

Episode 161: Annette Vee, Carly Schnitzler and Timothy Laquintano

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, Annette Vee, Carly Schnitzler and Timothy Laquintano talk about text gen ed, teaching with text generation technologies, AI literacies, assumptions about writing and AI, and responding to AI in first year writing.

Annette Vee is associate professor of English and director of the Composition Program at the University of Pittsburgh, where she teaches undergraduates and graduate courses in writing and digital composition. She's the author of *Coding Literacy: How Computer Programming Is Changing Writing*, and co-editor of *TextGenEd: Teaching with Text Generation Technologies*. She has published on computer programming, blockchain technologies, intellectual property and AI based text generation. Her current book project, *Automating Writing from Androids to AI*, examines why and how humans have sought to automate writing across history.

Carly Schnitzler is a lecturer in the university writing program at Johns Hopkins University, where her teaching and research focus on digital rhetoric, creative computation, and the public humanities. Her current book project investigates what creative computation does to amplify and ameliorate social critiques of contemporary digital life. Carly's other referee research and writing explores related themes of data ethics, authorship and digital infrastructures and creative computing. She also founded and co-organizes *If, Then: Technology and Poetics*, a community working group and event series promoting inclusivity and skills building and creative computation for artists, scholars and teachers.

Timothy Laquintano holds a PhD in writing and rhetoric from the University of Wisconsin Madison. He's associate professor of English and director of the college writing program at Lafayette College. Laquintano primarily uses qualitative research to study how ordinary writers adopt and adapt to new communication technologies. His book, *Mass Authorship and the Rise of Self-Publishing* won the 2016 Computers and Writing Distinguished Book Award. His current research focuses on writing and large language models. He is co-editor of an edited collection of essays and assignments that helps college instructors teach writing with AI. And he is currently conducting a qualitative study of how writers adopt and sometimes abandon generative AI tools. He has taught courses on writing with digital media, science, writing authorship and publishing and machine assisted composition. Through Lafayette's college writing program, he has been helping faculty integrate writing communications into their classes for the last 13 years.

Annette, Carly, and Timothy, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your recent co-edited collection TextGenEd: Teaching with Text Generation Technologies contains resources designed to "help writing teachers integrate computational writing technologies into their assignments." TextGenEd asks teachers to explore the past, present, and future of writing technologies and to consider the affordances of AI literacy. I wanted to give you

some space to talk more about this collection, perhaps its origins and how you foresee teachers taking this work up.

AV: Thanks so much, Shane. So this is Annette and I'm just really glad to be here. I'm a big fan of your podcast and it's a nice space to talk about things. In part this is kind of related to my answer to your question about the origins of this, is that especially post tenure, I've been really invested in open educational resources and I know Tim and Carly are also similarly invested. And so when we kind of heard these conversations about AI, it just seemed like there's a real need for more open educational resources related to this. But also for AI, Tim and I way back in 2017 collaborated on a piece where we talked about bots and automated writing. It was part of a special issue with literacy and composition studies on political speech. And Tim and I felt at that time that kind of missing from that conversation was the amplification and the automation of bots, in particular on Twitter, that they were really kind of shaping discourse. And so since then, Tim and I know each other way back from graduate school, we had the same graduate advisor. We graduated from UW Madison, and we've had a kind of ongoing conversation about AI and automated writing and how that really shapes contemporary spaces of writing, which is kind of central to our research. And so as we kept talking about it, we were kind of thinking then about how do we provide a space where all of these interesting kinds of assignments that are happening can be consolidated?

Because a few people had published a few things about assignments or people would share things on Twitter or we'd hear about things, but where could we consolidate them? And we started the call for this prior to the launch of ChatGPT. So we'd been thinking about this basically before everybody was thinking about this. And so it happened to be good timing, but that was kind of the impetus for it.

And Tim and I wanted to do this, and then Carly had taken a class with me in the fall of 2021, a grad class about automating writing, and I just adore Carly and wanted to find another space to work with her. So it seemed like a really good space to work. And also in terms of open educational resources, I can't say enough good things about the WAC Clearinghouse. I'd worked with them on another major project about a Dartmouth conference in 1966. I worked with Lindsay Harding who really deserves a ton of credit for putting this together and editing as somebody working with WAC Clearinghouse. And I just, again, these are all people who I loved working with and I wanted to work with them more on a kind of project that seemed really timely. So that's kind of my take of what was necessary, or the questions that this project was answering as a research and teaching project.

SW: Who did you imagine taking this collection up pre-OpenAI ChatGPT? Was that audience different at all? I'm thinking back to the origins of this collection and what took place during that timeframe with the emergence and popularity of ChatGPT. How did that shift the nature focus and even the organization of this book?

CS: Yeah, I can take this one, but I think we were imagining A, other writing teachers, other writing teachers invested in process-oriented approaches to writing and teaching writing. And also too, there is a pretty lively and substantial community of creative practitioners and artists and teachers who have been using text generation technologies in their classrooms for way

longer than you may expect, especially if you're just jumping into this conversation at the ChatGPT moment in time.

So the creative computation community is something that has been sort of nascent and around since the 1980s, way before I was happening in academia. And it's a community that is really lively and bright. And so that was sort of why I was excited to join this collection with Annette and Tim, and sort of one of the main constituencies that we imagined kind of taking this work up.

SW: In your introduction, you ask "which parts of the writing process can we cede to AI while retaining what we value about writing?" I read this as what are we willing to give up as writing teachers or writing studies as a field when it comes to understanding writing, and what do we need to hold onto? What's negotiable and what's not? I would love to hear you answer your own question and talk more about this.

TL: It is a big question, and I want to give up bibliographic formatting. If I never have to write another bibliography in my life, I'll be ecstatic. I've been thinking about this, and especially with how I relate to my students, and questions of whether or not this is going to make writing processes better, more efficient, worse. We just don't really have the studies to figure that out yet. One thing I would hate to see go is the kind of forced meditation that writing puts us in a position to do, right?, in two ways.

One, whether we do our writing sitting at a computer or walking across campus or in the shower, it kind of just forces us in some way to kind of concentrate our attention on a particular topic or a particular argument for a sustained period of time. And likewise, if you look at the undergraduate curriculum where I work, there's also a period of time over the semester where students are not hopping from one topic to another from week to week, where they're kind of in a position where they have to consider developing an argument over the course of several weeks. And that's something that I would not want to see go by any means.

But one of the things that I've been saying in workshops is that I think eventually what we're going to see is a fairly tight path that we have to walk to help students kind of augment their learning with these technologies without actively displacing it. I've been working on another research project where I've been interviewing writers, and there was one writer in particular who was developing a kind of curriculum to help adult learners work with GPT to write resumes and cover letters. And he had been using ChatGPT extensively for the past several months. And he already said, "I'm worried that it's starting to become a crutch for me." It definitely greased his writing process. He said it made it easier, it eliminated instances of writer's block that he used to have. But he already felt a kind of dependency on it.

Now, I don't know whether or not that will be some sort of widespread concern, but it's an exciting time in the sense that we have no idea what's going to happen. And I think I'm comfortable sitting with some of that uncertainty in ways that I'm not sure is always particularly common.

AV: I might want to add something to that too though, in terms of the question what do we retain and what do we cede? I think fundamentally writing is changing and it always has been changing. Right? Technology is built into the practice of writing. It's been changing the ways that we write for certainly decades but hundreds of years. And so it's not like there is a finite writing that is a static thing. Right? And so the other thing I think that this collection does, and this is to Carly's point about the kind of history for creative work in automating writing too, is that there's things that this kind of approach can add to the writing process.

So it's not just automating things of the writing process that are already there, but are there ways for it to augment creativity? Are there ways for it to change the way that we think about audiences, or to translate across audiences? That's one of the things that GPT does well, and actually Tim's assignment in this collection works with reading levels and having students understand reading level translations. So I think that's a really important question for all of us to think about as writing teachers, is how these technologies are shaping writing. And we don't, as Tim said, we don't have good answers to this right now, so it's really a space for all of us to think through it.

SW: Timothy, you alluded to this. I'm thinking about how conversations with faculty across the university have changed over the last couple of years, particularly with writing instructors and writing program administrators, and how as time has passed, there's been conversations I'm maybe more reluctant to have. For example, I'm interested in conversations where students are present in the room and that they're centered, their perspectives and understandings of AI and writing are centered. I'm interested in hearing students' actual uses, perceptions, understandings of AI and writing, which based on my own experiences haven't been as present or heard or visible in institutional conversations around AI.

CS: Oh, I just wanted to speak to the conversations I've been having with students briefly a little bit, because I think the student perspective is often one that is assumed to some degree. And I think actually being in conversation with your students about how they're using and if they're using these tools is a great first step. I just started teaching in a new institution and I'm teaching a couple of sections of first year writing class focused on digital humanities focus. And something that I've really enjoyed talking with them about is kind of inspired by an assignment we have in the collection, Mark Watkins assignment on establishing an AI code of conduct or standards of conduct with the class. And something there that I was really struck by is A, these students are using these tools or reporting that they use these tools way less frequently and with way less regularity than I would've assumed.

And B, there is also still a level of basic education that needs to be done around the utility of these tools and what these tools can do. So that's kind of what stood out to me initially. And then also I think something that became really valuable in my conversation with students around creating a code of conduct for AI tool use in the writing classroom is kind of just straight-up asking why are we in a writing classroom when there are these tools that can write for us? And I was really heartened to hear students articulate exactly the goals that we probably would articulate as instructors ourselves.

Things like writing is a process that promotes critical thinking. It will serve us in many other areas of our education. It's a way of finding your own voice and sort of integrating your own experiences and words. Things like that, things that rhetoricians have been talking about forever and ever. So it was a conversation that I was a little bit nervous about going into, but it was one that I was really glad that I had. Yeah. Sorry. Tim, go ahead.

TL: The conversations that I've had with faculty have been all over the map. I've had scientists say writing was an absolutely crucial part of me becoming a scientist. "I feel like I've been practicing science for 20 years and I'm still developing my voice." I've heard the scientists say, "Man, I cannot wait until my writing gets automated so it'll write up my results for me." I've had a law professor say, "I'm changing the way I'm teaching because I'm expecting a lot of back-of-the-house law to get automated over the next several years, and so I'm going to concentrate on other things and more oral components." And so I really think that there's extraordinary inconsistency and a lot of differing opinions across the curriculum now, based on the conversations I've had.

SW: I feel like there's assumptions about writing and AI, for example, one assumption is that students are using technologies like ChatGPT or Google Bard all the time to assist them with writing done for class, and we should spend a lot of time and energy addressing these issues in our institutions and classrooms. But how much do we really know? What are the assumptions versus the realities? What research studies past or present should we be paying more attention to in this moment in time? What do you feel like is absent from these national conversations on text generation technologies?

TL: The interesting part is that, I mean, in terms of the data, I've seen a lot of industry-produced surveys that show there's rapid and wide uptake of these technologies among students, and that's not jiving with all the anecdotal evidence. I've done a lot of workshops, a lot in liberal arts colleges. I've worked with a lot of students, and very few students have integrated these as a kind of fundamental part of their workflow. I've talked with two or three brilliant students who are doing independent research, and they did it primarily for coding completion. But there are a lot of students I feel like who have formed a kind of adversarial relationship with these technologies. So I'm working with them to experiment with them. I've read accounts of teachers coming in on the first day and their students say, "Yeah, I've seen it. I don't really use it. I don't know what it's good for."

And now we're talking about how good is our data, where is it coming from? And anecdotes are anecdotes as well. In terms of some of the best research, I've seen a lot of good stuff coming out of human factors conferences where they're getting really down into the nitty-gritty of how writers are interacting with these. Now they don't have the same kind of historical background to understand the evolution of writing as our field does. Some of the studies are very, very narrow. But in terms of experimental data, there are some good studies coming out that are actually showing kind of mixed results. In some cases, they show writers don't rely on these all that much. They still like to retain their own voice. Other studies are showing, yeah, well writers will get lazy if they use these. So it's not a particularly extensive body of work yet, but it is emerging.

AV: In terms of students, I love that Carly talked about students and having conversations with students. I think this is one of the primary functions of this collection is that it gives moments and structures for teachers to have conversations with their students about AI that are, I think, generative productive. I say generative, but that it gives a space for teachers to have these conversations even if they don't necessarily feel comfortable with these technologies themselves. And I think those conversations are really crucial because my sense at the research university I work at, which is a really different kind of institution than where Tim is at a small liberal arts school. I gave a survey of students, composition students, in the spring, and my sense from their open-ended questions and how they answered the questions are very similar to Carly's. That they understand what the purpose of a composition class is, that they know that using these kinds of technologies are shortcuts and they're not doing the kind of fundamental kind of thinking that they know that this class is for.

Now, whether that influences their decision at 11:30 at night when there's high stakes kinds of responses, whether that changes in a 19-person composition class such as we have at University of Pittsburgh, where you have a relationship with the teacher and all these best practices that we do in the field, or in a class with 200 people, or in an asynchronous class, or an online class. I think these are, Shane, you asked about research that we'd like to see. I mean, I found the survey that I gave to my students just fascinating and really important for understanding how our program should respond to this as something that's shaping the landscape of writing, rather than just pretending that nothing is happening. Right?

And I think that it's really going to depend on everybody's local context. So more data on how students in different contexts. How are they using AI in community colleges? How are they using them in first year versus seniors? How are they using them? There's so many different ways that we can break this up, but the research is really necessary and kind of wide open. And I think having conversations then too. Surveys, but also conversations about how students are perceiving writing and how their writing processes are changing, and what they value about their writing process, I think is really important research that should be happening now.

SW: Annette, what were those surveys getting at and how did your composition program respond to that information and data?

AV: Well, so this is one of the advantages of being the director of composition, is I can give the surveys and then I can actually do something about their responses. And one of the things that I did was basically share the responses in analyzed and digested form with instructors in my program. So we have at least a hundred instructors in my program. And so to say, "Look, these things." For instance, when an instructor says, "I don't want to introduce ChatGPT because I don't want them to learn about it." That horse is out of the barn. The students all know about ChatGPT. Are they using it? Well, actually not so much. They seem to be right now using it more outside of class than inside of class. And that's kind of interesting. Another thing that came out from the survey is students felt like it might make their writing process easier, but they felt like it might demotivate them to write. That's a really interesting response, and that could use follow-up research.

But that's the kind of thing that I feel like I love the instructors in my program. And so what we've done is we also receive data that students overwhelmingly want a clear policy of AI and they want to be able to have conversations about it. So in the assignment that Carly mentioned about Mark Watkins assignment, here's a space to talk about policy and then to implement policy. That's really important. So that is something I've advocated then for my program, for my department, actually for my whole university. And so it's really helpful to have that kind of data to say, "No, Pitt students specifically are asking for a policy so that they can do the right thing according to their instructor's perception of the composition class."

So I think that this is why local data is really important because you can get your own local data, and then there's different IRB regulations for that kind of thing too. It's a lot easier to send it back into your program and actually implement, like here's what our students are doing.

SW: Let's end here. Maybe each of you could take a moment and reflect on one chapter in the collection and share how you think teachers can take it up or how it extends our understanding of writing.

CS: Yeah, so you asked earlier, Shane, about something that feels absent from these national conversations around text generation technologies. And I sort of referenced it in the beginning of the conversation, and Tim and Annette have too. But it's sort of this new conversation that has sort of a long history attached to it. And some of the assignments that I am most excited to see in the collection and most excited to see adapted for future use are ones that aren't even necessarily using LLM powered tools, but are using some of these older potentially lower tech tools, things like Tracery and RiTa.js, and a variety of different Python libraries that do these sort of lower bridge text generation. So, Kathy Wu is a artist and a researcher out of the Brown Literary Arts program. And her assignment sort of locates our current moment of text generation and AI and all of that within sort of a tradition of found art and cut up art. And it's a really awesome assignment because it's asking students to ask questions about authority and property and power as far back as traditions that are sort of starting in the 1960s and before. And it's sort of really tracing a clear lineage from artistic traditions of the mid-20th century into the conversations that we're having today around how power is working, around whose work is this really, around kind of the ethical questions that come up in those conversations as well. So check out Kathy's assignment. It's really awesome.

TL: For my part, I really like the assignment by Alan Knowles, and the reason I like it is because it's a bridge from a kind of beginner use of language models into a little bit more sophisticated use, but in a way that almost every writing teacher will be able to deploy in their classroom. So it explains tokenization. It explains few-shot learning and one-shot learning, which are just kind of second tier terms, and if you've been in the space, you will have heard a thousand times. But for writing teachers who are just starting out with this and just starting to work students, it's one step beyond simple, like let's prompt this. It's, okay, let's train this and then let's analyze the output. He specifically uses a set of tweets to help train it, and there's a rhetorical analysis done on the tweets to see what we could discover about how these tweets are operating. But I like it because it's a really good step from your first step into the space into step 1.5. Not too technical, but somewhat technical.

AV: So it's hard to choose actually, there's so many good assignments here. But I mean, I can point to, for instance, Latrice Calhoun's assignment, which is one of those kind of creative assignments. When I answered earlier, what are the extra things that this could bring to us in writing? And so she uses a kind of speculative frame where it's like spell casting kind of thing, and you can do it on your own and then you can do it with the AI. And there's a kind of creativity generation that I think that it's like thinking with the AI and then looking at. And a number of the assignments do that.

So in the rhetorical engagements section for instance, there's a number of assignments that kind of point out, help you understand how genres work or how arguments are working or whatever. But if you have the AI do it as Calhoun is doing, there's a kind of understanding a little bit more about the process and then kind of introspection that happens with a teacher's proper scaffolding if they're using the AI not just as a way of short cutting things, but also to like, "Oh, look, the AI did this." Now I want to take it back and understand why it's doing that and what does that mean for my process, and what are the additional creative things that can happen in this way? And so I think a lot of the better assignments do that. But I mean, they're all great. But a lot of the assignments do that, and I think that's a particularly interesting take on that one.

SW: Thanks, Annette, Carly, and Timothy, and thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.