Design Based Implementation of AI "Learning Companions" and Supplemental Generative AI Tools for Online Social Work Education at an HBCU

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) holds considerable promise for transforming higher education and social work by promoting democratized learning through equity-focused, competency-aligned tools. As AI integration becomes more prevalent in academic programs, this design-based implementation study investigates an innovative strategy employed by an online Master of Social Work (MSW) program at a historically Black college and university (HBCU). Victor et al. report that generative AI tools function as effective supplementary resources for research and writing in social work education, demonstrating robust capabilities in memory, application, synthesis, summarization, reflection, and classification of general information. The program's educational ecosystem features custom AI learning companions powered by advanced language models and augmented retrieval techniques, enhancing chatbot support for coursework, practicum, internship education, research, evidence-based practice, and capstone projects. Two additional generative AI supports, Visible AI and the Research and Practice Writing Assistant, further facilitate writing, presentation preparation, and feedback processes. Genius Academy AI simulations enrich practice courses by enabling skills rehearsal and structured debriefing. Harmonize supports multimodal reflection and a two-stage oral capstone workflow, allowing students to submit a draft recorded presentation for AI coach insights and committee rubric-based feedback, followed by a final recorded presentation for scoring. Over two iterative cycles, prompts, guardrails, and instructional workflows were refined through the synthesis of student reflections, faculty and field educator input, and course-level observations. These efforts are situated within emerging frameworks for responsible AI integration in human services organizations. Grounded in an experiential learning framework, this initiative aligns with standards established by the profession's primary governing bodies. The study presents design principles, governance considerations, and an EPAS-aligned integration map to advance equitable, human-centered AI-enhanced education in other social work programs (Paying the Cognitive Debt: An Experiential Learning Framework for Integrating AI in Social Work Education, 2025) [1].

1. Introduction

Generative AI has transitioned from an experimental technology to a foundational component of educational infrastructure. This shift necessitates a reevaluation of professional preparation in environments increasingly shaped by AI. (Pedagogical Applications of Generative AI in Higher Education: A Systematic Review of the Field, 2025) According to Bodong Chen, these AI systems now serve as basic epistemic infrastructures, fundamentally influencing how knowledge is created, organized, and accessed in educational contexts. Early research indicates that generative AI can support case-based learning, writing development, and reflective practice. The effectiveness of these tools is maximized when accompanied by clear ethical guardrails

and intentional pedagogy Persistent concerns regarding bias, privacy, overreliance, and academic integrity remain central to address these issues, safeguards such as bias-detection protocols and stringent confidentiality standards were implemented from the outset. The 2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) focus on competency-based education. They also identify field education as a core teaching method and promote anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI) in the curriculum Technology standards stress confidentiality, informed consent, professional boundaries, accessibility, and risk reduction when using digital tools. These frameworks urge moving beyond informal AI use and support the creation of models that can be evaluated, guided, and improved. However,

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they also raise ethical concerns about this integration. Balancing AI's promise with risks such as bias and privacy breaches highlights the need for thoughtful, values-driven approaches that clearly consider both benefits and harms of AI in education. This implementation enables HBCU students to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical skills, particularly in the context of rapidly evolving digital tools. HBCUs possess a longstanding tradition of social justice and community empowerment, positioning them as leaders in equitable education. Within this framework, the initiative aligns its design with professional standards, including the 2022 EPAS emphasis on competency-based learning, integrated anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI), and ethical technology use as articulated by the national social work organizations. AI learning companions support the HBCU community by providing assistance that acknowledges and values each student's unique background, facilitating access and responsiveness central to ADEI and EPAS expectations. These companions offer guidance and feedback during complex assignments, promoting the application of social work principles to real-world scenarios in ways that foreground ethics and cultural responsiveness. Kennedy and Gupta identify the Practice Companion as an example of how AI and supplementary support can be leveraged in online MSW programs to foster skill development through feedback aligned with course objectives and established competencies. This study details: (a) the use of AI as a learning companion; (b) the implementation of four program-specific chatbots for practice, practicum, research, and capstone, (c) two generative AI tools (Visible AI and a Writing Assistant), (d) the integration of Genius Academy simulations in practice courses; and (e) the use of a Harmonize workflow for oral capstones. The primary contribution is a curriculum framework and an example crosswalk that centers equity by embedding culturally responsive teaching, Universal Design for Learning, and project-based learning within professional standards (EPAS, ADEI, and ethics), supporting equitable, standards-aligned education across diverse settings [2-6].

Mazaheriyan & Nourbakhsh (2025) explain that AI tools can act as helpful "learning companions" for students. These tools support students' understanding, encourage self-reflection, and help them develop professional skills while still valuing the personal and ethical connections that are key in social work education. For instance, when a student faces a difficult situation, she might use an AI companion to record her thoughts. The AI then gently asks her to think about ethical questions and offers guiding prompts to support her assessment.This approach helps Sarah review her decisions and relate them to her skills. This perspective supports new ideas about AI literacy as a professional skill and urges educators to design prompts that ask students to review AI-generated output, notice its limitations, and tie their learning back to core values. Three primary sources of guidance informed the design choices: (1) EPAS 2022 expectations for competency-based assessment and integrated ADEI, (2) joint technology practice standards emphasizing privacy, security, and professional boundaries, and (3) emerging research on generative AI in social work education that advocates for cautious, structured implementation. Collectively, these sources directed decisions regarding the value added by AI, the identification of risks necessitating explicit guardrails, and the visibility of AI use in learning and assessment [4-7].

2. Institutional and Program Context

The implementation occurred within a fully online MSW program at a historically Black college and university in the U.S. South. This institution has a rich history of championing civil rights and fostering leadership among its predominantly African American student body, rooted in a community historically committed to social justice and empowerment. The program utilizes 8-week terms within 16-week semesters and serves a geographically diverse population of working adults, including many first-generation graduate students, caregivers, and professionals who balance employment and community responsibilities. In similar contexts, research indicates that learners from historically marginalized backgrounds especially benefit from timely and accessible academic support, as well as structured opportunities to practice skills, which are important for retention and professional confidence The program had established a robust technology ecosystem (an interconnected set of digital tools and platforms) prior to this project, including a learning management system (software for delivering and managing coursework), synchronous online supervision (real-time remote guidance), and structured multimedia discussions (conversations using text, video, or other formats) to support clinical reasoning and professional identity development. (LMS-supported HyFlex clinical supervision model: Illuminating perspectives from teacher candidates in the department of English language teaching, 2024) AI learning companions were added to expand access to coaching and reflective scaffolding (supportive prompts and feedback during learning) between human touchpoints, while preserving the central role of faculty and field instructors in evaluative feedback and ethical decision-making [8].

3. Design Based Implementation Approach

A design-based implementation (DBI) approach was employed, emphasizing iterative cycles of design, enactment, reflection, and refinement in authentic course and field settings. DBI is particularly suited to rapidly evolving technological contexts, where educators must evaluate workable solutions while building evidence to inform future evaluation research. Rather than a formal outcome evaluation, iterative revisions were anchored in multiple forms of formative evidence. These sources included: (a) short student feedback prompts embedded within course modules and post-simulation debriefs; (b) Harmonize reflections in which students described their use of AI and methods for verifying accuracy and bias; (c) instructor and field educator observations regarding common points of confusion, strengths, and misuses; and (d) course-level implementation notes documenting where prompts, instructions, and guardrails required greater clarity. These sources informed revisions to companion prompts,

sequencing of AI-supported tasks, and explicit integration of EPAS-linked reflection expectations [2-4].

4. Iteration Cycles

In Cycle 1, the primary aim was to assess feasibility and ensure alignment. Four program-specific companions Practice Companion, Practicum & Internship Coach, Research & Practice Scholar, and Capstone Development Companion were developed and introduced in selected courses. Students received guidance on appropriate use, academic integrity, and de-identification (Humburg et al., 2024). Generative Artificial Intelligence initiatives, including Visible AI and the Research and Practice Writing Assistant, were also piloted to provide supplemental support for writing and presentation preparation. In Cycle 2, prompts were refined and guardrails established based on observed patterns in student inquiries and reflective feedback (Thornton, 2025). Language regarding AI's limitations and its potential to generate inaccurate information was strengthened, and the use of structured prompts requiring direct links to EPAS competencies was expanded (Ellucian et al., n.d.). Boundaries around client confidentiality, diagnosis, and legal or clinical decision-making were clarified. Additionally, the sequencing of AI use across Genius Academy simulations and Harmonize-based assessments was improved to ensure coherent learning pathways. This approach aligns with the near-universal adoption of AI tools among HBCU students and faculty, with 98% of students and 96% of faculty already utilizing such technologies. However, it is important to acknowledge the digital divide that may impact equitable access to these technologies. While the extensive adoption rate reflects a positive trend, some students may still encounter challenges such as limited bandwidth or restricted access to suitable devices. Recognizing these disparities helps preempt concerns related to equity oversight. The AI ecosystem includes four custom program-specific companions embedded across the curriculum and two supplemental generative AI tools to strengthen writing and presentation support. Each element serves as an optional scaffold, complementing required readings, instructor feedback, and field supervision [9].

5. Practice Companion

The Practice Companion supports foundation and advanced practice courses by helping students translate theoretical concepts into assessment language (descriptions used during client evaluations), goal statements (specific outcomes a client hopes to achieve), and ethically informed intervention plans (action steps grounded in social work values and ethics). Students may paste de-identified vignettes (anonymized short case descriptions), role-play summaries, or simulation notes and request guidance on biopsychosocial-spiritual formulation (holistic client assessment), treatment goal alignment (matching goals to interventions), or cultural and structural considerations (recognition of context and systemic factors). To illustrate the ethical scaffolding in action, the Practice Companion might ask, 'How might your personal experiences influence your understanding of the client's cultural background, and what steps can you

take to recognize potential biases?' The companion offers alternatives, asks clarifying questions, and prompts students to connect their reasoning to the program's competencies (skills and knowledge outlined in program standards), rather than presenting a single 'correct' The Research & Practice Scholar companion supports research methods and evidence-informed practice courses. It helps students clarify methodological concepts, frame researchable questions, and outline performance measurements or evaluation logic. The companion repeatedly instructs students to verify all claims using peer-reviewed sources and library databases and to avoid treating AI output as evidence. To demonstrate this verification workflow, students follow a brief step-by-step check

- Identify the suggested citation or claim provided by the AI companion.
- Cross-reference it with peer-reviewed articles and authoritative library resources to confirm its validity.
- Document the findings and discrepancies, ensuring that each claim is supported by credible evidence.

This approach reflects growing calls to integrate AI literacy into research training and to foreground risks of fabricated or biased content The Practicum & Internship Coach is structured to align student assignments with the CSWE Core Competencies as part of their Education Plan, supporting the measurement of demonstrated behaviors throughout field seminars and practicum courses (Work, 2024). The coach emphasizes the primacy of field instruction, reminding students to bring AI-assisted drafts to supervision for refinement and approval. Prompts encourage attention to safety, boundaries, documentation standards, and ethical dilemmas encountered in real-world settings . To strengthen equity integration, the Practicum Coach includes prompts such as, 'Reflect on how systemic biases might influence your assessment in this case, and identify specific anti-racist strategies you can employ.' This encourages students to actively engage with anti-racist practices, aligning with ADEI commitments [5-10].

6. Research & Practice Scholar

6.1. Capstone Development Companion

The Capstone Development Companion, a research and practice writing chatbot, provides support to students by assisting in project planning, organizing literature synthesis, and aligning their work with practical and policy competencies. This tool functions alongside structured writing supports and committee feedback to help students maintain progress on extended academic and applied writing projects, as seen in studies exploring how education students use AI chatbots as academic companions. A key feature of this companion is its role in empowering students to exercise agency over their own learning process. For instance, a student named Alex might initially receive an AI-generated suggestion to focus on a narrow research methodology for their capstone project. However, after reviewing additional peer-reviewed sources and consulting with their advisor, Alex decides to expand the scope of their

research to include a comparative analysis. This decision underscores the importance of students' judgment in accepting AI feedback, thereby preserving their authorship and reinforcing critical thinking. In addition to the custom companions, two supplemental generative AI supports were integrated. VisibleAI, as described by Dickey and is employed as an optional writing and coaching tool in selected courses, particularly where students benefit from structured prompts that support paragraph-level revision and clarity in academic writing The Research and Practice Writing Assistant provides an additional, specialized scaffold for capstone students, supporting outline development, section-level coherence, and preparation for committee expectations. Faculty members regularly intervene to provide qualitative feedback, ensuring a balanced interaction between human guidance and AI support. On average, faculty interactions occur at a rate of approximately one intervention for every three AI interactions during writing cycles Both tools are introduced with clear guidance on academic integrity and are positioned as complements to human feedback rather than substitutes for original authorship or scholarly verification.

7. Integration with Genius Academy Simulations and Harmonize

7.1. Genius Academy AI Simulations in Practice Courses
Genius Academy AI simulations are embedded within practice courses to provide structured opportunities for skill rehearsal and performance feedback in a low-risk environment. These simulations are not included in research methods or capstone writing courses. Instead, students participate in simulations related to specific course topics, such as engagement, assessment, and crisis response, after which they use the Practice Companion to reflect on their decision-making processes, identify ethical dilemmas and connect their performance to EPAS competencies For example, the simulation may track metrics such as an 'empathy score,' which allows students to assess their emotional engagement and responsiveness, and align this directly with EPAS competencies in ethics and behavioral standards.. This sequencing aims to deepen reflective learning while reinforcing that simulation performance must be interpreted through professional standards and instructor feedback [10].

8. Harmonize for Reflection and Oral Capstone Presentations

Harmonize is used for multimodal reflection across selected courses and serves a central role in the oral capstone presentation workflow. Students first post a draft recorded presentation to Harmonize, where they can access AI coach prompts and review the program's oral presentation rubric. Committee members provide structured feedback within the platform using a rubric to assess competency. After revision, students submit their final recorded presentation in Harmonize for final scoring, approval, and documentation of capstone completion. This two-stage structure supports transparency in assessment, reduces student anxiety about expectations, and creates a clear evidence trail for program-level competency review [11].

9. Ethics, Privacy, and Academic Integrity

To illustrate the type of reflection expected in our program, here is an anonymized example from a student's "AI use reflection": "In developing my capstone project, I utilized the Practice Companion to assist with structuring my literature review. Although the AI provided a helpful framework, I chose to revise certain sections based on my additional research, particularly regarding cultural competency. I verified the AI-generated suggestions by comparing them against peer-reviewed articles and ensured that my final analysis aligned with EPAS competencies. This process heightened my awareness of the need for critical evaluation of AI outputs and reinforced the importance of grounding my work in established evidence."

Ethical implementation required explicit boundaries around confidentiality, academic integrity, and the limits of AI-generated guidance. Students are instructed to use only de-identified or composite information when engaging AI tools and to avoid entering protected health information or agency-specific confidential data. The companions include reminders that they cannot provide legal advice, diagnose clients, or replace supervision. These guardrails align with the joint technology practice standards and reinforce core social work ethical principles of privacy, informed consent, and professional accountability. Additionally, the program is exploring the implementation of local LLM hosting solutions to strengthen data sovereignty and privacy assurance, ensuring all data remains secure and under institutional oversight. A particular privacy concern motivating this shift involves the protection of sensitive community data, such as personal experiences and stories from historically marginalized groups, which hold considerable cultural significance and require heightened safeguards. As part of this plan, a provisional timeline has been outlined, including initial feasibility studies by Q2 2024, pilot projects by Q4 2024, and a final evaluation phase slated for 2025. By signaling these future infrastructure plans, the program aims to address any data-sensitive stakeholder concerns. This timeline serves as a roadmap for the commitment to enhancing privacy measures. To reinforce academic integrity, students are required to maintain authorship of final products and to utilize AI solely as a drafting and reflection scaffold. In writing-intensive courses and capstone sequences, students complete brief "AI use reflections" that document their use of AI, the elements they accepted or rejected, and the methods employed to verify accuracy and bias. This transparency-oriented approach aligns with emerging recommendations to emphasize process and critical evaluation in AI-enhanced assessment [11,12].

Here is an anonymized exemplar of an "AI use reflection" to illustrate the depth and tone expected: "In developing my capstone project, I utilized the Practice Companion to assist with structuring my literature review. Although the AI provided a helpful framework, I chose to revise certain sections based on my additional research, particularly regarding cultural competency. I verified the AI-generated

suggestions by comparing them against peer-reviewed articles and ensured that my final analysis aligned with EPAS competencies. This process heightened my awareness of the need for critical evaluation of AI outputs and reinforced the importance of grounding my work in established evidence."

Sharing a sample reflection demystifies the assignment for other programs. (Sample Written Assignments, 2004). Student experience data are derived from structured AI-use reflections embedded within coursework. These reflections indicate that students engaged AI tools as supplementary supports rather than replacements for faculty instruction or field supervision. The Harmonize draft-to-final oral capstone workflow further reinforced human evaluation by centering faculty committee feedback within a transparent assessment process. While the study does not measure trust or relational learning outcomes, reflections suggest that students

understood AI as bounded by professional expectations and human judgment [13].

10. EPAS 2022 Alignment and Curriculum Mapping

Table 1 provides a high-level mapping of the AI learning companions and supplemental tools to curricular touchpoints and illustrative EPAS competency supports. The mapping aims to serve as a practical template that programs can tailor to fit their specific course structures, assessment strategies, and institutional policies regarding artificial intelligence (Mapping the use of artificial intelligence in medical education: a scoping review, 2025). To enhance the portability and actionable nature of this template, programs should first analyze factors such as course credit hours, delivery modality, and existing technological infrastructure. These elements will help adapt AI tools effectively to align with unique educational contexts.

AI Tools	Primary course locations	Illustrative EPAS connections	Example student uses	Key guardrails
Practice Companion	Foundation & advanced practice courses; field seminar debriefs	Competencies 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9	Case formulation; intervention options; simulation debriefs	De-identify cases; no diagnosis/legal advice; verify with readings/supervision
Practicum & Internship Coach	Practicum/ internship courses; learning agreements	Competencies 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9	Learning plan drafts; supervision agendas; weekly reflections	AI is not supervision; never include client identifiers; bring drafts to field instructor
Research & Practice Scholar	Research methods; evidence-informed practice	Competencies 4, 6, 7, 8, 9	Research questions; evaluation outlines; concept clarification	AI output is not evidence; verify all claims; avoid fabricated citations
Capstone Development Companion	Capstone sequence (planning and integration)	Competencies 1, 4, 6–9	Outline integration; competency narrative alignment	No ghostwriting; cite sources; committee remains final authority
VisibleAI (supplemental)	Selected writing-intensive courses	Supports competency-linked reflection and communication	Paragraph-level revision; clarity; structured reflective prompts	Use for coaching only; student authorship required; verify references
Genius Academy AI Simulations	Practice courses only (not research or capstone writing)	Competencies 1, 4, 6–9	Skills rehearsal; feedback; risk-free practice	Simulation learning must be contextualized with ethics and instructor feedback
Harmonize (oral capstone workflow)	Oral capstone presentation	Competencies 1, 4, 6–9	Draft recording + AI coach + committee feedback; final recording for scoring	Rubric-governed feedback; disclosure of AI support; committee final approval

Table 1: AI Tools

We observed several recurring patterns of constructive use. In practice courses, students used the Practice Companion after Genius Academy simulations to compare alternative engagement strategies and identify how cultural context influenced their responses. In field courses, students used the Practicum & Internship Coach to translate daily tasks into competency language for learning agreements and to develop focused supervision questions. In the capstone sequence, students combined the Capstone Development Companion with the Research and Practice Writing Assistant to refine outlines and ensure that applied projects maintained a clear line of sight to EPAS competencies. The Harmonize draft-to-final oral presentation workflow helped students clarify expectations, reduce presentation anxiety, and document committee feedback and approval.

11. Limitations and Future Directions

This article describes an early-stage, program-level implementation in a specific institutional context. Future studies should examine learning outcomes, equity impacts, and student well-being using mixed-methods designs, including comparisons across modalities and institutional types. Researchers should also explore the feasibility of more secure, institutionally governed AI infrastructures that reduce reliance on proprietary systems when confidential data may be at risk

11.1. Faculty Capacity and Professional Development

Faculty and field educator engagement centered on the establishment of explicit instructional guardrails, shared expectations regarding ethical AI use, and ongoing monitoring through course design and assessment practices. While the manuscript documents governance principles and boundaries—such as de-identification requirements, prohibition of diagnostic or legal outputs, and reinforcement of supervisory authority—it does not yet describe a formalized faculty training curriculum. The need for structured faculty development is identified as a critical next step for scaling and sustainability.

12. Implications and Conclusion

At this stage, the project does not report measurable outcomes such as pre/post learning gains, retention rates, or differential equity impacts. Consistent with design-based implementation research, evidence to date is formative and includes de-identified student reflections on AI use, faculty and field educator observations, and course-level implementation notes that informed iterative refinement of prompts, guardrails, and instructional workflows. Outcome evaluation is identified as a priority for future research. The ecosystem is intentionally presented as a configurable framework rather than a prescriptive model. Core design elements—ethical guardrails, transparency of AI use, and human-in-the-loop pedagogy—are adaptable across institutional contexts. However, the article does not present empirical evidence from multi-site implementation. Scalability is therefore framed as a design consideration rather than a demonstrated outcome, with adaptation dependent on local governance capacity, faculty workload structures,

and technological infrastructure. Equity considerations informed the design of the ecosystem, particularly through the use of AI companions to provide additional academic scaffolding between human instructional touchpoints. However, the study does not yet include evaluated digital divide interventions such as differential access analyses, technology provisioning outcomes, or subgroup comparisons. Equity is therefore addressed as a design intent rather than a demonstrated impact, underscoring the need for future evaluation of access, accessibility, and differential student benefit. This implementation provides a concrete example of how AI governance, equity commitments, and accreditation frameworks can be translated into program-level educational design. By treating AI as a configurable companion ecosystem, combined with carefully bounded supplemental tools, simulation supports, and transparent assessment workflows, social work programs can expand access to coaching and reflective scaffolding while protecting the relational core of the profession. Educators are encouraged to adopt a cautious but proactive stance that foregrounds AI literacy, human-in-the-loop pedagogy, and ongoing evaluation of equity and ethical impacts. To support implementation, programs may consider the following three-step roadmap: 1) Map existing curricular goals and standards to potential AI tools and supports that align with educational priorities. 2) Develop pilot projects that allow for iterative testing and refinement of AI companions, ensuring integration with current instructional practices. 3) Establish governance policies that define ethical and equitable AI use, with continuous evaluation to adjust based on student feedback and learning outcomes. This approach aligns with the design-based implementation's emphasis on adaptability [14-18].
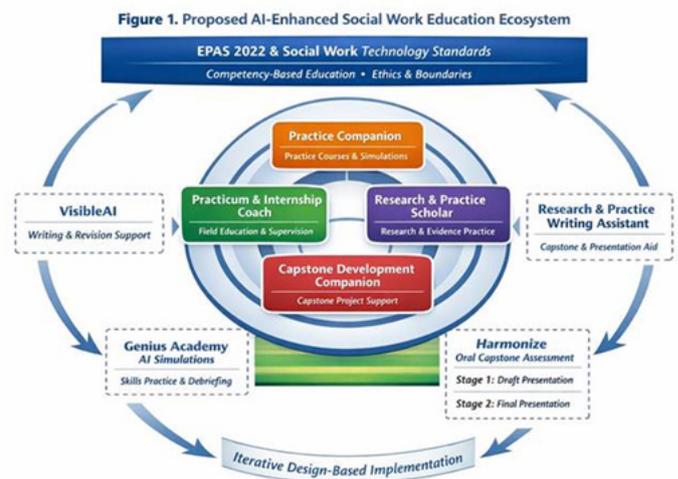

Figure 1: Proposed AI-Enhanced Social Work Education Ecosystem Conceptual Model

This figure will depict the relationships among policy foundations (EPAS 2022 and technology standards), the four custom learning companions, supplemental generative AI supports (Visible AI and the Research and Practice Writing Assistant), Genius Academy simulations in practice courses, and the Harmonize oral capstone assessment workflow,

organized across two iterative design-based implementation cycles.

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