CHAPTER 6.

AI CAN "DO IT ALL!" ✨ *WE HAVE WORK TO DO, TOGETHER*

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In graduate school, I got feedback on a particularly rough draft of a paper. "Charlie, if you say you're going to do everything, you'll end up doing nothing." I think about this often, and recently, I've been thinking about it a lot in the context of AI and writing. Over the last 36 months, I've heard plenty of bad ideas about AI. Perhaps the most frequently heard, in a variety of venues, was succinctly articulated by a student of mine (with his tongue in his cheek): AI "can do it all!"

It is in response to this idea we'd do well to heed my graduate-school lesson. When writers assume that AI can do it all, they risk approaching it without the careful, restrained stance necessary for ethical and generative use. The opposite is also true, of course. When we start from the position that AI is entirely incompatible with academic writing, we ignore the benefits it might offer. Here, I want to challenge this notion of AI doing it all or doing nothing in a series of pedagogical, scholarly, and cultural snapshots. In doing so, I hope to offer a better idea: for AI to be a useful collaborator in writing and pedagogy, we need to work together on pairing it with critical, measured, and experiential literacy skills. The result, I hope, is a sort of AI pragmatism for teachers and writers, an approach that foregrounds collaborative experimentation rather than utopian fantasy or dystopian dread.

We'll travel to classrooms, libraries, journals, and even the distant celestial prisons of *The Twilight Zone*. In these brief visits, we'll witness diverse engagements, shifting attitudes, emergent literacy skills, and, ultimately, a movement beyond binaristic, limiting ideas about GenAI and its writerly capabilities.

Writing for *Scientific American*, computer scientist Ben Shneiderman (2022) divided AI thinkers into two camps: blue-sky visionaries and muddy-boots pragmatists. The blue skies are eternal optimists, excited big thinkers. The muddy boots are the cautious bunch foregrounding experimentation, problems, and solutions. They recognize the harms, biases, and potential perils involved in current AI models, something writing studies scholars have been quick to identify (e.g., Aguilar, 2024; Byrd, 2023; Owusu-Ansah, 2023).

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According to Shneiderman (2022), we need both groups. The blue skies ask us to imagine. The muddy boots ask us to temper that imagination.

On a Tuesday morning in Fall 2023, I'm teaching in a bright-but-windowless room. It's the first day of class and I'm introducing students to English 1127, an honors section within our first-year writing sequence. My version has for years emphasized writing about place. This semester, there is a twist, reflected in its title: "Writing Auburn: Research, Space, and … AI?"

As I hand out the syllabus, I make note of confused looks. Rather than the customary flip-to-the-grade-and-attendance-policy move, students are stuck on page one. On it are a series of conversations I had with ChatGPT as I planned the course. As students read through prompts and outputs, I ask how many of them have used ChatGPT before. Most of them demur. They've heard of it. But they would never ever use it for school. They swear.

Finally, a student laughs. "Seriously? I use it all the time," he reports to his colleagues. "I can't believe y'all don't. It's awesome. Guys, it can do it all!"

Writing and crisis are old friends. Well, maybe not *friends*. But they aren't strangers either. Writing has long been a location where changes to existing social orders are negotiated (Trimbur, 1991). And in the midst of our current "AI anxiety" (Johnson & Verdicchio, 2017), it's no surprise that writing seems to be at the center of so many questions. If AI "can do it all!" where does that leave writers? And even more worrying, where does that leave the intellectual work we've long developed with writing?

The good news: like so many other crises in the past, teachers of writing and teachers who care about writing seem well-positioned to tackle this one (Johnson, 2023). It will be hard work. Fundamentally, we need to rethink the sometimes-invisible impact that technologies have on, and have always had on, our students' writing processes (Bray, 2013; Bryan, this collection). We know that writing processes are situated, recursive, and technologically mediated, and we need to consider—by working *with* students and other stakeholders—how AI might impact and reshape those processes (Graham, 2023; Hart-Davidson, 2018). This will likely lead to messy classrooms and even pedagogical failures, as I discuss below. But this muddy-boots approach to new technologies might create space for real dialogue on, and real experiences with, the perils and possibilities of this reorganization of writing within and beyond the academy.

In Spring 2024, I taught ENGL4000, an upper-level course I named "AI and the Future of Writing." Much of the course was intended to introduce students to recent work on GenAI, computers and writing, and literacy crises. I also introduced students to popular representations of AI, from Alan Turing to *The Jetsons* to *The Terminator*. I wanted students to get a sense of where our

contemporary optimism and pessimism surrounding these technologies comes from, and to foster a sense of AI pragmatism moving forward.

But the core goal of the class was to practice and study what these technologies might mean for student writing. I wanted to create a space for students to openly experiment with AI as we composed a variety of genres and, most importantly, to be able to track and talk specifically about those uptakes. Through Auburn's office of university writing, I was put in contact with an assessment-technology company called EXAMIND that was piloting a new platform geared toward essay writing. Their browser-based platform is organized in panels. On the left, students see the prompt and rubric. The middle is a classic word processor, where students write, format, and revise. The right screen is a sophisticated AI-chatbot students collaborate with as they compose.

When I first met with EXAMIND, they explained that their software would allow me to track student AI usage and assess it based on its efficacy and ethics. When students submit work, the assessment view would show "significant moments" where the software detects reliance on artificially generated writing: paraphrasing, direct quoting, research, etc. As the professor clicks these highlighted excerpts, they are taken to the moment in the chatbot where the software detects overlap. Additionally, the software provides professors with a timeline feature, which allows them to see the student writing and chatbot history unfold synchronously. Together, these features granted me a previously closed window into students' AI-saturated writing processes.

In early conversations with EXAMIND, I encouraged them, at least for my pilot, to grant students access to their significant moments and timelines. I wanted students to get real-time feedback on how AI was impacting their writing processes. This wasn't always neat, but after students submitted work, we held workshops where we reviewed the writing-process data EXAMIND provided. The results were some of the richest conversations I've had with students about their writing.

This is not a place to go through all the findings of this experiment. I'll just note three of the common outcomes students reported:

- Heightened awareness of how writing technologies shape their processes
- More exploratory uptakes of AI, not seeking it out in moments of panic but rather easing it into their processes more holistically
- More critical reading of AI outputs

By making AI more visible in their writing processes, students and I were able to have specific discussions about what it can do, what it can't do, and the ethics and restraints we must foreground. The conversations were never: "AI can do it all!" or "AI can't do anything!" Instead: "Look at these specific things AI is doing

to our writing processes. What are the benefits? What are the harms and risks? Where do we go from here?"

These conversations got us close to a sort of AI pragmatism. As we worked through the ups and downs of using this new technology, we had our boots on, getting muddy, recognizing impacts, identifying problems, developing solutions, and all the while, imagining the future of this technology and of writing.

One of my favorite episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, called "The Lonely" (Serling, 1959), tells the story of a prison inmate named James Corry, sentenced to fifty years in solitary confinement. The twilight-zone twist is that the confinement happens on an asteroid nine-million miles away from Earth.

Every so often a spaceship delivers supplies to keep Corry alive. On one of these visits, the Captain, Allenby, leaves a large crate. Inside, Corry finds a lifelike robot, assigned the name Alicia. Initially rejecting the companionship of this artificial intelligence, Corry learns to appreciate and even love Alicia, until he is pardoned and tragically forced to leave the asteroid without her.

My favorite line in the episode is delivered by Allenby. After he leaves the mysterious crate, another pilot asks him about its contents. Allenby reflects on what he's just delivered to Corry. "I'm not quite sure, really. Maybe just an illusion. Maybe it's salvation. I don't know."

Back in English 1127 later in the semester, students are struggling. *We just don't know this place. How can we write about something we're just learning?*

Well, I say, let's write about some places we do know. Students get excited, and I figure this is a good moment for them to test if AI could really do it all. I ask each of them to pull up both a blank document and ChatGPT. First, they write 200 words on their own about a place in their hometown that means something to them. I then ask them to prompt ChatGPT to write about that same place. Students share both versions at their tables and report the findings to the larger class.

Unanimously, writers and audiences are unhappy with the AI outputs. In my teaching notes, I write down that students report that the AI sounds like travel brochures for these places. Words are repeated to describe radically different places, words like "charming," "nested," and "vibrant."

I then ask students to continue collaborating with the AI, to iterate their prompts until they are satisfied with the outputs. The room falls silent, sans the sounds of typing and frustration. As students begin to give up, I ask them to share with the class.

Students are still largely unsatisfied. Certain moments did get better, they tell me. They could imagine integrating those into their own place-based writing. But on its own, this just wasn't up to their standards, and even more, it didn't reflect the real attachments they felt to these places. *ChatGPT can write about a place*, my teaching notes read. *But it can't take you there*.

As students leave, many of them still sharing experiences from their hometowns, I note that we are a long way from *AI can do it all!*

When it comes to writing, AI can't do it all. It can't do everything. It's not a salvation offered to us as we float along on our own teaching and writing asteroids. And by thinking it can, writers risk it doing nothing well. But through experimentation and open dialogue, it can play a productive role in writing processes and classrooms.

To get there, writing teachers need to approach implementation with an expectation of messiness, discomfort, and even failure. The experiences and ideas in this chapter arose over many months, many starts and stops, and like Captain Allenby and the crate, I'm still not entirely certain about my own ideas about AI. Reading over this chapter, I worry that I've painted too rosy a picture. GenAI is *not* just another writing technology. The risks, disruptions, and harms it poses—economically, socially, politically, environmentally—loom over our classrooms, as several contributors to this collection document (e.g., James; Wilkes). But here, I hope to have communicated a productive, day-to-day classroom stance to take while we wrestle with these dangers: one of muddy-boots pragmatism, a collaborative, experimental spirit, and a willingness to meet these technologies where they are and prepare for where they might be headed.

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