Can a Machine Conduct This Research?
A Meta-Experimental Inquiry into LLMs and Humanistic Inquiry

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Part 1. Literature Review Research

Can machines interpret? A literature review on LLMs, humanities research, and epistemic stakes

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Large language models cannot conduct humanities research in any epistemologically defensible sense — but the attempt to use them reveals more about the nature of humanistic inquiry than decades of prior methodological debate.

Why LLMs cannot conduct humanities research?

1. Pattern-recognition, not understanding.

a. **‘Stochastic parrots.’** Bender and Koller (2020): because LLMs can access only text, they cannot access meaning *a priori*, no grounding in the actual world. Contested by Clark (2025): LLMs implicitly encode world-referential information.
b. **‘Bulshit.’** Hicks, Humphries, and Slater (2024): LLM outputs are neither hallucinations (implying misperception), nor lies (implying intent), but bullshit, i.e., speech produced without any orientation toward truth.

2. Political economy of machine knowledge

a. Pasquinelli and Joler (2021): their notion of **‘nooscope,’** an instrument for viewing knowledge space that systematically extracts, compresses, and privatizes collective human knowledge.
b. Training datasets encode social biases, learning algorithms compress the world into statistical models, and these models systematically fail to detect genuinely novel phenomena ("the undetection of the new"). **If AI cannot detect the new, it cannot identify lacunae in scholarship.**

3. What AI can and cannot do in the research pipeline

AI excels at **well-defined, data-rich subtasks** but fails at the integrative, judgment-laden work that constitutes genuine research.

AlphaFold is an example *par excellence*.

4. LLMs are disembodied systems, lacking understanding

As universities face pressure to integrate AI tools, **humanistic interpretation** risks being devalued in favor of **prompt engineering**.

Also Demichelis (2024).
Also Wang (2021).
Also, Dreyfus (1992).

5. AI deskillng is a structural problem.

Nicholas Carr (2025) cites a 2024 University of Pennsylvania study showing students with GPT-4 access received better grades but performed worse when AI was removed.

Three scenarios of automation: amplification for masters, atrophy for practiced workers, and **prevention of skill development for novices.**

6. Peter Elbow (1983), "Teaching Thinking by Teaching Writing," *Change* 15 (7),

writing is not output but *a mode of thinking*. "You start writing at the very beginning — before you know your meaning at all — and encourage your words gradually to change and evolve." **If writing is thinking, outsourcing writing to AI is outsourcing thinking.**

Also Ilyenkov, Vygotsky (in particular, thinking as embodied social practice).

Part 2. Experiment’s setup

The paper's meta-experimental structure (using Claude to prepare a paper for a seminar on AI in research) turns this tension into an empirical case, joining a small but growing body of autoethnographic AI scholarship.

Stefanie Panke, "How Can (A)I Research This?" Journal of Teacher Education, 2025.

a five-month autoethnographic study integrating AI tools into every phase of research, with the tool simultaneously serving as instrument and object of study, grounded in Activity Theory.

Also Stojanov (2023, 2025a, 2025b).
Also Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011).
Also Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018), Corti et al. (2015), and Skains (2018).

My own observations:

1. It is ironic to read critique of AI research generated by AI.
2. It gives a broad and multi-voiced perspective on the field of critical AI research, which in the process of reading reminded me of certain topics and positions that I have known, while informing me about those I haven't known.
3. It is ultimately me who makes sense out of this literature review, who carefully selects talking points, who structures and prepares this presentation, and who ultimately stands here and presents it to you in order to discuss it with you.

Claude’s own final words

“The paper's own meta-experimental structure embodies this tension. Claude can gather sources, summarize arguments, and organize a literature review with impressive efficiency. What it cannot do is ***care*** whether its characterization of Ilyenkov is accurate, ***notice*** that its summaries systematically flatten dialectical complexity into propositional claims, or ***feel*** the intellectual discomfort that signals genuine learning. The machine reveals, by contrast, what only the human researcher can do — and why that capacity is worth defending.”

Bonus: Timings

Started: 1:54 AM
Last clarification: 2:11 AM
Real-time research: 18m 5s
Title, abstract, the list of references: 2:35 AM
Important! Claude reminded me on tone and framing.
Title’s edit: 2:42 AM

In total: 48 min
In contrast: 4 weeks for 4 hours, 20 days, ~4800 min