer and student whatsoever.

This study's findings reveal three principal patterns. First, epistemic authority is shifting from lecturers toward AI, evident in the growing tendency of students to treat AI-generated answers as sufficient without further verification. Second, the structure of learning interaction is changing from a linear lecturer and student relationship into a triangular lecturer AI student relationship, one that structurally opens space for verification and comparison of answers, even though students do not always take up that opportunity. Third, this new relationship carries two potential directions: the strengthening of critical dialogue, when AI's output is treated as a generative theme that sparks further questioning; or the reproduction of banking education in a new guise, when that output is instead accepted uncritically as a final answer. Read through Freire's pedagogy, generative AI is best understood not as a subject capable of genuine dialogue, but as codification material for critical reading that is only meaningful when it becomes the object of authentic dialogue between lecturer and student. On this basis, the shift in epistemic authority triggered by AI does not, in itself, determine whether higher education moves toward liberation or toward a new form of oppression; that

outcome depends on whether the human relationship between lecturer and student is deliberately preserved and strengthened around AI's output, or is instead allowed to erode as AI comes to be treated as a self-sufficient source of answers.

This study also offers a practical implication for higher education institutions and lecturers: pedagogical strategies that deliberately position AI's output as a starting point for discussion rather than as its terminus are more likely to sustain the dialogical, liberatory character of education that Freire envisioned, even as generative AI becomes an increasingly routine part of everyday academic life.

This study is limited in the scope of the theoretical framework it employs. The analysis focuses specifically on Freire's critical pedagogy (1972) and related studies concerning the widespread use of AI among university students, and therefore does not explore in depth other power knowledge perspectives, such as the framework of Michel Foucault, which could potentially offer a different reading of how epistemic power operates in a more diffuse manner within students' interactions with AI systems. This limitation was adopted deliberately, in order to preserve depth and focus around a single theoretical framework, while at the same time opening space for further research that specifically tests the tension between a Freirean reading and other theoretical readings of the same phenomenon. Future research employing empirical methods such as classroom observation or interviews with lecturers and students would also be valuable in testing whether the conceptual patterns identified here through literature synthesis are borne out in actual classroom practice.

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