

HOW TO NOT WRITE LIKE A ROBOT:

“BLOOD ON THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR” AND COMPOSITION’S READING OF GENERATIVE AI

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Script: <https://tinyurl.com/edwards-cccc-2024>

Slides: <https://tinyurl.com/edwards-slides-2024>

Soundtrack: <https://tinyurl.com/12-robot-songs>



there is always an unbridgeable lacuna between
any explication of a reading & any actual

reading

Charles Bernstein
“Artifice of Absorption”

it is helpful to imagine the representations... as *complex networks*, like dense roadmaps, made up of many nodes of information, each *related to others in multiple ways*... The links between a group of nodes might reflect causality, or subordination, or simple association... The process of constructing this representation is carried out by both *highly automated processes of recognition and inference* and by the more active problem-solving processes on which our work focuses.

Christina Haas & Linda Flower

“Rhetorical Reading Strategies and the Construction of Meaning”

OVERVIEW

1. anti-quantitative rhetorics
2. fear of numbers
3. plagiarism, product, process, poiesis
4. ideologies of technology
5. erasing the reading student
6. past plagiarism scholarship and influence
7. “a two-player word processor”
8. reading and perceiving processes
9. against “rodential” pedagogies
10. toward an anti-absorptive and interruptive pedagogy

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anti-quantitative rhetorics

- ▶ lectures over writing
- ▶ product over process
- ▶ summaries over tracing arguments

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fear of numbers

- ▶ tracing “Stochastic Parrots” citations
- ▶ miscalculating harms
- ▶ Villanueva (2005): **we fear numbers**
- ▶ Coon (1947): **composition is labor-intensive**

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plagiarism, product, process, poiesis

- how good writing happens
- technologies substitute capital for labor
- capital as frozen labor
- poetics over poiesis

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ideologies of technology

- technological neutrality
- technological essentialism
- production, distribution, use, reproduction
- pedagogies of production and use

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erasing the reading student

- Mariolina Salvatori, “Conversations with Texts”
- pedagogies of difficulty and intention
- turned away from studying textual engagement
- turned away from studying writers writing

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plagiarism scholarship & influence

- Rebecca Moore Howard, Margaret Price, Amy Robillard
- influence as embodied, material, affective
- patchwriting *versus* whole-text plagiarism
- citation quizzes versus Jonathan Lethem's "The Ecstasy of Influence"

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Imagine that words have a life of their own, radiocontrolled by an automatic pilot called history... To understand language as artificial intelligence is to conceptualize writing as a kind of psychic surgery... The poem sounds as music the marks of its continual newness in being made; and the only mark of its past, of its having been made, is the blood on the cutting room floor.

Charles Bernstein, “Blood on the Cutting Room Floor”

“a two-player word processor”

- shows us language and the Other at work
- latent and explicit as literalizations of metaphor
- backpropagation & stochastic gradient descent—
but not the internal processes of the writer
- composition’s missed opportunity with
cognitive process psychology

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reading & perceiving processes

- dialogic nature of reading
- stochastic gradient descent
- Peter Elbow on reading processes

Consider the example of seeing a car down the road ahead of you. Cognitive psychologists have found... that even vision is an active, exploratory process of creating meaning. It always occurs in stages through the passage of time, not instantaneously... In the first stage of seeing, our mind receives the first pieces of information... and quickly makes a guess or hypothesis about what we might be looking at. As we drive along, we instantaneously see a white car way down there ahead of us on the road. But the mind repeatedly checks this guess against further information, and we discover that it's actually a white boat being towed behind a car. In many situations, of course, our first guess is right—especially if the actual facts fit the context. A vehicle moving down the road is likely to be a car. For the story of perception is the story of how context and expectation are just as important as sensory data... We can take in the whole scene of the car on the road in just one glance—or rather that boat on the road. But **we can't read a whole page at once—any more than we can write a page all at once.** As we read a page, we can only read a few words at a time. As we understand them, our mind inevitably develops some guesses and hypotheses about what the rest of the sentence or paragraph or whole piece might be about. As we read further, we inevitably revise our guesses and hypotheses.

Peter Elbow, foreword to *The Original Text-Wrestling Book*

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against “rodential” pedagogies

- monolithic producers of completed texts
- black-boxing the student
- Chris Gallagher on “rodential” behaviorism
- slippage from “scribal activity to textual product”

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interruptive anti-absorptive pedagogy

- Roland Barthes: “smitten, insolent” reading and “interruptive” writing
- textual labor in moments of human contact
- “Textpocalypse” as *avant-garde* of *De Copia*
- getting writing wrong makes meaning

weird writing “courts contradiction, feeds on inconsistency. The political value of writing resides in the concreteness of the experiences it makes available... [W]riting has always had [the power] to make experience palpable not by simply pointing to it but by (re)creating its conditions.”

Charles Bernstein, “Professing Poetics”

WORKS CITED

For ethical reasons, I will not cite sources from Elsevier-owned journals such as *Computers and Composition*. Beyond the sources below, I am indebted to my co-panelists and to John Gallagher and Anna Mills for the conversations that sparked these ideas. ChatGPT made 56 gradated hex codes for slides.

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Thank you for making the time for our panel.

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