

From Pen-to-Prompt: Co-Writing with AI to Foster Student Voice, Critical Thinking, and Writing Identity in Elementary Classrooms



PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Project at a Glance: Pen-to-Prompt (P2P) is a customized AI Writing Companion designed to support Grade 6 students as they brainstorm, plan, elaborate, revise, and reflect on their writing. The tool is intentionally positioned as a scaffolded companion rather than a substitute writer or evaluator, preserving student authorship and teacher professional judgment while exploring how AI can strengthen writing confidence, critical thinking, and writer identity.

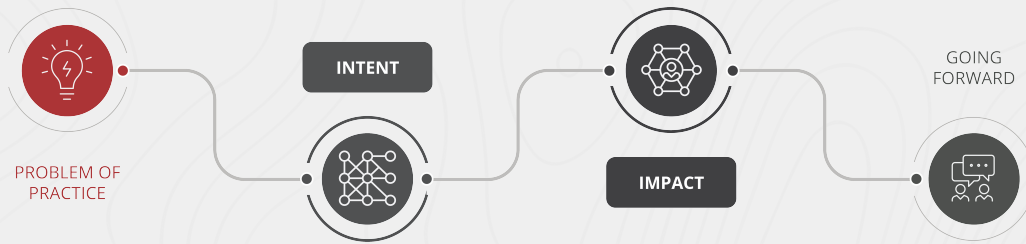


LAURIER 
WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY

Organization: **Wilfred Laurier University**
Province: Ontario
Date: **2026**
Technology: 100 Devices Donated by Dell Technologies
Lead: Dr. Keri Ewart, Assistant Professor, Language and Literacies and Co-Chair, Bachelor of Education Program
Dr. Tara-Lynn Scheffel, Associate Professor, Language and Literacies and Incoming Associate Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

From Pen-to-Prompt. Wilfred Laurier University

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Problem of Practice

A key problem of practice for the Pen-to-Prompt project is how to strengthen elementary students' writing development, confidence, and writer identity at a time when many learners continue to experience gaps in writing following the global pandemic and a recent intensified focus on reading in Ontario. In Grade 6 classrooms, this challenge is especially visible as students are often being asked to produce increasingly complex written responses while also navigating uneven foundational skills, reduced writing stamina, and greater hesitation to take risks as writers.

The concern is not simply whether students can produce more text. The deeper challenge is how to support students in becoming more capable, reflective, critical, and confident writers whose voice, agency, and authorial decision-making remain at the centre of the writing process. Teachers are also navigating increasing demands for timely, meaningful, and individualized formative feedback. In many classrooms, the need for differentiated writing support exceeds the time and human capacity available during regular instruction.

This problem sits within a broader literacy conversation. Across educational systems, recent reforms have rightly brought attention to foundational reading instruction. At the same time, educators have expressed concern that writing can become deprioritized when literacy is treated as a set of isolated skills rather than as an interconnected relationship among reading, writing, speaking, listening, representing, and meaning-making. Pen-to-Prompt responds to this opportunity with a focus on reciprocal literacy development, student identity, and teacher-supported formative feedback.

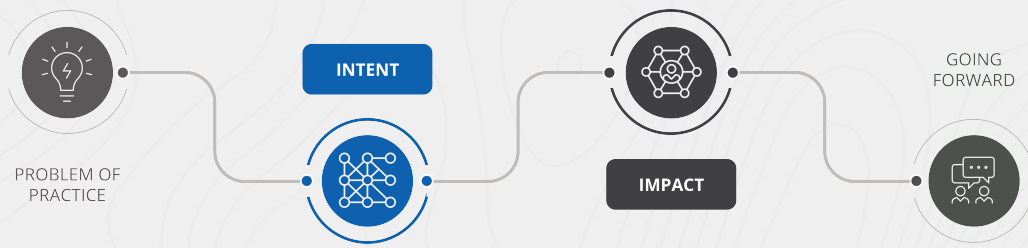
Our team therefore frames the problem of practice as follows, **how might a collaboratively designed, ethically bounded AI Writing Companion support Grade 6 students' writing development, confidence, critical thinking, and writer identity while protecting student voice and preserving teacher professional judgment?**



Guiding commitment: AI offers the opportunity to help students think more intentionally as writers, not bypass the thinking, struggle, revision, and identity work that make writing meaningful.

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Intent

In response to this problem of practice, Dr. Keri Ewart and Dr. Tara-Lynn Scheffel from Wilfrid Laurier University, in collaboration with software engineers from mrln.ai and local school boards (e.g., including student success officers, literacy coaches, classroom teachers, senior administrators), co-created Pen-to-Prompt, a customized P2P AI Writing Companion tool for classroom use.

The role of AI in this project is thoughtfully designed and implemented through the [AIME architecture](#) (Ewart & Mueller, 2025). The P2P tool functions as a supportive writing companion or coach that helps students move through stages of the writing process, including brainstorming, planning, organizing, elaborating, revising, and reflecting. It is designed to ask questions, offer prompts, redirect students back to the task when needed, and support students in making more intentional authoring decisions. The AI is not designed to write for students, finish student work, grade writing, complete rubrics, or replace teacher-led instruction.

This distinction is central to the project. Pen-to-Prompt is grounded in the belief that AI should operate as an offloading tool rather than an outsourcing tool. In other words, the tool may help students manage some of the cognitive and organizational demands of the writing process, but it should not remove students from the cognitive, creative, reflective, or identity-forming work of writing. Students remain the primary authors and decision-makers.

On the teacher side of Pen-to-Prompt, educators create individualized learner profiles that help shape the type and level of support provided to each student. These profiles can include information about reading and writing levels (according to grade), first language and/or ESL/ELL Steps (if applicable), specific learner accommodations (accessibility needs, teacher notes, scaffolding, strategies, and accommodations). Educators also indicate the degree to which the AI is involved in the feedback given to students (none, minimal, moderate, high). This design keeps teachers positioned as professional decision-makers who understand students' learning histories, classroom contexts, strengths, and needs.

AI Support	Writing level	Reading level	First language	ESL step	ELD step	Notes
High	3	3	English	—	—	Notes
Minimal	4	4	Urdu	Step 3	—	Notes
High	2	2	English	Step 2	—	Notes
Moderate	5	6	Hindi	Step 4	—	Notes
High	2	2	Urdu	Step 5	—	Notes
Moderate	3	4	Mandarin	Step 3	—	Notes
Moderate	4	4	Tamil	Step 5	—	Notes
High	2	3	English	Step 4	—	Notes

Notes & accessibility – kewart+student@demo.mrln.ai ✕

Accessibility needs
Learning needs or accommodations for this student

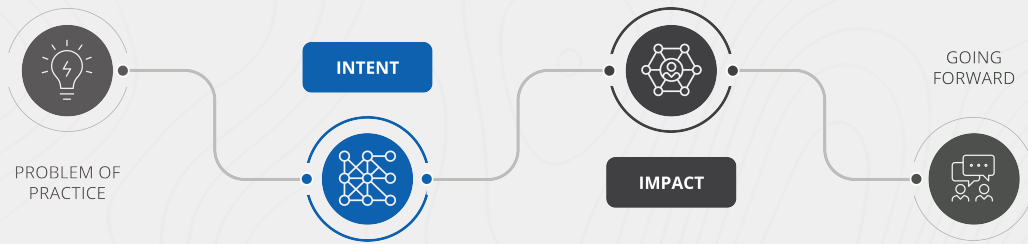
e.g. dyslexia, ADHD, visual impairments

Teacher notes, scaffolding, strategies & accommodations
Notes, scaffolding, strategies or accommodations for the AI when supporting this student

always provide sentence stems as needed

Figure 1. P2P Learning Profile Page

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Intent

Sample Learner Profiles from Pen-to-Prompt Tool

Responsible implementation is also treated as part of the learning process. Students are introduced to the tool through a digital citizenship lesson that includes learning about privacy, bias, overreliance, prompt dependency, and appropriate use. Through their use of the tool, students are learning about AI literacy and the ways AI can become a critical partner in the writing process.

The tool is intentionally designed to:

- support idea generation, organization, elaboration, revision, and reflection;
- preserve student authorship, voice, confidence, identity, and critical thinking;
- provide scaffolded prompts without writing the final product for students;
- support teacher differentiation and formative feedback processes;
- protect teacher professional judgment by excluding AI grading or automated evaluation;
- build responsible AI use through shared routines, digital citizenship, and critical AI literacy.



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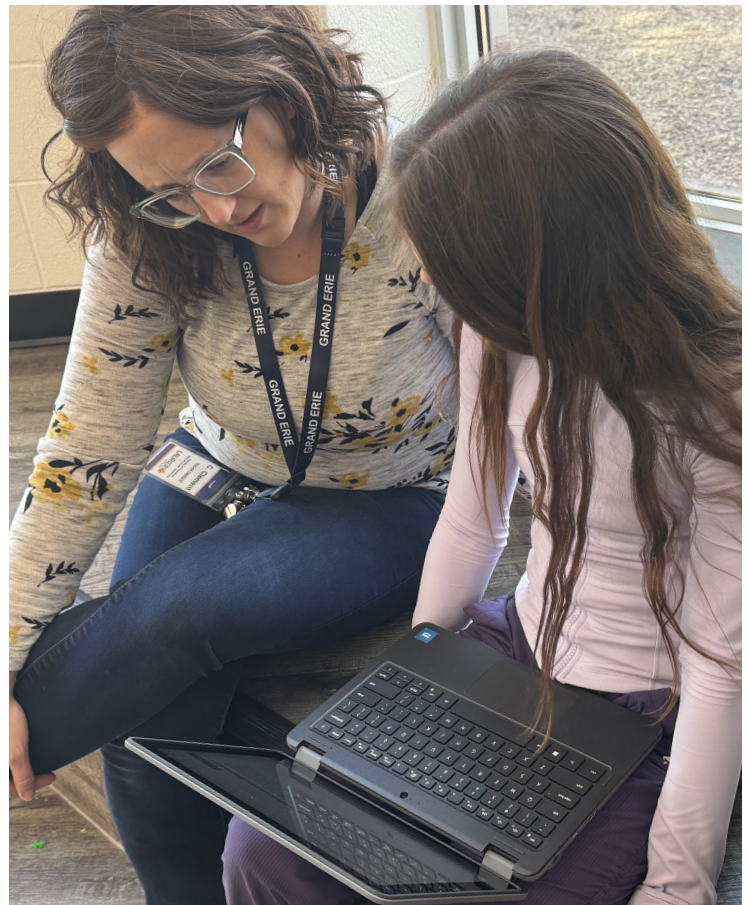
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Impact

At this stage of the project, impact is not framed as a final outcome claim. Instead, early impact is evident in the relational, ethical, technical, and instructional groundwork now in place for classroom implementation. The project has established a careful foundation of trust, collaboration, professional learning, privacy-conscious design, and shared language for responsible AI use.

Parent information sessions were hosted to explain the purpose of the project, how students will and will not use the tool, and what safeguards are built into the tool. Educators completed the equivalent of a full-day onboarding session that included a full demonstration, set-up support, prompt training, and hands-on time to explore the Pen-to-Prompt writing companion before classroom implementation. These sessions were important as this project is not simply about introducing a tool; it is about building the conditions for confident, responsible, pedagogically grounded use in real classrooms.



Implementation also included safety and privacy structures. Pseudonyms are used for student work. Interaction logs are anonymized and stored within board systems, and research data is secured through institutional storage. A pre-writing sample was collected from each student prior to using the P2P tool. A post-writing sample will be collected mid-June following completion of the study. This provides an important base for examining student writing growth, scaffold use, revision practices, and shifts in confidence or engagement over time.

The project has engaged educators and the research team in shared professional learning. Each meeting, onboarding session, troubleshooting moment, and tool iteration has surfaced new design insights. The co-design process required reimagining writing instruction using an AI tool, followed by ongoing pivoting, P2P iterations, and refinement. This process has strengthened the project's ethical stance, which has been AI integration in elementary writing must remain cautionary, critical, responsive, relational, and grounded in classroom realities. The project has expanded discussions around current ethical guidelines at both the university and school board levels in relation to the implementation of AI within pedagogical practice as well as addressing privacy concerns.

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Impact

Early indicators of change include increased shared language among educators about responsible AI use, clearer boundaries around what AI should and should not do in writing instruction, and stronger alignment between tool design and teacher professional judgment. Original iterations included AI evaluation functionality that was removed following team discussion around teacher judgement. This is a significant example of co-learning in action. In the current P2P tool iteration, assessment remains with the teacher, while AI is positioned as a scaffold for writing development rather than an evaluator of student work.

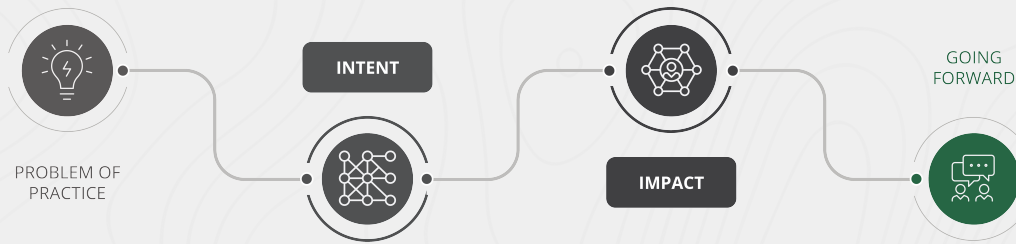
The project is now positioned to study impact across multiple forms of evidence (qualitative and quantitative), including student and teacher reflection journals, AI interaction logs, observational fieldnotes, and interviews. This mixed data collection will help the team understand how the P2P tool supports writing, for whom, under what conditions, and with what ethical or pedagogical tensions.

Figure 2. Evidence and Early Indicators

Area of Impact	Evidence So Far	What We Are Watching For
Implementation readiness	Parent information sessions; teacher onboarding sessions; tool demonstrations; set-up support; prompt training; hands-on exploration.	Whether educators feel prepared to introduce the tool confidently and responsibly within regular writing instruction.
Privacy and trust	Pseudonym system; anonymized board-stored logs; institutional research data storage; shared expectations for appropriate use.	Whether students and educators understand the boundaries and safeguards that support responsible use.
Writing development evidence	Pre-writing samples without AI; post-samples will be collected for comparison.	Growth in idea generation, organization, elaboration, revision quality, writing stamina, and confidence.
AI literacy and digital citizenship	Student introduction includes responsible use, privacy, bias, overreliance, and prompt dependency.	Whether students use AI as a critical companion rather than a shortcut or cognitive outsourcing.
Teacher professional judgment	AI grading/rubric-completion functionality was removed; teacher creation of learner profiles that support differentiation.	Whether the tool strengthens feedback and scaffolding without displacing teacher interpretation, assessment, or relational knowledge.

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Going Forward

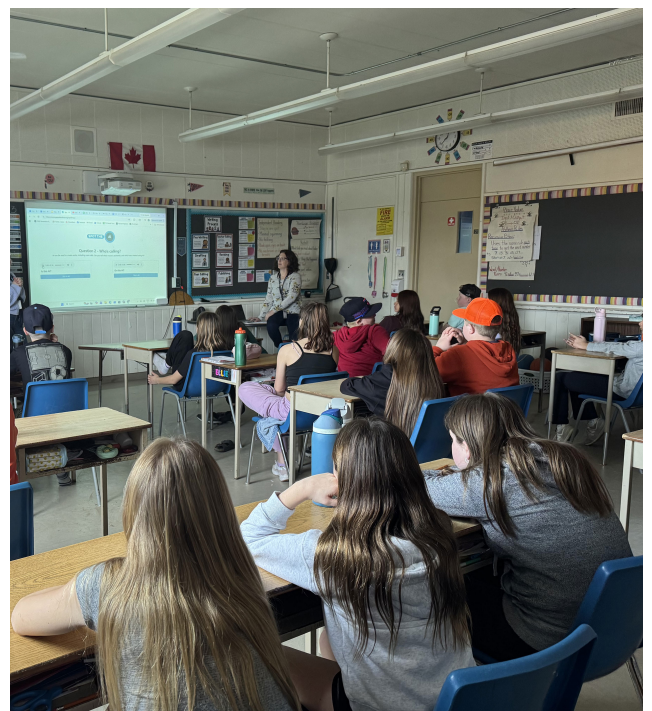
The next phase of Pen-to-Prompt will focus on deepening classroom implementation, collecting evidence of impact, and continuing to refine the tool and professional learning model through an iterative, co-designed process. The team's goal is to understand whether, how, for whom, and under what conditions an AI Writing Companion can contribute meaningfully and responsibly to student writing development and depending on outcomes.

In the immediate next steps, the team will continue supporting classroom introduction of the tool and teacher-supported routines for appropriate use. The team will also continue to monitor key ethical and pedagogical questions: Are students using AI to deepen thinking rather than avoid thinking? Does the tool help students become more intentional authors? Are students developing critical awareness of AI outputs, bias, privacy, and overreliance? How does the tool support differentiated scaffolding while still preserving teacher judgment? What forms of professional learning help teachers use AI in ways that are culturally responsive, inclusive, and instructionally meaningful?

As the project matures, findings will inform future iterations of the P2P Writing Companion, educator onboarding materials, student AI literacy routines, and potential scaling across additional classrooms, grades, and school board contexts. Expansion will be approached carefully, with attention to equity, privacy, teacher agency, student voice, and the conditions required for meaningful implementation.

Key next steps include:

- continue iterative co-design with educators, school board teams, researchers, and mrln.ai software engineers;
- complete classroom implementation across the initial Grade 6 pilot sites;
- collect and compare baseline and post-writing samples;
- analyze reflection journals, AI interaction logs, interviews, and observational field-notes;
- examine the quality of AI-supported scaffolding in relation to student voice, identity, and critical thinking;
- develop knowledge mobilization materials for school boards, Faculties of Education, and broader AI in education audiences;
- consider phased expansion only after careful analysis of impact, safeguards, and conditions for responsible implementation.



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Conclusion

The Pen-to-Prompt use case offers a thoughtful and ethically focused example of how AI can support writing instruction without replacing student voice or teacher judgement while engaging students as creative and critical writers. By positioning AI as a scaffolded companion, the P2Ptool keeps the learner's experience at the centre of instruction. As classroom implementation continues, this project will provide valuable insight into how co-created AI tools can strengthen writing skills and competencies with personalized feedback to help students continue to become reflective, and confident writers. There is hope that this project will extend to different grades, schools, boards, and provinces across Canada to have a much larger impact on students' writing development.

Resources

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