

AI-Enhanced Thematic Teaching in Chinese Film History: Exploring Students' Perceived Learning Experience under the New Liberal Arts Framework

Zhang Lu

School of Literature and Communication, Zaozhuang University, Zaozhuang, China

Corresponding Author Email: zlu3276@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of AI-enhanced thematic teaching in a Chinese Film History course within the framework of the New Liberal Arts in China. In response to the growing demand for pedagogical innovation in humanities education, it explores how the integration of artificial intelligence into thematic teaching shapes students' perceived learning experience. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study collected data from 171 undergraduate students through a questionnaire consisting of 22 closed-ended Likert-scale items and three open-ended questions. The quantitative findings show that students generally held positive evaluations of AI-enhanced thematic teaching. Among the five measured dimensions, AI-assisted learning and overall evaluation received the highest mean scores, followed by learning gains and thematic teaching design, while classroom participation showed comparatively lower, though still positive, evaluations. These results suggest that AI was perceived as particularly effective in facilitating information retrieval, improving content understanding, and supporting idea generation. The qualitative findings further reveal a nuanced pattern of student perceptions. While many students valued the efficiency, accessibility, and learning support enabled by AI, some also expressed concern about over-reliance and the possible weakening of independent thinking. These responses suggest that the educational value of AI depends not only on its functional affordances but also on how it is pedagogically integrated into classroom practice. Overall, this study provides empirical, student-centered evidence that AI-enhanced thematic teaching can support more interactive and student-centered learning in humanities education. It further highlights the importance of instructional design and critical guidance in ensuring that AI functions as a scaffold for inquiry rather than a substitute for thinking within the New Liberal Arts framework.

Keywords: Ai-Enhanced Teaching, Thematic Teaching, Chinese Film History, Perceived Learning Experience, New Liberal Arts

Introduction

In recent years, the development of the New Liberal Arts initiative in China has prompted renewed reflection on teaching models in humanities education. Rather than functioning merely as a policy discourse of disciplinary restructuring, the New Liberal Arts represents a broader educational reform centered on talent cultivation, interdisciplinary integration, and pedagogical innovation. It seeks to respond to rapid social transformation, technological development, and the growing demand for graduates with both critical and innovative capacities (Zhang et al., 2024).

Existing studies suggest that the core of the New Liberal Arts lies in transforming traditional humanities education through the integration of disciplinary knowledge, digital technologies, and student-centered pedagogies (Qi et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2024). In this sense, the New Liberal Arts is not simply concerned with adding new content to established curricula. Rather, it calls for a rethinking of how knowledge is organized, taught, and applied in higher education. In particular, it encourages the integration of humanities, science, and technology and promotes more flexible, interactive, and innovative forms of learning. In fields such as art and design education, researchers have argued that the incorporation of digital technologies is increasingly important for cultivating students' creativity, adaptability, and interdisciplinary thinking (Ren & Liu, 2024).

Within this context, traditional lecture-based teaching in humanities education has increasingly been questioned, especially in relation to its limited ability to promote active participation and deeper engagement. This concern is consistent with broader higher education research showing that active learning and student-centered pedagogy are generally more effective than purely transmissive instruction in promoting participation, conceptual understanding, and sustained engagement (Freeman et al., 2014; Michael, 2006). In courses such as Chinese Film History, teaching has often followed a chronological structure, focusing on historical periods, representative directors, and canonical works. Although this approach provides a systematic overview of film development, it can also lead to passive learning and limited student participation, particularly in large-class settings. Previous studies have likewise shown that lecture-dominated teaching models may constrain students' classroom interaction and critical engagement (Biggs et al., 2022).

In response to these limitations, thematic teaching has emerged as an alternative pedagogical approach. Unlike chronological teaching, thematic teaching organizes course content around major issues, topics, or problems, thereby encouraging students to engage in inquiry-based and problem-oriented learning. Research has shown that such approaches can enhance student engagement and deepen understanding of complex subject matter (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Prince, 2004). In film studies, thematic teaching enables students to connect film texts to broader social, cultural, and ideological contexts, thereby fostering a more integrative and interpretive learning process.

At the same time, recent developments in artificial intelligence have introduced new possibilities for enhancing thematic teaching in humanities classrooms. AI tools can support information retrieval, idea generation, contextual exploration, and discussion preparation, thereby creating more interactive and responsive learning environments. In this sense, AI-enhanced teaching may not only improve learning efficiency but also reshape students'

perceived learning experience by supporting inquiry, participation, and interpretive engagement. However, the educational value of AI depends not simply on technological availability, but on how it is integrated into pedagogical design and classroom practice.

Despite the growing literature on thematic teaching and AI in education, these two strands of research have largely developed separately. Limited attention has been paid to how AI can be integrated into thematic teaching in humanities courses such as film studies. Moreover, empirical studies examining students' perceived learning experience in such course-specific instructional contexts remain relatively scarce.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the integration of AI-enhanced thematic teaching in a Chinese Film History course and examines students' perceived learning experience in this setting. In this study, students' perceived learning experience is understood as an umbrella concept reflected in five interrelated evaluative dimensions: thematic teaching design, classroom participation, learning gains, AI-assisted learning, and overall evaluation. By focusing on students' perceptions of this instructional approach, the study aims to provide empirical evidence of how AI-supported thematic teaching may contribute to humanities teaching reform under the New Liberal Arts framework.

Literature Review

AI in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges

The rapid development of artificial intelligence, especially generative AI technologies, has significantly reshaped teaching and learning in higher education. AI is increasingly understood not merely as a technological tool, but as a mediating resource that can support knowledge construction, inquiry, and personalized learning pathways (Holmes et al., 2019; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Recent studies on generative AI and large language models further suggest that these technologies can enable dialogic learning, provide immediate feedback, and support iterative refinement of understanding (Kasneci et al., 2023). This development is important because it shifts the role of educational technology from content delivery to learning mediation.

AI-enhanced learning environments are often associated with greater efficiency and accessibility. Students can retrieve information quickly, explore multiple perspectives, and engage in self-paced learning, all of which may positively shape their perceived learning experience (Luckin & Holmes, 2016). AI tools can also support adaptive learning by responding to different learning needs, thereby enhancing learner autonomy and engagement (Roll & Wylie, 2016). Compared with traditional lecture-centered instruction, where explanation and feedback are constrained by class time and instructor availability, AI enables students to ask questions repeatedly, reformulate problems, and receive responses in real time. As a result, learning may become more continuous, exploratory, and learner-centered.

These opportunities are especially relevant in contemporary higher education, where active learning, student participation, and individualized support are increasingly emphasized. Whereas traditional teacher-centered instruction often positions students primarily as receivers of knowledge, AI-enhanced learning environments may encourage more active forms of knowledge engagement. Students can use AI to brainstorm ideas, summarize concepts, compare interpretations, and test preliminary responses before

entering classroom discussion. This preparatory function may be particularly valuable for students who are hesitant to speak in class or who need more time to develop their thoughts.

At the same time, the educational significance of AI should not be understood in purely instrumental terms. AI matters not only because it speeds up access to information, but also because it may alter the relationships among students, knowledge, and learning processes. When students interact with AI systems, they often engage in recursive practices of asking, revising, clarifying, and comparing. Under appropriate conditions, this process may support a more dialogic and reflective mode of learning. From this perspective, AI may influence students' perceived learning experience not simply through what it produces, but through how it is used within broader pedagogical processes.

However, alongside these opportunities, the literature also highlights important concerns. Scholars have warned that excessive reliance on AI may lead to superficial learning and reduced critical thinking (Selwyn, 2019). There are also ongoing debates over the reliability, bias, and epistemological implications of AI-generated content, especially in contexts where interpretation and critical analysis are central. AI-generated responses may appear coherent and persuasive while still containing inaccuracies or oversimplifications. In educational settings, this creates a tension between convenience and intellectual rigor.

For this reason, recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes that the educational value of AI depends on pedagogical design rather than technological capability alone (Alam & Mohanty, 2023). AI does not automatically improve learning. Its value is shaped by how it is embedded in classroom activities, what kinds of tasks students are asked to complete, and whether reflection and critique are built into the learning process. If AI is used merely to generate quick answers, it may encourage passive consumption. If, however, it is used to support comparison, questioning, and revision, it may contribute to deeper intellectual engagement. This distinction is particularly important when evaluating students' perceived learning experience, because positive perceptions of convenience do not necessarily indicate meaningful learning.

Student Engagement and Students' Perceived Learning Experience

Student engagement has long been regarded as a key factor in learning effectiveness in higher education. It typically includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, reflecting the extent to which students actively participate in and invest effort in learning activities (Fredricks et al., 2004; Kahu, 2013). Behavioral engagement refers to visible participation, such as attendance, discussion, and task completion. Emotional engagement concerns students' interest, enjoyment, and sense of connection to the learning process. Cognitive engagement involves deeper forms of investment, including critical reflection and sustained effort in dealing with complex ideas.

In recent years, students' perceived learning experience has received increasing attention as a useful lens for evaluating educational innovation, especially in technology-enhanced learning environments. This perspective focuses not only on measurable outcomes but also on how students interpret and evaluate their own learning processes (Sun et al., 2008). Studies suggest that in the context of higher education's digital transformation, perceived learning experience has become an important dimension for assessing the

effectiveness of technology-supported learning (Yu, 2022; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). In particular, perceptions of usefulness, clarity, confidence, and satisfaction have been shown to shape students' engagement and learning behavior (Davis, 1989; Sun et al., 2008).

Research grounded in the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) and in e-learning studies (Sun et al., 2008) further indicates that positive perceptions of usefulness, ease of use, and satisfaction may strengthen students' engagement with learning tools and activities. In AI-supported learning environments, such perceptions are often associated with higher levels of motivation, participation, and overall satisfaction (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). When students perceive AI as relevant, supportive, and accessible, they are more likely to incorporate it into their learning practices.

At the same time, student engagement and students' perceived learning experience should be understood as closely related but not identical. Students may perceive AI as useful and convenient without necessarily becoming more cognitively engaged. Conversely, a demanding activity may still be positively experienced if students feel that it enhances their understanding. For this reason, evaluating AI-enhanced teaching requires attention to both experiential and intellectual dimensions. It is not sufficient to know whether students liked using AI; it is also necessary to understand whether AI helped them participate more fully, think more critically, and feel more supported in the learning process.

Recent studies also highlight the ambivalent nature of students' responses to AI-supported learning. While AI tools may improve learning convenience and responsiveness, they may also introduce new challenges in relation to critical engagement and cognitive processing (Zhai et al., 2024). Students may appreciate the speed and support offered by AI while simultaneously worrying that excessive use could weaken independent reading, reflection, or interpretation. This ambivalence is not a contradiction but a meaningful part of students' perceived learning experience in the age of AI.

AI-Enhanced Teaching in Humanities Education and the New Liberal Arts Context

Compared with STEM fields, the integration of AI into humanities education remains relatively underexplored. Humanities disciplines, particularly subjects such as film studies, emphasize interpretation, contextual analysis, critical thinking, and dialogic learning. This suggests that the value of educational technology in humanities settings cannot be reduced to efficiency alone. As Bayne (2015) argues, technology-enhanced learning should be understood in relation to broader epistemological and pedagogical questions rather than in narrowly instrumental terms. Similarly, Laurillard (2013) emphasizes that educational technologies become meaningful only when embedded in carefully designed teaching processes. In media and film education, interpretive dialogue, contextual reading, and critical literacy remain central, which means that AI should function as a support for inquiry rather than a replacement for interpretation (Buckingham, 2013).

This disciplinary specificity raises important questions about how AI can be integrated meaningfully without flattening the complexity of humanistic inquiry. Unlike many technical disciplines, humanities education values ambiguity, multiple interpretations, and historically situated reading. As a result, AI in humanities classrooms should not simply follow an efficiency-oriented logic.

In the Chinese context, the New Liberal Arts framework provides an important policy and pedagogical background for this transformation. The New Liberal Arts emphasizes interdisciplinary integration, digital transformation, and the cultivation of innovative and critical talents. Scholars have argued that the incorporation of digital technologies, including AI, is increasingly important for the modernization of humanities education and for enhancing its relevance in the digital era (He et al., 2022; Lü, 2021; Wang, 2022). This policy direction encourages humanities teaching to move beyond one-way knowledge transmission and to experiment with more interactive and technologically mediated forms of learning.

Existing studies on New Liberal Arts education have highlighted several key directions, including the integration of technology and humanities knowledge, the transformation of teaching methods, and the promotion of student-centered learning. AI-enhanced teaching aligns with these goals by enabling more interactive and flexible learning experiences. In the context of film studies, AI may assist students in identifying thematic connections, accessing historical and cultural background information, comparing interpretive perspectives, and refining discussion questions. When appropriately integrated, these functions may broaden interpretive entry points and support more active classroom engagement.

At the same time, AI use in humanities education also raises distinctive concerns. The aims of humanities learning include not only comprehension and efficiency, but also interpretation, argumentation, ethical reflection, and critical judgment. If AI-generated responses are treated as authoritative interpretations, students may bypass the reflective and dialogic processes that are essential to humanistic learning. Therefore, AI in humanities teaching should be understood not primarily as a substitute for thinking, but as a catalyst for inquiry, comparison, and discussion.

Nevertheless, existing research has focused mainly on policy discussions and general theoretical frameworks, while providing relatively limited empirical evidence on how AI-enhanced teaching is implemented in actual humanities classrooms and how students experience such practices. In particular, there remains a lack of classroom-based studies examining students' perceived learning experience in specific humanities courses such as film studies, where interpretive and critical abilities are central.

Research Gap and Research Objectives

Based on the above review, a clear research gap can be identified. While AI-enhanced learning has been widely discussed, existing studies rarely examine how AI is integrated into thematic teaching in humanities classrooms, and even fewer provide student-centered empirical evidence from a specific course context under the New Liberal Arts framework. In particular, limited attention has been paid to how students experience AI-enhanced thematic teaching in terms of classroom participation, learning gains, and overall learning support within an interpretive discipline such as Chinese Film History.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the implementation of AI-enhanced thematic teaching in a Chinese Film History course and examines students' perceived learning experience in this context. By combining quantitative questionnaire data with qualitative responses, the study aims to provide empirical insight into how AI-supported thematic teaching is experienced by students in terms of thematic teaching design, classroom

participation, learning gains, AI-assisted learning, and overall evaluation. In doing so, the study seeks to contribute to current discussions on AI in higher education by offering a course-based, humanities-centered, and student-oriented perspective under the New Liberal Arts framework.

Therefore, this study aims to:

1. examine students' perceived learning experience in AI-enhanced thematic teaching within a Chinese Film History course;
2. investigate how AI-supported thematic teaching influences classroom participation, learning gains, and students' overall evaluation of learning;
3. explore students' perceptions of the opportunities and challenges associated with AI-assisted learning under the New Liberal Arts framework.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine students' perceived learning experience in an AI-enhanced teaching context. The research was conducted in a Chinese Film History course at a local university in China, where AI tools were systematically integrated into classroom activities to support discussion preparation, idea generation, contextual exploration, and content understanding. Rather than focusing on objective academic outcomes, the study emphasizes students' perceived learning experience, understood here as students' evaluations of their learning process under AI-enhanced thematic teaching.

Data were collected through a questionnaire survey administered to students who had directly participated in the AI-enhanced thematic teaching activities. The questionnaire was distributed through Wenjuanxing (Questionnaire Star), one of the most widely used online survey platforms in China. The platform supports online questionnaire distribution, response collection, response monitoring, and basic data validation, including response completeness checks. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed, and 171 valid responses were obtained, yielding a response rate of 85.5%.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part collected background information, including students' grade, major, and frequency of AI use in the course. The second part included 22 closed-ended items measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). These items were developed with reference to prior studies on student engagement, perceived usefulness, and learning experience, and were adapted to the specific context of AI-enhanced thematic teaching in a humanities course. The items were organized into five dimensions: thematic teaching design, classroom participation, learning gains, AI-assisted learning, and overall evaluation. The third part included three open-ended questions designed to collect qualitative feedback on the perceived advantages of thematic teaching, areas for course improvement, and suggestions regarding the use of AI in teaching. This design helped ensure that the questionnaire remained closely aligned with the study objectives and the specific instructional context of AI-enhanced thematic teaching.

Only the 22 closed-ended items were used for quantitative analysis, while the three open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean values and overall response patterns, in order to identify

general trends in students' perceived learning experience. Given the exploratory and course-based nature of the study, descriptive statistics were considered appropriate for summarizing students' overall evaluations rather than testing causal relationships.

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Students' open-ended responses were first read repeatedly to gain an overall understanding of recurring views and concerns. Initial codes were then generated based on repeated keywords, expressions, and meaning patterns. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader thematic categories, such as perceived learning efficiency, improved understanding, classroom preparation, and concerns about over-reliance on AI. This process allowed the qualitative findings to complement the quantitative results by providing richer insight into how students interpreted and evaluated their learning experience.

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Students were informed that the questionnaire was used only for academic research purposes and that their responses would not affect course assessment or academic standing. No personally identifiable information was collected. By combining closed-ended questionnaire data with open-ended student responses, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive account of students' perceived learning experience in an AI-enhanced thematic teaching environment.

Table 1

Structure of the Questionnaire

Dimension	Description	Number of Items
Thematic teaching design	Structure, coherence, and organization of thematic teaching	4
Classroom participation	Participation, expression, and interaction in class	4
Learning gains	Understanding, analytical ability, and critical thinking	5
AI-assisted learning	AI support for learning, efficiency, and idea generation	4
Overall evaluation	Satisfaction, preference, and overall perception	5
Total	—	22

Results*Quantitative Results*

A total of 171 valid responses were collected from 200 distributed questionnaires, yielding a response rate of 85.5%. Most respondents were undergraduate students enrolled in the Chinese Film History course, representing different academic backgrounds and varying levels of prior AI use in learning activities. The questionnaire adopted a seven-point Likert scale to evaluate students' perceptions of AI-enhanced thematic teaching in the Chinese Film History course.

Overall, the findings indicate a positive evaluation of the teaching approach. Across the 22 closed-ended items, mean scores ranged from 5.15 to 5.67, suggesting that students generally agreed with the positive statements regarding thematic teaching, AI-assisted learning, and overall course experience.

At the dimensional level, AI-assisted learning received the highest mean score ($M = 5.64$), followed by overall evaluation ($M = 5.64$), learning gains ($M = 5.56$), and thematic teaching design ($M = 5.53$). Among the five dimensions, classroom participation showed the lowest, though still positive, mean score ($M = 5.21$). This pattern indicates that students responded most positively to the supportive and facilitative functions of AI, whereas its influence on active classroom expression and discussion was comparatively more moderate.

At the item level, the highest-rated statements were “AI tools help with information retrieval and organization” ($M = 5.67$), “AI-assisted learning improved the overall learning experience” ($M = 5.67$), “This teaching approach is more challenging than traditional teaching” ($M = 5.66$), and “AI tools help me understand course content more efficiently” ($M = 5.65$). Students also expressed strong support for the continuation of this teaching approach, as reflected in the high ratings for “I hope this teaching method will continue to be used” ($M = 5.64$) and “I would recommend this teaching method to others” ($M = 5.64$).

By contrast, relatively lower-scoring items were concentrated in the dimension of classroom participation, including “I am more willing to express my views” ($M = 5.15$) and “I am more willing to participate in classroom discussion” ($M = 5.16$). Although these scores remain above the midpoint, they suggest that AI-enhanced thematic teaching was perceived as having a stronger effect on supporting understanding and learning preparation than on directly transforming students’ willingness to engage in verbal classroom interaction.

Taken together, the quantitative results suggest that students generally welcomed the integration of AI into thematic teaching, with particularly strong perceived benefits in learning support, efficiency, and overall evaluation.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Students’ Evaluations of AI-Enhanced Thematic Teaching

Dimension	Number of Items	Mean (M)	Interpretation
Thematic teaching design	4	5.53	Positive
Classroom participation	4	5.21	Moderately positive
Learning gains	5	5.56	Positive
AI-assisted learning	4	5.64	Highly positive
Overall evaluation	5	5.64	Highly positive

Qualitative Findings

The open-ended responses further support the quantitative findings and provide deeper insight into students’ perceived learning experience.

First, many students emphasized that thematic teaching improved the structure and coherence of course content. Compared with traditional chronological instruction, students found that thematic organization made the course more focused, systematic, and easier to understand, allowing them to grasp key issues more clearly.

Second, students consistently reported that AI improved learning efficiency and understanding. AI tools were frequently described as helpful for information retrieval, content organization, and clarification of difficult concepts. Students also noted that AI

supported their preparation for classroom discussion by helping them generate ideas and organize arguments in advance.

Third, although students generally expressed positive attitudes toward AI, some also raised concerns about over-reliance and the possible weakening of independent thinking. Several responses suggested that AI should be used as a supportive tool rather than as a replacement for personal interpretation. Students also highlighted the need for clearer guidance on how to use AI appropriately and critically in academic contexts.

Overall, the qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative results by showing that AI-enhanced thematic teaching was generally experienced as beneficial while also pointing to the importance of pedagogical guidance and critical use.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide empirical support for the pedagogical value of AI-enhanced thematic teaching in a humanities course context. By integrating AI tools into a Chinese Film History course, the results demonstrate that AI can contribute to a shift from lecture-centered instruction toward a more interactive and student-centered learning environment.

A key finding is that students reported particularly strong positive perceptions of AI-assisted learning, especially in relation to information retrieval, content organization, and conceptual understanding. This suggests that students primarily experienced AI as a cognitive support resource that enhances accessibility and reduces the complexity of engaging with course material. In this sense, AI does not simply function as an information provider, but as a mediating tool that supports the structuring and processing of knowledge, aligning with prior research that conceptualizes AI as a facilitator of learning rather than a replacement for it (Kasneji et al., 2023).

At the same time, the results reveal an uneven distribution of AI's perceived impact across different dimensions of learning experience. While overall evaluations and perceived learning gains were highly positive, classroom participation received comparatively lower ratings. This pattern suggests that AI may have a stronger influence on cognitive preparation and internal readiness than on immediate behavioral engagement. In other words, AI appears to function initially as a form of "backstage support," enabling students to prepare ideas, organize thoughts, and reduce uncertainty before these processes translate into visible classroom participation. This finding extends existing discussions of student engagement by highlighting the distinction between internal cognitive engagement and external behavioral expression.

Another important insight concerns the ambivalence in students' perceptions of AI use. Although students generally appreciated the efficiency and support provided by AI, qualitative responses indicate a concurrent awareness of potential risks, particularly the possibility of over-reliance and reduced independent thinking. This ambivalence reflects a broader tension identified in the literature, where AI simultaneously enables and constrains learning processes (Selwyn, 2019). Rather than indicating a contradiction, this dual perception suggests that students are actively negotiating the role of AI in their learning practices.

Finally, these findings reinforce the argument that the educational value of AI is not determined solely by its technological capabilities, but by how it is embedded within pedagogical design. AI can support inquiry, reflection, and knowledge construction when integrated into structured learning activities, but may encourage passive reliance if used without critical guidance. This is particularly significant in humanities education, where interpretation, contextual understanding, and critical judgment remain central to the learning process. The findings therefore suggest that AI can meaningfully enhance humanities teaching, but only when it is aligned with the epistemological goals of the discipline. Beyond its practical implications, this study also contributes to student-centered discussions of AI integration by showing that AI may function first as a form of cognitive preparation and learning support before translating into more visible forms of classroom participation.

Implications

The findings of this study offer several important implications for teaching practice, curriculum design, and the development of AI-enhanced learning in humanities education.

First, AI should be positioned as a cognitive scaffold rather than a substitute for learning. The results indicate that students benefit most when AI is used to support idea generation, information processing, and conceptual clarification. However, these benefits depend on how AI is incorporated into learning tasks. Instructors should therefore design activities that require students to engage critically with AI-generated content, such as comparing interpretations, refining arguments, and questioning outputs. This aligns with recent pedagogical discussions emphasizing that the effectiveness of AI depends on its role in supporting, rather than replacing, students' intellectual effort (Mollick & Mollick, 2023).

Second, the study highlights the importance of developing students' AI literacy in higher education. Beyond technical competence, AI literacy involves the ability to evaluate the reliability of AI-generated content, recognize its limitations, and use it responsibly within academic contexts. The presence of student concerns about over-reliance suggests that learners are aware of these issues but may lack systematic guidance. Integrating AI literacy into course design can therefore help students engage more critically and effectively with AI tools.

Third, the findings suggest that AI can support more inclusive and flexible forms of classroom participation. Although AI did not directly lead to substantial increases in verbal participation, it appears to enhance students' preparedness and confidence. This indicates that AI can function as a preparatory tool that lowers the threshold for engagement, particularly for students who may be hesitant to participate in traditional classroom discussions. Instructors can leverage this function by incorporating AI-supported pre-discussion activities, thereby creating more supportive and participatory learning environments.

Fourth, this study provides practical insights for curriculum reform under the New Liberal Arts framework. AI-enhanced thematic teaching represents a viable approach to integrating digital technologies with humanities pedagogy in a way that supports student-centered learning. However, the findings also suggest that technological integration should not be treated as an end in itself. Effective curriculum innovation requires a reconfiguration of

teaching strategies, assessment methods, and classroom interaction patterns to ensure that technology reinforces rather than diminishes critical and interpretive learning.

Overall, the study suggests that successful AI integration in humanities education depends on a balance between technological affordances and pedagogical design. AI can expand learning possibilities and support more dynamic forms of engagement, but its educational value ultimately relies on how it is used to facilitate inquiry, reflection, and critical thinking.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations.

First, the study is based on a single course conducted at one university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Students' responses may have been influenced by the specific course design, instructor practices, and institutional context.

Second, the research adopts a cross-sectional survey design and therefore captures students' perceived learning experience at only one point in time. It does not fully reflect how students' attitudes toward AI-enhanced learning may evolve over a longer period.

Third, the study focuses primarily on perceived learning experience, including classroom participation, learning gains, and evaluations of AI support, rather than on objective learning outcomes such as academic performance. Future research could incorporate longitudinal or comparative designs to examine how AI-enhanced thematic teaching influences both perceived and measurable learning outcomes over time.

Conclusion

This study investigates the integration of AI-enhanced thematic teaching in a Chinese Film History course and examines students' perceived learning experience within this instructional context. The findings indicate that students generally evaluated this teaching approach positively, particularly in relation to AI-assisted learning, learning gains, and overall evaluation, while classroom participation demonstrated comparatively more moderate improvement.

More importantly, the study suggests that AI can support humanities teaching not only by improving access to information but also by assisting students in idea preparation, conceptual organization, and interpretive engagement with course content. At the same time, students' responses reveal an important tension: although AI is widely perceived as useful and supportive, concerns regarding over-reliance and the weakening of independent thinking remain significant. These findings indicate that the educational value of AI depends not simply on technological capability, but on how AI is pedagogically integrated into classroom practice.

Within the broader framework of the New Liberal Arts in China, this study contributes to current discussions on AI-enhanced learning by extending existing research beyond technology-centered and STEM-oriented contexts into humanities education. Unlike many previous studies that primarily emphasize learning efficiency or technological performance, this study conceptualizes AI as a pedagogical scaffold that supports interpretive inquiry, contextual understanding, and reflective learning within humanities classrooms.

In addition, by providing classroom-based empirical evidence from a Chinese Film History course, the study offers a student-centered perspective on how AI-enhanced thematic teaching shapes perceived learning experience in practice, particularly in relation to learning support, classroom participation, and critical engagement. The findings further demonstrate that the successful integration of AI into humanities education requires not only technological support, but also instructional guidance and alignment with the interpretive goals of humanities learning.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing literature on AI in higher education by demonstrating that the educational significance of AI lies not in replacing human interpretation, but in facilitating inquiry, reflection, and student-centered learning within carefully designed pedagogical environments.

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