CHAPTER 22. DE-CENTERING GenAI OUTPUTS AND RE-CENTERING STUDENT LABOR

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In her state-of-the-union-esque essay as writing program administrator (WPA) for the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt), Annette Vee shrewdly zeroes in on a crucial truth about generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Chatbots, as systems, are not good at writing as such but at writing answers (Vee 179). Let's pause to consider that for the developers of such systems, this is a feature, not a bug. But for Vee in her role as writing-teacher-in-chief, this essential function neatly summarizes the problem inherent in a large language model (LLM) like ChatGPT, which is "never uncertain" and moreover "has no relationship to what it means to be uncertain, to inquire, to examine its own experiences" (177). For Pitt's first-year writing (FYW) program, teaching writing is a vehicle for teaching inquiry, like it is where we work at Columbia University. So, the crafting of an answer is less interesting to us as teachers of writing than the crafting of a question. If FYW at our two institutions privileges the inquiry-driven process behind a final product, then we would need to "shrink the vision of what writing is for" for GenAI as it exists now to automate writing (Vee 178).

Columbia's writing center (WC) is institutionally housed in the same department as the undergraduate writing program, which oversees FYW. Physically, we work in the same office, but the symbiotic relationship extends to the culture we share: prioritizing similar values about the teaching of writing. This affinity informs WC consultants' training and practice, not just because we work with an abundance of first-year writers, but because teaching writing for us is a chance to get students to think about rhetorical structures, maneuvers, and responsibilities that facilitate inquiry. The same problem Vee articulates about GenAI as a confident (sometimes incompetent) answer-generator (cutting short or eliminating the process of inquiry) concerns us at Columbia's WC, as we imagine it concerns many WC workers and administrators.

Driven by fending off the potential for further neoliberal entrenchment in the capital U-university, Joe Essid reaffirms foundational skills human WC workers possess and practice for the humans they meet with face-to-face, which

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GenAI has not as yet replaced: "metacognitive questioning, active listening, and principles of fair use" (39). Similar to Vee's project, Essid grapples with the advent of GenAI by reflecting on the mission and priorities of teaching writing to double down on values that the confusion of this moment might cloud. We begin our own essay by channeling this energy, as we believe GenAI systems, as they currently exist, more often stand to destabilize sound pedagogical principles than to revolutionize students' learning or writing.

Herein, we hope to work from the values Vee and Essid reaffirm but also consider how to reconcile these values with the reality of students' use of GenAI. For Columbia's WC, this means returning to and reinvigorating metacognitive questioning for our writers in order to continue the work of their long-term development as scholars. The reality that our students are developing working relationships with machine intelligence does not negate our values.

By de-centering GenAI outputs and re-centering our students' process of collaboration with GenAI systems, we can foster WC conversations that are productive and in accordance with our expertise as writers who support other writers' development. WC workers have the unique opportunity to strengthen other writers' understanding of their own processes by openly addressing any engagement with a text generator. This essay will describe a framework for using WC sessions to stage what we've termed "usage-narratives."

To accomplish this reorientation from output-focused to process-focused, we begin by intervening in the consultation's information-gathering stage to naturalize conversation around GenAI usage, in order to open opportunities for our writers to develop metacognitive capacity. We then examine "process" as it applies to ChatGPT through the lens of our WC values by asking the question, "What kind of writer is ChatGPT?" The answer will help make the case for the importance of guiding writers to create usage-narratives to privilege metacognition.

NATURALIZING THE CONVERSATION

In order for a consultation to reckon with the all-too-real presence of GenAI, we first require a writer's voluntary disclosure that they are using GenAI to develop the project they are working on. But such a disclosure is fraught. The first important move is to remind ourselves, and the writers we work with, that we are not policy-enforcers. Policing abrogates teaching. However, adhering to the well-considered policy in place for Columbia's WC, that we respect decisions classroom instructors have made for GenAI, should be seen as a best practice. After all, students bear the repercussions of their choices while enrolled in any given course. If our WC policy roots itself in a principle of acting in students'

best interests, then, by extension, we also should not punitively enforce an instructor's policy, as if the WC were a beat that we must, like rank-and-file cops, patrol on behalf of someone else's force. To put it plainly: WC workers shouldn't be cops.

In true third-space fashion, we see an opportunity to honor the prohibitions of other instructors and support students' development as writers simultaneously. For all cases, we are proposing a metacognitive move away from optimizing GenAI usage in sessions. We believe such a move can be productive, even in the most restrictive scenario. In the WC, no one's integrity should be in jeopardy. What matters to us is cultivating a serious and robust mindfulness about what GenAI systems actually do and what our students might count on them to do.

Yet, in the majority of our sessions in 2024, GenAI was not a topic. We still notice that few bring it up unprompted (pun intended). Inviting the topic still seems like inviting trouble. This culture of silence is serving no one. A mutual strategy of avoidance closes off unique opportunities for us to do our jobs as consultants. Students need to feel comfortable disclosing their use of GenAI. Consultants need to feel comfortable asking if writers are using GenAI. And it is the WC's responsibility to create an environment where disclosing isn't dangerous and asking isn't accusatory. We believe it is possible to naturalize this conversation, a premise shared by Cochran et al. in Chapter 18 of this collection.

The timing of questions to facilitate such a disclosure is also essential in naturalizing this conversation. Asking whether a writer used GenAI in response to reading a draft of their work, mid-session, is problematic—a sudden injection of GenAI into the conversation seems accusatory and can foreshadow policing and prosecution. In Chapter 27 of this collection, Botvin highlights incidents of unwarranted accusations and the considerable stress such accusations placed on writers. One extant study characterizing student responses to allegations determines the vast majority of cases to be false (Gorichanaz). We, humans, are unreliable at distinguishing machine-generated writing from human writing: even experts struggle to differentiate the two (Casal and Kessler) and so do most GenAI detection programs (Dalalah and Dalalah; Weber-Wulff et al.; Fowler). Looking to ascertain how a student has created a draft they share with us is inherently fraught.

The right moment to ask is in the beginning of the session, which for us and many other WCs constitutes a strategic period of information gathering. If questions about GenAI usage are asked before the writer shares their work, as part of familiarizing ourselves with their project and as part of building rapport, it gives us an opportunity to naturalize the presence of GenAI and to communicate our disposition as the writers' supportive collaborators. Additionally, we should be explicit about why we're asking questions about GenAI. A

broad acknowledgment would suffice initially. For example, language like "Since GenAI is here, we're asking everyone. Knowing how GenAI is part of your process will help us devise optimal strategies for the session."

To clarify what this transparency and acknowledgement doesn't mean, we'd like to pause and reject the flipside of avoidance, which would substitute one extreme for another. Opening the door to reckoning with GenAI should not lead to a prompt-engineering-focused consultation, or an opportunity to share tips and tricks on how to get the most out of the model by outsourcing as much labor as possible to it.

We contend that neither avoiding the subject nor foregrounding it for the sake of authorizing uncritical usage supports a writer's development in a way that reflects our values. To allow a consultation to illuminate what is actually happening in a GenAI-influenced writing process, we propose a middle ground that centers a writer's labor relationship with GenAI. What we're most interested in is all the information embedded in a hypothetical "yes" response to a non-threatening, non-judgmental query. Talking openly about GenAI and writing requires us to think deeply and carefully about what GenAI systems do and about how they do it. One serious challenge in reckoning with GenAI as a collaborator is that the systems' de facto design makes writing labor invisible.

GenAI: A WRITER WITHOUT PROCESS

Imagine a writer writing an essay. Booting up ChatGPT, a writer-cum-user encounters a welcoming, soliciting user interface that announces itself as a collaborator. "Hi, how can I help?" the system asks. The chat interface indicates that a user can "Message ChatGPT," and to its initial universal query of support, a user can respond in kind with any imaginable response. Unless seeking the recipe for napalm or proprietary secrets of OpenAI's intellectual property, the system will happily accommodate, often with an opening exclamation of enthusiasm like "Of course!" ChatGPT composes responses at lightning speed before the users' eyes, visibly generating text, albeit too quickly to read along with. Character by character, word by word, sentence by sentence, text is composed linearly from start to finish, as if from inception to completion, from input germ to output organism. Each response is rendered in so-called 'natural language,' a computer science term of art which perhaps means that the generated text possesses fidelity to Standard Written English and also that responses possess coherence and cohesion. In other words, perfectly legible answers are offered to whatever query the system receives. Included in this dialogical back and forth, the system doesn't simply respond but also asks for feedback in the form of social-media-like buttons attached to every output: thumbs up and thumbs

down icons with which a user can binarily confirm or deny any of the system's responses in toto. It is worth pausing to observe and narrate the composition practices that make up such a helpful Socratic chit-chat so that we may establish a baseline with which to consider the subject of composing from our own disciplinary expertise. Although "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers" by Nancy Sommers is a familiar text, digesting her study again in coordination with our observations of ChatGPT's performance for the user offers a novel way to conceive of GenAI's affordances for practicing and learning to write for college.

Through a study of the revision practices of novice and expert writers, Sommers discerns substantive differences in the novice and expert writers' conception of writing. For novice writers, meaning is predefined, drafting is sequential, revising is primarily concerned with rewording to best align with the predefined meaning drafted sequentially (Sommers). These are novice writers' struggles. As a generative system, ChatGPT produces texts that have already addressed the concerns and difficulties novice writers express to Sommers about the purpose and problems of composing. Quick public service announcement: although ChatGPT appears to write, writing is a far cry from what it is actually doing. ChatGPT generates sequentially in a spontaneous performance of its pre-trained knowledge, using the massive computing power of transformer technology to write answers, to transcribe seamlessly what its neural network has learned when it is prompted to demonstrate knowledge. Understood this way, ChatGPT excels at writing from the perspective of what a novice writer believes to be good writing.

Sommers' study shows that expert writers know differently what writing is for. And for a novice writer, like a college student experiencing a whole new rhetorical situation, our discipline now takes for granted that the actual problem is not the being-novice-ness, but that students "lack procedures or heuristics to help them reorder lines of reasoning or ask questions about their purposes and readers" (Sommers 383), which the experts possess. Novice writers don't have a shrunken vision of what is for; they have yet to be taught the expansive vision. Novices have yet to be taught to think like experts, and, unsurprisingly, "they do what they have been taught to do in a consistently narrow and predictable way" (Sommers 383). Consider again what an LLM models.

Now the question becomes: Is it possible that collaborating with ChatGPT helps address gaps in students' knowledge of what writing can be for? Unlikely. Especially if the nature of collaboration treats a bot like a labor-replacing tool, with the focus confined to the task at hand and disconnected from the writer's overall development. Also unlikely if the use of the system is causal or uncritical. Highly unlikely if writers don't have any guidance. The presence of a writing consultant modeling the missing expert can nullify these negative eventualities.

DEVELOPING A USAGE-NARRATIVE

This persistent, future problem troubles us most: if labor done by GenAI or alongside GenAI becomes unconscious or habitual, opportunities for metacognition and learning transfer will become harder. Therefore, we need to develop strategies for having conversations about GenAI that are process-oriented.

WC consultants already negotiate the tension of product and process: although much of WC's pedagogy privileges a focus on long-term development through metacognition and potential learning transfer, often sessions will and should revolve around the particular textual artifact on the table between a consultant and a writer. A session that skillfully strikes a balance is difficult to conduct. At Columbia, we've invested in training consultants to follow John Nordlof's injection of Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) into consideration for our pedagogy. Nordlof helps shift the conversation beyond previous debates about directive and non-directive practices or hierarchical vs. dialogic sessions in clarifying that "the role of the tutor or instructor becomes to establish what the student already knows and what the student is learning so that the session can be focused on building the scaffolding or structure for the student to practice under supervision those skills that are in development" (58). Rather than view a writer's GenAI-influenced process as an obstacle, we can coordinate around it. We can, owning our expertise in the session, help writers to become storytellers of their interactions with the GenAI collaborator. By guiding them through the creation of a usage-narrative, we can ascertain aspects of their knowledge that we fear GenAI could be occluding in their development or worry GenAI could be displacing from their process.

Soliciting a usage-narrative privileges process over product and definitively shifts away from policy or policing. Aligned with our mission as consultants, this strategy upholds principles of collaboration or trust between consultant and writer and cultivates writer agency within the collaboration. If writers are willing to undertake this reflection and if we co-create the contours of this reflection, then the balance of agency can be maintained and arise out of the asymmetry between novice and expert. Prompting a writer to actively, critically reflect about their use of the technology can create conversational opportunities to discern their ZPD in relation to relevant aspects of their project. This practice can be flagged explicitly as metacognition and taught as a useful strategy to learn and develop inside and outside the WC.

The tables included in this chapter present pared-down language for zeroing in on particular GenAI facets that could comprise a usage-narrative. Broadly, questions are geared toward illuminating three areas: practical engagement with the system, labor targeted for replacement, and motives for deciding to use the system. We present a brief table for each area, followed by a digest of the purpose for asking each kind of question. Of course, the divisions are only so rigid

as these questions can blend and merge with one another. However, we seek to inflect as many facets as possible.

Consider Table 22.1 to represent a fact-finding mission. Practical engagement questions can highlight tangible or concrete aspects of a collaboration. Ascertaining how much time a writer has spent with a system could yield a variety of responses, from a handful of minutes to several hours. A writer can send signals to a consultant about whether they iteratively engage in prolonged exchanges or enter single inputs. What a writer takes with them from the interface to their composition can also vary. Very different things are happening if a writer is copying and pasting word-for-word from an output, paraphrasing passages from an output, or drawing inspiration from what they read. We cannot understate how much reading matters in this exchange. Generally, these questions retrieve essential information which can lead to reflective questions like those in Table 22.2 or present opportunities this table can't predict.

Table 22.1. Practical Engagement with the System

What the Question Seeks to Know or Could Solicit	A Question's Essential Form or Conversational Phrasing
A description of the chat session.	How much time did you spend working with it? And how did you spend that time?
A description of the approach and the prompting.	How did you get it to do that?
An accounting of reading strategies.	What are you reading for? How do you read the outputs?
Type/amount and placement of GenAI generated output in the project.	Are you incorporating anything it generated?
Quality/kind of GenAI output in the project and in what form.	How are you incorporating what it did?

Table 22.2. Labor Targeted for Replacement

What the Question Seeks to Know or Could Solicit	A Question's Essential Form or Conversational Phrasing
Goals and aims for their engagement as defined by the writer.	What are you getting at with this prompt? Walk me through why you prompted this or how you arrived at the wording of your prompt?
Description of the collaboration and the division of labor within the collaboration.	Can you tell me what tasks are you doing? / What tasks is it doing for you?
Assessment of the effectiveness of the collaboration.	What do you think it helped you do finally? How was it helpful?

Asking questions which will reveal and explicitly name the labor a writer seeks to replace or supplement can begin to probe their disposition, their task awareness, their process-knowledge and language, amongst other things. How a writer imagines their agency might determine the division of labor. How a writer assesses the effectiveness of collaborating with a GenAI system can and should extend beyond considerations of whether any certain input yielded a desirable output. If a writer can describe their purposes, a conversation can shift to a reflection on their labor rather than evaluations of machine-generated text.

We have grouped the questions that we consider as most straightforwardly metacognitive in Table 22.3. Asking a writer to consider their motives might most readily help a consultant locate a ZPD to prioritize or explicitly flag. Although human conversations are unpredictable, we have saved this grouping for last as we imagine some requisite staging to naturally and intelligibly arrive at these questions. Since these kinds of reflective questions can be met with resistance, because they draw attention away from a writer's product, we posit that questions from the earlier tables might scaffold and warrant going meta—the goal of the usage-narrative.

Table 22.3. Motives for Deciding to Use the System

What the Question Seeks to Know or Could Solicit	**A Question's Essential Form or Conversational Phrasing**
Gauge critical literacy.	Who taught you to use this system?
Expectations and faith in the system.	Was this output what you expected? How? Or how not?
Sense of their own skill and perceived deficits.	What does that do for you? How does that help you? By outsourcing a specific task to the bot, what did it afford you? What's the benefit of its usefulness to you?
Moment before and moment of the decision to use the system.	At what point did you decide to use it? Why then? Why did you decide to use it? Talk about the way you made the decision? What considerations were part of making that decision? What were things you did before you turned to the generator?
Speculation about the process of the generator.	What's different about how you'd do a task and how it does a task? Are the strategies you'd use to accomplish this task yourself the ones you bring to the devising of the prompt?

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

Because we are both curious about GenAI and the ways in which students integrate it into their writing practice, we have naturally welcomed the topic whenever students brought it up. Motivated by that same curiosity, we have also introduced the topic ourselves, however never because we suspected undisclosed usage. More likely, a student would share their screen or sit down next to us with their laptop, and we'd see ChatGPT open in their browser and use that to introduce the topic. Saying, for example, "Oh, I see you have ChatGPT on your computer. I'm really curious to know how you're using it. What are your experiences with it? Would you say it's been helpful? In what ways?" Since these conversations have yielded openings for considerations around ethical engagement and process-awareness, we will continue to seek out opportunities to introduce the topic.

Additionally, since the beginning of the 2024 fall semester, the WC's intake form has an option for writers to check "using AI writing assistants," flagging that they want to talk about matters of GenAI. Integrating this option is a step towards normalizing the conversation.

We also notice ChatGPT becoming a topic more often in sessions of two kinds. First, when a writer is dealing with a class assignment that explicitly asks them to integrate ChatGPT to complete a project. Asking questions about how the system has been contextualized in class to prepare the writer for the assignment has been helpful. "What did you learn in class about how the system works and how to approach this assignment? What do you think are expectations about the collaboration? What is the work the system is doing, and what is the work you are doing?" In this situation, we have observed elaborate, well-devised instructions as well as minimal or absent instructions. After thinking through these questions together and looking at the writer's assignment-in-progress, we can either expand on their usage-narrative that details their process thus far or create an AI-literacy-informed usage-narrative together. For example, writers working with ChatGPT as part of an underdeveloped assignment experienced frustration when engaging with the system. When confronted with the task of evaluating a system's output, writers discovered they were unsure how to do that.

Second, when writers seek our assistance with job or application materials, such as statements of purpose and cover letters, we've noticed some voluntary disclosures. These materials are high-stakes projects that require a high degree of compliance with formal expectations. Writers presented as anxious and described feeling uncertain about their abilities. We presume that because these writing projects are not governed by institutional policies, writers were more comfortable openly talking about their GenAI usage. Like some writers

documented in the case above, they also expressed uncertainty about how to evaluate GenAI outputs. They signaled their hope that we would help them to ascertain whether the draft that ChatGPT co-created was successful. In these situations, we found it useful to talk about the expectations explicitly. "What do you think is the function/purpose of this statement/letter? Who do you imagine will be reading it?" From there, we found it easier to shift to questions soliciting why, when, and how they turned to GenAI to meet assumed reader expectations, soliciting a brief usage-narrative. For example, one session explored the ways GenAI fell short when communicating the writer's life and mind to a potential employer. Imagining 100 other applicants also submitting ChatGPT-generated drafts as their applications, we then thought about how the writer could set themselves apart.

Whenever we've had the opportunity to communicate our disposition of judgment-free curiosity, we've noticed that conversations about GenAI led to disclosures and to constructive follow-up conversations that produced the kind of talk we now refer to as a usage-narrative. With this essay, we sought to conscientiously develop what we have been doing incidentally.

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