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In Defense of Invention: AI, First Year Composition, and Literacy Narratives

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In the reddish, sepia-tinted days of graduate school, the students I taught as a GTA brainstormed, using their own brain; they outlined, by dint of their own minds and imaginations; they engaged in freewriting sessions with the wild, uncertain force of poets. My own "writing as heuristic" approach panned out, so to speak, and one thing led to another, chapters formed, interviews set-up, recorded, transcribed, and coded. I took pride in generating my own content, though I never thought of composing that way until now and was fascinated by the power our own words had in generating more words, something like the way AI identifies patterns, though really nothing like that at all. I read, or read a part of, Janet M. Lauer's *Invention in Rhetoric and Composition,* when she visited as a guest speaker in the Introduction to Composition Theory seminar I was taking. In other words, I was just as enamored with old-fashioned invention as many today are of Gen AI.

In my multilingual FYC course at the University of Central Florica (UCF), I ask students to freewrite, without the use of ChatGPT, for 10-15 minutes about the rhetorical conventions they were taught in their home countries and compare that to what they have been learning about writing and rhetoric in the U.S. context. Before assigning this activity, I gave a mini lecture about Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle, and an even shorter talk about world rhetorics, to give the students some background knowledge about the task. Almost against myself, I asked students to input their freewrite into ChatGPT and ask it to create an outline for a literacy narrative. This goes against my fundamental ideas and feelings about writing, and I'm not sure how many would believe that I wasn't wandering into pretty shaky territory here. I was taking a recommendation about AI use that I read about in *ChatGPT Assignments to Use in Your Classroom Today* (Yee et al.) and implementing it in the classroom, and excused any potential ethical breaches, whatever they may be, by telling myself that I must "start somewhere," lest I be left behind or worse, become sadly antiquated in the "modern world."

As the students typed away, I held my breath, hoping they were at least heeding my suggestion—or rather, desperate plea—to please use your own words, thank you. I tried to imagine writing from their perspective, whatever that may be. What was the point of writing a "shitty first draft" if Gen AI could produce, instantly, a non-shitty first draft, or at least a less shitty first draft than an honest-to-goodness, real human being could do? The students typed and typed. They posted their free-

writes on Canvas, then they posted their ChatGPT-generated outlines.

Was I grasping at straws? Surely, I was grasping at straws. What else was I doing? Nonetheless, I stumbled upon the idea of analyzing a few of the student's AI-generated outlines—to call it a rhetorical analysis would be a glorification, though I was convinced that we could analyze the "text." But who does a rhetorical analysis of an outline? God, that couldn't be the right track, could it? And what would the director of the writing program, Dr. Wood, think of these amateurish shenanigans, however genial and gentlemanly he may be? Every authority figure in our discipline seemed to be peering skeptically over my shoulder. Still, I talked myself into the idea that we could, in fact, at least, examine how ChatGPT organized the outline, versus the way students would have organised it without machine assistance; or the type of language it used to construct the outlines, and how helpful, or useless, these might be to my students in thinking towards a first draft, for whatever that was worth.

Would such a rhetorical analysis serve as a viable introduction to *rhetorical analysis*? Could such a rhetorical analysis, if I got away with calling it that, work as a portal to a first draft? If nothing else, we could at least discuss to what extent these outlines suggested possibilities that were aligned with, or far askew from, our student learning outcomes. Could such an activity meet our first year-writing program's Information Literacy outcome: "Students will be able to evaluate and act on criteria for relevance, credibility, and ethics when gathering, analyzing, and presenting primary and secondary source materials"? If ChatGPT output could be classified as a "secondary source," however unreliable, however uncredible—or rather, if the output is intrinsically not credible, then how could we examine the output except as an exercise in identifying information that is not credible?

I thought back to what I learned about invention in graduate school. The word "invent" comes from the Latin, and in the 15th century, invention meant to find out, to discover. Obviously, in the Late Middle Ages, humans were doing the discovering, not machines. But it's worth considering the definition. ChatGPT is a language model, trained on data, and it generates text based on patterns in the data it has been trained on. This is not invention, in the pure sense of the word, but rather, at best, a kind of sorting through. ChatGPT can take human discoveries, and then help *present* them in a particular genre, for example, but it cannot discover or invent. I suggest that ChatGPT cannot be very useful in the process of invention because invention is outside of its capacity.

Furthermore, ChatGPT can't gauge the emotional state of the audience, and consequently, it cannot make an authentic emotional appeal (Pathos). ChatGPT may seem to prove something as true through logic (Logos), but again, it sorts through data it has been trained on, so not only can it not prove that something is true, but it cannot provide reliable evidence. AI may be used rhetorically by humans, via prompt engineering, but it doesn't produce rhetoric. Or does it? These thoughts about invention spread through my mind like a wildfire and were interrupted by text popping up on Canvas. As students began posting their outlines, I skimmed through them, tense, hoping against hope—for what, I wasn't sure.

In our class discussion, we found that ChatGPT produced a workable outline as far as the first

body paragraph, but in the second and third sections of the outline, the suggestions veered off track. Why? Maybe because ChatGPT could not predict the particulars of the students' past literacy experiences, especially if they occurred across countries, cultures, and languages. ChatGPT generally recommended cliched, stereotypical narrative arcs reminiscent of bad movies, and students, I concluded, might cheat themselves of writing about their own richer and far more complex experiences if they relied too heavily on ChatGPT. In other words, I wanted students to see that ChatGPT presented a generic plot, but that our lives are not generic, and follow no formula. I ended our discussion by asking students to "Write the truth of your own unique illogical experiences (this is what ChatGPT can't do)."

As I walked to my office, I thought of what I learned about invention in my Classical Rhetoric class. Aristotle, my professor said, believed that invention was a heuristic, meaning that the process of invention could lead to the construction of arguments and even to solutions that could not have been discovered in any other way. I remembered my advisor, Dr. Tony Silva, telling me that, though I may not be clear about where my dissertation was headed beyond a few good ideas and a skeleton of an outline, I might begin with a "vivid introduction" to set the table for my dissertation, an intergenerational study of Japanese American heritage language learners. This was a few years before ChatGPT was launched, or rather, about 42 months prior to its arrival, though none of us had an inkling that anything called a Generative Pre-trained Transformer, or anything like "neural network architecture" would burst upon the scene, changing our lives and the world forever. Looking back on that quaint afternoon, sitting in Dr. Silva's fourth floor, windowless office at Purdue, with all those issues of *The Journal of Second Language Writing* on the shelves, going back, I believe, to the 1990s, I see a rustic academic scene being played out, as if from a previous century.

Back in my office, I notice the pink flamingo I won in a raffle on the final day of The UCF Summer Faculty Development Institute, propped between Cicero's "On Invention" and "Writing Futures: Collaborative, Algorithmic, Autonomous." The flamingo appears not to take sides. He is on his own, removed from the flamboyance, yet somehow emanating the flamboyance he is removed from.

References

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