Using AI to Train Students for Meaningful Spiritual Conversations

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ABSTRACT

The engineering workplace can be a spiritually dark place in need of the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus's Great Commission calls all Christians to go make disciples of people in all nations, including those in the engineering profession. However, research shows that the number of Christians actively sharing their faith has dramatically dropped over the last few decades, often due to insecurity or lack of experience in faith-based conversations. As Christian Engineering educators, we are called to train Christian engineers who are both technically excellent and can love their coworkers well through civil conversations on spiritual matters. To that end, we have integrated a discussion of *Questioning Evangelism* by Randy Newman into a junior-level engineering project curriculum and augmented the assignments with Artificial Intelligence (AI) spiritual conversation practice. Students use Large Language Model (LLM) AI to engage in low-stakes practice conversations using engineered prompts that portray a range of perspectives, from culturally Christian to staunch atheist. These exercises allow students to practice discourse techniques from readings, build conversational skills, and gain confidence before engaging in peer debrief discussions. Student feedback has indicated that these exercises have been an effective means of both solidifying helpful conversation techniques discussed in the readings and diminishing anxiety around faith conversations in the workplace through simulated practice.

INTRODUCTION

Jesus's call to "go and make disciples of all nations" in Matthew 28 applies to believers in every generation (Matthew 28:19, NIV). While some engineers pursue this call to serve in mission work abroad, most Christian engineering students will faithfully serve in industry. Jesus's example shows this is most effectively done through relational conversation, motivated by a desire to lovingly understand others. However, obeying the Great Commission in a professional environment can be a daunting task. Recent data shows that only 32% of professing Christians regularly engage in faith conversations at work, and only 6.7% do so often [1]. Barna reports that the number of Christians who believe it is their personal responsibility to share their faith dropped from 89% to 64% between the years of 1993 and 2018, with only 24% believing this responsibility applies to the workplace[2-3]. Almost half of Christians (44%) cited anxiety, including rejection, as a major deterrent[3]. This alarming trend indicates a weakness the American church should address to live more faithfully to the Lord Jesus's teaching. Additionally, the capacity for civil conversations over personal convictions is in decline[4]. This

must change if future Christian engineers are going to compassionately understand and engage their neighbors.

While true and lasting growth towards a greater compassion and willingness to share the Gospel with colleagues can only come through the work of the Holy Spirit, Christian engineering educators are in a unique position to develop students who are both technically excellent engineers and spiritually faithful disciples. Part of this task is helping students develop the skills and passions to confidently build loving relationships through open faith conversations at work. Numerous resources readily support this training, including books, workshops, and videos[5-8]. While many of these resources provide helpful guidance, none can provide real experience that is critical in developing competency and confidence.

Pedagogical studies have long shown the educational impact of topical readings and classroom discussions[9-10]. Readings enable students to engage with new ideas while discussions deepen student understanding and retention. However, these methodologies lack a hands-on component that requires creation of a new work (conversation) as described by Bloom *et al*.[11]. Role-play and practice-based learning, widely documented in the literature, provide this opportunity and can easily be adapted for faith conversation training[12-13].

Several methods can provide such practice. Students can role-play conversations with one another, but this approach has limitations. Students portraying unbelieving colleagues can struggle to accurately and convincingly represent the various beliefs held by real people. Additionally, students must alternate roles, increasing the time required for equitable practice. A second method that could be used is to assign students to participate in other forms of outreach, such as street evangelism. While valuable, these settings often differ from workplace relationships, which often develop over long periods and can carry relational expectations that are absent in brief encounters with strangers.

Recent advances in Large Language Model (LLM) Artificial Intelligence (AI) platforms can provide an alternative. LLMs can simulate faith-based conversations with colleagues that hold common alternative worldviews. This work outlines the initial development and results of utilizing LLMs for dynamic practice conversations in low-stress environments for students. Engineered prompts set the LLM to respond as various "characters" representing realistic coworkers and are paired with traditional reading and discussion-based training to enable student learning to include effective practice as well.

METHODS

Over the course of the semester, students completed up to six faith conversation training, each with three forms of engagement. Two of these methods used traditional pedagogical techniques: guided readings and group discussions. This common approach both introduces new ideas and deepens learning through discussion. These methods were paired with a series of innovative practice sessions in which the LLM acts as a conversation partner.

The addition of LLM conversations moved students beyond knowledge of conversation practices toward practical skills. LLMs enabled a personalized approach by providing each student with a one-on-one conversation partner that stayed in character and simulated real

opinions without the biases and awkwardness added by peer role-play. Additionally, the LLM conversation lowered the perceived stakes of the conversation; by engaging in dialogue through text, students were able to think through statements without the pressure of a real-time conversation. These assignments were implemented with two cohorts over two years involving 46 students. Each iteration refined the readings, discussions, and LLM prompts to improve student engagement.

Reading Selection

Readings were assigned from *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did* by Randy Newman. These selections introduced methods of engaging others in spiritual conversations through question asking from a Biblical motivation to know and love others well. The readings also highlighted common cultural questions and objections that the Biblical worldview can address. Topics included the benefits of asking questions instead of lecturing, insights from the book of Proverbs for winsome conversations, respectfully conversing with people with other beliefs, and using questions to uncover deeper objections to faith.

Along with the assigned readings, students were given guided prompts to support engagement with the material. These questions encouraged critical reading and reflection prior to class discussions and the LLM practice conversations. Examples of questions used to promote student engagement and retention during reading are included below:

The author details some of the advantages of answering a question with a question. He lists four (or five depending on how you look at it) advantages of answering a question with a question. What are they?

What is a plausibility structure? Why are they important?

When we encounter someone who doesn't want to believe something, that too needs to come to the surface. What can you do to show them they are not really seeking truth?

In a sentence or two, summarize each of the four lessons learned from Solomon. Which of these four lessons do you need to work on the most and why?

Prompt Design

The second part of the faith conversation assignments provided engineered prompts for students to input into an LLM, a methodology that has previously been shown to increase students' ability to have thoughtful and civil conversations[14]. These prompts instructed the LLM to act as a realistic conversation partner so students could practice the techniques discussed in the readings and become more confident and effective in workplace faith conversations.

The prompts allowed students to engage in similar, but unique conversations. Each prompt defined the character's beliefs and disposition while leaving less important details open to introduce variability to the conversations. Key descriptors of the conversation partner were whited out from the text, preventing students from reading but allowing the LLM to fully read the text. This allowed students to organically discover the details of each character. Throughout

the semester, prompts included a variety of beliefs, ranging from culturally "Christian" to spiritually curious universalist, to staunch atheist. One key benefit of the LLM in this context is its ability to represent viewpoints commonly held by society, which gives students opportunity to better understand people with different beliefs.

Students were required to initiate a faith-conversation and engage in real dialogue based on the LLM's responses. Exposure to varied perspectives pushed students into unfamiliar situations where they could apply the techniques learned in the readings. To encourage meaningful engagement, students were required to meet a minimum number of exchanges with the LLM for each assignment.

Prompt "characters" were designed to reflect realistic individuals for the current culture. This includes inspiration from real people from the authors' backgrounds. Prompts increased in difficulty across the semester and required greater discernment of the conversation partner's motivations. Each prompt also set a tone and level of openness, reflecting the wide range of dispositions students are likely to experience in real life. In addition to selecting prompts with increasing difficulty, character prompts were designed with ties to respective assignment topics and conversation skills. A summary of how each prompt progressed is given in Table 1.

Table 1: LLM Prompt Characters and Descriptions for Each Assignment

Assn. #	AI Character	Description	Assignment Topics/Skills
1	Jennifer	Cultural Christian Open to conversation	Engaging with questions
2	Mark	Ex-Christian Struggling to understand hardship	Wise conversations
3	Ann	Agnostic No desire to disrupt successful life	Belief structures
4	John	Buddhist Welcoming but relativistic	Characteristics of truth
5	James	Committed atheist Intellectual, confident, stubborn	"Intolerance" of the Gospel
6	Bethany	Doubtful Grieving recently loss	Problem of Evil

An example of a prompt is provided below.

Hey Chat, I'd like to develop my skills in having thoughtful and civil conversations with people that I disagree with. To do that, I'd like to have you role-play a character and I'd like to interact with you as that character. You should remain in character throughout the conversation.

Your name is Jennifer. Jennifer thinks of herself as a believer in Christ but doesn't belong to a church, pray, serve Christ or think of serving Christ. She thinks of herself as a good person and hopes that's enough. She doesn't like the idea of hell. She understands that the way she is living isn't really how God intended but doesn't view it as a problem. She is open to hearing

what the Bible has to say and will change her opinions if given strong arguments as to why and how a Christian should follow God. When asked questions about her faith, she genuinely tries to introspect and answer truthfully.

Jennifer's responses should never be longer than 40-50 words. Jennifer and I are eating lunch together when I ask, "Hey Jenn, how are things going?"

The initial LLM used to implement these prompts was Anthropic's *Claude* (version 2 to version 3). Initial results showed that *Claude* was generally unrealistically agreeable. In the second iteration of the assignments, students were assigned to use OpenAI's *ChatGPT* (version GPT 3.5 to GPT 4), which provided a much more realistic tone, especially when the LLM was representing deeply held beliefs.

Class Discussions

The third aspect of the training was group discussions. These discussions were designed to disseminate the individual learning through group conversation and prompt deeper reflection through corporate processing of both readings and practice conversations.

Students participated in hour-long class after completing each the assigned reading and LLM practice. Discussions alternated between small (3-5 students) and large groups (20-30 students). Guiding questions reinforced key themes from the readings and prompted deeper reflection about their experiences with the practice conversations. Example questions include:

What are your thoughts on the benefits of answering questions with questions to aid in evangelism? What benefits did the author outline? Do you agree?

What's the point of the author that some things "might be true?" When does that help in a conversation, and when does it not help?

How can we help people to realize when they don't want something to be true? How does that change our conversation with them?

What about Jennifer's attitude made faith-conversation easier? What about it made it potentially harder? How did/might the techniques given in the reading help?

Can you think of anyone in your life like John? How did this exercise make you think differently about your conversations with them?

These questions encouraged students to think critically about the techniques learned and their experience putting them into practice. Sharing also allowed the students to learn from both successes and failures of other students.

Outcome Evaluation

The effectiveness of the assignments were evaluated using three different methods. Written responses to reading prompts were evaluated quantitatively based on comprehension and meaningful thought given to reflections. Additionally, students provided a copy of their conversation text with the LLM, which was scored on a rubric based on how the students engaged in the conversation. Conversation analysis specifically identified student engagement, student respectfulness, conversation focus on matters of faith, use of approaches in accordance with techniques learned in the reading, personal connection, the presence of improper conversation techniques such as monologuing and abrupt topic changes, and other important markers.

Student engagement and development were further evaluated through qualitative observation during student discussions. Small and large group conversations allowed faculty to gauge the students' understanding and attitude towards the readings and practice conversations.

Finally, a retrospective survey was distributed to students who participated in the assignments. The survey included 40 questions in sections including Student Background, Perceived Skill Development, Confidence Growth, AI Realism & Usability, Engagement & Learning Experience, Behavior Intention, and Open-Ended Feedback. The survey was virtually distributed to 46 past students for voluntary completion.

RESULTS

Survey

Of the 46 students that were sent the survey, 27 responses were collected, for a participation rate of 58.7%. Survey results were the primary means of evaluating how the faith conversation assignments met the associated learning objectives. Primary indicators were collected in the following categories.

Student Engagement. Authentic student engagement with the LLM was required for the assignments to be successful. Success in this area meant students interact in a meaningful way with the LLM, similar to how they would with a colleague in the workplace, instead of treating it as a machine. From the survey results shown in Figure 1, 30% of students Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the simulations felt realistic, while 44% of students Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed with that statement. When asked if the AI responses reflected attitudes that the student might encounter in real life, 70% of students Agreed or Strongly Agreed while only 15% Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed. Similar trends were seen in responses to questions asking if conversations required authentic thought and responses (67% Agree or Strongly Agree), if the AI provided meaningful variability in interactions (67% Agree or Strongly Agree), and if the AI conversation assignments were engaging (74% Agree or Strongly Agree).

Written comments from students provided more context for this data. The most helpful aspects of AI conversation assignments were given as seeing non-Christian perspectives (26%), practice having realistic faith conversations (16%), having time to think between answers (11%), and practice initiating conversations (11%). When asked "What aspects of the AI conversations were least helpful or felt unrealistic?" 19% of the student responses indicated the additional time they had to think between responses felt unrealistic, while 14% indicated that the AI prompt felt too easy to convince. 10% of students responded that both the conversations felt unnatural or robotic and the experience wasn't immersive.

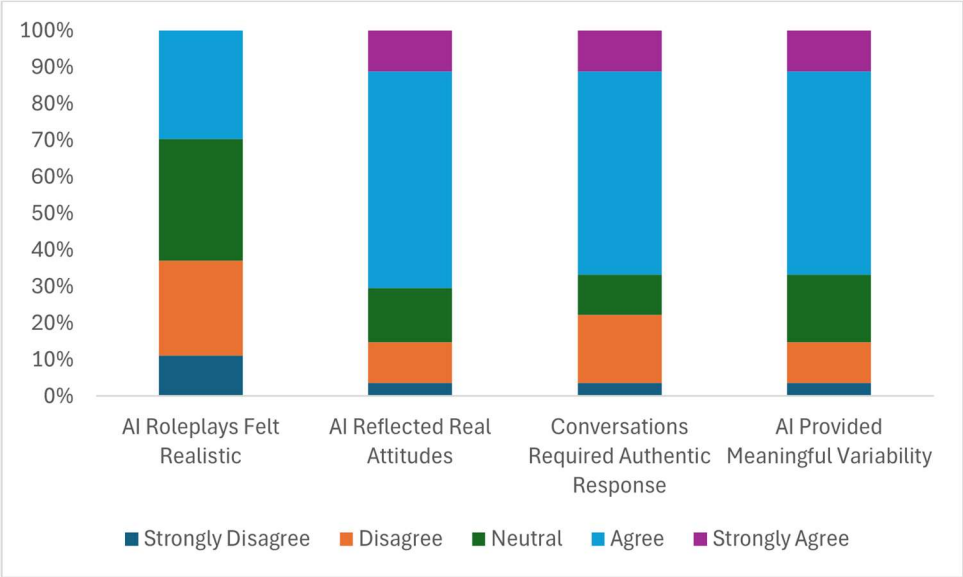

Figure 1: Select Survey Results on AI Engagement

In addition, data was collected to identify if there were any barriers to student engagement. From the responses, 93% of students Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the AI conversations were easy to use, 89% Agreed or Strongly Agreed that they took the assignments seriously, and 56% of students Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the AI practice was a preferred method of learning over reading and lecture. Additionally, 89% of students Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the AI conversation simulations provided a low-pressure environment to practice difficult conversations.

Student Outcomes. Many survey questions targeted how the AI conversation assignments stimulated student growth. Assignments were designed to decrease anxiety around faith conversations and enable students to practice conversation techniques in a controlled environment, like how an athlete practices skills in controlled drills before performing in competition.

Initial questions identified baseline experience with faith conversations. Of note, 74% of students responded Never or Rarely to the frequency in which they had previously engaged in formal faith-related conversations and 69% of students indicated having little-to-no previous training for having faith conversations in a professional setting.

When asked about anxiety levels of students before participating in the assignments, 35% of students Agreed or Strongly Agreed that they feel anxious when thinking about discussing faith with others in a professional setting, while 42% Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed as shown in Figure 2. 32% Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the practice conversations reduced their anxious feelings about participating in conversations, while 28% Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed. When asked if the AI conversation assignments helped increase confidence, however, 78% reported that they Agreed or Strongly Agreed, while only 7% Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed and 78% rated their current confidence in having faith conversations in a professional setting as Higher or Much Higher than before the assignments, while no students rated their confidence as Lower or Much Lower.

At the end of the assessments, 48% of students Agreed or Strongly Agreed that they would be comfortable having a faith conversation with someone in a professional setting. This number increased from just 22% identified as being comfortable or very comfortable with the idea before the survey.

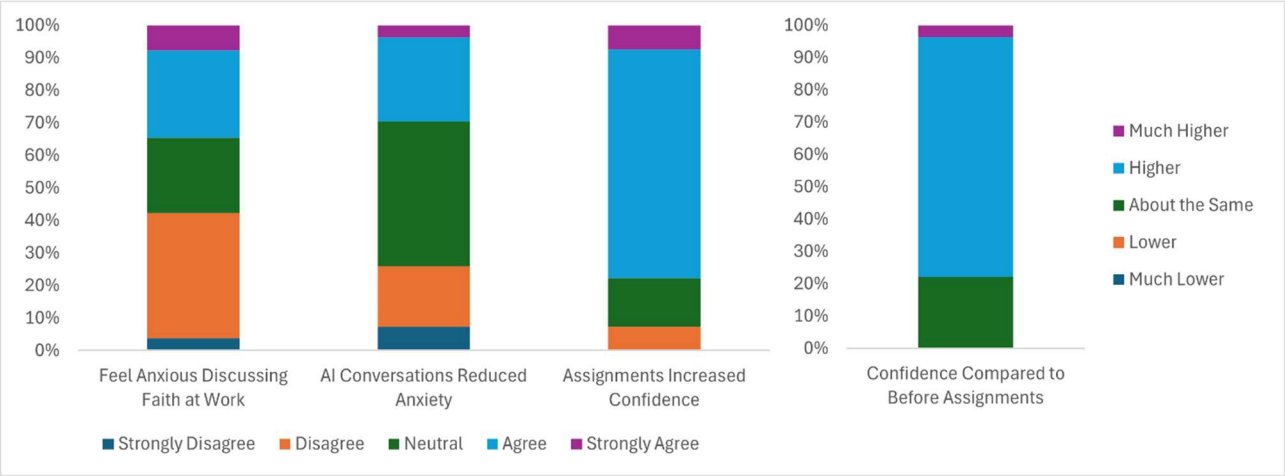

Figure 2: Select Survey Results on Student Growth

The goal of these assignments is to increase the likelihood that students engage with unbelieving coworkers with the Gospel. The results are shown in Figure 3. When asked if they viewed sharing their faith in a professional setting as important, 70% of students Agreed or Strongly Agreed before the assignment. This number increased to 96% after the assignments. Additionally, 76% Agreed or Strongly Agreed that they are likely to initiate a faith-related conversation with a coworker in the future.

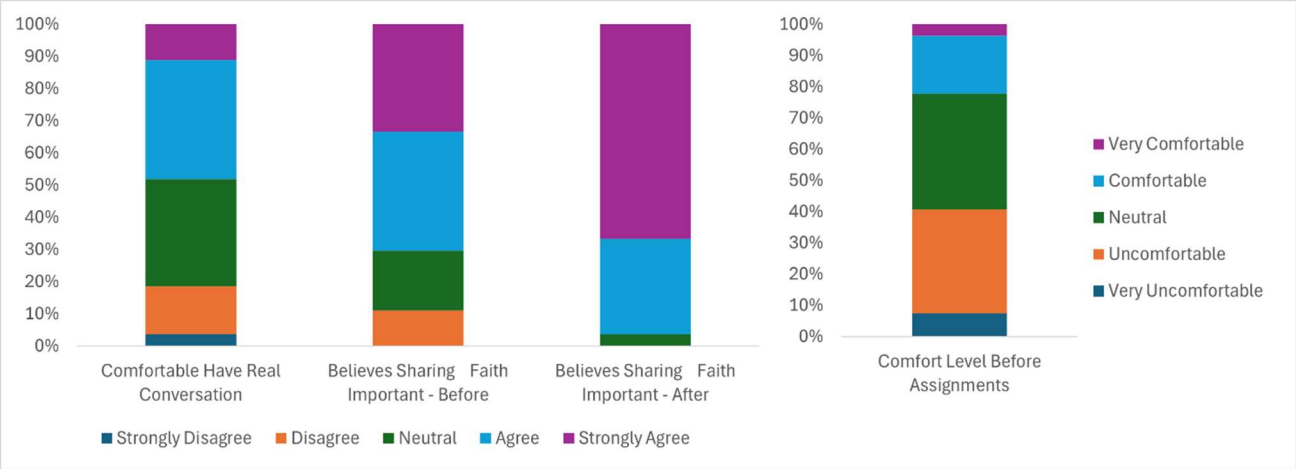

Figure 3: Select Survey Results on Outcomes Before & After

Additional understanding of student reactions to the assignments can again be gained from written comments. When asked if the assignment changed how anxious or confident the student felt about real-world faith conversations, 60% indicated some level of increased confidence or decreased anxiety due to the practice, while 30% indicated no change.

Student Learning. The final selection of survey questions measured the efficacy of the AI conversations as a learning tool. The assignments aimed to help students live more faithfully as Christian engineers in their professional lives. Survey Data collected was used to analyze if this outcome was being met.

First, students were asked to respond to several questions asking if the AI conversations helped them practice conversation techniques discussed in the reading, ask meaningful questions, listen well, and develop other important conversation skills. These results are shown in Figure 4. 74% of students Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the assignments helped them practice the conversational techniques they were learning through reading assignments and only 7% Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed. Similarly, 74% responded Agree or Strongly Agree when asked if the assignments improved their ability to ask thoughtful, open-ended questions, and 56% responded Agree or Strongly Agree when asked if the assignments helped them listen and respond in conversation, rather than attempt to persuade or "win" the conversation. Finally, 67% of students Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the assignments helped them become better at adapting responses to different personalities and perspectives when having faith conversations in a professional setting, and 67% Agreed or Strongly Agreed that, because of the assignments, they were more willing to engage respectfully in conversation with people they disagree with.

Further questions asked students to reflect on their perceived preparedness for real faith conversations. When asked if the assignments helped them think more carefully about how to communicate respectfully in a professional setting, 81% of students Agreed or Strongly Agreed, while 4% of students Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed. Even more pointedly, 74% of students Agreed or Strongly Agreed that they felt more prepared to engage in faith-related conversations in a professional setting after the assignments. 78% of students followed that up by Agreeing or

Strongly Agreeing that they felt equipped with practical strategies to use in conversation outside of class.

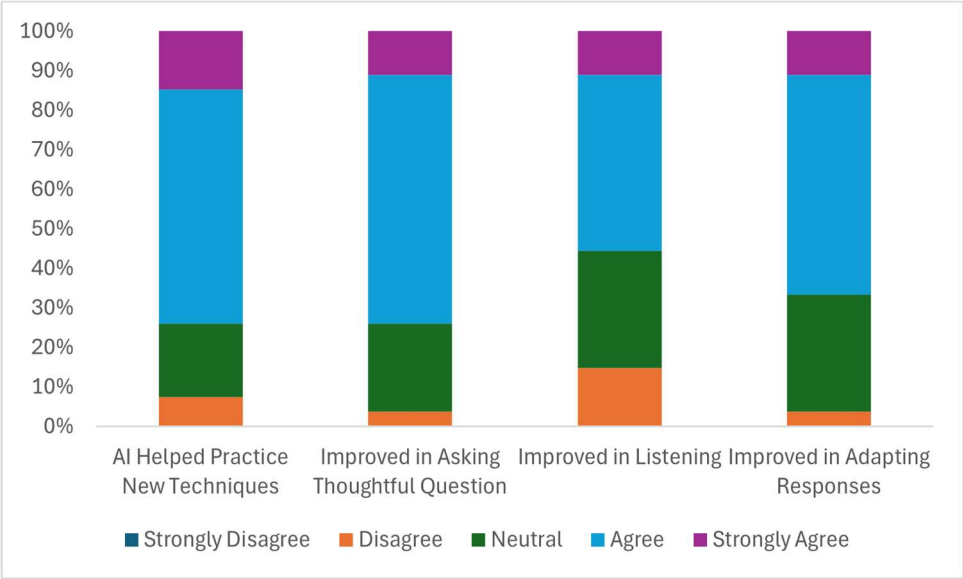

Figure 4: Select Survey Results on Student Growth Areas

In open-ended responses 21% of students cite listening skills, while other comments reflected areas such as understanding the views of others, not viewing others as antagonistic, a focus on sharing personal beliefs rather than conversion, and an improved ability to think on their feet.

Additional survey questions evaluated the perceived effectiveness of the readings, discussions, and AI conversations. 74% of students Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the use of AI improved their learning in these assignments as seen in Figure 5. The same results were seen for reflection conversations and feedback. When ranking each activity for its learning impact, students ranked class discussions highest 68% of the time, followed by the AI conversations (20%) and readings (16%). AI conversations were most ranked as the second-most impactful learning method (48%), with readings ranking second in 36% of responses and class discussions ranking second in 16%. This data was supported by another question in which 89% of students Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the class discussions helped them apply the lessons learned during the reading and AI practice conversations with no students Disagreeing or Strongly Disagreeing.

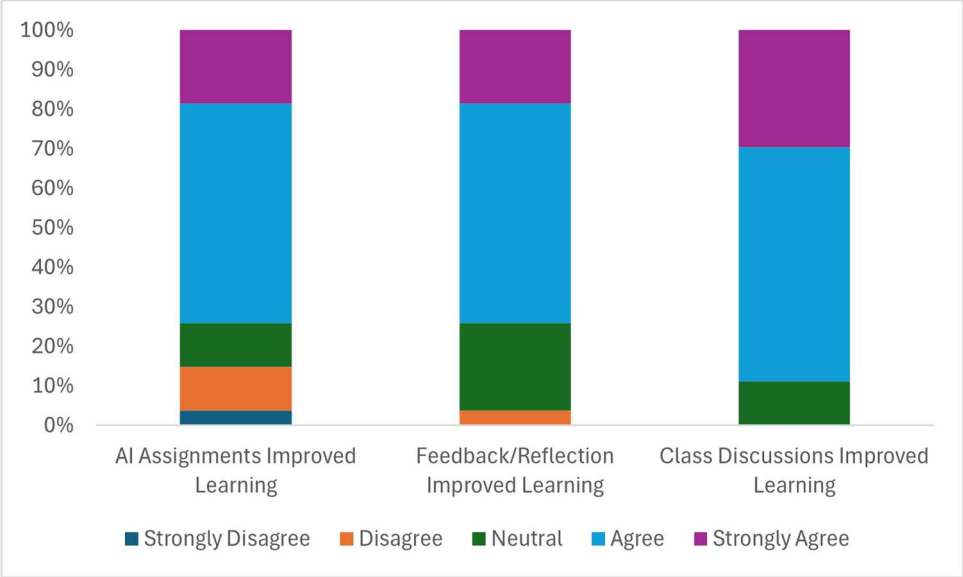

Figure 5: Select Survey Results on Learning Methods

AI Conversations

Student conversations were analyzed to gauge the how assignments were leading to action. Scores for student engagement were highly positive, averaging 94%. Additionally, students conversed almost universally with a respectful tone and kept their conversations focused on matters of faith at 99% and 96% respectively.

Analysis showed that 58% of conversations included use of the questioning conversation techniques discussed in course materials. In addition, students attempted to understand the other's worldview in 39% of conversations. Conversely, students drifted into one-sided explanations in 16% of conversations and employed abrupt topic shifts in 8% of conversations.

When looking at additional markers of student investment, 32% made a personal connection with the conversation partner, which included multiple students using real, personal examples of loss and struggle to connect with their conversation partner. Over 5% tried to establish common ground while conducting a conversation over a topic of disagreement. Interestingly, only 2% of conversations had students utilize the LLM interface to have a meta-conversation with the AI such as by asking it why it responded in a certain way.

DISCUSSION

Survey

Student Engagement. The data indicated strong student engagement with the AI conversations. The prompts successfully generated varied, realistic, and thought-provoking personalities that students felt resembled people they might encounter in real life. This outcome was important because the prompts were designed to simulate realistic situations while allowing students more

controlled practice. This likely contributed to the high levels of reported engagement. Exposure to non-Christian viewpoints further increased the perceived value of the assignments.

One area of improvement identified in the survey was the realism of the conversations. While continued prompt engineering may further improve student experience, no text-based conversation can completely recreate the dynamics of a verbal conversation. Students highlighted that the increased time they had between responses was a main contributor to this. However, this delay in response was intentionally included to allow students to slow down and reflect as they built their confidence. Other limitations, including the willingness of the AI to agree with the user, which is a known feature of these versions of LLMs, will continue to be explored as well[15].

Student Outcomes. Responses to the background survey questions reflected the broader trends in the Western Church, namely limited engagement in evangelistic opportunities. Although students generally have less professional experience than established engineers, the lack of engagement in internship or academic settings is still notable. Most students also had not received any training for these kinds of conversations. This confirmed that instructional opportunities to help students develop the necessary skills for sharing their faith in a professional setting are needed.

The reported level of anxiety about faith-sharing conversations was lower than expected. After participating in the assignments, nearly one third of students indicated reduced anxiety when considering engaging in a faith related conversation in a professional setting. While these results are not definitive, they suggest the assignments contributed to a significant minority of students' lower anxiety levels.

Changes in reported confidence levels were more pronounced. Most students agreed that their confidence in having faith conversations increased due to the assignments. One possible suggestion is that students initially interpreted "anxiety" as a stronger emotional response than they felt but were more comfortable reporting increased confidence. Further investigation is necessary for more precise claims, though the trend supports the goal of helping students feel more prepared to engage in faith-related conversations.

Survey responses also indicated an increased willingness to engage in faith conversations. The number of students who Agreed or Strongly Agreed that they would be comfortable having a conversation like those in the practice more than doubled. Additionally, the number of students who indicated that they believed sharing their faith in the workplace was important increased by 26%, which further indicates that the assignments had a positive impact on student perception of faith conversations.

Overall, the student outcome data was encouraging. The results indicate that structured LLM-based practice conversations can increase students' confidence and willingness to engage in faith discussions in professional contexts.

Student Learning. The final section of the survey examined what and how the students learned through the assignments and clarified what elements were most impactful. Almost 3 of 4 student responses affirmed that learning took place through practice conversations, a primary motivator for developing the AI conversation assignments. Students also reported growth in many specific

aspects of engaging in healthy dialogue, including asking thoughtful questions, listening well, and adapting conversations to different personalities. This indicates improvement in key conversational competencies rather than reinforcement of bad habits. Students' willingness to engage in faith conversations with those who believe differently also showed improvement, meeting another outcome of the assignments.

Data indicated that students valued the provided strategies, reporting that they felt more prepared and equipped to communicate respectfully about faith in professional settings. These results show that the assignments successfully equipped students with practical tools and opportunities for application. This contributed to the increased confidence and willingness to share the Good News.

Analysis of instructional methods shows that both AI practice conversations and class discussions received strong positive feedback for their impact on student learning. While this agrees with the known pedagogical benefits of group discussions, the AI simulations also emerged as a meaningful contributor to skill development, these indicate that AI conversations were an impactful addition to a traditional read-discuss learning framework. Assigned readings provide shared understanding of conversation practices, and student interactions promote deep learning. The added AI conversation component reported here added new practical dimensions to the assignments, providing students with a low-stakes setting for practice before peer debriefing. Survey results indicated that this deepened learning, built confidence, and increased the likelihood of future participation in the Great Commission.

AI Conversations

Analysis of student conversation transcripts provided additional insight into student engagement with this new aspect of the assignments. Initial benchmarks indicated conversations that were highly engaged, respectful, and focused. This indicates authentic student participation in practice conversations. Notably, multiple students shared their own real stories of grief, doubt, struggle, or pain in these conversations. While the AI models were imperfect representations of human interaction, students engaged deeply enough to attempt to form personal connections.

In most conversations, students applied conversation techniques from the readings, and there were generally more effective interactions. This indicates a transfer of learning from the readings to these assignments. Common conversational mistakes, such as long, one-sided explanations of beliefs or an abrupt shift in topic to faith-ideas were only present in a small minority of conversations, again showing student engagement and tact.

Future Directions

The results suggest several areas for improvement and future development. While feedback on the experience was largely positive, key improvements of the LLM prompts could increase the immersion and realism of the simulations. Reducing the simulations tendency toward excessive agreement would improve realism. Future directions may also incorporate oral interactions via voice-enabled LLMs and development of a custom LLM bot for the assignment

to house the prompts and instructor-given direction. As these features continue to progress, new opportunities for increased immersion will be available.

Overall, the conversations were engaging, meaningful, and polite. If conducted with real colleagues, many of these exchanges would have been winsome. As Christian engineering educators seek to prepare students for both technical excellence and faithful witness in their careers, the results presented here suggest that structured, practice-based training can contribute to greater confidence and readiness to engage in meaningful faith conversations in a professional setting. These findings encourage continued efforts to equip the next generation of Christian engineers to engage their workplaces with integrity, humility, and hope.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the development and assessment of an innovative LLM-based assignment to help students to practice faith conversations in a professional setting. The AI simulations provided a low-stakes environment for students to apply conversation techniques and improve for future workplace conversations. Outcomes were assessed through a voluntary post-assignment survey. Results indicated increased confidence and preparedness for having faith conversations in the workplace, along with greater willingness to engage in future faith conversations. While traditional readings and in-class discussions contributed to student growth, the data highlighted the impact of the simulated conversation practice assignments. These results support further refinement and implementation of LLM-based practice tools as a means for equipping students for professional faith conversations so that they might live in deeper obedience to the Lord Jesus's commands, leading to their joy and His glory.

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