

AI as a Critical Friend, Committee Reviewer, and Ideation Partner in Doctoral Action Research

Course Subject	EDU 7310 / R3.5 — Advanced Research Design 2
Student Level	Doctoral
Number of Students	Approximately 20 per quarter (~60 total across three quarters)
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What the Students Did

In EDU 7310, doctoral students used Claude and [Scite.ai](#) as scaffolded thinking tools throughout multiple assignments connected to their Cycle 1 Fieldwork Reports, the first major data collection and analysis milestone in their dissertation-in-practice (DiP). Students used these tools to support ideation, critical questioning, methodological reflection, literature exploration, and action-step development. AI use was intentionally prohibited during the qualitative data analysis assignment in order to center human meaning-making in the interpretation process. Following each AI interaction, students submitted a structured description and reflection as Appendix A of their Fieldwork Report.

Purpose

The purpose of this activity was to scaffold doctoral students into purposeful, critically reflective uses of generative AI tools at key stages of their action research process. Rather than treating AI as a shortcut or writing aid, the course positioned Claude and Scite.ai as tools for intellectual extension, prompting deeper examination of assumptions, sharpening methodological thinking, and expanding the range of options considered during planning. Each AI interaction was paired with a required written reflection so that students developed metacognitive awareness of how they were engaging with AI-generated output and what they were taking from it. The integrated use of Scite.ai for literature discovery introduced students to AI-assisted research tools that prioritize citation integrity and source reliability, directly supporting the scholarly standards expected in doctoral work.

Assessment

Each AI interaction was assessed through the written description and reflection submitted in Appendix A of the assignment. Reflections were evaluated using a rubric with the following criteria:

Score	Description	Points
Full Marks	The description and reflection demonstrated thoughtful interactions with insightful perspectives on the process.	5 pts
Partial	The description and reflection demonstrated an attempt to interact with cursory perspectives on the process.	3–0 pts
No Marks	No review was reported.	0 pts

Faculty Reflections

What surprised me most was the range in how students engaged with the AI feedback. Some students had genuinely productive exchanges that pushed their thinking in new directions. Others produced more surface-level interactions and reflections. The rubric helped make the depth of engagement visible, but I am continuing to think about how to scaffold students toward richer dialogue with the tool rather than treating it as a checklist item.

The most important move in the whole scaffold, in my reading of the data, is the prohibition on AI use in the coding and thematic analysis assignment. AI can interrogate your framing but not constitute your findings. AI can simulate a committee but not sit on it. AI can help you locate literature, but not decide which literature is substantively relevant. AI can help you brainstorm what to try next, but not tell you what your participants meant.

The prohibition is also what gives the data analysis itself its shape. Doing qualitative coding by hand, in a course where AI is otherwise encouraged, is a felt experience — the student knows she is doing something AI is not permitted to do. AI's pattern-matching is real and useful, but the meaning-making about those patterns belongs to the person who knows the context. When the curriculum makes that distinction concrete by placing the prohibition on the interpretive work, the student does not have to grasp the distinction as an abstraction. She performs it.

My advice to faculty considering something similar: be explicit about the purpose of each AI interaction before students complete it. The prompt structure matters enormously. I provided instructional videos for each tool interaction to reduce confusion and focus students on the intellectual work rather than troubleshooting. I would also recommend requiring the reflection as part of the assignment grade, not as an add-on, so students treat it as an opportunity to think rather than a formality to complete.

Step-by-Step Directions

Assignment 1: Claude as Critical Friend (Problem of Practice)

Step 1	Complete the following sections of your Cycle 1 Fieldwork Report: Problem of Practice, Purpose Statement, Research Questions, Context, and Positionality.
Step 2	Watch the instructional video on how to conduct a critical friend review using Claude (see Related Materials).
Step 3	Open Claude. Begin by introducing your context: "I am a doctoral student in education conducting action research for my dissertation."
Step 4	Use this prompt: "I am studying [insert brief problem of practice]. Please act as a critical friend and identify potential blind spots, assumptions, or missing perspectives in my purpose of research statement: [paste statement]. Ask me probing questions that will help me think more deeply about this issue."
Step 5	Engage with Claude's questions. Follow up as needed.
Step 6	Write a description and reflection on the critical friend interaction. Include this in Appendix A — Description of and Reflection on AI Use in your Cycle 1 Fieldwork Report.

Assignment 2: Claude as DiP Committee Member (Methodology)

Step 1	Complete the following sections of your Cycle 1 Fieldwork Report: Qualitative Research Methodology Description, Action Research Methodology Description, Participants, Data Collection Procedures, and Data Analysis.
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Step 2	Watch the instructional video on how to conduct the committee member role-play using Claude (see Related Materials).
Step 3	Open Claude. Upload your completed assignment.
Step 4	Use this prompt: "You are an experienced dissertation committee member reviewing a research methodology section. The purpose of my research is... [insert statement]. Please read the Methodology sections of the document and ask challenging questions about: 1) participant recruitment and retention, 2) researcher positionality, 3) data collection feasibility, and 4) ethical considerations. Be specific and thorough in your concerns."
Step 5	Respond to Claude's questions and engage with the feedback. Follow up as needed.
Step 6	Write a description and reflection on the DiP committee member interaction. Include this in Appendix A of your Cycle 1 Fieldwork Report.

Assignment 4: Scite.ai for Literature Support (Findings)

Step 1	Complete your Findings sections, including participant quotes and initial citations.
Step 2	Watch the instructional video on how to use Scite.ai to locate and evaluate supporting literature (see Related Materials).
Step 3	Open Scite.ai. Search for literature related to at least one of your three findings.
Step 4	Review how the sources have been cited in the literature — supporting, contrasting, or mentioning. Use this to select references that strengthen your findings section.
Step 5	Add at least 2–3 citations from your Scite.ai search to your Findings sections.
Step 6	Write a description and reflection on your Scite.ai interaction. Include this in Appendix A of your Cycle 1 Fieldwork Report.

Assignment 5: Claude as Ideation Partner (Cycle 2 Action Steps)

Step 1	Complete Assignment 4 (Findings) before starting this step.
Step 2	Watch the instructional video on how to use Claude for Cycle 2 ideation (see Related Materials).
Step 3	Open Claude. Upload your completed Assignment 4.
Step 4	Use this prompt: "Based on these findings about [insert study focus]: [paste findings], help me brainstorm creative, feasible action steps for Cycle 2. Consider: [insert relevant constraints, e.g., limited resources, diverse languages in the community, varying work schedules]. Generate both traditional and innovative approaches."
Step 5	Use follow-up prompts as needed to push the ideation further or to narrow down options.
Step 6	Complete the following sections of your Cycle 1 Fieldwork Report using your ideation session as a resource: Implications for Cycle 2 Action Steps, Ethical Considerations, and Trustworthiness.
Step 7	Write a description and reflection on the Claude ideation interaction. Include this in Appendix A of your Cycle 1 Fieldwork Report.

Related Materials

- None at the moment