

Episode 120: John Gallagher

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, John Gallagher talks about digital writing and rhetoric, usability and user design, technical writing, the afterlife of digital writing, and using digital technologies in research.

John R. Gallagher is an associate professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign. He studies interfaces, participatory writer-audience relationships, and technical communication. He has been published in *Computers and Composition*, *enculturation*, *Journal of Business and Technical Writing*, *Rhetoric Review*, *Transformations*, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, and *Written Communication*. His monograph, *Update Culture and the Afterlife of Digital Writing*, is available from Utah State University Press. He is currently working on two projects, a book about digital case study research and long-term project about machine learning communication.

John, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your teaching interests include several aspects of digital writing and rhetoric as well as visual rhetoric. Can you give an example of an assignment that students have responded well to at the University of Illinois, especially one that might use or critique digital media and/or online participation and ethics?

JG: Yeah, sure, so I study digital writing and rhetoric. And I also, within those, I would say I study interfaces with a particular focus...I stress how interfaces are created, designed for social media purposes. I think theoretically about interfaces. So, you know, I draw on some people outside of the field, like Brandon Hookway and Alexander Galloway, to sort of think about interface. And then, you know, I teach a lot about interface design. I also think sort of about circulation, and specifically about circulation I think about the way that, you know, distribution modules and distribution nodes sort of guide users to sort of act in certain ways. I think about sort of online writing habits, in particular, and I try to connect all those things in my book, which we'll talk about in a moment.

But in terms of an assignment that I found really well is I always ask students to do some sort of interface redesign of a recent social media platform that they really like. So back in 2006-2007 this assignment was redesign Facebook's interface, right. How you would want it to be changed and why, what kinds of habits you're thinking about. Then it became Twitter for a while. You know, now it might be TikTok. But really it's not about the platform itself. It's about sort of thinking about how the interface coerces as well as encourages certain kinds of user behaviors. I actually have a chapter on this in Jessica Reyman and Erika Sparby's collection *Digital Ethics*. In that chapter, I sort of talk about how Twitter could be redesigned to make it a little bit more of

a “nice place.” And I literally mean that like in a nice place. I don't mean civil. I mean, it's like a nicer place. So you know, one of the suggestions in that chapter, I actually offer some nice visuals about how you could redesign Twitter's interface. And one of them would be adding like a cool down button, right? Like you can't just tweet every second, you know. That maybe you need like a two minute cool down or a three minute cool down. Or alternatively, you could design a capture function, right. Where you have to sort of click it. So like, “I'm not a human,” or like maybe, “I'm not a monster” or something like that. But then also even sort of more broadly, you could redesign the way a tweet looks, right. A tweet comes out in a sort of a rectangular function, right. That's really probably the result of it needing to be on a mobile device, but you could design a tweet to be in the shape of a heart. Just thinking about the way that these interfaces actually have a firm sense of habituation on the user.

Some of the theory that I'm drawing on, if people ever wanted to go read about it, come from BJ Fogg's work. BJ Fogg is a Stanford professor who in 2002 coined the term “captology,” which is sort of how computers persuaded people be. I note BJ Fogg not just because I know who he is, but actually because his students went onto these large corporations called like, at that time, a weird little thing called Facebook and another weird little company called Twitter. Right? So it's really funny because sort of all...these sort of originators come out of BJ Fogg's lab and they went to these companies and sort of used that theory.

This is actually a firm example where like academia had a huge impact on social media because they ingrained all of these addictive habits and addictive user design functions and features into social media. They've just gotten recreated in sort of...every single social media platform. Throwing out BJ Fogg's name isn't just, “Oh, he is a theorist, right?” No, like his students for better or for worse, had a great big impact on how we think about interface design and how all of these social media companies basically got us addicted.

SW: John, you're talking about interface design and how the user interacts with these interfaces and how interfaces can even recreate patterns of behavior and participation. I'm curious as to how you define user design and terms like usability in your classes? And I'm also wondering how your definition intersects with other scholarly work via disability studies and universal design for learning?

JG: I mean, you know, I think any sort of unit about usability and user design needs to critique those terms and not critique them in like a bad way, but also like pull them apart for what they mean. So one of the things that I actually do is I take the word “user design” and split it up and say, “Okay, like we have user, what does a user mean?” I'm actually writing about this in my next projects about case study. We're like, “What exactly does a user mean?” So a user, I think sometimes we say “users” and we mean “people,” but you know, there's only two types of people who refer to their clients as “users,” right. Drug dealers and website designers. I think that's Tufte's joke. So like, you know, what does a user mean?

A user is like intrinsically connected to an interface. A user is intrinsically connected to a database. It's intrinsically connected to some sort of infrastructure. So thinking about what that term does when you sort of situate a person as a user, right. You know, pulling that term apart, then thinking about the term “design.” I think design is probably one of the most overdetermined terms in the last 10 years because we could talk about design in an architectural sense, we could talk about design in terms of infrastructure, we could talk about design in terms of aesthetics. So, getting students to sort of pull those apart. There's all sorts of really good readings about user design both in the field as well as sort of like in HCI research – Human Computer Interaction, as well as all sorts of CS research and things like that.

Karrie Karahalios, who's a professor here in CS, does really good work. I would recommend anybody who's interested in sort of user design stuff – she does really fascinating work that I think a lot of compositionists would love to get their hands on. She actually did a study about users and how she interviewed a bunch of users on certain social media platforms and showed them how their inputs were ignored by algorithms. She did this study of people who were leaving online reviews and through the user design, their reviews just got bumped to the bottom or not even displayed to other people. She asked about their affective reactions to that. Some really interesting stuff with user design going on across various fields.

Then I would say one of the things that...the way I really think that people seem to account for, you said disability studies in your question and universal design is...I like to sort of think about usability and sort of an inverse, you know, Gaussian distribution. Rather than sort of thinking about what's like the center of the Gaussian distribution, right? The big bump in the middle of a distribution, thinking about sort of the tail users, right. We would call these “edge users” in the language of user design. The people at the tails, right? How are you attending to them because you would likely attend to the distribution in the middle if you attend it to the edge users. So historically people haven't really attended to the edge users because they've traditionally been marginalized users, marginalized people, but if you attend to sort of what their design needs are, you would intrinsically take care of the majority population. So that's one of the ways that I sort of think about disability studies and universal design.

SW: In your most recent book, Update Culture and the Afterlife of Digital Writing, you include a chapter on learning and pedagogy in update culture. Can you give an overview of the book and a definition of “update culture” – what that means and how you see this working within composition studies and classes like technical writing?

JG: The whole premise of the book *Update Culture and the Afterlife of Digital Writing* is...we basically think about, there's a bunch of stuff that writers do after they “publish.” There's a bunch of stuff they do. That should be, in my view, considered writing or part of the writing process and what it means to be a writer. For example, if you were publishing books – to go on a book tour, to go sort of do some of the marketing and the advertising involved in selling those books. Of course we've always had this. I mean, a lot of *Equiano*, one of the first slave narratives that was published...he went on a book tour in England. You know, it's not necessarily a brand new

idea, but as I argue in the book, this scale of the actual life of writing has dramatically increased with social media.

For example, writers are marketers, producers, advertisers. They're their own editorial assistant. They have to consider all of the various kinds of distribution mechanisms and think about those things in a much more intense way than without social media. One of the examples that I've been using when I talk to people about this is academic publishing. When you publish a book, you have to write a book proposal and oftentimes in that book proposal they now ask you how many Twitter followers you have. What kind of digital presence do you have and how will that help sell the book. Right? These are academic presses that I'm talking about. This isn't even like the highest form of capitalistic efficiency where sometimes, you know, you have to have like a following before they would even give you a book contract. For instance, from like Simon & Schuster.

The book basically makes that argument. I would actually just change the book title to *The afterlife of Digital Writing*. I'm not sure "update culture" is...as I define it in the book, the expectation that websites now change when you go back to them. If you go back to Twitter, the layout might be the same, but like all the content's going to be new. And so we have this expectation that we can revisit our writing and it will be different. We can revisit sort of the websites, we can revisit digital writing and digital writer and sort of things change. So there's an expectation to updates. There's an expectation to change. The holistic argument in the book is that we have to consider these afterlife processes to be part of writing, and that would naturally impact our teaching.

So one of the ways that I think about this is asking students to think about...instead of just writing this paper, like, how would you advertise this paper? What media form does this paper need to take so that others might be able to read it more? You can also do the classical remediation thing where you ask the student to take a traditional paper and turn it into a podcast or a YouTube video or something like that. I think one way to sort of build in the afterlife is to give students credit for doing that work and that labor. I actually draw on a couple of examples in the book where I've done this. I've taught a course on self-publishing, and I will give students credit for spending the time trying to get others to read their posts, their blog posts or their content.

One very concrete example that I can give is dropping links to your blog in the comment section of other blogs or in the comment section of YouTube videos that people might be like, "Hey, I had something similar that you did here. Would you come read my blog?" And believe it or not, I actually did this for a while in 2016 and 2017 embarrassingly, I was writing a basketball blog and I would just drop the links. I got a surprising number of readers cause I was dropping the links in the comment section of ESPN back when it had a comment section. I was getting like a couple thousand hits a day about stuff where I was like, "Tim Duncan is the greatest basketball player ever." And like making like outrageous claims about it. But these strategies work and thinking about those kinds of strategies and allowing students to sort of use that as a form of

writing and giving them credit and saying, you know, every time you drop a link into 20 different comments sections...20 different times you do that, that's the equivalent of a 300 word blog post.

SW: So your research, as we've discussed, is deeply connected to digital technologies, interface design, usability, digital writing. I was hoping you could talk about the affordances of using digital methods and methodologies in research and how these methods have made you a better researcher and teacher, and then maybe you could share some of the challenges that come along with this kind of research.

JG: Sure, sure. I think there's a two-part answer here. One is that sometimes, not all the time, but sometimes people sort of think of me as like a quant guy because I've done some quantitative research and I don't think of myself as a quantitative researcher. I also don't think of myself as a qualitative researcher. I actually like to think of those things as a spectrum, very deeply related to one another. And sometimes you can see how you could actually...if you interviewed a hundred people and you could like run statistics on that, but that's a qualitative process. But the reason why I sort of don't necessarily identify as a qualitative or quantitative researcher is because my approach is, I sort of study and theorize about audience. If I'm going to do that, I realize that I had to do the qualitative work – interviews, questionnaires, field work, ethnographic approaches, observations. Very sort of fundamental groundwork qualitative research, but I also needed to integrate quantitative...and if I'm going to study audience, like from a larger perspective, a group of audience, I might need to do surveys. Which aren't necessarily questionnaires surveys with statistical approaches, statistical analyses of focus groups, properly sampling my data.

My own theoretical approach, that audience research, which is both a perspective about audiences, as well as how writers perceive audiences, necessitates both those paradigms. Now to like fully answer the question is I like to think of those things as sort of inextricably connected to one another. For example, I use web scraping in my research. Web scraping you can do it with Python, you can do it with R, also here's a plug for a friend of mine, Aaron Beveridge who's at UNC Greensboro. He has a program called MassMine, MassMine.org. From an NEH grant that allows people to web scrape without coding knowledge. You have to know how to use command line prompts. But you don't have to know any code. So it does it all for you. This allows people to sort of scale up their research. So rather than if you need to scrape, if you needed to pull off information off of 150 Wikipedia pages, you could do it in five minutes rather than sort of copy and paste them over the course of several hours. I think being able to sort of use these digital technologies to answer your research questions is really good and sort of I've turned to web scraping my research and some people think of web scraping as a quantitative approach. But as actually...you pull a bunch of stuff off of a website, then you can analyze it qualitatively.

Web scraping is one of those digital technologies that I use in my research that I think other people might be interested in. I also think distant reading as some people might call it in our field...like to just think of sort of like running large scale analysis. You could do some topic modeling, which is sort of like looking at latent patterns. You could also sort of turn to sort of

Corpus linguistics for interesting terms. Conrad and Biber have a great book about Corpus linguistics that I would recommend to everybody. So those are some of like the advantages. When you turn to some of these digital technologies, you can see the intersection between qualitative and quantitative research, you can scale and the second point would be to scale up your research so that you can get more data that you can take a more macro approach. Then, you can drill down to do some of the micro work that all of us want to do.

In terms of the challenges, the startup cost of all this. This is the big one, right? This takes time. This takes time to learn. I did some web scraping for my dissertation, right? It took a whole month out of my summer in July 2013. I spent a lot of time sort of figuring it out. That was back when web scraping was sort of the wild west before all the disinformation came out. So, you know, the number one challenge is the startup time, but that startup time gets less and less. The more you learn it also gives people skills that are more sellable if you can't get a tenure track job or more stable academic job.

There's some other challenges too, that have come up right. I know enough statistics to get myself in trouble. In other words, like I don't know advanced statistics. I can do descriptive and sort of basic influential statistics, but I always, whenever I do statistics in my work, I try to have people that I know at the university or even members of my family because I have that privilege and advantage of making sure that the statistics make sense. So when you do some of the more scalable, large scale work, making sure what you don't know and sort of being aware of your own gaps because...when you get into some of the stuff, it's very fun and it's very innovative and you immediately want to use it and do it.

And you're like, "Oh, maybe there are some disadvantages here." Sort of being aware of your own blind spots would be the second challenge. Those challenges are part of the fun about the flexibility of what we do in academia. I think academia's largely left...we have a lot of freedom in academia to sort of pursue our own research and our projects. I think that's one of the cool things about it. That's why I, on Twitter, I want people to sort of share those stories and be like, "Hey, I'm doing this really cool, innovative research," and I want to read about it and learn about it.

SW: Thanks, John. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.