A Dis-Facilitated Call for More Writing Studies in the New AI Landscape; or, Finding Our Place Among the Chatbots

Courtney Stanton

"If we wish to make a new world we have the material ready. The first one, too, was made out of chaos."

— Robert Quillen

I've heard a steady mix of fear and fervor in the conversations surrounding generative AI, a sense that we are on the brink of a revolution and that its full consequences, still frightfully unknown, will be profound. Personally, I am afraid of what this first step into a new educational terrain will mean for my career and those of my colleagues, but I'm excited about the questions and concerns that these changes will inevitably bring to the forefront of our conversations. Along with persistent questions about ethics and plagiarism, we will also have to confront other, more disruptive lines of inquiry. What is the point of asking students to write an essay, if technology exists to do it for them? Will chatbots one day become ubiquitous enough to render certain communication-based skills obsolete? What capacities, if any, of language use can we—should we?—cordon off as strictly human ones, as skills that AI cannot or perhaps simply may not master? If an AI program eventually can produce language in all ways as well as or superior to humans, what will be our argument for preventing it from doing so? Within all of these questions is an unspoken but nonetheless insistent worry: What if writing skills simply aren't needed anymore? Beyond the occasional need to string a few words together, perhaps to sign a card or jot a personal note, it is not unreasonable to project that chatbots will become more adept and readily available for any and all writing tasks. So then what happens, we fear, to writing skills?

As I hear these fears, I am reminded of my work with disability theory, particularly its application to science fiction literature. Sci-fi, because it typically deals with the future, offers unique insight into how contemporary society values and defines disability. If a work of sci-fi leaves out disability entirely—via a lack disabled characters, for instance, or the use of curative technology—it conveys a message about the value of disabled bodies and minds. As such, analysis of sci-fi raises questions similar to those surrounding chatbots. What if disability is rendered obsolete by the advancement of technology? What if a work leaves out disability, suggesting a future in which it simply...goes away? By crafting a specific future for bodies and minds and determining the role(s)

that disability plays within it, sci-fi affords consumers the opportunity to confront basic existential questions. What would we change about ourselves and our environment, if we had the technological means to do so? How do we understand the ideal body and the ideal mind, and to what lengths are we willing to go to attain them? Sci-fi forces us to consider what it means, and what it should mean, to be human, as its imagined worlds encourage us to examine our own, as well as our places within it. In just these fundamental ideas, we can see glimmers of the discourse surrounding chatbots. Both areas of inquiry engage questions of humanness, of what humans should be or do, and where they find, or should find, value or utility. In both, the advancement of technology threatens to undermine the value ascribed to specific identities, whether it be one defined through disability or through the use of—teaching of, study of, production of—language. My argument here is that critical disability theory, particularly its manifestations in the sci-fi genre, can help us find our places within this new AI-enabled terrain and that, more specifically, the most effective means to do so will be the wider adoption of a Writing about Writing (WAW) approach.

Many of the informal discussions I've heard among academics have focused on plagiarism and how to design prompts that stymie a chatbot's capabilities, but these seem to avoid the bigger and more challenging issue. Learning the new ethics of chatbots is crucial, certainly, but I wonder whether all of this might be moot in a not-too-distant future when AI begins to play a more prominent role in our language-based interactions. This is not simply to imply that AI will become increasingly difficult to detect, though this is all but certain. Rather, I'm thinking of the world our students will face beyond academia—the world of corporate employers, consumerism, and the like—a world in which much of the language work of their everyday lives will likely be outsourced to machines, and wherein this will be seen by most as a boon. AI will craft their emails and work reports and drive their digital conversations, and they will not encounter the same level of distrust and user reluctance that exists in academia. As such, we must look beyond questions of academic integrity, for we are moving into a new era wherein the term itself is shifting, and this process of redefinition is exposing more important questions for us to consider.

At the heart of much problematic sci-fi is a heavily medicalized view of disability, one that effectively reduces bodies and minds to a collection of mechanical concerns, and the same could be said for the ways chatbots can influence perspectives of writing. Bodies and minds contain multitudes, and a purely mechanical conception excludes the many ways that individuals are shaped—defined, utilized, discarded, or revered—by the surrounding culture. It is easy to imagine how chatbots could treat the act of writing similar to the way sci-fi medicalizes disability—by offering clear, tangible fixes for nearly any

task difficulty. Facing a grueling night of report-writing? Take a dose of the chatbot—ask it whatever questions have you stuck and you'll be better in no time. What if we were to resist this medicalization, however, by focusing more intently—perhaps exclusively?—on the processes and knowledge associated with writing, rather than its products?

Like sci-fi works that seem to cure the so-called problem of disability with nary an explanation of how they've done so, a chatbot also offers solutions without any need to reveal its inner workings. Chatbots therefore carry the potential to oversimplify writing to a mere mechanical task, an impediment to be addressed. User experiences with chatbots generally present an incomplete picture of writing as an activity, focusing on the products generated rather than the processes and knowledge associated with writing. Moreover, in doing so, they also carry the even more profound potential to imply that a future without writing is a desirable one. The imagined advancements of sci-fi's futures lay bare pressing existential questions, and the chatbots of the present—and these enormous, exponential leaps in the ability of machines to employ language—do the same. In the face of this new technology, we must actively probe potentially uncomfortable territories of inquiry: What value does writing have? If there were the means to eliminate the challenges of writing, would people want to do so? What does it mean to be a student of writing?

It is in these facets of our discipline, by which I mean not just steps like drafting and revision but also nuanced conceptual discussions of ideas like audience awareness, literacy sponsorship, and heteroglossia, that any writer most meaningfully grows and learns. These are concepts which, like an effective portrayal of disability, take into account the influences of environment, history, and intertextuality. A chatbot, by spitting out an essay, may help an overworked student to stay afloat in a class, but it does not teach them about writing. And if we are to stay afloat in a world driven by AI, we must prioritize the knowledge associated with the discipline of composition.

Considered another way, we must ask ourselves: if chatbots can compose, critique, and revise, what are we left with? What do we identify as the unique and enduring value of what—and how—we teach? A Writing about Writing (WAW) approach not only teaches students how to write, it teaches them about writing. It imparts specific content knowledge about writing as an inherently social activity and about the many threshold concepts of composition (see Adler-Kassner and Wardle). Such a pedagogy shifts attention away from the application of conventions and traditional elements of process and toward engagement with concepts of discourse analysis, assessment, multimodality, and the like. WAW calls us to move away from more rote, routine-based pedagogical practices—I'm reminded here of colleagues who largely forgo grammar instruction nowadays, given the ubiquity of tools like Grammarly—and lean

more fully into the content knowledge of composition. In doing so, not only will we better prepare our students for the future, but we will also, usefully, teach them about the limitations of the AI itself.

Consider, for instance, composition courses taught from a cultural studies perspective, a common alternative to the WAW approach. If we distill a cultural studies approach to writing down to two types of knowledge imparted, we find situational knowledge of the cultural lens—ideologies underlying science fiction, for instance—and knowledge of writing. If, to speculate further, the latter is composed primarily of concerns regarding process and convention, then the complex conceptual discussions taking place in such a course are more likely focused around ideas of cultural studies, not writing. The students in such a class would learn *how to* write, and *about* cultural studies (for more on this distinction, see LaRiviere; Wardle and Downs). If, then, we imagine this course in that future world wherein AI language programs are ubiquitous, a world in which the *how to* skills have been outsourced, what remains? At the end of such a course, what will the students have learned? A WAW course, in contrast, would by definition remain focused on writing, regardless of whether students use chatbots. If the situational knowledge of a writing course—e.g., the sci-fi genre—gets more attention than the disciplinary content knowledge of composition, this calls into question what, if anything, it will teach students about writing in a world wherein much of their written products will be accomplished by machines. By explicitly centering composition as the primary act and the object of study, we can clarify the boundaries between what AI can/will and cannot/will not accomplish and, in doing so, illustrate more clearly our own utility as scholars and professionals.

Such an approach would also seek to actively acknowledge technological limitations in a way that is more transparent and less punitive than erecting various technological safeguards (or simply revising an academic integrity policy). Just as adopting a disability perspective on sci-fi allows consumers of the genre to better evaluate its shortcomings, a WAW approach would encourage students to see chatbots as a technology with limitations that is, in fact, socioculturally complex. Instructors are already beginning to ask students to turn the mirror, so to speak, and consider the constraints of programs like ChatGPT ("Incorporating"). Along with taking the technology itself as the object of analysis, a WAW approach would attempt to impart composition knowledge so that students learn about writing in a meaningful way regardless of whether they actually produce any—regardless, in other words, of whether they employ chatbots. If, on the other hand, our only or primary means of instilling composition knowledge is to ask students to compose, we not only risk at least some students learning little to nothing at all, but we also call into question our own professional and scholarly utility.

Proposing a broad shift in pedagogy across any discipline, I realize, is not without complications. A greater commitment to important questions about what expertise is required for teaching composition and, from this, who is qualified to do so (for more, see Hansen; Wardle and Downs). The questions which motivate discussions of labor are profoundly important, as is the need for considered and equitable responses. Still, as technology erodes the importance of the act of composing, we must honestly examine what of our pedagogy remains and whether it aligns with the goals of our discipline and our programs. Chatbots will push us to think more carefully about these concerns, and if, as I predict, the advancement of technology forces us to place our shared knowledge of composition more explicitly at the center of our pedagogy, then we must be willing to deal with the attendant costs and complications of this shift.

Works Cited

Adler-Kassner, Linda, and Elizabeth Wardle. *Naming What We Know*. Utah State UP, 2015.

Hansen, Kristine. "Discipline and Profession." *Composition, Rhetoric, and Disciplinarity.* Utah State UP, 2018, pp. 134–59.

"Incorporating CHATGPT into Your Assignments." *Washington University in St. Louis Center for Teaching and Learning*, Washington University in St. Louis, Feb. 2022, ctl.wustl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Using-ChatGPT-in-Assignments.pdf.

LaRiviere, Katie Jo. "Play the Game but Refocus the Aim: Teaching WAW within Alternative Pedagogies." *Next Steps: New Directions for/in Writing about Writing*, edited by Barbara Bird et al., Utah State UP, 2019, pp. 261–70.

Wardle, Elizabeth, and Doug Downs. "Reflecting Back and Looking Forward: Revisiting 'Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions' Five Years On." *Composition Forum*, vol. 27, 2013, www.compositionforum.com/issue/27/reflecting-back.php