

From Policy Ambiguity to Guided AI Use: Graduate Students’ Sensemaking of AI Policies in Academic Practice

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DESIGN

QUALITATIVE

Graduate-student perspectives

CONTEXT

SPRING 2026

Graduate statistics course

DATA COLLECTION

ZOOM

Semi-structured interviews

ANALYSIS

4 THEMES

Open coding in MAXQDA

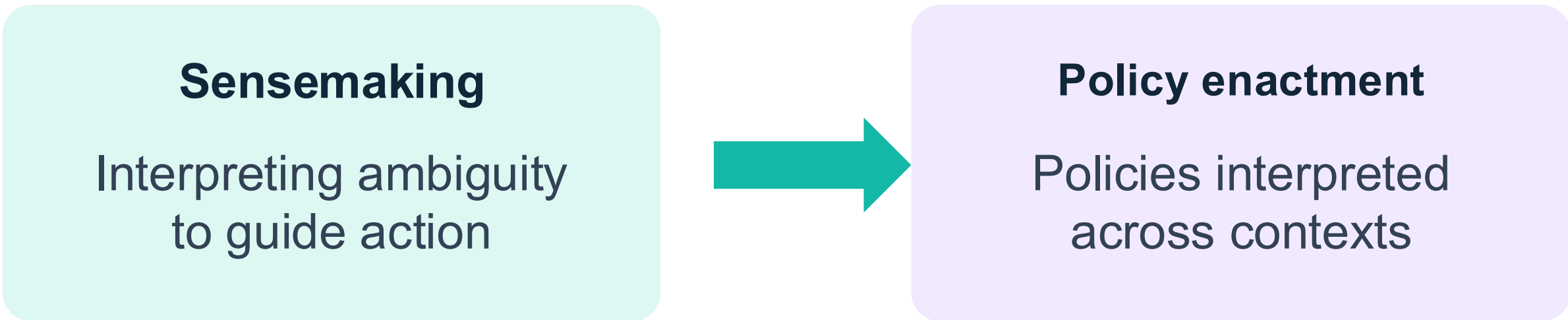
BACKGROUND

Generative AI can support writing, coding, and feedback, but evolving policies may leave students uncertain about whether AI use is acceptable, ethical, or risky. Students often rely on course-level guidance from syllabi, assignments, and instructors.

STUDY PURPOSE

Examine how policy ambiguity, instructor guidance, and clear communication shape students’ confidence, ethical concerns, and academic use of AI tools.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



AI policy is shaped through communication, interpretation, and classroom practice rather than experienced only as a fixed rule.

METHODOLOGY

- Setting: Spring 2026 statistics course at a southern U.S. university
- Participants: Graduate students primarily from agriculture, education, communication, and related social sciences
- Ethics: Institutional Review Board approval
- Data: Semi-structured Zoom interviews
- Analysis: Open coding in MAXQDA

Scope: one course, one university, and primarily social science-related disciplines

RESULTS: FOUR THEMES

1

Policy ambiguity created uncertainty
Expectations varied across professors, courses, and assignments. Students were unsure whether AI use was acceptable, ethical, or risky.
“Every professor has a different stance on AI.” · “gray area”

2

Instructor guidance legitimized AI use
Clear explanations of what was allowed—and why—shifted AI from a risky tool to a legitimate academic resource.
Clear boundaries supported “healthy and ethical skill sets.”

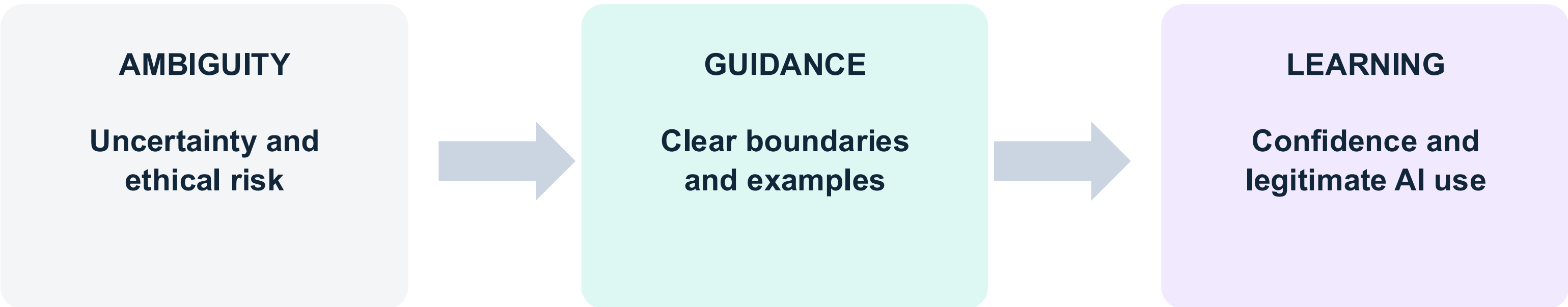
3

Clear AI permission supported learning
When permitted, AI helped students troubleshoot coding errors, complete assignments, overcome barriers, reduce frustration, and build confidence.
Permission helped students continue learning.

4

Students wanted clearer policy guidance
Students wanted concrete examples and ethical discussion at both course and university levels—but not necessarily one universal rule.
Explain when AI use is encouraged, discouraged, or inappropriate.

How students experienced AI policy



INTERPRETATION

Students perceived AI policy as both an academic-integrity rule and a condition shaping learning. Course-level communication determined whether AI felt risky, acceptable, or useful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Translate broad policies into task-specific examples for writing, coding, data analysis, feedback, and exam preparation.
2. Pair policy with AI ethics and literacy education.
3. Train instructors to communicate expectations clearly while balancing innovation and academic integrity.
4. Keep governance flexible and responsive to disciplinary and student differences.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

AI policy should move beyond restriction toward clear, practical, and context-sensitive guidance that supports responsible learning.

LIMITATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The small, single-course sample limits transferability. Future research should examine diverse disciplines and institutions and use longitudinal designs to track changes in policy awareness, ethical judgment, and AI use.

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