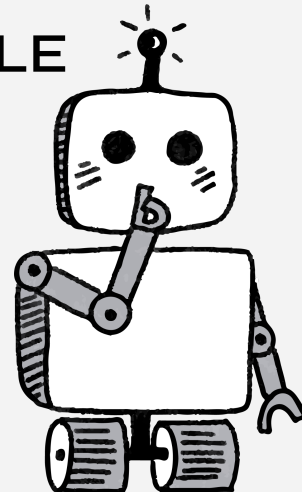


MAKING AI PRESSURES VISIBLE

BETA VERSION

Think about when and why people keep their AI use a secret.

- 1 Define:** Understand what a "Secret Cyborg" is (using AI but keeping it hidden).
- 2 Surface:** Brainstorm and share moments when you or others have felt pressure to hide AI use.
- 3 Notice:** Identify patterns across experiences and what they reveal about hidden pressures.



When we use AI and keep it a secret, we become what Ethan Mollick calls a "[secret cyborg](#)." We might be worried others will judge us. We might not have someone we trust to talk to. Or we simply don't have the time or energy. We may feel like our task lacks meaning, so we just want to get it done. Some people use AI because they feel like it's the only way to keep up with others, or to meet expectations. Keeping secrets can cause feelings of shame and isolation. **WHEN WE MAKE THESE EXPERIENCES VISIBLE, WE OFTEN DISCOVER WE'RE NOT ALONE – AND WE CREATE SPACE TO REFLECT ON HOW AI FITS INTO OUR LIVES.**

PURPOSE

This practice creates space to talk about the pressures students face around AI use and the complicated feelings that come with it. It focuses especially on moments when those pressures push students toward secrecy. These pressures affect students in a range of ways, but they rarely get discussed openly (and even less often with teachers present). By surfacing when and why people hide AI use, students discover they're not alone in facing these tensions. It also provides a natural opportunity for reflection on what pushes us out of alignment with our values, whether that's the pressure to hide use, the pressure to use AI when we'd rather not, or other forces that make choosing with integrity harder.

WHEN TO USE THIS PRACTICE

This practice works well as a foundation for other AI conversations. It helps students connect over shared experiences and invites you to identify and name pressures you may not have known they were feeling. Understanding these pressures together creates space to address them, so students can navigate AI use with more intention and integrity. This practice can be particularly valuable to do before [MAP A MOMENT](#) to seed a generative AI experience. It also pairs with [ALIGN ON THE LINE](#) to surface gray area uses of AI.



STEPS

- 1 Introduce the term.** “Secret Cyborg” moments happen when someone uses AI but keeps that use hidden. They're acting as part-human, part-robot (which is why it's called a *cyborg*), but because they want to keep their use hidden, it's *secret*. Whether it was for academic work, emotional support, social guidance, or personal validation — the key is they used AI and don't want others to know.
- 2 Generate reasons privately.** Display the prompt: *"When or why do people feel pressure to keep AI use a secret? (You can think of your own experiences or stories you know from friends or relatives.)"* Students write their answers on slips of paper, stickies, or [the handout](#). Encourage thinking about different contexts: specific classes, types of assignments, social dynamics, or family expectations.
- 3 Post and vote.** Invite students to post their answers on a shared wall. Invite them to add dot stickers to those pressures that resonate most with them.
- 4 See, think, wonder.** Invite students to share: What patterns do we notice? What do they suggest about why secrecy happens? What do we wonder about these pressures?

VARIATIONS

Anonymous Version: Use a digital tool (e.g. Padlet, Miro, Mentimeter) where students can submit pressures without names attached. Instead of stickers, students can add digital "+1's" or hearts to pressures that resonate with them. This helps everyone see shared experiences without anyone having to claim specific pressures as their own.

“Secret Human” Version: The “Secret Cyborg” activity explores when students feel pressure to keep AI use hidden. This flips the direction: when do students feel pressure to use AI even though they'd rather not? Ask: *"What creates pressure to use AI even when you'd rather not?"* Students share times they felt pushed to use AI against their preference — to keep up with peers, meet impossible deadlines, or because "everyone else is doing it." This variation surfaces how AI can feel less like a choice and more like a requirement, revealing systemic pressures that push students away from their own learning preferences.

TIPS

Consider running this when you're setting norms, culture, and core practices for your class. It builds rapport and surfaces issues that can inform how you approach other activities like [MAP A MOMENT](#) or [ALIGN ON THE LINE](#). Remember that disclosing AI use can be more vulnerable for some students — not because their use is illegitimate, but because sharing *why* they used AI might reveal personal information they want to keep private (e.g., learning differences, language background, access to technology). Keep focus on understanding patterns and pressures, not catching rule-breakers or venting about cheating in other classes. The goal is to reduce isolation and shame to pave the way to more understanding, reflection, and integrity around AI use; creating a context where students end up feeling more shame is counterproductive. If sensitive pressures emerge (mental health, family situations), acknowledge them without dwelling, then follow up individually if needed.