Gabriel Ramos - Interview

SPEAKERS
Andrea Flores, Gabriel Ramos

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Andrea Flores
So Gabriel, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today. We're starting a new communication series at the Lab, similar to the photoblog, Humans of New York. I don't know if you've ever heard of that.

Gabriel Ramos
Yeah, a little familiar with that.

Andrea Flores
The goal is that we really want to hear your personal stories, but with the focus on your experiences in the age of AI. So we're looking forward to hearing more. All right, so Gabriel, can you share a little bit about your background and upbringing and how it has shaped your perspective on life, education, maybe your educational goals or career goals?

Gabriel Ramos
I'm a first generation student right now, I was raised by Salvadoran immigrants who came here in the 1980s and '90s. Growing up, I've been around a Hispanic household, having that mindset of always working hard and being very diligent and responsible. After high school, I went to a community college [to study] graphic design because it's something I was somewhat interested in. And the more I was into it, I got more interested. And after three or four years at community college, I eventually transferred to MICA [Maryland Institute College of Art], which is where I'm currently at right now. Trying to get my bachelor's in graphic design. And one of my biggest career goals right now is to become a creative director once I get out of school and building my way up to get to that point.

Andrea Flores
Nice. Those are big goals. So, my other question would be, are you familiar at all with AI or generative AI?

Gabriel Ramos
Yes, over the past I would say about a year and a half there's been a lot of chatter within like the design and art communities that I've been a part of. It's always been something that has been a little bit of an interest, but also a lot surrounding it. Just because people are really unsure of everything that's going on with AI and how quickly it's growing. But, apart from that, I've used it to help me study sometimes. I've used it, you know, as a resource, and I'm learning how to use it as a tool right now.

Andrea Flores
Okay, actually, that was my next question. What are some other ways that you've used it or, you know, you think it could help you in terms of furthering your educational or career goals?

Gabriel Ramos
Right now, I think I'm in a space where I'm really trying to figure out where AI is applicable to my projects, not in terms of doing the work for me, but how can I use it to give me a competitive edge, almost. How can I use it to make my workflow smoother, and how can I use it to, essentially, assist me in whatever I'm doing?

Andrea Flores
Can you share a time or a specific example of how you've used it to help you?

Gabriel Ramos
Um, I would say, when it comes to theory and understanding certain aspects of a historical standpoint, it's a great tool. Because if you Google something random, like a color theory question you're gonna get a bunch of different articles telling you different things. And what AI will do is it'll condense a lot of that information into a short, a short paragraph or a couple of paragraphs, so it's easier for you to understand, but it's pulling all this information from different sources, and it's really like defining, okay, what's the most common ideas from those... from those articles and those websites that are talking about it.

Andrea Flores
And do you have any concerns or questions as you're using AI to help you with your school?

Gabriel Ramos
I would say one of the biggest concerns is clarity and a sort of understanding with professors, you know, that students are going to use AI all the time to write their essays or do their work, essentially, for them. Trying to find a middle ground where you can use AI as a tool, as a resource. But don't use it to do your work for you.

Andrea Flores
Okay, so are you saying that that might be something that the professor would need to keep in mind versus the student?

Gabriel Ramos
I would say I would say more so the professor because the professor is going to be [the] one teaching the class and the professor is going to be one that has pretty much the ground rules for the class. It comes down to how they want to teach class and how they like to operate because especially with art professors, [they] are design professors. They're very unique in the way that they like to approach it. And they're very unique in the way that they like to, you know, translate the information to the student.

Andrea Flores
And kind of thinking about this relationship between the professor and the student, are there people in your life or even at school that have been really helpful and supportive as you've been going through your educational journey? Or even your work journey.
Gabriel Ramos
I would say my biggest supporter has always been mom. She's always been there for me even through the times when I was in high school and I wasn't doing so great. She'll try to push me in the right direction. Even in community college... she was like, keep pushing, keep trying to pursue what you want to do. I can always rely on her to call her and [say], “I don't know what to do” and she’ll give me some guidance and then allow me to make the decision for myself as opposed to choosing a decision for me.

Andrea Flores
All right. And do you think that AI could actually play a role here in terms of providing similar kinds of supports, like your mom?

Gabriel Ramos
Um, I definitely believe it can. Especially in a more corporate, professional workspace, just because those skills can be easily obtained if you have the right guidance. Of course, there's some soft skills that you might have from, wherever else, but those other soft skills in a workspace with... the word is slipping my mind, but it's, uh, how to pretty much approach people in terms of how to communicate with others in a professional space. It's something that can definitely be taught through an AI telling you, “Hey, you know, this is the best way to say this, or these are the best practices to approach this problem or [how to come] up to someone to talk to them, ask them a question.” The last thing I'll say about that is it would help you be more, it can definitely help you also learn skills quicker to be able to approach issues that may arise within a workspace.

Andrea Flores
So you talked about how it can really support you. What do you think might be some of the limitations of AI in terms of that human relationship?

Gabriel Ramos
Obviously everyone is different. So, the same way you approach one person might not be the same way you approach another person. And I feel like it [will be] an issue for a little bit. For, I guess, in different scenarios, but I feel like within a corporate or a more professional workspace, everyone is kind of on the same level and the same wavelength in terms of communicating. So I think that's something you may struggle with if someone isn't necessarily like your typical professional. Especially working with artists, sometimes they aren't the most, you know what I mean? I'd say that they aren't most spoken with, sometimes they're not as, quote unquote, professional in terms of like corporate standards.

Andrea Flores
Right, they might have different rules for the corporate world. You talked a lot about your mom and how she was able to... she's always there, she's encouraging and supportive. What are some of those special characteristics about that relationship with your mom that really helped you? Do you think AI might be able to do something similar or not?

Gabriel Ramos
That's a very interesting question. Just because I feel like it would come down to the relationship between a mother and her son, and that's a bond, that's something that's very unique in itself, you know. She understands me, knows my background, knows the things that I've personally gone through, and you know,
my mom is a very attentive person, she's a very detailed person. So she pays attention to the little things. It's not something that can be given within a couple of sentences. I've been next to my mom my whole life, so it's definitely never going to be exactly the same. I feel like the closest it can come to is maybe in terms of emotional support, like maybe guidance counselors. Someone you would find as a resource out of school. I think it would be on that type of level. I think that would be the biggest issue is getting past you know, that level of, um, understanding, I think is the best way to put it.

Andrea Flores
In terms of schooling, do you have any teachers or educators - this could be an informal space or formal space like school - where you have that kind of relationship?

Gabriel Ramos
At my community college, my typography professor was great because not only was he the first professor that actually gave me very good, constructive criticism, but when he gave it he was also very warm about it. He was very like, ‘You did this and this, I really liked this, this can be better, but we can do this to support you to grow.’ We were a class of 16 and I had him for two semesters in a row. He had a little bit more of a personal relationship with every single one of us trying to understand us a little bit better. And trying to get us to be the best we can be in trying to help us grow And of course, it came down to the student, if they were there and trying to actively grow as artists or designer.

Andrea Flores
Okay, if you had a magic wand, what would you love for AI to be able to do for you? In terms of your learning or professional goals?

Gabriel Ramos
If I had a magic wand, I would love it to be able to teach me skills that I've always wanted to learn. I'm someone who will Google a Photoshop tutorial or an Illustrator tutorial to try to learn that, but [I'd love] something that will be like, 'Hey, we think this would apply really well to what you're doing.' This is how you can grow. This is how you can learn. Giving me something that I can grasp onto so that I can keep on growing as a designer. Just because I feel like that's something that's very rare to find within a professor anywhere else. Because you know, professors, they're there to give you a grade, but a good professor will try to help you grow. And I think that's something that I've been kind of all about is like, How can I continue to grow as a person? How can I continue to grow as a designer? So it's like, I had a magic wand. I want it to help me grow in ways I didn't think that was possible, you know, help me think outside the box.

Andrea Flores
Okay, so maybe bringing in perspectives that you had never even considered. So then my last question for you would be what advice would you give to other learners aspiring to navigate the AI age? Successfully?

Gabriel Ramos
I always say approach it with a lot of curiosity. I feel like we're in a day and age where we'll see something and will immediately try to judge it, or will immediately try to find the right angle, or like me, you know,
what's the correct way to do this? But just to be curious about it and trying to understand it more and looking more into depth with it, especially with AI, it’s like a Swiss Army knife, it has so many different tools that you didn't even think about that would be useful in a certain situation. So it's like being able to play around with that and trying to find ways it can benefit you in whatever you're doing. You know, regardless if you're an artist, you can have it draft you a contract, or if you're an artist and you need to know the top art exhibitions you should try to get into and what galleries are around you that you should keep trying to get into. A lot of artists don't really think that way. They just think, “Is this just gonna replace me?” This is just gonna, you know, take my jobs away, but no, you can use it to upskill yourself. You have to be curious. You have to be very creative in terms of how you use it.

Andrea Flores
So applying that artist creativity to other aspects of the work of managing yourself as in a creative professional, and I really love that analogy that you use of a Swiss army knife. I'm curious, thinking about your usage with AI, how has it affected your ability to make decisions or the choices that you've been making in your educational professional path?

Gabriel Ramos
In terms of AI, with my field it's a little bit more tricky. Just because I'm in a creative field. Obviously, I'm a graphic design major. And a lot of the time, people are very cautious and they're very wary about the use of AI in any case, just because people are afraid that it's going to take away their jobs and whatnot. But I think for me, the use case scenarios I've been thinking about were, “How can I use AI to give me resources, research, and inspiration?” I feel like I have a very narrow idea how I want things to look and a certain feeling, I guess, a certain style. But if I want to branch out, if I want to try something new, AI can potentially open doors to things I had no idea about. That's one of the biggest things I use it for. If I'm looking for something, I guess a little bit more contemporary, or if I'm looking for something a little bit more brutalist, I can just search up something like that on AI, or other key scenarios, like if I'm looking for other assets to add to a project, like a voice actor, obviously as a student, I don't have access to a large source pool of voice actors. If you want to just have someone say something really quickly, who's not you, you can use AI voice generators.

Andrea Flores
Yeah, absolutely. And something that we heard last time we chatted was about your mom and how she has been a big supporter who has deeply understood you right in ways you may not have even explicitly observed or been conscious of yourself. In particular, I think that what you shared with us was that my biggest supporter has always been my mom. She's always been there for me even through times when I was in high school and I wasn't doing so great. She will try to push me in the right direction. Even in community college. She was like keep pushing, keep trying to pursue what you want to do. I can always rely on her to call on on her like to call her and be like, I don't know what to do and she'll give me some guidance and then she'll allow me to make the decision for myself, as opposed to choosing the decision for me, her understanding, knowing my background, knowing the things that I've personally gone through, she pays attention to just like the little things I didn't realize that or necessarily at face value. You couldn't tell by looking at me. Does that still stand and feel like it resonates with you?

Gabriel Ramos
Oh yeah. 100% Whatever change, you know, there's nothing that could ever change that.

**Andrea Flores**

Yeah, absolutely. And so as you reflect on the ways your mom has supported your agency, how do you think those are similar or different to the ways that AI has affected your agency, that you just talked about?

**Gabriel Ramos**

Well, definitely, I guess a similarity would be the amount of options that an AI generated response would give you would be similar to how my mom is when she would give me advice based on word-of-mouth opportunities. And with AI, you would kind of get similar results, even a Google search by AI would be a little bit more in depth, and it'll try to give you the best opportunities for your specific scenario, whether that's an internship, scholarship, or even schools. I think it can help you with that search. Those things take a lot of digging, a lot of understanding and knowing what those programs are or what they offer. I guess the biggest difference when it comes to my mom, [is that] she obviously has her own idea of how she would approach it, and she also knows me and knows the things that I've failed and succeeded at. And I think with AI, that relationship, that bond is not going to be 100% the same. If you get overwhelmed if you have to write, let's say for an application for a scholarship or an internship, they might have asked you to write a cover letter. If my mom knows I'm not much of a writer, she's gonna be like, 'Hey, this would be a good opportunity for you, but just know that this is going to take a lot of brainpower and a lot of your time to actually do this.' And AI wouldn't necessarily have that understanding of me or anyone else who's trying to look for resources like that.

**Andrea Flores**

Absolutely. That's really interesting. Thank you for sharing that. I'm switching gears a little bit and moving to our next set of questions. Could you tell us about an interaction you've had with others that affected your sense of belonging whether that was in a positive or negative way? What happened and what effect did it have on you?

**Gabriel Ramos**

Of belonging? I think when I think of that there is actually this moment in time when I was working at a grocery store in the deli, and I was working with my manager on inventory that night. I had been working with that manager for about a year, doing relatively well. But I remember when we were working together, she looked at me, "Hey, you did a really good job with this with inventory. I really want to give you an opportunity to get a full time or a team leader position, maybe that's something you can work towards - ", she looked at me and stopped mid sentence. "- you know, it's not that I wouldn't want you to do that but I know that you want to do other things, to pursue design, to pursue something artistic, so I really don't want to force your hand or push you in that direction because I know that you want to do something more." And so I guess that that kind of took that sense of belonging away. From feeling like I belonged at that grocery store to feeling like I belonged somewhere else, somewhere more suited to what I want to do.

**Andrea Flores**

And what effect did that have on you?

**Gabriel Ramos**
It honestly really motivated me. I always think about that moment. Because it was a really pivotal moment in trying to figure myself out and trying to understand what I wanted to do. So it really motivated me to get back into school. And it really kind of got me out of that feeling like school wasn't for me and, you know, actually give a really heartfelt attempt at school again. And so that, that really motivated me and then from there, you know, there was like a snowball effect. It pushed me, kept on pushing me pushing me and then, you know, I eventually ended up here so you know, I feel very, I'm very grateful towards that manager. I'm very grateful that we had that conversation at that point in time.

It honestly really motivated me... it was a really pivotal moment in trying to figure myself out and trying to understand what I wanted to do... to get back into school. And it got me out of that feeling like school wasn't for me, [to] actually give a really heartfelt attempt at school again.

Andrea Flores
Yeah, absolutely. I love that. On the flip side, has AI at all impacted your feelings of inclusion or connection with your surroundings or with others? How's that showing up for you?

Gabriel Ramos
Well, with AI I feel like, to have that... I wouldn't even say a connection, but to think of it as a resource like that. It hasn't always been there for me, I haven't always thought to go to AI to find a certain resource... so I guess I would have a very limited experience in terms of that. Just because I feel like there's a certain human nature that comes with if someone wants the best for you, they're gonna try to give you the best opportunity, and of course, AI is gonna give you the opportunities but they don't know what's gonna best fit you in that moment in time.

Andrea Flores
That's super interesting. And you've started to speak to this a little bit in your response but, you know, reflecting on that example with your manager at the grocery store, you know, what are the similarities and differences in the way that AI has affected your sense of belonging compared to humans?

Gabriel Ramos
Well, with humans, I feel like humans can be a little bit more... Everyone has their own world. So you never know what's going on with someone else. So someone's having a bad day, and they might respond a little bit more negatively than you would have hoped. AI is going to be consistent. It's not going to be like, I'm not in the mood right now, let's not talk, so I think that's one of the biggest differences. It's something that's always there. No matter what, no matter if you want it to, it's gonna be there if you need it. You know, I'm trying to try to find an analogy, something to compare it to. I don't know what I would compare it to, honestly.

Andrea Flores
That's okay. You know, a metaphor is nice, but it's definitely not need to have. What other reflections would you like to share?

Gabriel Ramos
Um, yes, more so in particular with my school, and how my classes are kind of taught. Just because I feel like with the tools that we use, there's a lot of integration with AI tools, especially the Adobe software. But all of my professors ... don't want to touch it. They [say], 'It's there, but don't rely on it. Don't really try to use it.' And I'm kind of against that. Why don't we try to use it? Why don't we try to use it as a tool, not to generate stuff, but to help fix certain things, like if there's certain objects that need to be removed. But yeah, I guess it's just my headspace has been very much like how is AI going to eventually integrate into the arts, education, in design, and then especially the workforce with artists and designers? I'm very interested to see how that evolves over time.

Andrea Flores
Yeah, absolutely. And so I'm hearing a tension between where you're at and where your institutions are. Is there anything that comes to mind that you would love to share with us that you haven't had the chance to share already?

Gabriel Ramos
I would love to see other people's perspectives when it comes to AI because I feel like I grew up in a very technology-centered area. So I feel like I am able to grow with it more. I'm very open to it. I really want to see how someone else, who didn't necessarily have the access to technology, how they're approaching and how they're looking at it.

Andrea Flores
Really great insight. Yeah. Gabriel, thank you so much for spending the time with us and for sharing your insights and perspectives.