**Episode 149: Elizabeth Losh, Sarah Z. Johnson, and Matthew Kirschenbaum**
Pedagogue podcast
*Transcript*

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

This episode is in collaboration with the Big Rhetorical Podcast Carnival. The Big Rhetorical Podcast Carnival is comprised of a group of academic podcasters and rhetoricians and compositionists that are coming together around a singular theme. This year's theme is artificial intelligence, applications and trajectories.

In this episode, Elizabeth Losh, Sarah Z. Johnson, and Matthew Kirschenbaum talk about the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI.

Elizabeth Losh is the Duane A. and Virginia S. Dittman Professor of American Studies and English with a specialization in new media ecologies at William &. Mary. Sarah Z. Johnson is the Writing Center director and a member of the English faculty at Madison College in Madison, Wisconsin. Matthew Kirschenbaum is a distinguished university professor at the University of Maryland. He's currently completing a book about artificial intelligence entitled Textpocalypse.

*SW: Just a little information, the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI was formed in December of 2022 by the executive leadership of the MLA and the CCCC's executive committee. Elizabeth, maybe you could start by talking a bit about the origins of the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI.*

EL: Sure, I'll be happy to talk a little bit about that. I'm co-chairing the task force with Holly Hassel, who's at Michigan Tech and who is certainly an esteemed and experienced writing program administrator and somebody who's really been on the composition studies scene for a while. The task force was formed in November 2022, and part of the reason I ended up co-chairing the task force is I had organized the MLA's Executive Council panel on artificial intelligence a few years ago under the direction of the past president, Chris Newfield. So I had already had some contacts with people who were working on things like AI and algorithmic bias, and so we were really interested in putting together a really diverse group between the two professional organizations. We were interested in making sure that we had people who were working on the history of assistive writing technologies, people like Matt.

We wanted to make sure that we had a range of institutions so that we were representing people at community colleges, people at HBCUs. We wanted to make sure that we had people who had worked on electronic literature, people who had been part of the computers and composition community, which has certainly been around for a long time. So scholars at both of these professional organizations have actually looked at automated text generation for decades. This is not necessarily a new concern for these organizations, but we started meeting in 2023. We created our website presence in the beginning of January, and then we met on a very regular basis. I would say that as a group, we're conscious of the fact that we're really soliciting more input because we don't have a representative who works in disability studies, and we don't have somebody who specializes in language instruction for languages other than English.

And so there's certainly ways that the issue of generative AI and writing touches on so many fields in the humanities and writing studies that we know that writing studies and literary studies are very broad and diverse fields, but we tried to make sure that we had a range of people who are really interested in both the possibilities of these technologies and the potential harms of them. And for almost all of us on the committee, really, I think part of why we were selected to be part of this group was that we're really people who represent both perspectives. That we're both excited and terrified of these technologies. And I think that's part of why our conversations over these weeks and months have been so productive. And the working paper is just the first thing that we've produced, and I'd advise everybody to go to our website on Humanities Commons. So it's the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI, and we have blog posts. We've had a webinar. We're going to be soliciting more feedback. So please keep in touch.

*SW: Sarah, can you talk more about the collaborative writing process that the task force engaged in for the white paper? There's 10 educators on the task force, and I'm interested in hearing more about the collaboration involved and particularly what those conversations looked like given the range of perspectives and disciplinary expertise on the task force.*

SZJ: This has actually been a really interesting and fun collaboration, as Liz was just talking about. We've been meeting a lot since the beginning of the year, and I have done work with CCCCs, and NCTE, and TYCA for a long time, but I hadn't worked with my colleagues in the MLA pretty much during my career. And so this was a really interesting and fun opportunity to exchange, I think, just sort of ideas and methods that I wasn't always used to. I will say, in terms of the collaboration process, of course we met virtually monthly, if not more for a while, and we really found interesting grooves when it came to how we did that. And I think when it comes to collaborative writing, the folks who are listening to your podcast, Shane, will know how challenging that can be, especially with a bunch of English teachers.

I remember the first time we were talking to each other about how important conciseness would be, and we were thrilled when our first draft was only 40 pages. We tried a lot of different things in terms of sort of divvying up sections to write collaboratively in terms of spending time as a group to just write together on different parts of the document. So that part, I think, was super interesting. And, of course, we spent a lot of time just talking. For me, one of the most productive and generative times that we spent, of course, was when we got together face-to-face for the first time in New York City.

And that, during those two days, I cannot believe how much we got accomplished because, again, those of you who are listening probably know what it's like to be in all kinds of department meetings and things like that. We were productive. We really got a lot of things written, a lot of things done, and we were doing, I think because of the diversity of perspectives that Liz was talking about, there were many of us at the table who were spending really a lot of thought, and time, and effort in thinking about, well, who at this table or who is not at this table and who is not being heard here? What are the things that are important? And for example, I'll say as a two-year college person, Anna Mills is another on the team.
While everybody was very focused on practicality, I think she and I especially were thinking about what are the things that we can tell teachers who are scared right now. And actually, yesterday I spoke with a group of high school teachers in the whole Madison area, and that's

something, of course, that I think a lot of classroom teachers are dealing with. The other piece that, again, we are all bringing, I think, different areas of expertise. Matthew is bringing his expertise in the digital humanities and a lot of the theory and the history that the MLA folks were bringing. One of the things I think that one of the reasons that I was on the task force is because I'm also the academic integrity officer for my college. And so, while that's certainly not necessarily part of my scholarship, I had always been sort of tangentially related to and listening to that conversation. And so hearing how the academic integrity side of things was responding to and thinking about, and talking about this issue of generative AI was also really interesting and, I think, important to the conversation.

*SW: One of the main goals is to "make principle-driven recommendations for how educators, administrators, and policymakers can work together to develop ethical mission-driven policies and support broad development of critical AI literacy." Before we talk about the recommendations, I was hoping someone could talk a bit more about the white paper and provide a general overview of its goals, purposes, and the way you all approached putting this document together.*

MK: Sure. I can get us started on that. This is Matthew. So for all of the investment in efficiency and concision that Sarah mentioned, I think we also all felt it was important to really start from first principles in this document. These technologies are currently, as we know, the subject of a massive societal conversation of which this working group, the organizations, and even the constituencies we represent are only a small, tiny part. And so we started simply by glossing and defining the technologies a little bit, explaining what a large language model is, explaining what ChatGPT is, explaining why we use the term artificial intelligence, which is, there's nothing about this technology that is not contentious right now. And people have asked us that, why do you sort of buy into the kind of branding and hype that goes along with that term? And so we really just wanted to break down all of the nomenclature and the acronyms for people. We tried our best to do that in clear and accessible language. And then also just sketched a little bit of historical context that Sarah and Liz have both mentioned. Computers have been generating text in one form or another for a long, long time; what is and isn't new about this particular set of technologies?

SZJ: I guess I'll jump in here too and talk about, because, as Matthew was saying, the first section is this introduction and background, but then we do get into what we, as a group, and we were informed on what we ended up writing about by a survey that we sent out in the early spring of 2023. And that had to do with the risks and the benefits. I'll focus on the risks just because that was the section that I ended up working on the most, but in many ways also then is mirrored, or perhaps the opposite is mirrored in the benefits section. But I think one of the reasons that we ended up putting it first in the, once we started to discuss the issue itself after the introduction and background was we recognize that a lot of teachers are feeling those risks way more right now than the benefits.

I mean, I think there are a lot of people who are excited, but I don't know of anybody who isn't at least a little bit scared too because they see the possibilities. So I'll say one of the ways that we had originally thinking to look at dividing up or categorizing the risks was to think about what

are the urgent or immediate risks? What are the intermediate and what are the long term? But of course, as we began listing things out, we realized, oh, those are all really bleeding together. And so what we ended up doing was discussing these risks and benefits in terms of audience, because we're rhetoricians, so there we go. So we talked about risks to students, risks to faculty, and risks to the profession in general, like into programs. And so when we talk about the risks to students, those are the things that I think a lot of people, those of us as teachers, are worried about. That students who don't get the practice that they need to learn to write, to understand the value of writing to think that that will be lost, and we're not sure what the consequences of that are going to look like.

And a lot of those risks to students center around those kinds of issues. And honestly, I think those can be far-reaching as well as immediate; the risks to faculty really focused on issues of labor. What we kept coming back to over and over again was this idea that this is going to be a lot of work if we want, and we, meaning our profession, meaning administration, meaning society, wants to prepare students to live in and navigate this new world that's going to take time and effort. And right now, we are not seeing a ton of great space being made for that. And so part of what our recommendations ended up being had to do with this, that we strongly advocate for this space, whether it's time, resources, whatever, being made and recognizing that this is a sea change or can be and that teachers need to feel prepared or they're going to remain in denial or at least just sort of dabbling around the edges.

And then, of course, finally, the risks to the profession had to do with a couple different things, because at first, a lot of our survey results said that people were very worried about their jobs and especially non-tenured faculty. And that certainly is a concern that is understandable, right? I mean, if nobody needs to learn how to write anymore than what a writing teacher is going to be doing. As we talked about it much more though, what we realized was, and this is something I think we may talk about a little bit later, but in the long run, I think writing teachers are going to be the source of knowledge, pedagogy information that a lot of other disciplines are going to need because we've been focusing on process for decades. And so in many ways, we have the tools already to talk about assessment, how to think about our assignments and how we teach writing, understanding the reading of different kinds of rhetorical contexts. And so I really do feel like, in terms of risks to the profession, they're certainly not existential, but they certainly are risks to how we go about doing our work. So that, I think, is important for all of us to consider.

*SW: Elizabeth, Sarah talked about the risk of AI to teachers, students, programs, administrators, which is one of the earlier sections in the white paper. Do you mind talking more about the benefits?*

EL: Sure. And I'll focus on the parts of the working paper that are specifically about writing instruction because I know that's really what a lot of your listeners are most interested in. And in particular, we point out that there are a lot of different ways that students can use LLMs to stimulate thought and develop drafts that are still in the student's own voice or represent aspects of the student's own conceptualizing and learning processes. And this can be helpful for students who face psychological obstacles for tackling invention and even revision. So when used in this way, LLMs have the potential to really inspire and spur activity among students. They can also produce all kinds of creative materials. One of my favorite prompts that I heard from an

instructor at North Dakota State University is having students write a resignation letter from God. And of course, that sounds like a relatively simple prompt, but of course you can give God all kinds of reasons for resigning from his position.

And then she had a part two, which was then have the devil write an application letter applying for the position. And again, this gives students the opportunity to think creatively about how do we take these traditional genres and sort of infuse them with a sort of fantastical or supernatural element, or an [inaudible 00:18:55] element at the very least. And so there are a lot of ways that these can be creative processes, and this is something that scholars of electronic literature have known for a long time. And not everything is automated. It's really about writing a good prompt. It's about thinking about the ways that different prompts act on each other. It's also really exciting in terms of multimodal writing. There are a lot of ways that students can use LLMs, not LLMs, but use AI technologies to create images that are much more professional than the images that they might otherwise be able to create, ways to create music.

So there are a lot of ways that the creative process can be assisted by these technologies in ways that can really enhance the writing classroom. And I think most importantly, and this is something that I know we'll talk about later, it opens up an opportunity to really teach critical AI literacy if these technologies are going to be built into composing platforms. This is something that Matt, and Sarah, and I have seen firsthand. These things are going to be part of Microsoft Word, they're going to be part of Google Docs. These LLMs are going to be part of the composing environment for students. So taking an attitude of prohibition and surveillance is not going to be very productive. And that's one of the things that we really hit hard in our section on recommendations is that we really think it's important, and our members know this, right? Our members want to support student development. They don't want to take a punitive attitude, particularly one that has a tendency to harm students who are already affected by these technologies, who are being algorithmically profiled by these technologies, who are having their voices in many ways homogenized by these technologies. And so even though these technologies can be exciting also as a way to speed up language learning to help with translation, there are a lot of things that LLMs can be helpful in doing. We're also mindful of the potential harms, but taking an approach to those harms that's really much more holistic that isn't just about trying to get students to sort of toe a particular line, and we want to facilitate our students' creativity and growth.

We don't want to be a kind of textual law enforcement. And of course, that also creates a lot of labor issues, particularly since these supposed identification tools are so incredibly flawed. So from the policy standpoint, we're really encouraging administrators to recognize all of the labor that this pivot is going to involve because we're not really seeing people changing their assignments or ways of teaching yet, at least based on the surveys of our members. And so this is going to require a major pivot, and it's not the kind of thing that is getting supported in the way that the pivot to online teaching during the height of COVID was really getting. And so we are really calling upon institutions to invest in these new literacy initiatives that are going to be so critical for success.

*SW: Matthew, can you speak to some of the challenges to engaging and participating in this kind of work? And you can take this however you see fit. Challenges in maybe the collaborative*

*writing process of the task force, challenges to the evolving nature of AI, to writing technologies, maybe challenges to what this means for our field and our scholarship, or even our classrooms and our students.*

MK: Sure. So I think, as you have a sense, the committee has very intentionally tried to be as open, as transparent, as accessible as we can be. The kind of outreach we've been doing, the survey, the working paper as published is open for comment. Anybody can leave a comment on the online page where it's posted. And we have several dozen comments there. And I think it's fair to say that we've gotten a lot of appreciation, a lot of love, as they say, but there's also been a critique. There have been concerns about shortcomings, or blind spots, or omissions in the paper, which are certainly fair and reasonable, and welcome. We are just a small group of people doing the best we can, and we're not going to be able to cover all of the angles or respond to every concern. But I think along with that, there's also, at least, I, myself, have sensed a kind of real undercurrent of anger in some of the responses too. Not necessarily anger directed at us as a working group, but anger at the situation at large.

I think it's related to what Liz just mentioned in passing, the double whammy of first COVID and online teaching, and now this set of technologies that I think a lot of folks sort of feel like, gosh, nobody really signed up for this. We didn't ask for this. But suddenly here they are, landing in our lap or in our laptops as it were, courtesy of big tech, and they're part of the fabric of our reality, and we've got to cope. And the kinds of resource questions that Liz was just describing, where is the time, the money, going to come from for yet another so-called pivot? I think all of these are driving some of that undercurrent of anger. Worth mentioning too, I think that these technologies don't exist in a vacuum. This is part of where some of my own sort of historical and theoretical interests come into play.

They are very much a part of whether we want to call it late capitalism, surveillance capitalism, platform capitalism, choose your terminology. There are lots of different frameworks out there, but they're not neutral, disinterested technologies. They are not dissociated from the current political landscape, where there have been all sorts of attacks on education at every level. So in this wider frame, wider contexts, that kind of anger, I think, isn't surprising. And I think a lot of us are just going to have to find our own individual ways of now integrating the reality of these tools and technologies into everything else that is also part of our material and institutional realities as teachers in a wide array of different kinds of contexts, but still, again, very much part and parcel of that backdrop of a political environment, a capitalistic framework, all of these things that feed into the tech.

I think at just a more sort of down-to-earth level, maybe the single biggest challenge we faced was just keeping up with the tech. I mean, this is stuff that's changing daily under our feet. And how do you sort of write recommendations that aren't obsolete the moment that they're published or which seem naive the moment that they're published? I think, as we've been saying, the landscape is going to look very different. Where, right now, ChatGPT is, it's still a service that you have to sort of seek out. You've got to create an account, you've got to open a browser window. But we are starting to see the integration of these tools into our everyday writing environments. And that in and of itself is yet another game changer. So the challenges are not small.

*SW: Let's end with a conversation about what's next. Where do we go from here with writing and AI? What would you like to see educators pay more attention to as it relates to artificial intelligence? And what would you encourage us to do as students, teachers, and administrators?*

EL: One of the questions we've tried to grapple with is: What are going to be the impacts of these technologies beyond just higher education? Obviously, our professional associations advocate for our members as workers in the higher education setting, but we also, as humanists, have a shared conviction that writing is an important mode of learning and also of civic participation, of public identity, of so many facets of our democratic institutions. And so we really think that the time for having major public conversations about these technologies that include discussions about regulation, that it's really important to act now. And that's part of the reason that we have been meeting so regularly. We've also made recommendations to the Biden Administration's Office of Science Technology Policy, and many of us are also serving in advisory capacities in relationship to these technologies because this really has the potential not only to transform higher education but also to transform economic sectors and political institutions.

SZJ: Yeah. And I'll just kind of jump in a little bit too. That's definitely the broader aspect of it. I should share too, and I can't remember if Liz or Matthew talked about this. This is just our first working paper, and we are looking at creating more as time goes on that have to do with more specific issues. And we've been gathering a lot of feedback on what are the things that people in the humanities, specifically in MLA and CCCCs, want to know and need to know more about. One of the things that I think we really came back to, and I keep considering the conversations that whirled around when we were all together in the same room in New York City, was the idea of critical AI literacy. And just as teachers in the humanities have taken on the responsibility of teaching all kinds of information literacy, humanities literacies, digital literacies, that this is going to become, I think, one of the most important jobs we have. One of the things that I see as a possible future if we're not careful, this goes along with what Liz was saying, it's not just about higher education.

Whenever we've taught information literacy in the past, I think the fallback is always, well, you can't trust everything you read. Make sure you know what your sources are; make sure everything is traceable; blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And LLMs make that impossible in a number of ways. I mean, number one, they are not built to be transparent. Nobody knows exactly how it is. And even though, yes, there are some regulations being written that call for more transparency in how they work, it's still not baked into their operations. But for me, I think, and again, I think the group in general was the idea that we are also entering into what can be a very risky landscape where the students we're working with, it's not so much that they are having trouble finding credible sources, it's that they don't believe there is such a thing as a credible source anymore with things like deepfakes and that basically everything can be manipulated. They can't really trust anything anyway. And so I think as teachers, part of our job will be to help them navigate a world and not just throw up their hands and say, well, it's all crap anyway, to really help them understand that there are still going to be ethical and, I think, critical ways to understand the information and just all of the stuff that they are consuming so that they can be ethical producers of generative AI texts and images, but also consumers of it as well.

MK: And for me, looking forward, I think it's sort of customary to sort of round out a conversation like this with a note of optimism or at least resilience. And I'm not so sure that, at least, I can offer that in good conscience. I think that it's difficult to really be confident in our projections of the kinds of impacts this technology is going to have, whether it's in our classrooms or again, at a more sort of societal level where we talk about things like deepfakes, and disinformation, and so forth. It's not obvious to me that our relationship to language will remain unchanged or intact. The sort of intimacy I think that we associate with the written word, it's sort of the authenticity that we associate with written communication. All of that seems to me to be sort of called into question. And the possibility exists that writing by default will become something a lot more like spam, and it's hard to, again, sort of foresee the consequences of that. So for somebody like myself who has spent a career studying the sort of intersect of technology and writing, this is, as we say, what a time to be alive. But I'm not willing to say that it's all going to be okay and that we're going to get through it. I think we don't quite know what the future really holds. And coupled with the emergence of other kinds of educational providers, the kinds of certificate programs that you're seeing a lot of corporate investment in, again, it's not obvious to me that the great ship of higher education will continue to sort of sail on through a straight and steady course.

*SW: Thanks, Elizabeth, Sarah, and Matthew, and thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.*