CHAPTER 14.

AI OUTPUT IS NEITHER SOCIAL NOR RHETORICAL

✨ *HUMAN-AI COLLABORATION IS A COMPLEX SOCIAL AND RHETORICAL PRACTICE*

Cydney Alexis and Theresa Merrick Cassidy
Kansas State University

In a department meeting, our colleague dismissed generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) output as "elegant bullshit." Elsewhere, others have echoed this sentiment, such as an author who refers to it as "art barf" (Wendig, 2024). As writing studies (WS) scholars and writing-center trained professionals researching AI, we've been struck by proclamations that, in the process of delegitimizing GenAI output, dehumanize the people who use it and their diverse motivations for doing so. In other words, we saw people emphasizing output over the human/AI collaboration and dismissing the product as neither social (lacking a heart, disconnected from the social realm, only harmful to human society) nor rhetorical (no human "rhetor" with a purpose, unpersuasive, anti-dialogic).

In "Writing is a Social and Rhetorical Activity," Kevin Roozen (2015) complicates the conventionally held view of the writer as a solitary "I" writing in a garret and embeds the writer in social and rhetorical context. He argues that "writers are always connected to other people" (2015, p. 17)—the social dimension. "Considering writing as rhetorical," Roozen argues, "helps learners understand the needs of an audience … [and] what the audience finds persuasive" (2015, p. 18). This is rhetoric in the Aristotelian sense: the art of persuasion, through appeals to heart (pathos) and mind (logos), produced out of a desire to have one's words trusted by others (ethos).

Below, we unpack human-AI writing collaboration, or *complex collaboration*, as we are calling it. We argue that despite the distress and panic this causes in many hearts, including our own at times, complex collaboration is, nonetheless, a social and rhetorical act. It is social in that writers turn to a machine for help with contextualizing, enriching, and problematizing their writing, writing that

DOI: https://doi.org/1010.37514/PER-B.2026.2777.2.14

will ultimately connect them to other people. It is also social in that writing is not, as it is often characterized, merely individual labor, but a reflection of everything that has brought that writer to that moment, including parents, teachers, schooling, and resources—a concept explored by Deborah Brandt (2001).

But collaborating with AI is also *rhetor*ical—with the human *rhetor* at its heart, who turns to AI for specific needs and purposes. Our position explores how human-AI collaboration is (1) a rich social and rhetorical exploration, worthy of attention and not dismissal; and (2) a complex collaboration between writer and machine that engages the heart and mind, the result of which is real writing, and not merely "art barf" or "elegant bullshit." We feel it is important not to demean either writing produced with AI or those for whom exploring it feels important. To illustrate, we use examples to encourage people to be curious and open to diverse, socially rich, rhetorically purposeful re-imaginings of writing with, and in the context of, AI.

In the "AI in Education" Google Group, consisting of ~2,400 members, people in diverse fields engage in rhetorically complex discussions around AI technologies. To cite one example meaningful to us as WS scholars, two people who identify as "writers" debated the stage in the writing process when AI use is appropriate. Replying to a question about whether it is important to "create space" (Pacheco,[1] 2024) for students writing first drafts with AI, a participant answered that he is a "writer" who exclusively uses AI for first drafts. He stated, "I'm not yet convinced that learning to write, in the traditional manner, is the way to move forward. Formulating cogent prompts, combined with scrupulous editing, might be of equal educational value" (Loundy,[2] 2024). Another person responded: "I am a writer too … I fear that an AI-generated draft … would limit thinking and possibility, especially among early writers (Breidenbach,[3] 2024). These writers situate AI within their understanding of what it means to be a person who writes, an identity position they lean on to validate when AI can meaningfully be brought into the process. This is obviously social, in that people are conversing on a listserv to gather collective teaching wisdom. It's also rhetorical—these scholars not only make persuasive pitches to each other, but also demark specific limits for AI use.

We see professionals beyond teachers and writers using AI for writing with careful attention to purpose and audience—hallmarks of rhetorical strategy—with a goal of making existing written documents more socially conscious. For example, neurosurgery resident Dr. Ali, collaborating with colleagues and

1 Assistant director of undergraduate admission, Loyola University Chicago.

2 Instructional technology specialist at a public school district in Silicon Valley.

3 Associate provost for faculty development, The New College.

hospitals, used ChatGPT to simplify patient consent forms, translating them into vernacular English while still maintaining medical and legal accuracy. Ali stated: "Our hope is … that consent forms read less like terms and conditions statements and more like how they should read for someone who is entrusting their lives in doctors' hands" (Scales, 2023, par. 3). What's compelling here is Ali's use of "entrusting," his emphasis on using the tool to inform and protect patients. Ali's frustration with legal writing, which leads him to engage AI, also informs his prioritization of people who are frequently obscured in the morass of medical documentation.

The above examples illustrate people grappling with how to integrate AI in ways that assist others (such as Charles N. Lesh [this volume] who incorporates AI with an experimental spirit and critical eye), demonstrating ethical motivations in collaborating with AI. We note the social and rhetorical purposes embedded in them: to teach students how to write, to help students to understand how their practice might be shaped by using AI at different stages, and to help people in medical situations, often which involve pain and trauma, with a reading task complicated precisely because of the situation's exigence.

> *Complex:* A whole or system, made up of complicated, but interrelated parts; ideas or concepts that have many layers of meaning; a network; hard to separate, analyze, or solve; a disproportionate concern or anxiety about something

While we were presenting on AI, a colleague asked, "isn't collaboration always between two humans?" Initially, this question surprised us, because of widespread use of the word in reference to human/AI interaction. Yet we registered in her question a sincere distress over relegating this type of collaborative thinking and work to AI.

We see working with AI as a complex collaboration that intricately binds human and machine. Neither the human sculpting GenAI output nor the machine producing it in response to human questioning can be removed from the equation. People have used many phrases to describe this collaboration ("co-intelligence" cf. Mollick, 2024; "collective intelligence," cf. Herndon, 2024 and Lévy, 1999); however, we think *complex* does critical work when placed before collaboration in emphasizing embedded tensions that are important to carry with us as we explore and even reckon with this technology. Our colleague's question caused us to pause and evaluate what had become value neutral for us, while having for her a completely different valence.

In writing center (WC) work, the term collaboration is central; it has widely been used to push against ideas that tutors do work *for* students, in violation of academic honesty policies. But WS and WC scholars such as Lisa Ede and

Andrea A. Lunsford (2001) have also pushed against reductive views of collaborative scholarship that devalue this work and oversimplify the entangled nature of writing and thinking with others. "Collaboration" represents our commitment to pushing back against limited, often gatekeeping perspectives on collaboration and authorship. We do think that humans and machines can (and already do) collaborate, to speak to our colleague's point; even more, as writing landscapes and technologies evolve, it's important to critically evaluate terms and concepts we hold dear, including outdated ways of understanding (solo) authorship.

Alongside "collaboration," "complex" retains a sense of our colleague's concerns and indicates that collaborating with a machine is intricate, layered, and often fraught. Complex captures the anxiety—both reasonable and at times, maybe, disproportionate (history will tell)—that people are feeling. Yet complex also evokes the multi-faceted undertaking of creating something—in a social network. With AI, writers engage in a dialogic, rhetorical meaning-making process that mirrors the (often unrecognized) social dimension of traditional writing, through which writers seek feedback from friends, peers, mentors, and editors—and continue to revise. AI has caused a sea change and surfaced complexities in how we view writing. Thus, it's important to consider the ways that AI will build identity and capacity around human writing and creativity—and not just reduce it.

Students are offering us examples of the rhetorical questioning and identity-building that they experience in AI collaboration. In one of our courses, students were permitted to use GenAI to generate professional statements, a genre people sometimes find laborious and impersonal, despite these documents' high stakes. This exercise prompted discussion of voice in job documents; one student reported learning "how [he] want[s] to sound by seeing what [he] [doesn't] want." GenAI feedback offered the opportunity for the writer to engage critically with his own text, characterize his desired voice, and feel confident defining his professional identity.

In another course, one of our students produced a 100% AI-generated text, violating the assignment's terms. In a meeting, this student (whom we'll call Colin) disclosed that he was ashamed by this AI use, before disclosing that he has severe ADHD and had begun using AI to assist with reading. His shame hovered on the surface of the conversation; as a first-generation college student, a lot of family hopes and pressures rested on his imminent graduation. He was distraught over having used ChatGPT in a way that could jeopardize this. He explained his close friendship with another student who loved to read and constantly encouraged him to read for pleasure; Colin wanted to experience what his friend did, but ADHD caused him to forget what he had just read, so that each time he opened a book, he had to re-read what he had last read, a frustrating process. He used AI to summarize texts after he read them, to test the

accuracy of his interpretations, and he kept them afterwards, as memory aids. This conversation's outcomes included greater understanding of why students turn to AI for legitimate, targeted purposes, as well as a stronger bond between student and teacher through the mediating force of AI.

These examples highlight a fundamental aspect of complex collaboration: that humans can delegate a collaborative role to AI without surrendering their identity and voice, sometimes even strengthening them. In being guided by their instructor through GenAI use to create a personal statement, a student gains a deeper sense of the genre's import and intricacies, while improving his sense of how to represent himself professionally. The interaction with Colin shows how a dreaded institutional conversation for many teachers (and students) having to adapt to AI's presence becomes a moment of heart and mind, a connective dialogue that enriches both people's understanding of the writing process and the rhetorical motivations that underlay why people turn to AI.

While AI on its own might not be viewed as inherently "social" or "rhetorical," the complex collaboration between human and machine is. Even as we are cautious about AI, for the well-being of the many who find themselves writing, working, and teaching with it, we can be curious and open. Investing in the notion that writing with AI is a social and rhetorical practice might help people receive the idea that writing produced with AI is legitimate—*real*—writing. We use "complex collaboration" to describe this practice, and while we do not think that AI is inherently good or bad, we do believe in exploring it. AI's explosive onset has disrupted composition conventions; but as we've seen, humans, with AI, are re-shaping conceptions of writing identity and voice, within a new writing landscape that will continue to evolve alongside AI.

REFERENCES

Brandt, D. (2001). *Literacy in American lives*. Cambridge University Press.

Breidenbach, R. (2024, August 9). *AI for first drafts* [Discussion post]. AI in Education Google Group. https://groups.google.com/u/1/g/ai-in-education/

Ede, L., & Lunsford, A. A. (2001). Collaboration and concepts of authorship. *PMLA*, *116*(2), 354–369. https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2001.116.2.354

Herndon, H. (Guest). (2024, May 24). "Artificial intelligence?" No, collective intelligence [Audio podcast episode]. In *The Ezra Klein Show*. The New York Times Channel. https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/artificial-intelligence-no-collective-intelligence/id1548604447?i=1000656616801

Lesh, C. N. (2026). AI can "do it all!": We have work to do, together. In C. Basgier, A. Mills, M. Olejnik, M. Rodak, & S. Sharma (Eds.), *Bad ideas about AI and writing: Generative practices for teaching, learning, and communication*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2026.2777.2.06

Lévy, P. (1999). *Collective intelligence: Mankind's emerging world in cyberspace*. Helix Books.

Loundy, M. (2024, August 9). *AI for first drafts* [Discussion post]. AI in Education Google Group. https://groups.google.com/u/1/g/ai-in-education/

Mollick, E. (2024). *Co-intelligence: Living and working with AI*. Portfolio/Penguin.

Pacheco, E. (2024, August 9). *AI for first drafts* [Discussion post]. AI in Education Google Group. https://groups.google.com/u/1/g/ai-in-education/

Roozen, K. (2015). Writing is a social and rhetorical activity. In L. Adler-Kasner & E. Wardle (Eds.), *Naming what we know: Threshold concepts of writing studies* (pp. 17–34). Utah State University Press.

Scales, M. (2023, August 23). Before and after: See how ChatGPT helped local doctors make medical forms easier to understand. *The Boston Globe*. https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/08/23/metro/can-chatgpt-help-with-medical-forms/

Wendig, C. (2024, January 10). *Just say no to artificial intelligence in your creative pursuits, please, JFC, WTAF* [Blog post]. Terribleminds. https://tinyurl.com/f2kddk48