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Generative AI and the Future of the Humanities

Reading, Writing, Teaching, Labor

Dana J. Gavin

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CHAPTER 1

The Luddite's Battle Cry

Abstract This chapter introduces the main argument of this book: namely, that while generative AI presents a unique threat to the acquisition and development of critical reading and writing skills, it also represents a general public malaise to those skills. The humanities as a professional institution have not been able to break through the public discourse noise to make a case for the necessity of those skills. This book aims to raise questions, offer suggestions, and ultimately argue for action rather than passivity.

Keywords Humanities · Critical reading · Critical writing · Generative AI

A system of machinery almost organic has been devised and arranged, which, while it relieves the human frame of its most laborious efforts in printing, far exceeds all human powers in rapidity and dispatch. That the magnitude of the invention may be justly appreciated by its effects, we shall inform the public, that after the letters are placed by the compositors, and enclosed in what is called the form, little more remains for man to do, than to attend upon, and watch this unconscious agent in its operations.

(John Walter II, qtd. in Moran 1973, 108)

This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium — that is, any extension of ourselves — result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology. (McLuhan 2013, 19)

INTRODUCTION

In late November of 2022, I likely heard about ChatGPT on the social media platform known then as Twitter. I was not nearly as interested in current technology as I was in learning everything I could about the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century innovations for the steam-powered printing press. That research was critical to my dissertation, and I was trying to keep my head down, pressing forward through muddy writing to a final graduation-deserving document. Still, I followed Academic Twitter, and the buzz finally reached my fingertips.

Sitting in my office in the Dutchess Community College Writing Center in Poughkeepsie, New York, I opened ChatGPT (like many, many, many other people at the very same time, I imagine) and wrote a prompt question based on my current literary concerns. Unfortunately, I did not save that query and response, but it was something along the lines of looking for examples of Imperialism in Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*. Within seconds, an effective answer had been delivered to me, as a cucumber tea cake on a silver tray. I was stunned, then bereft, then filled with gallows humor; I carried my laptop out into the lobby of the Writing Center and showed ChatGPT's work to my colleagues. "Start polishing those resumes, folks, we're going to be closing up shop here," I moaned dramatically.

I wallowed for a few days, and noted, imprecisely, how often I encountered mentions or discussions surrounding ChatGPT. In short order, I realized that I was hearing an echo—the anxiety and anger I had been reading about for years at that point, voices from the nineteenth century reacting to the advent of the steam-powered printing press, was being replicated, now in my hand as I scrolled social media on my smartphone. I also became more aware of the company behind ChatGPT, and of the roles that Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, and Sam Altman in the founding of OpenAI; I listened more closely to the way this product was being foregrounded, inescapably, into my daily information consumption.

My wallowing dried up, and a hot anger replaced it.

In November 2022, New York State was nearly two years past the lockdowns stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when many academics across the world were forced to take their well-honed pedagogy into a purely digital space (and for many of them, it would be their first time in a such a space). My academic circles were filled with English professors, and so I was consumed with how to translate freshman composition into this asynchronous class space. I was fortunate: I had experience teaching online, asynchronously, before March 2020. I did not have experience managing the social and emotional fallout from a global health crisis that devastated my students, my colleagues, and myself. Emerging from the intensity of 2020, as we started to trickle back into something like a pre-COVID-19 educational existence, the wounds were deep for many educators. Complaints were voiced in person and online about how many students either plagiarized papers or fully refused to do the assignments. Stress and frustration dominated the cultural and academic mood, in my perception, and in general, people were simply worn down to exposed nerve endings.

I do not presume to speak, as it were, for the humanities like the Lorax speaks for the trees; people who teach in the humanities have tongues and have been speaking up—or rather, *writing up* for a very long time about the existential dangers we have been facing in education. One of my goals for this book is to draw from many strands of conversations in and out of academia, about the humanities and about public life, from those embedded in technology fields and those well outside. I hope this book can provide a conversation spark in the veins of reading, writing, teaching, and labor discourses, so that we might feel like we are comrades in the fight on all fronts—not in a fight against AI specifically, but in a fight against a mass illiteracy event. My professional experience in the classroom has largely been in rhetoric, composition, and literary studies. I have been fortunate to have interdisciplinary bent to my education and research, and I feel a profound commitment to disciplines that teach critical thinking skills through reading and writing as the pedagogical core. My attention has long been in this space, and as the director of a Writing Center, I feel even more aligned with educators outside of the English discipline, supporting folks who are also using writing as a primary assessment source.

To my mind, ChatGPT simply broke the written-assessment educators' hearts. It was one indignity too much. Perhaps I broke too, a bit, under

the weight of book bans in the United States, under the successful 50-year assault on public education, and under the anti-democratic deluge of misinformation that rolled over me and my students like a tidal wave of sewage.

Instead of being sad, I got mad. And I thought about winemaking.

In October 2017, a series of wildfires took root in Northern California; one of the most destructive of the many fires was called the Tubbs Fire, which burned through wine country, including Napa and Sonoma counties. When the grapes were harvested for the purpose of making wine, they were infected with what scientists call “smoke taint.” The grape skins had absorbed the smoke from the wildfires, attributable to climate change. The resulting wine from the 2017 harvest tasted of smoke and ash, nearly unpalatable. As Sigfredo Fuentes, Associate Professor of Digital Agriculture & Food Sciences at the University of Melbourne, noted, “While flavour characteristics caused by the soil, plants and environment are the source of the variety we appreciate in wines, these spoilage characteristics certainly make the wine less palatable for wine lovers” (Fuentes et al. 2019). Wildfires, enhanced by man-made climate change, produce clouds of toxins which seep into the pores of the grape skins, altering the taste and quality of an indulgent intoxicant. The wine is often undrinkable, and is often disposed of, as it is unfit for sale.

I was sitting with roiling fear, anger, and a resignation to the idea that the discipline of composition, and English in general, was going to be irrevocably changed. Much as winemaking is an ancient practice, a creative craft passed down through generations, so too is writing a craft passed down, when it is most effectively taught, from the more practiced scribe to the novice. I sensed the end of a practice I cherish greatly, and that I feel is crucial to personal development—that is, writing, in my experience as an educator and as the director of a community college writing center, is the key to unlocking deep learning and deep critical thinking, both of which aid in self-actualization and in full societal participation. In both cases (of wine and writing), something external and man-made had come to poison the process that crafters had been honing for ages. The situations seem hopeless, as the ensuing taint seems inevitable.

Yet I quickly came to realize that, maybe, there were people interested in profiting off my fear and anxiety, and I began a great pivot. The discussions we are having today are in no way unique—we have lived thinking that the next generation doesn’t know how to write, or that the technology they use is corrupting their ability to think and write critically.

What we are up against, now, is that these very old conversations are happening at a crisis made of an obsession with speed and the degradation of labor; a crisis which is further fueled by the effects of a pandemic. And yet, I am filled with sincere hope that our disciplines will finally be forced to revise ourselves in ways needed for at least 50 years.

That sincere hope has been challenged, regularly, by people within and without academia. In the very early days, there seemed to be great fear and anger over the emergence of technology that seemed primed to allow students to avoid the difficult labor of writing. “The College Essay is Dead” proclaimed *The Atlantic*, December 6, 2022, as the headline for an article written by Stephen Marche. Rashi Shrivastava, writing for Forbes, suggested “Teachers Fear ChatGPT Will Make Cheating Easier Than Ever” on December 12, 2022. “Teachers are on alert for inevitable cheating after release of ChatGPT,” wrote Laura Meckler and Pranshu Verma on December 28, 2022, for *The Washington Post*. My personal conversations with fellow educators echoed the spirit of these headlines.

Quickly thereafter, however, a new strain of extreme optimism emerged: on April 6, 2023, Will Douglas Heaven’s article, “ChatGPT is going to change education, not destroy it,” appeared in MIT Technology Review with the subtitle, “The narrative around cheating students doesn’t tell the whole story. Meet the teachers who think generative AI could actually make learning better.” On February 29, 2024, Forbes published Jeff Fromm’s article, “Can AI and ChatGPT Reshape Academia: Arizona State Believes So.” The backlash to the backlash had begun in earnest. Indeed, I have perceived in academic conference settings, educator workshop settings, and on multiple social media platforms, that an ardent strain of toxic positivity flows through and around conversations. It feels utterly fair to see educators adopt this radical optimism—“if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” is a powerful mantra. If, after decades of being on the receiving end of abuse and financial cuts, humanities folk both want to be perceived as technologically progressive change-makers and get a piece of the financial windfall that seems to be dangling from OpenAI’s business model, it is difficult to sneer at such a response. It is, of course, disagreeable to be considered close-minded, a human roadblock to happiness and prosperity, a stick-in-the-mud, and, most offensively, a filthy Luddite.