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CAN GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE HELP SCALE INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING?

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CAN GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE HELP SCALE INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING?

Jerrylynn Manuel

Little has changed since eLearning's last *Scope (Learning and Teaching)* publication in that we instructional designers are still on the journey of establishing ourselves within the Southern Institute of Technology (SIT) (Koller et al., 2023). Our role continues to evolve in response to the needs of individual projects and the organisation's current situation, a process consistent with the literature on this profession (Drysdale, 2019; Schwier & Wilson, 2010; Wintersberg & Pittich, 2025). The nature of our services can be best described as a mix of transactional (product focused, traditional instructional design) and transformational (pedagogical-change focused, learning design) work; the latter is the subject of this reflective piece. The terms instructional designer and learning designer are used synonymously at SIT.

eLearning became involved in facilitating pedagogical change across SIT because of the institution-wide roll out of hybrid-flexible (HyFlex) delivery. HyFlex is a delivery mode where learners decide on their method of participation: on-site, synchronously, or asynchronously. At the instructor level, due to the dynamic nature of the mode, this means rethinking how learning occurs. Instructional coaching has been our preferred method for implementing learning design choices made by the instructor. A detailed account of our instructional coaching service has been published elsewhere (Manuel & Watt, 2025). While the demand for the service has declined slightly this year, we anticipate a resurgence due to the need to offer more innovative learning experiences to ensure financial viability in this post-Te Pūkenga era. With our current level of staffing, it may not be possible or financially sustainable to offer the same degree of one-on-one assistance as what was previously supplied. Could generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) be our answer to increasing our reach in a cost-effective manner?

Given that instructional coaching is relatively new at SIT, if we are introducing GenAI, it is important to thoroughly evaluate the service for success and risk factors to avoid the ill-considered incorporation of this technology. Without the key insights provided by such a review, the benefits of human-led coaching may inadvertently be compromised for the sake of expansion. Thus, the purpose of this reflective piece is threefold: 1) to evaluate the key determinants of the service's success against the literature; 2) to synthesise research examining the relationship between AI and self-regulated learning, and 3) to propose a GenAI-augmented instructional coaching model. The hope is that the information presented here may benefit not only my own practice but that of other learning designers who are involved in institution-wide change.

INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING

A brief overview

Instructional coaching is a relationship-based system in which coaches engage with instructors to help them apply evidence-based teaching practices (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Ultimately, the goal of this interaction is to enhance teaching quality (Knight, 2017). It has often been described as more impactful than one-off workshops and other traditional forms of professional development (such as performance reviews) (Burleigh et al., 2023; Desimone & Pak, 2017; Knight, 2009). For years, instructional coaching has been characterised by cycles of observations and post-observation feedback (Joyce & Showers, 1981; Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010). In Knight's (2009) earlier version of the instructional coaching process, a more detailed approach was provided with eight defining steps. The model was later condensed into three components (identify, learn, and improve) known collectively as the Impact Cycle (Knight, 2017). Key tasks associated with respective components include goal setting, coach-led training and modelling, and implementation and evaluation of the strategy. Central to Knight's models is the belief that instructors and coaches should engage in equal partnership for collaborative relationships to be established. Knight termed this the "partnership principle" and structured it around seven tenets (equality, choice, voice, dialogue, reflection, praxis, and reciprocity) (Knight, 2009; Knight, 2017). Therefore, reflective practice and collaborative relationships function as important drivers of deep learning around one's own teaching practice.

Effective coaching elements

When large-scale, project-driven pedagogical change is required, instructional coaching has proven to be an effective catalyst for it (Ako Aotearoa, 2025; Bennett, 2017; Bennett, 2019; Desimone & Pak, 2017; Knight, 2009; Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010). In earlier work (Manuel & Watt, 2025), we established instructional coaching as an important mechanism for enhancing tutors' teaching abilities in the context of HyFlex delivery. Outside of that research, I have witnessed marked improvements in lesson planning, namely in the design of assessment-aligned instruction and tasks. This may be the result of frequent cycles of observation and feedback, and a manageable coaching workload maintained by limiting the number of instructors to support. Modelling (for instance, the sharing of exemplary digital content created by more experienced tutors) was generally underutilised by our coachees.

Compared to the findings of literature on instructional coaching, my observations suggest a much narrower range of effective coaching features. It should be recognised that the discourse on the efficacy of instructional coaching is largely dominated by research from within a certain segment of the compulsory sector in the United States (pre-K to elementary school, and reading and literacy initiatives). Critical coaching elements were found to vary across contexts. Coaching that is content specific, paired with instruction, and small in scale was claimed to enhance both teaching practices and student achievement (Kraft et al., 2018). Instruction and multiple cycles of observation and personalised feedback were described as essential by Kretlow and Bartholomew (2010). Glover et al.'s (2023) more recent work looked at the predictive power of individual coaching elements (modelling, practice, and feedback) on teachers' use of the evidence-based strategies, teaching fidelity, and student achievement. Their research revealed opportunities for practice to be a strong predictor of all outcomes. Feedback strongly predicted the first and third outcomes while modelling was found to be least effective (Glover et al., 2023). Finally, in the context of higher education, Burleigh et al. (2023) determined that the provision of high

quality, timely, regular feedback was essential for successful instructional coaching. Unlike the other studies, theirs focused solely on feedback. My observations are consistent with the studies above that highlight the importance of personalised feedback; however, more work is needed in my case to better determine the effectiveness of the individual components of eLearning's coaching system, especially their impact on student achievement.

The tutor factor

Instructional coaching has not always been welcomed by tutors. In fact, it is unclear within my setting whether its reception was positive or if participation was driven largely by compliance. Over the years, tutors have shown varying degrees of resistance. Those most defiant have often expressed discontent with their department's decisions to adopt HyFlex delivery. "Principled resistance" (the unwillingness to adopt mandated interventions) (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006) was exhibited by these individuals in behaviours such as avoiding lesson observations and lack of engagement in scheduled coaching conversations or feedback implementation; and in attitudes including scepticism towards the degree of organisational support promised (such as time release for professional development). Workload issues have often been cited as a barrier to engagement, while teaching experience and subject area did not seem to be important factors. Often, it is those with an orientation towards the scholarship of teaching and learning who actively seek eLearning's services despite having similar work conditions as others. My speculation is that participation in instructional coaching may be heavily influenced by intrinsic motivation rather than external conditions.

One study by Jacobs et al. (2018) specifically explored why teachers chose not to engage in instructional coaching. Contrary to what I have observed, teaching experience and subject area were found to be important determinants of coaching participation. According to Jacobs et al. (2018), those more experienced (with more than 10 years of teaching experience) and from the science field were more resistant to coaching than their less experienced and social science and language arts counterparts. Similarly, the authors identified three categories of resistant teachers: 1) those resistant to coaching time (the time involved in communicating and engaging with their coaches), 2) those resistant to the initiative, and 3) those resistant to implementing feedback. Aside from competing demands with teaching duties, little explanation was offered for why teachers devoted little time to coaching. Jacobs et al. (2018) go on to state that resistance to the initiative and to coaching may be mutually exclusive issues and that they should be dealt with separately; I have tended to believe that the former is the cause of the latter. It is also worth noting that there was no difference in the overall quality of teaching between the resistant and receptive groups in Jacobs et al.'s study. This led the authors to question the extent of coaching required by all participants and suggest that alternative supports be made available. As the majority of the participants were experienced teachers, the authors suggest that resistance may be due to their lack of interest in changing their methods. I have made a similar observation with our cohort of coachees, as some were able to apply best practices with minimal to no assistance from eLearning. What this all suggests is that the experiences described within SIT are unremarkable. Something I have not considered is whether non-participants are involved in peer support and knowledge sharing elsewhere. This is something that I will look into in the future. Perhaps, AI could serve as a useful tool to enhance coaching by acting as an alternative to the coach.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AI AND SELF-REGULATED LEARNING

As recognised above, cycles of observation and feedback are a valued part of eLearning's instructional coaching model. Rather than as a means of one-way transmission of my criticism, these cycles function as opportunities for scheduled, guided reflection by the coachee. However, for instructors to reap the benefits of it they must be willing to engage. In the remaining part of this piece, I will describe how AI may be leveraged to expand support options for participants while preserving the effectiveness of key coaching elements.

The provision of personalised feedback and an individual's intrinsic motivation are both reflected in the theoretical concepts of self-regulated learning (SRL), personalised learning, and self-determination theory. According to self-regulated learning theory, students are active participants in their education through the setting of goals (forethought phase), the act of learning and monitoring their progress (performance phase), and the evaluation of their performance (self-reflection phase) (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009). Personalised learning refers to an individualised learning experience where the instructor uses educational theory, their expertise, and learner data to adjust instruction to better meet the needs of their learners (Shemshack & Spector, 2020; Walkington & Bernacki, 2020). Self-determination theory asserts that when students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are met, intrinsic motivation is enhanced (Ryan and Deci, 2020). According to Lan and Zhou (2025), self-determination theory may be situated within the forethought phase of SRL.

In my view, there exist parallels between Knight's Impact Cycle and SRL; the first two and the final stages of the Impact Cycle may be categorised within the forethought, and performance and self-reflection phases, respectively. What is more, Knight's model may be used to operationalise SRL by guiding instructors through the process of goal setting, performance monitoring, and self-refection. Several studies have explored the relationship between AI and SRL (Achuthan, 2025; Fan et al., 2025; Lan & Zhou, 2025; Li et al., 2026; Sharma et al., 2025; Q. Xu et al., 2025; X. Xu et al., 2025; Zhai et al., 2024). With SRL being the common link between instructional coaching and AI, I am suggesting that the literature on SRL may be used to guide AI adoption in an instructional coaching context. The impact of AI on SRL and a proposed AI-augmented instructional coaching model are described below.

The facilitative role of AI in self-regulated learning

While there is limited information on the role of AI in supporting self-regulated learning in higher education, several reviews have sought to clarify the relationship between the two. Lan and Zhou's (2025) qualitative systematic review determined that all AI tools studied had some effect on the different stages of SRL and that the impact appeared to be tool specific. For instance, due to their ability to provide real-time guidance, chatbots were found to support the performance stage. Moreover, seven out of the 14 studies included in the review focussed mainly on performance support. In Achuthan's (2025) systematic meta-analysis, AI interventions (such as the use of conversational and interactive systems like ChatGPT) yielded strong, positive effects on all SRL stages. Compared to the other stages, the positive effect on forethought was most pronounced while a small but statistically significant positive effect was noted for self-reflection. The effect on performance was found to be dependent on context. In studies related to personalised learning, the AI-SRL relationship is more implied. For instance, in Sharma et al.'s (2025) systematic review, affordances associated with the use of large language models in learning (for example, immediate guidance, emotional and motivational support, and in some cases enhanced critical

thinking skills) appear to align within the three stages of SRL. In terms of the association of AI-driven personalised feedback and students' goal achievement, self-efficacy, and engagement, Q. Xu et al. (2025) reported a moderate to strong effect on each. When mapping to SRL, goal achievement and self-efficacy may be associated with forethought and engagement to perform. In a self-directed professional development context, GenAI was reported to have helped reduce the inertia of starting tasks such as course design, and to have enhanced the reflective practice of teachers (Li et al., 2026). Taken together, the data suggests the following associations: GenAI-forethought and GenAI-self-reflection. Overall, the reported positive effect on forethought was consistent across most of the studies evaluated.

The negative effects of AI on self-regulated learning

Despite the reported benefits described above, several studies have drawn attention to the adverse and limiting effects of AI on SRL (Achuthan, 2025; Fan et al., 2025; X. Xu et al., 2025; Zhai et al., 2024). In Zhai et al.'s (2024) systematic review of the impact of AI dialogue systems on students' learning in higher education, the authors surveyed concerns around the potential decline of students' cognitive abilities especially in the decision-making, critical thinking, and analytical thinking domains. They also raise ethical issues around AI, including hallucinations, algorithmic bias, plagiarism, and privacy and transparency concerns. Rather than merely accepting AI-generated outputs at face value, the authors suggest that students approach them with a critical lens, and that the inherent flaws of AI outputs be addressed. In a similar vein, Fan et al. (2025) highlighted the risk of "metacognitive laziness" where learners offload metacognitive activities (such as orientation, planning, monitoring, and evaluation) associated with SRL to AI. In their study, those who used ChatGPT support for revision of their written assessments exhibited fewer metacognitive processes compared to those who utilised other avenues of support (for instance, human experts). Fan et al. (2025) concluded by proposing scaffolds to support active learning. X. Xu et al. (2025) found that the provision of metacognitive support to college students in GenAI learning environments enhanced their SRL abilities, particularly in task strategy, help seeking, and evaluation dimensions; those without support saw a reduction in those same areas. The authors assert that this type of support may help students become more discerning with and less reliant on AI outputs. Finally, Achuthan (2025) concluded that the benefits of AI use on SRL are not universally applicable with participant age, and length and area of study being moderating factors.

AI-AUGMENTED INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING

What all this may mean for GenAI- augmented instructional coaching is that the application of AI should be restricted to certain parts of the coaching process and individuals, and that human involvement is needed to ensure deep learning still occurs. Models have begun to emerge that describe collaborative and supportive roles of AI in the instructor-AI relationship (Guberina & Procházka, 2026; Memon & Kwan, 2025). For instance, Memon and Kwan (2025) propose a dynamic interaction where GenAI may be used to assist students pre- and post-lesson, and teachers with lesson design. In Guberina and Procházka's (2026) co-teacher model, the teacher's authority over information and decision-making abilities are retained while AI fulfills a distinct function in the system, such as the provision of feedback based on a rubric or set of criteria supplied by the teacher. Even when adhering strictly to these authors' suggestions that GenAI remain as a collaborative partner, any proposed instructional coaching model has the potential to offer instructors (coachees) a more personalised coaching experience by widening the range of support options. The willingness by both parties (instructor and coach) to engage with GenAI

in this context is a limiting factor. Additionally, by shifting the facilitation of tasks associated with those earlier in the instructional coaching process (such as goal setting) to GenAI, there is a risk of limiting the time to cultivate instructor-coach relationships. Therefore, integration of AI must be carefully considered so as not to diminish opportunities for human partnerships to develop.

Although the integration of GenAI into instructional coaching at SIT is still far from reality, in preparation for the inevitable, a conceptualised model has been proposed (Figure 1) that draws on insights from the literature on AI and self-regulated learning.

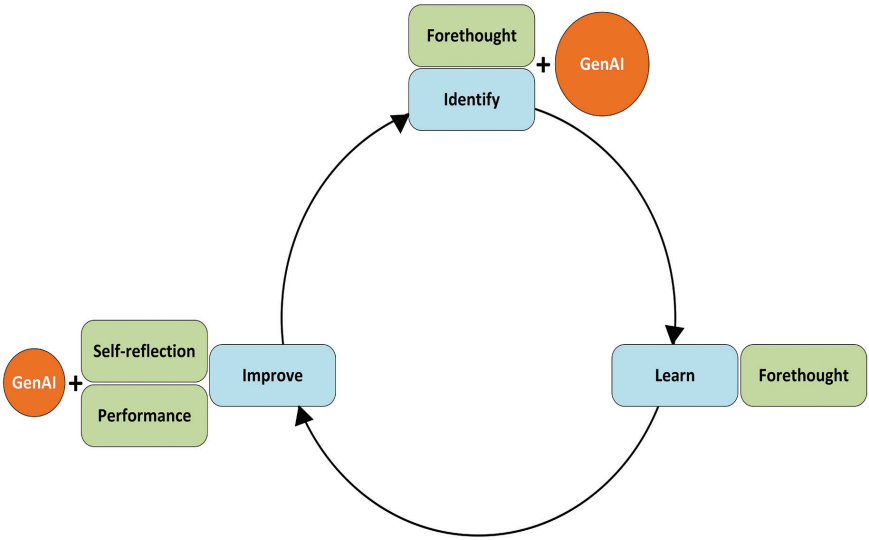


Figure 1. GenAI-supported Instructional Coaching Model. Created by the author depicting the alignment of Knight's Impact Cycle (in blue) and the self-regulatory process (in green), and the corresponding parts of the cycle that may be augmented by GenAI (in orange).

What is envisioned is that GenAI may largely support the "identify" and "forethought" phases of Knight's Impact Cycle and the SRL process, respectively. Additionally, it may serve a lesser function in the "improve" section of Knight's process. The rationale for limiting AI use in the latter part of the instructional coaching process is to help ensure that deep learning of coachees occurs through coach-led strategies, such as the provision of metacognitive support.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Overall, though some remain sceptical of its utility, instructional coaching has been useful in my setting to improve the teaching practices of those involved in HyFlex delivery. While the service is now in its fourth year, it has yet to be thoroughly evaluated. This being the case, integrating GenAI into instructional coaching at SIT is a task for the future, but the model presented here offers one possible path. To answer the question posed at the beginning of this piece: Yes, GenAI may help scale eLearning's instructional coaching service, but only incrementally, as the intention is not to replace the coach, but to use AI to help redirect the coach's efforts to the parts of the coaching process where human involvement is most valued.

Jerrylynn Manuel is an instructional designer at the Southern Institute of Technology where she supports instructors with the application of digitally enhanced teaching practices and the creation of digital learning resources. Her areas of interest include flexible and distance education, the instructor experience, and instructional coaching.

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