



C&W
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**THE PROCEEDINGS
OF THE ANNUAL
COMPUTERS AND
WRITING CONFERENCE
2024**

**Edited by
Christopher D. M. Andrews
Elena Kalodner-Martin
Nicole O'Connell, Hua Wang
Lydia Wilkes, and Charles Woods**

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ANNUAL COMPUTERS AND
WRITING CONFERENCE, 2024**

PROCEEDINGS OF THE COMPUTERS AND WRITING CONFERENCE

Series Editors: Christopher D. M. Andrews and Lydia Wilkes

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**THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE
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On Fishbowls, Student Personas, and the Wicked Problem of Generative Artificial Intelligence

On Behalf of The 7C's Ad Hoc Committee on AI:

Morgan Banville, Massachusetts Maritime Academy

Antonio Byrd, University of Missouri-Kansas City

Anuj Gupta, University of Arizona

Gavin P. Johnson, Texas A&M University-Commerce

Joseph Robertshaw, University of Alabama in Huntsville

Charles Woods, Texas A&M University-Commerce

Discourse on generative artificial intelligence moves almost as fast as the technology's evolution. How can teachers, scholars, and administrators join the conversation without feeling overwhelmed or being haunted by the expectation they must know everything? The 7C Ad Hoc Committee on AI presents fishbowls and student personas to guide critical conversations on wicked problems, such as Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI).

Joining a research community as a professional requires engagement with multiple writing genres (Miller, 1984; Swales, 1990). The conference presentation maintains important status as it allows an early entrance into a conversation, the testing of ideas, and inviting others into potential collaborations. For a graduate student or junior scholar, for example, a conference presentation and its subsequent question-and-answer (Q&A) portion centers their expertise rather than frequently nodding to established scholarship. They can offer careful insights and pose curious provocations to engage audiences. While many conference presentations cover topics that attendees themselves know tangentially, other topics are wicked problems – “complex, ambiguous problems involving many stakeholders. They neither have easily identifiable, one-time solutions nor can they be solved simply with more information” (Garskie, 155). In that case, a de-centered, communal approach to audience engagement may be more appropriate, not to solve the problem per se—wicked problems are inherently unsolvable—but to establish shared values, practices, and priorities that help the research community address smaller consequences of the wicked problem itself.

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) poses a wicked problem for writing pedagogy. Although not a new technology or even a new conversation in Computers and Writing (C&W) scholarship (Johnson, 2023), the current iteration of GenAI effectively and quickly generates text, images, and sounds in response to user prompts. This feature alone presents multiple challenges, risks, and rewards (Cummings, Monroe, & Watkins, 2024). For example, a writing instructor can worry that students will submit inaccurate synthetic text as their own work, while students may find AI a helpful collaborative tool for brainstorming and drafting (Li, 2024); Researchers can anticipate GenAI leveling the playing field for English language learners (Gupta, Atef, Mills, & Bali, 2024), while also acknowledging the racial, gendered, and linguistic bias of the training data (Byrd, 2023); students can want college faculty to teach them how to use GenAI ethically, yet that possibility remains dubious considering issues of surveillance and privacy erosion (Woods & Johnson, 2024) and the extreme impacts even minor AI output has on the environment (Crawford, 2021; Luccioni, Jernite, & Strubell, 2024). Given these risks and rewards, many writing instructors are wrestling with the nuances of GenAI.

The 7C Ad Hoc Committee on AI (the Committee) facilitates conversation and helps to imagine potential actions on GenAI for the C&W community. We met multiple times in Fall 2023 and Spring 2024 to discuss various ways we might encourage critical discussions about GenAI from diverse perspectives. To engage audience members on the wicked problem of GenAI more broadly, the Committee proposed a fishbowl format for the 2024 conference. By stepping away from a traditional conference panel, we imagined different opportunities for engaging audiences in collective thinking about GenAI, in particular a tight focus on the perspectives of students across multiple institution types.

Here, we encourage scholars to consider using this underutilized presentation format for contexts that require multiple perspectives and resources. We begin by briefly outlining the fishbowl format. We, then, highlight the potential of using research-informed student *personas* as conversation starters. We present the methods and process for collecting and analyzing student survey responses that informed the student personas. Then, we discuss the planning and organization of our fishbowl, and Committee members offer reflections on this format. Unfortunately, unlike traditional conference presentations, we cannot accurately capture the dynamics of the fishbowl in writing; therefore, the ideas attendees presented could not be featured here. Nonetheless, we hope this brief essay will encourage more widespread use of the fishbowl format when working on wicked problems in our classrooms and research.

What's a Fishbowl Session?

Typically, conference presentations come in a few formats. The most common format is the concurrent panel session, which typically features three or four panelists presenting individual papers that are thematically linked followed by audience Q&A. Roundtable sessions typically are less formal than paper presentations and feature brief remarks from five or more presenters followed by a moderated dialogue and audience Q&A. While these formats have their advantages, typically the audience acts as listeners with the opportunity to (maybe) ask a question or provide a comment at the end of the session.



Figure 1.1. Fishbowl graphic posted on Facebook created by Kit Snyder.

The call for proposals for C&W 2024 offered the typical session types as well as a *fishbowl* format. A fishbowl is a presentation format or teaching strategy that encourages participation through discussion and listening. It allows presenters and teachers to maintain organization while allowing for a wide-ranging discussion. (Event Leadership Institute, 2019). Leading up to the proposal submissions deadline, conference organizers encouraged fishbowl sessions via social media. For example, Figure 1.1 was posted on Facebook on October 23, 2023. The graphic, which features the unofficial 2024 C&W Conference mascot Clem the Orange Dinosaur swimming in a fishbowl, is divided into four dialogue boxes each addressing the question: What's a fishbowl session?

The graphic explains that a fishbowl session is:

- Moderator-guided discussion where anyone can contribute or listen
- Collaborative and engaging sessions where participants step into the “fishbowl” to contribute!
- Conversations that start with a common topic and then change to follow the group’s interests.
- It concludes with “Sound fun?” and a call for proposal submissions.

While considering how to represent the work of the 7C Ad Hoc Committee on AI at the conference, the fishbowl format became appealing because of its flexibility, open-endedness, and increased opportunities for audience participation. Further, the Committee recognizes the lack of student voices in discussions about GenAI and are working to rectify this by collecting stories from students working with GenAI in 2023-24—the early days of widespread GenAI implementation in our classrooms. Therefore, for our session, we chose to theme the fishbowl around “Amplifying Student Voices.”

Additionally, we chose the fishbowl because we believe hearing from students amplifies voices often silenced by the academy. The Committee assembled a group of tenured, tenure-track, contingent faculty, and graduate students who teach writing and study GenAI, and, most importantly, value student perspectives as a critical, necessary element of the future of GenAI. Our goals, now and in the future, are to enter and center the discussion on the stories that we tell students, the stories we tell about students, and students’ stories about the integration of GenAI in education and their futures. While educators often drive conversations about GenAI, bringing students into these worldmaking conversations at each crux is crucial. Students are not just consumers but active participants and burgeoning experts in the evolving landscape of GenAI in higher education. To meet the multiple challenges that arise with amplifying student voices, the Committee decided to utilize personas as a method. We discuss this decision-making process, and subsequent reasonings in the following section.

Personas: An Opportunity to Amplify Student Voices

To amplify student voices in this ongoing conversation, the Committee decided to ask students what they thought about GenAI and what their experiences had been with it, both inside and outside of the classroom. To do this, we developed an IRB-approved research project. Our short survey asked students to share their perceptions on the use of GenAI both in the contexts of writing and education and outside of education. Topics covered instructors’ guidelines and policies, how instructors discussed issues related to challenges in using GenAI,

how students used GenAI in their personal or professional lives, how many courses taught AI literacies, and the types of assignments and activities that involved GenAI use. This final question was inclusive of courses, programs, writing centers, and labs. We distributed the survey at our respective institutions and received 52 responses from graduate and undergraduate students. The responses represented a total of five public R1 and R2 institutions. Committee members then analyzed the survey data using open and closed code analysis. In the process, we found that the best way to present our findings was not as a series of themes with supporting quotes and analysis but rather organizing the collective experience of students' use of GenAI into personas.

Personas are not fictional but realistic collective representations of users that have been a staple of technical communication scholarship and practice. Often used for interface design research or audience analysis, personas are tools used to define problems and keep research teams focused. It follows then that we might draw on User Centered Design methods "to honor student knowledge" (Martin 2022, 49) as we locate students and their relationships to AI. Lisa Melonçon (2017) explained, "Persona creation involves overlapping concepts and ideas that lead to three-dimensional representations of users who have bodies and who move for specific purposes" (60). Using the results of our survey, we generated four personas representing different student orientations toward GenAI, which are presented in detail in the following section.

As a method for research (or in this case, conversation starter), personas do important work including identifying thoughts and motivations for using a tool, identifying pain points, and revealing potential opportunities for additional research. For us, these personas allowed investigation of teaching strategies that might align with student needs and desires while keeping in mind that we are balancing a class of students who likely account for all personas. That is, we are able to consider how to teach about or with GenAI while attending to a range of students. A limitation of personas is that, while grounded in research and realistically rendered, they are not meant to be one-for-one representations. Students, after all, are complex humans with complex emotions and experiences related to GenAI. Therefore, individuals might be represented across multiple personas.

Results: Student Personas on AI Use

Our analysis revealed the following personas below. Images used to display the personas for the fishbowl are also provided afterward:

- *The AI Avider*: learns from professors that AI leads to a decline in students' wanting to complete work on their own and that it keeps them

from thinking critically. Avoids GenAI use so they aren't perceived as a lazy student or seen as dishonest in any way.

- *The Inquisitive AI User*: uses GenAI to learn faster, especially with process-based tasks, such as summarizing articles, asking questions about the articles, and considering approaches to writing in general.
- *The AI Brainstormer*: uses GenAI to get started on writing and overcome the “blank page problem.” The AI Brainstormer uses GenAI to come up with ideas for writing and generate synthetic texts they can revise and integrate into their original writing later on.
- *The AI Enhanced Communicator*: uses GenAI as needed, but when they do so it's often to generate common writing genres such as emails because they tend to be clear and have a professional tone. In addition, this persona uses GenAI for creative works, such as editing photos and digital art.

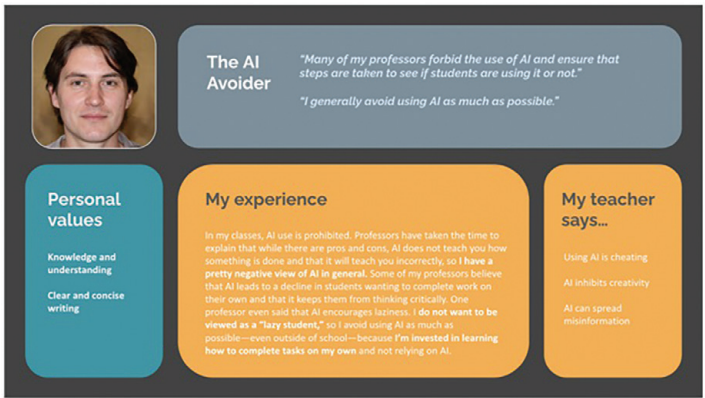


Figure 1.2. Persona profile for “The AI AVOIDER” created by Ashley Beardsley



Figure 1.3. Persona profile for “The Inquisitive AI User” created by Ashley Beardsley

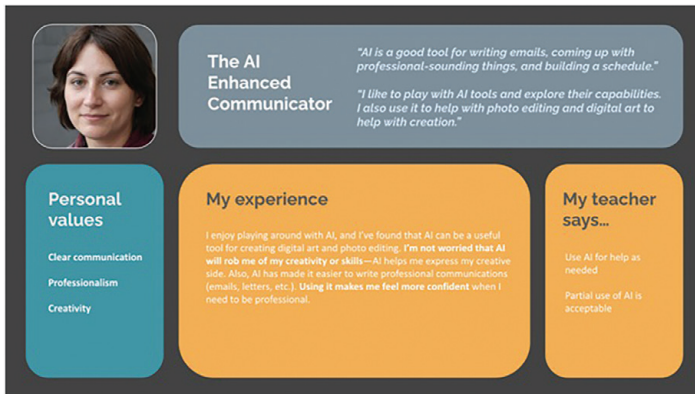


Figure 1.4. Persona profile for “The AI Enhanced Communicator” created by Ashley Beardsley

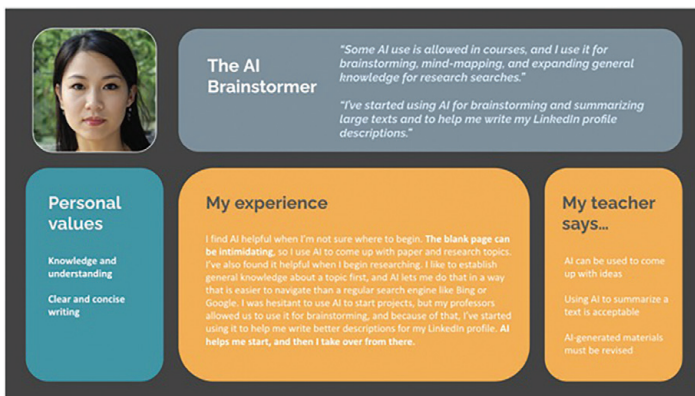


Figure 1.5. Persona profile for “The AI Brainstormer” created by Ashley Beardsley

Our Approach to the Fishbowl

When dealing with wicked problems, it is important to account for upwellings of sentiment and varied approaches that are fluidly forming and reforming, and, we suggest, traditional conference presentations do not provide an appropriate amount of flexibility for such topics. In contrast, the fishbowl format decenters the presenter and engages with the audience organically, inviting a community-based problem-solving atmosphere (Garrison and Munday 2012). To this end, the format of the fishbowl is exceptionally good for nascent subject matter. Pairing the fishbowl format with research-informed student personas make clear that GenAI is not a settled issue. The Committee’s fishbowl presentation at the 2024 Computers and Writing Conference,

titled, “Amplifying Student Voices in Our Stories about Generative Artificial Intelligence” occurred on Friday, June 25, 2024, in Tandy Hall Room 1308 of the Neely building on the campus of Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas (pictured in Figure 1.6). The room was designed well to host a fishbowl: it had two curved tables near the front that created a semi-circular installment mimicking the curvature of a fishbowl surrounding participants who were seated at a square table in the center. The audience was seated in tiered rows (lecture hall style) or standing along the back of the room, which provided clear sightlines throughout the room and opportunities for bringing attendees into the conversation.

Our fishbowl session was moderated by Charles Woods and Jason Tham and was divided into four sub-sessions, each anchored around one of our personas. For each sub-session, moderators would invite a diverse sample of attendees to act as discussants. These discussants, seated at the center table, would first introduce and review their designated persona to the audience and then engage in a discussion among themselves using guided questions about what the persona meant to them and how they would use it in their pedagogic practice and policy contexts. Moderators introduced the personas, one at a time, with the attendees. The conversations were lively, engaging, and even frank as the discussants shared their experiences framed in the context of the persona on the projector and the associated questions. The audience was invested and listened to the conversation until the moderator called for questions or comments from the audience. Once the sub-session for a persona was complete, a new diverse sampling of discussants was selected from the attendees to come to the center table to discuss the next persona in the collection. This pattern repeated throughout the session until all personas had been discussed. Our moderators Charles Woods and Jason Tham returned to offer a wrap-up of the conversation’s highlights and offered an exit ticket, walking the audience through an inventory of their attitudes before the session and comparing them to their perceptions after the session.

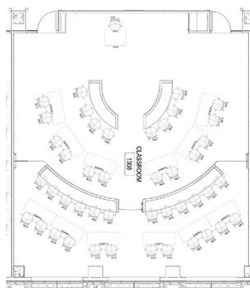


Figure 1.6. A CAD drawing of the layout of 1308 Tandy Hall in the Neely Building: the location of the 7C’s Ad hoc committee on AI fishbowl session.

Reflections on the Fishbowl

Here we offer our reflections on the session and on the project as a whole. The reader will note that although we worked together on this effort, and stood and sat in the same room during the session itself, the scope of our takeaways was wide and varied but quite productive.

Antonio

While our research sought to amplify and understand students' voices on GenAI, the fishbowl itself amplified the voices of scholars and teachers in the room. By happenstance, our moderator for the fishbowl session, Jason Tham, selected participants who came from a variety of institutions. The fishbowl brings into sharp relief the need to address some problems as a collective rather than relying on the expertise of any one scholar or a small group of scholars. If we're intentional in how we design these discussions, institutions that we take for granted, such two-year colleges, come to the forefront as important knowledge producers.

Charles

For me, utilizing the personas allowed fishbowl participants the opportunity not only to discuss pertinent issues related to integrating GenAI into their classrooms via assignments and activities, but also offered a robust glimpse into the different pedagogical approaches instructors might employ with students with various perspectives in their classes. The rise of virtual conferences spurred by the coronavirus pandemic has reshaped how higher education does conferencing. To me, the fishbowl format is an attempt to reshape the monotony of the traditional conference panel format: read papers and respond to queries.

Gavin

To be honest, when we first started planning the fishbowl, I wasn't sure how it'd all work. I've participated in many paper presentation panels, roundtables, and even workshops, and I'm very comfortable with those conference genres. As we planned the session, the vision became a bit clearer, especially with the creation of the student personas; however, I was still uncertain about the format. What if we had a small audience or an audience not willing to jump in? What if the space was not accessible for this kind of format? Will these personas be recognizable to the audience or feel overly manufactured? These concerns quickly dissipated when we started the session. The room, as mentioned, provided a seemingly ideal design for a fishbowl, every seat was occupied and some attendees were standing around the perimeter of the room,

and Ashley Beardsley did an excellent job developing the persona profiles. With Jason and Charles acting as moderators, the session went smoothly and the conversation was lively. While there is always room for improvement, I feel like the fishbowl was a success and one of the best sessions on GenAI I've participated in or attended precisely because expertise was spread throughout the room.

Joseph

The use of the personas as content anchors to steadily regulate and move the conversation forward, coupled with the invitation for audience members to participate—not only with questions from their own seats but by actually *coming to the table* to share their concerns and experience—made this one of the most engaging forms of roundtable I have ever seen. The repeated questions that focused the attention on each persona in succession and inherently invited comparisons and contrasts between the students the personas represented and the ways in which we might connect with them. I entered the room in trepidation but left invigorated.

Morgan

While I was unable to attend Computers and Writing in-person due to my first commencement as a faculty member, I *was* able to reflect on the results of the fishbowl and persona-making. In particular, based on the reflections from Committee members who were present at the fishbowl, as well as personal reflections from attendees, our next step is situating how the fishbowl could be reimaged in other contexts. Because of the student-centered *and* audience-centered nature of the fishbowl, this provided an opportunity for multiple perspectives. The physical space, as noted, should also be of consideration: say, for instance, the fishbowl were to be introduced to your classroom space. What does the physical space of your classroom afford for this type of activity? Personas, too, are a useful tool in the fishbowl to begin the conversation *and* steer conversation as it naturally shifts. Lastly, it is important to note that instructors should refrain from recording in classroom settings unless otherwise noted to protect student privacy, and intellectual property.

Anuj

For me, the design of the fishbowl represents a user-friendly way in which we can make our research on the scholarship of teaching and learning more accessible, meaningful, and impactful for a wide range of audiences. Scholars across writing studies produce very insightful research but teachers, students, and administrators do not always know how to apply it meaningfully in their localized contexts (Gupta, Shuck, & Tardy 2024). Using innovative

designs, like a fishbowl session created with user personas, is an excellent way to merge best practices in user-experience (UX) design and instructional design to give greater rhetorical velocity (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2017) to our research work.

Other Projects and Future Possibilities

The Committee organized this session as our first public opportunity to engage the Computers and Writing community in critically discussing GenAI. The fishbowl, however, is just one project that the Committee has taken on in order to contribute to the growing investigations of GenAI in the field.

There are a number of resources available for the scholar who wishes to explore the topic further and we wanted to provide a starting place for those scholars. While many other presentation styles do offer excellent ideas and resources, the engagement that we anticipated from a fishbowl session might leave participants and audience members alike in need of an immediate resource with which to continue their conversational inquiry into the affordances and limitations of GenAI. The Special Issue on AI published in *Computers and Composition* and edited by Nupoor Ranade and Douglas Eyman (2024) seemed like a natural place to direct our fishbowl audience to as that issue, and its authors, draw on a wide array of conversations that ground their own contributions to the conversation.

Knowing also how many demands there are on our time in this age, three readers (Mahaffey, Mitchum, and Robertshaw) engaged that special issue in an effort to develop a deliverable that could be offered alongside the fishbowl presentation as a help for those who connected with the presentation and wanted next steps. These readers annotated the articles of the special issue pulling out points that caught their attention or inspired them. The readings and comments from each reader were vetted and extended by a second reader for reliability. A [spreadsheet](#) came from this effort that categorized the comments from each article in several major themes: Application to Teaching, Application to Research, Application to Administration, and Application to Industry. The deliverable can serve readers as a quick reference to help them understand which of the articles in the special issue are most relevant to their areas of interest. The spreadsheet is also a site to locate potential research questions, gaps in the conversation, and take a look at what our readers saw as the main takeaways of each article.

Furthermore, the committee has also compiled resources and approaches for instructors to create an AI “policy” in the classroom space. In particular, GenAI technologies have and will continue to revolutionize the professional world: students, teachers, and professionals are finding uses for text generative

technologies to assist with their work, and recent data has shown they are being used frequently in many diverse contexts (Vee, Laquintano, & Schnitzler 2023; Westfall 2023). We've found it useful to have students do the metacognitive work to articulate their position on AI. Such articulation gives them a chance to engage with shaping class policy, and supporting their decisions based on conversations, readings, and their own research and/or experiences. Will they use GenAI? In what ways? To achieve what ends? If they won't use it, what has shaped that decision? Has learning about the larger ethical implications of AI helped them frame the issue differently? To do this work, we have created a list of "policy" resources (linked here: [Teaching with AI: Policy Resources](#)). The policy resources range from field-specific and higher education guides, to our own institutional guides (or lack thereof), as well as publication statements/guides. We have not yet found venues or means to share all of the artifacts and projects our committee has been developing.

The 7C Ad Hoc Committee on AI has plans for the future. We have identified a multitude of ways to effectively serve the C&W Conference and community. One of these plans includes hosting a fishbowl about GenAI annually at the C&W Conference. Currently, the Committee is considering the sustainability of their work as they navigate how to maximize their impact. How might we reinvest in our policy document project and make it useful for the Computers and Writing community? Additional projects the Committee is interested in developing include an article historicizing GenAI panels, writing a Wiki entry on "GenAI and Writing," and using the data from their recent study to further literature in the field regarding and amplifying students' perceptions. As we move forward, as a Committee and a community, it is important that we remain willing to move the practices of the fishbowl into our conversations with students, colleagues, and the wider-world. As discussed throughout this article and the fishbowl session, takeaways such as working to recognize a vast range of expertise, distribute opportunities for input equitably, and rethink the genres of knowledge-production will be essential if we hope to continue tackling the wicked problem of GenAI.

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We want to hear from you!

Use the QR code below to share more about how you think the 7C Ad Hoc Committee on AI can serve the Computers & Writing Community.

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Appendix. Student Perception Survey

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. Your instructor should inform you of your rights as a participant prior to beginning the survey. Please know that your participation and responses in this survey will not be used against you in any way. We appreciate your help with our study.

1. Are you 18 years of age or older? (For participants from Alabama, you should be at least 19 years old.) *
 - Yes
 - No
2. Do you consent to participate in this study? You can withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. *
 - Yes
 - No
3. Please tell us the university/institution you are affiliated with. This helps us to contextualize your responses in this survey. We will not look up your identity using this information.

Please tell us your class standing.

- Undergraduate: First-year
 - Undergraduate: Sophomore
 - Undergraduate: Junior
 - Undergraduate: Senior
 - Graduate: Master's level
 - Graduate: Doctoral level
 - Other:
4. Have you used AI (or been asked to use AI) as part of any of your courses? Your answer will not be used against you in any way. *
 - Yes
 - No
 - Other:
 5. What policies, guidelines, or instructions in your courses, programs, centers, and labs have informed and guided your use of AI in the last 2 years? Please try to provide as many details as possible. Links to resources are welcomed. (Enter "N/A" if not applicable.) *
 6. In what ways have your instructors discussed issues related to challenges in using AI technologies in teaching & learning? Please try to provide as many details as possible. (Enter "N/A" if not applicable.) *
 7. In what ways do you utilize AI outside of academic settings? Please try to provide as many details as possible. There are no wrong answers. (Enter "N/A" if not applicable.) *
 8. In the last 2 years, how many courses have you taken that included AI as a learning component? *
 - 0
 - 1-2
 - 3-4
 - More than 4
 9. What assignments and activities have you performed using AI in your courses, programs, centers, and labs in the last 2 years? Please try to provide as many details as possible. You can be as formal or informal in your description as you wish. (Enter "N/A" if not applicable.) *

Seeking Connectivity: Grappling with Data Privacy in Digital Social Settings

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This article overviews how computers and writing scholars may grapple with data privacy in a gaming application, and on a social media platform. We question how privacy impacts the embodied experiences of the people interacting in those digital spaces. To address the complexities of data privacy, we discuss the precarity of information in digital spaces in the wake of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned. Our article questions: how do computers and writing scholars navigate spaces that gamify our work and create connectivity, while simultaneously putting our privacy at risk? How can, or should, computers and writing scholars support digital activist projects for reproductive justice while also negotiating issues of privacy and data collection? The article contributes to understanding data privacy concerns through connectivity in gaming spaces and through storytelling experiences on Instagram to advance advocacy for and against reproductive justice. Computers and writing scholars have a role in designing, circulating, and caring for digital stories and the bodies connected to them; as such, they should critically engage with digital advocacy stories and the privacy invasion embodied by storytellers.

Keywords: data privacy, gaming, graduate students, advocacy, embodiment

As scholars in computers and writing, we believe that, because we play a role in designing, circulating, and caring for digital stories and the bodies connected to them, we should also critically engage with digital advocacy stories and the privacy invasion embodied by storytellers. Throughout the article, we provide suggestions for computers and writing scholars and instructors, whom we view to overlap significantly with technical communicators and technical and professional communication (TPC) courses. As such, this critical engagement extends to how we teach digital advocacy and privacy within the TPC classroom. To address the complexities of data privacy, or how individuals control their personal information, we discuss the precarity of information in these digital spaces in the wake of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned. We believe that, in the wake of the court ruling, digital spaces used for connectivity became even more precarious due to the restrictions and legalities of sharing private information,

such as any content related to reproduction (i.e. birth control, menstruation, abortion, etc.). The Supreme Court's June 2022 ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* overturned *Roe v. Wade* and eliminated the federal constitutional right to abortion. Since then, many state legislatures have created new abortion restrictions and bans. Research has shown that abortion bans of all types have the greatest impact on people in marginalized groups (Oberman, 2022; Jarman, 2015; McGinn Valley et al., 2023; Foster 2020). In particular, Liza Fuentes (2023) showed how individuals who face systemic racism and other forms of oppression, especially Black and Indigenous women, may encounter compounding barriers to obtaining an abortion. Reproductive justice is an important site for inquiry due to its intersections with other social justice issues, digital activism, and ongoing political turmoil. We highlight the tension between the need to share for activist purposes/in precarious situations and the privacy risks associated with that sharing. The virtual workspace that we highlight is a space where privacy risk is elevated, as is social media.

In this article, we interrogate data privacy as it manifests in a gaming application called Gather.Town and on the social media platform Instagram, contributing to further understanding(s) of how precarious events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide abortion bans, has changed the United States' habits of work and play in digital spaces, especially as it relates to surveillance. We follow Morgan Banville's (2023) definition of surveillance, which is the "collection of both visible and invisible data/information derived from those being observed, suggesting an application of power over the observed audience, who are often not informed of such collection" (p. 32). We consider how privacy impacts both digital spaces and the embodied experiences of the people interacting in those digital spaces (Johnson et al., 2015). We therefore question: how do computers and writing scholars navigate spaces that gamify our work and create connectivity, while simultaneously putting our privacy at risk? How can, or should, computers and writing scholars support digital activist projects for reproductive justice while also negotiating issues of privacy and data collection?

Definitional Work: The Surveillance Assemblage

As Estee Beck and Les Hutchinson Campos (2021) noted, "scholars of computers and writing have addressed issues of surveillance and privacy within writing infrastructures through course management systems, plagiarism detection software, and social media used in classrooms" (p. 3). This article does have implications for classroom use; however, it can further contribute to writing infrastructures, defined as the role language, through writing and identification, plays in shaping our understanding of objects and bodies

(Boyle, 2018; Ching, 2018). Infrastructures are not neutral, and “exert agency over everything from how we communicate to how bodies move” (Frith, 2020, p. 406). Our case examples contribute to understanding data privacy concerns through connectivity in digital infrastructures such as Gather.Town and Instagram to advance advocacy for and against reproductive justice. We specifically focus on examples that assist computers and writing scholars with negotiating privacy concerns in digital spaces, all the while grappling with seeking connectivity. Users seeking connection in digital gaming and social media spaces often navigate tensions between genuine connectivity and sacrifice of privacy. These social spaces of digital connection offer users a feeling of control over their profile, interactions, and information; the reality is that users are not in control of their data privacy—technology companies are. We view technology companies’ role in collecting data as an example of the powerful ways in which surveillance capitalism persists (Zuboff, 2019). The intricacies of the privacy tradeoff and grappling with connectivity contribute to ways that users are involved in the surveillance assemblage. The surveillance assemblage is complex and inextricably tied to privacy and data concerns, lateral surveillance, and consent.²

Joseph Turow, Michael Hennessy, & Nora Draper (2016) for example, indicated that marketers are misrepresenting a large majority of Americans by claiming that Americans give out information about themselves as a tradeoff for benefits they receive (p. 3). To the contrary, the survey reveals most Americans do not believe that ‘data for discounts’ is a square deal. Turow et al. (2016) reported that marketers justify their data-collection practices with the notion of tradeoffs, “depicting an informed public that understands the opportunities and costs of giving up its data and makes the positive decision to do so” (p. 3). For example, a Yahoo report (2014) concluded that online Americans “demonstrate a willingness to share information, as more consumers begin to recognize the value and self-benefit of allowing advertisers to use their data in the right way.” The end goal of this “tradeoff” illusion, according to Turow et al. (2016), is to claim to policymakers and the media that “Americans accept widespread tracking of their backgrounds, behaviors, and lifestyles across devices, even though surveys repeatedly show they object to these activities” (p. 3). The data collected as a tradeoff is inextricably tied to the surveillance assemblage that occurs digitally.

1 A user is a person “who is trying to get something done and has a clear objective in mind” (Rose, 2024, p. 2).

2 Surveillance assemblages operate by “abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings and separating them into a series of discrete flows. These flows are then reassembled into distinct ‘data doubles’ which can be scrutinized and targeted for intervention” (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000, p. 605).

In the assemblage process, groups which were “previously exempt from routine surveillance are now increasingly being monitored” (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000, p. 606). Even before the fall of *Roe*, Maria Novotny and Les Hutchinson (2019) offered critical interrogation of surveillance in technologies, uncovering the tracking of users in women’s health apps. These technologies claim to give users more control over the storage and use of their information and data while at the same time giving third parties access to that data. Since *Roe*, we are seeing an increase in hyper-surveillance of people within states that have banned or severely limited abortion. Though written over two decades ago, Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson’s discussion of privacy’s role in the surveillance assemblage remains relevant to current day: “privacy is now less a line in the sand beyond which transgression is not permitted, than a shifting space of negotiation” (2000, p. 616). We believe that computers and writing scholars can engage in coalitional work in their own practice, but also in the classroom to equip students with the tools to dismantle oppressive digital platform practices that impact material bodies.

Case 1: Trading Privacy for Connection

What follows is a case example of not just the need for increased privacy protection, but also a point of intervention for computers and writing scholars seeking to communicate in digital spaces while also remaining private. Oftentimes privacy and security are terms used interchangeably; in this case example, we urge users to consider the platforms they use and reimagine how to communicate about what it means to be *secure* for consumers to protect their [private] personal information.

Gather.Town, an online space marketed for use to “Communicate, collaborate, and feel more connected in a persistent space that reflects your unique team culture”, was used by technical and professional communication (TPC) graduate students during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 to gamify their work (Gather, 2023). The graduate students were part of the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) Graduate Student Committee. Gamifying workspaces certainly has many benefits; however, there is a greater need for cybersecurity protocols to be addressed when sensitive company information, personal information, and societal implications are at stake in the gamified space. Cybersecurity, though related, is different from data privacy: data privacy “insists on the protection of user data, while cybersecurity requires thorough audit trails” (Mikac, 2022). Cybersecurity is focused on *preventing* security breaches, and in our case examples, is deeply intertwined with data privacy’s decision of *when* and *how* data will be shared with a third-party. We want to focus on such

consequences: that of breaching data, as well as consequences of third-party access just from using a platform.

Despite the usage of this platform for increased connectivity and collaboration, the lines between work and play were blurred. Although the Gather company provides extensive privacy and security reporting, as a graduate student user in the space, there were still extensive lateral surveillance, often referred to as peer-to-peer surveillance, concerns. So, how do we navigate spaces that gamify our work and create connectivity, while simultaneously putting our privacy at risk? The answer is not so straightforward—and surprise—depends on the context.

Joanna Wallace (2022) wrote, for example, that gaming is the largest entertainment industry worldwide, and the COVID-19 “pandemic caused an enormous 26% surge in growth in 2019 and 2021 as users attempted to break up the monotony of lockdowns and stay close to friends and family.” This yearning for closeness can cause users to “trade” values: that is, trade protection of personal information, for personal connection.³ A popular claim is that people do not care about privacy (Banville, 2023, p. 60). Everything is already out there! In reality, people *do* care about their privacy. According to a study by MAGNA Media Trials and Ketch, 74% of people now rank data privacy as one of their top values (Ketch, 2022). There are privacy implications of using Gather.Town for both work and social life, which serves as a case example of the ways graduate students value connectivity over potential privacy invasion and lateral surveillance (Andrejevic, 2007). When using the application, users are able to “Stop by someone’s desk, say hi in the hallway, and bring back water cooler chats. No scheduling required” (Gather, 2023). For example, when TPC graduate students met online, any student could “walk” into a meeting without notice. While it may be noted that Gather has updated their platforms since the initial usage in 2020, such considerations are applicable to any digital space. Gather (2023) now has a protocol where meeting rooms may be locked, chat history “disappears,” doors have passwords, and guests must wait in waiting rooms. Despite Gather touting that they could make the chat history “disappear,” their privacy policy suggests otherwise. While users may believe the history is “gone,” as Gather (2023) suggested, “When all users leave a private area, the chat history will be erased so the next group won’t see your notes,” the privacy policy states, “Gather may store chat messages. When stored, they are encrypted at rest” (Gather Privacy Policy, 2023). Though the messages are encrypted, Gather is still subject to distributing such content of the messages to law enforcement, as well as distribution to third-parties that

3 The privacy paradox refers to the “conflict between individuals express[ing] concern over privacy and their apparent willingness to surrender that privacy in online spaces in exchange for very little of value” (Reilly, 2021, p. 33).

connect to Gather such as “Google Integration, Outlook Integration, Slack Integration” and more.

Regardless of these updates, computers and writing scholars must critically question the dissemination of information in this politically charged time. For example, in the wake of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned, digital spaces are particularly vulnerable for sensitive information to be distributed unknowingly from participants. Since Gather was used as a space for graduate students to connect, commiserate, and collaborate across geographical locations, content that would lead to arrest in some states created heightened anxieties about what information is and could be shared with third-parties.⁴ Though Gather provides information about “cross border data transfers” between the EU/UK, there are not any mentions of how data is *secured* across borders in the United States (2023).

Aside from the lateral surveillance concerns in the space, that is, peer-to-peer surveillance, there are also data privacy implications. According to a 2023 study conducted by Usercentrics, a leading Consent Management Platform (CMP) provider, 90% of mobile games are not in compliance with privacy regulations. This means millions of gamers around the world have no control over how their personal data is collected, stored, and used. As with many systems and applications, games such as Gather.Town are not exempt from complying with the law. Gather.Town may be used as an example for students to discuss compliance protocols; such data collection implemented by the “game” invades privacy further creating vulnerabilities for, in this case, graduate students who are already in precarious positions such as those who are multiply marginalized, international students, first generation, and more.

With such considerations in mind, Gather.Town could be introduced into the TPC and writing classroom space as a tool to use with students, while also carefully critiquing and considering potential privacy and surveillance implications, digital and not. For example, according to Gather’s Data Processing Addendum effective as of November 2023:

4.1. Gather will not disclose Personal Data to any individual or to a third party other than: . . . (iv) as required by applicable law or a valid and binding order of a law enforcement agency. Except as otherwise required by law, Gather will promptly notify Customer of any subpoena, judicial, administrative or arbitral order of an executive or administrative agency or other governmental authority (“Demand”) that it receives, and which relates to the Personal Data.

4 Location map of U.S. state policies on abortion: <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/state-policies-abortion-bans>

The information that would be of particular interest to students, instructors, and practitioners (given the target audience of Gather), is highlighted: Gather “except as otherwise required by law” would notify customers of any law “demand” that they receive. That is, if you are within a state that currently bans abortion, and you discuss such information with a coworker, Gather can share this information with law enforcement. Though Gather does not have any responsibility to interact with whomever is making a demand for information, they also do not say that they won’t interact with them. There has been a significant move for companies, especially menstruation applications, to take a stance regarding the safety and well-being of their consumers. For example, according to Catherine Roberts (2022), the company Period Tracker suggested that it would not comply with a subpoena designed to convict someone for having an abortion. Though it is unclear when Period Tracker published their blog, they wrote: “We would rather close down the company than be an accomplice to this type of government overreach and privacy violation.”

Gather is one of many platforms that companies are using to promote connectivity. Though this is feasible, and certainly did provide a means for connection for TPC graduate students, privacy and security concerns should be addressed and noted. In particular, if instructors wanted to introduce students to critical digital literacies such as privacy, annotating Gather’s Privacy Policy would be a crucial first assignment. From there, instructors could overview “hidden” implications, such as what is suggested in the “Usage, Location and Tracking Cookies” section. Gather could have the most airtight Privacy Policy and Data Processing “Addendum” in the world, but that does not mean the third-parties that have access to consumer information do as well.

Case 2: Trading Privacy for Advocacy

In this case example, we encourage users to be wary of the vulnerable information they share on social media, even in pursuit of social justice movements. Computers and writing scholars are uniquely positioned to think and act critically, rhetorically, and ethically regarding technical documentation such as privacy policies and application settings as well as multimodal and digital communication via technologies such as Instagram. These skills and expertise, paired with a social justice orientation, can position computers and writing scholars as scholar-activists disseminating digital literacies and practices to users for ethical engagement on social media platforms. In doing so, they make visible the embodied experiences tethered to a story, which are often re-experienced by storytellers (Novotny & Gagnon, 2019) as the story circulates. For example, users may not be conscious of the risk to privacy and

security when they share their vulnerable lived experiences on social media in hopes of forwarding the reproductive justice movement.⁵ Deemed by some as #slacktivism, digital engagement with and creation of content for social change has grown as a staple activist practice. Jennifer Nish (2022) cited digital activism as one of many methods needed to successfully pursue social change, not only as a gateway to other activist practices but also as a method with its own benefits for accessing and participating in social justice movements. The wide circulation afforded by Instagram, which seamlessly links to Twitter, Facebook, etc., is indeed a benefit to spreading awareness, informing an audience, and building coalitions. But the uncontrollable rhetorical velocity (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009) of stories of reproductive [in]justice on social media after the fall of *Roe v. Wade*, paired with the ease of remixing content or cross-platform sharing, threaten the privacy of users. In recent cases, these stories have even been used as evidence against individuals engaging in ‘illegal’ abortions (Davis, 2023). Users must be made aware of these potential dangers when asked to share their vulnerable stories by activist organizations or when deciding to do so themselves.

Storytelling has been a method used by reproductive justice activists long before the rise of social media (Silliman et al, 2004). But sharing stories in digital public spaces requires an ethical awareness and digital [privacy] literacy that most users are not taught. For instance, the phrase “My Body, My Choice,” a slogan often chanted in marches for reproductive rights around the globe, has been co-opted by anti-abortion advocates to question a pregnant person’s willingness to impose their control over another “body,” that of an unborn fetus (Savas, 2023). This same tactic was used by advocates against COVID-19 vaccinations to question a pregnant woman’s right, *in this context*, to choose what is done to her body. Once out in the digital public, lived experiences of reproductive injustice are often re-purposed for alternative agendas. For example, a reel that was originally promoting abortion services as reproductive justice can be remixed to stitch in harsh anti-abortionist attacks and can still apply #reproductivejustice as a hashtag.⁶

Policies related to social media are far behind reality. Instagram’s privacy policy is provided by its umbrella company, Meta Platforms, Inc., which also owns Facebook and Messenger, Threads, and WhatsApp. In regard to data, Instagram collects information from users and stores it for a variety of reasons:

5 Reproductive Justice has four main tenets: the right over bodily autonomy, the right to have kids, the right to not have kids, and the right to parent kids in safe and healthy environments (SisterSong, 2023). The movement seeks to center the most marginalized individuals and is multifaceted, intersectional, and coalitional.

6 I intentionally chose not to describe a specific account, story, or person here to avoid further unwanted circulation of an embodied experience of reproductive injustice.

for product promotion, external research, public safety, and more. These policies, which can be only slightly altered by users' account settings, allow for sharing of information with third-parties due to various reasons, including legal requests from third-parties such as civil litigants, law enforcement and other government authorities; applicable law or legitimate legal purposes; and the safety, security and integrity of Meta Companies, Meta Products, users, employees, property and the public (Meta Privacy Policy, 2023). This means that a user's posts, stories, reels, and direct messages are not private, even if their account is marked private. Information about a user's location, device, network, created content, and viewed content could be used to implicate them in perceived criminal activity, such as seeking abortion services in states where abortion is illegal or sharing resources about at-home abortions. It also means that if users have not limited Meta's access to their camera roll – which is not unheard of given the functionality of Instagram as a visual-dominant platform – then Meta could pass along location-related information, time stamps, and content provided via the user's camera roll regardless of whether images have been uploaded to Instagram or not. Additionally, Meta's privacy policy states that it shares information across its products, meaning that something shared in a seemingly private space like Facebook Messenger, such as pregnancy test results, is not private nor secure. Reflecting on “public safety,” it is worth asking: whose perspective on public good or safety is being held as the standard? What are their values, and who might they view as “dangerous” to public safety regarding reproductive health?

Meta's privacy policy is storified in its presentation with inviting images and “highlights” that provide the basics of each section. This structure nests the most pertinent information behind one or more clicks. Individual users and organizations sharing the stories of others should be aware of the potential for risk, invasion of privacy, and/or investigation based on interactions, posts, or messages. Even users who have privacy features activated are vulnerable if they share an experience of reproductive injustice with a friend, organization, reporter, or someone else who then shares it publicly. While it is important to embrace the ways in which stories are intertwined and not necessarily owned solely by any one person, it is also important to recognize the real harms that could come to a person living in a state in which abortions are banned. Recently, the right to contraception has also been under attack (National Women's Law Center, 2024). If it becomes a “public safety issue” to stop women from using certain or all contraceptives, what is to stop law enforcement from requesting data from Instagram to find those breaking that law? The content that users create and interact with on Instagram is not private and could be used to incriminate users for seeking out alternative reproductive health care or services.

Computers and writing instructors who want students to engage with movements such as reproductive justice should approach their pedagogical praxis with care and caution. Despite the “trend” factor of incorporating social media, stories, and digital activism into the classroom, instructors must be wary of how they ask students to interact with, respond to, and/or analyze user content related to reproductive justice. For instance, Danielle Koepke (forthcoming) theorized practices of care to support student engagement with digital activist stories that prioritizes the embodied experiences of storytellers while developing students’ critical digital literacies and ethical awareness of the complications and complexities of digital connectivity. When framed with care, students can learn a lot from these digital and multimodal communication events that will better prepare them for future engagement in their own careers, communities, and digital activism.

Synthesis of Cases: How to Navigate the Privacy-Connectivity Tension

Sites of surveillance, such as our case examples with Gather.Town and Instagram, are emblematic of the surveillance assemblage. David Lyon (2007) mentioned that despite the ubiquity of surveillance technologies, it is important to study specific “sites of surveillance” in order to understand their nuances (p. 25). In our cases, the ways in which our physical body becomes vulnerable is through our identity (through sharing personal information) being distributed through platforms. Our participation in sites such as Gather.Town and Instagram for connectivity renders the body susceptible to systems that seek to further marginalize and harm. We focused on these platforms because they were and are used to communicate potentially compromising information. Thus far we have referenced themes such as trading data privacy for connectivity, as well as the tension between companies taking stances on “safety” and “well-being” of consumers versus the actual decision making of said stances. Let’s envision this:

Marcie is a graduate student in Texas. She is seeking connectivity with fellow students across the nation. Marcie identifies as a cisgender woman, and recently missed her period. The stress of missing a period, as well as the yearning for a support group has led Marcie to seek guidance and support on a social media platform.

In this imagined scenario, Marcie is being surveilled in a variety of ways (both seen and unseen). Perhaps laterally, Marcie’s family noticed that she has been distant: she moved to Texas for the graduate program and has not been

communicating as much. Marcie is part of a vulnerable and precarious population, not just because of her status as a graduate student, but also because she is concerned that she may be pregnant. *Who can she share this concern with?* When Marcie moved to Texas, she was recommended to join a group of fellow graduate students via social media. In the group were some people who had children of their own. Marcie, after weeks of interacting with the group and developing a sense of trust and belonging, disclosed with one of the members that she was afraid she was pregnant. This disclosure, however, is not private; it can be passed along to third parties. Abortion is completely banned in Texas because of a state law that went into effect July 1, 2022. Individuals can travel out of state to get an abortion, if they have access. Marcie doesn't have transportation, though. The exceptions that may allow individuals to get an abortion in Texas include: "to save the pregnant person's life and to prevent serious risk to the pregnant person's physical health" (Abortion Finder, 2024).

As a nation, we have seen the effects of people assisting or even knowing about someone having an abortion. Take for example the case in Texas, where an ex-husband made a "Rule 202" request — "a filing that usually precedes a lawsuit when illegal activity is suspected. If approved, the court could allow the man to seek documents related to the alleged procedure and order the woman and others accused of helping her to sit for depositions" (Coronado, 2024). As the article suggests, the Texas abortion ban provides for enforcement either through "a private civil action or under the state's criminal statutes," meaning that those involved could be punishable by up to life in prison for anyone held responsible for helping a woman obtain an abortion (Coronado, 2024).

Marcie is at risk of facing a legal battle due to the surveillance assemblage she is part of. All messages that she shared in a seemingly private space are subject to training the social media platform's AI, as well as being shared with law enforcement. Because historically excluded populations are expected to do more emotional labor within the white capitalist heteropatriarchal society that we live in (hooks, 1984), these populations seek relief through community, often through virtual connection. They may also feel a responsibility to share or disclose, to help someone else similar to them avoid, in this case, lack of access to care, accidental pregnancy, and so forth. Imagine that the woman Marcie shared her concerns with accidentally left her computer open. Her partner saw the conversation, and reported suspicion that Marcie might try to have an abortion to local authorities. *What should Marcie do?*

We put a lot of responsibility onto individual people when technology companies should be held accountable for the ways they collect and distribute data. While we can, and will, give some broad guidance for what users can do, we believe that it is fruitless without a collective effort. Public pressure does lead to change. Take for example, the period trackers that store data locally

and don't allow third-party tracking—Drip, Euki, and Periodical (Roberts, 2022). Without sharing this information or urging applications and platforms to reimagine what it means to protect users, those seeking to track menstruation in states currently banning abortion might believe that there is only one solution: don't track at all. We can still connect, and we can still support reproductive justice efforts, but not without a critical approach to data privacy. So, in your next meeting, perhaps suggest an application who focuses on protecting the users, rather than opting into the majority vote or “most popular” platform (broadly speaking). Small acts of resistance can lead to larger forms of activism (Banville, forthcoming).

Conclusion: So, what do we do now?

Since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, the use of stories to advance advocacy for and against reproductive justice has risen. Such politicized events contribute to an added layer of precarity for already-vulnerable populations who are subjugated to hyper-surveillance. The hyper-surveillance, in this example, occurs geographically and digitally, requiring individuals to trade their privacy for connectivity. Computers and writing scholars can play an important role in digital activism for the reproductive justice movement through careful circulation of and honorable engagement with stories. However, each individual must know their own potential risks, such as those imposed by university policies. For instance, many public universities can request content from emails, learning management systems, and research-related work. This calls into question our role as scholar-activists, as we may end up doing more harm than good for those most impacted by injustice. It is essential to carefully negotiate how we can best support digital activist work without co-opting it in the classroom, in our research and writing, or through our ties to the university. Privacy is a human right, but it is not an individual responsibility; it is a collective one. This work calls for coalitional approaches across designers, researchers, instructors, graduate students, and community members.

Let's return to our initial question: how do computers and writing scholars navigate spaces that gamify our work and create connectivity, while simultaneously putting our privacy at risk? We suggest computers and writing scholars use their technical skills and expertise to demystify privacy policies and what happens with data collected through gaming and social media apps while also seeking out more secure methods for connectivity. Though we have not used the services ourselves, it is said that Kumospace is a feasible option to use as a messaging, meeting, and gathering space. According to Kumospace privacy policy (<https://www.kumospace.com/privacy>), the company is fully Service Organization Control Type 2 (SOC 2), Health Insurance

Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) compliant. There are drawbacks, including that the free version is limited to five users. Users could also download a virtual private network (VPN) such as Windscribe or a similar tool: this certainly does not solve the platform precarity of games and apps such as Gather.Town. and Instagram, however, it does add a layer of potential protection. Downloading a VPN unfortunately puts the onus on the individual, instead of a collective approach towards privacy. For scholar-activists, some have found higher levels of security and control on Discord (<https://discord.com>); however, their privacy policies are something to be wary of as well. There just does not seem to be a perfect, secure, system. And perhaps that's what we need from future computers and writing scholars.

As instructors, we can advocate for a critical awareness towards implementation of applications, technologies, and platforms within and outside of the classroom space. Our second question asked: How can, or should, computers and writing scholars support digital activist projects for reproductive justice while also negotiating issues of privacy and data collection? We believe that computers and writing scholars should critically engage with digital advocacy stories and the privacy invasion embodied by storytellers. To attend to this call, advocacy can begin in the classroom space and through our roles as computers and writing scholars in the design process. It is crucial to communicate or translate potential dangers of data privacy collection: to do so, we can raise awareness by being advocates in our individual spaces, as well as through the digital platforms we have access to (ironic, right?). Banville (2023) argued that due to recent shifts in surveillance technologies, scholars and instructors in computers and writing must call attention to and explore technological ethics including “describing how data and information are collected, who has a right to privacy and why, and communication exchanges between employer/employee and the public,” such as through applications like Gather.Town and Instagram (p. 310). In our roles—from instructor, to student, to administrator, and more—we can intervene in the tradeoff fallacy through the creation and design of materials that communicate transparently (through localizing knowledge) about privacy, data, and surveillance concerns as they relate to the platforms we choose to use and incorporate in our everyday.

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Coding with Flavor: Combining Foodways Research and Inclusive Design to Teach Empathy in a Digital Composing Course

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Combining food pedagogies, which examine how power, authority, and expertise are intertwined with gender, race, politics, and class (Alvarez, 2017; Flowers & Swan, 2018; Julier, 2019; Zeide, 2023), this article explores using empathy to teach students how to create accessible, digital foodways research projects and explicates how students reacted to a pedagogical approach that encouraged guided self-teaching (Lawrence, 2022) and asked them to “reimagine what it means to program and write code” (Quigley, 2022). Students took an inclusive design approach (Horton & Quesenbery, 2013) and applied design thinking (Tham, 2021) to use GitHub Codespaces to learn basic HTML, build websites, and create food texts as they considered what it means to write in a digital environment.

Welcome to ENG 388: Writing for the Web!

What’s your favorite food? Where does it originate? What is the most popular food on campus? In Illinois? These are the questions I asked Western Illinois University (WIU) students in the syllabus for ENG 388: Writing for the Web. The syllabus informed students that we’d explore these questions, among others, while learning basic HTML to build websites and create food-themed digital texts.¹ The focus on food pedagogically sought to provide a way to learn, as Rick Flowers and Elaine Swan (2015) said, “about the Other, about our selves [sic], our food producers, and the animals and plants which are our food” (p. 19). Although the course’s learning outcomes prioritize creating digital content—from social media posts to a small, multipage website—the projects were grounded in food research because it is an entry point into seeing food as a memory object used to represent people across places and time.

By studying foodways, we moved beyond our institution to critically examine how food defines local and global communities. WIU is a medium-sized

¹ The course materials (syllabus, assignment sheets, and student examples) are accessible via GitHub (<https://github.com/am-beardsley/eng-388>). You can view and download materials there or access the live website to see course content and student projects.

public university in the small Midwest city of Macomb, Illinois, and Writing for the Web is a course in our Professional Writing (PW) option. Students majoring or minoring in professional writing can choose to take it to fulfill their PW requirements. In Fall 2023, Writing for the Web was the only PW course option beyond Technical Communication, a required course for PW folks. I've provided some context about the program here to give a bit of background about the 10 students who took the course. In addition to being English majors, none of the students had any prior coding knowledge, and only four took Technical Communication with me.

This article gives you a taste of how foodways informed Writing for the Web. I discuss what I learned using Stephen Quigley's (2022) Open Fuego tool and open-source coding platforms in this 300-level professional writing course. First, I go over how I used foodways to frame the course and highlight the research questions and the semester's central project goal. Next, I overview the assignment sequence and how I incorporated design thinking. Then, I describe GitHub Codespaces, the open-source code editor we used, and share our experience using Codespaces as the primary course tool. I conclude with a brief reflection on what I plan to change the next time I teach students HTML and CSS. In doing so, I hope to encourage readers to take on foodways research in digital writing courses and use open-source tools to teach coding.

Course Topic: Foodways Research

During the first week of classes, I introduced food studies and foodways research as the course focus. According to Alice Julier (2019), food studies is “the academic practice and teaching about food, agriculture, food systems, and food culture” (p. 21). I explained that the digital content we'd create falls under food studies and that we'd examine foodways—food's cultural, social, and political components. Although students were unaware they'd have to write about food when they registered for the course, grounding our projects in foodways research took some pressure off topic selection so students could focus on building technical skills. Everyone has something they can say about food. In this way, a foodways approach facilitates a sense of expertise for writers. They start by researching something they know about food and become experts in the ways that topic impacts culture. As you'll see in the next section on assignments, leaning into food expertise meant that students wrote the content for their websites first, so the whole third unit focused on revising their writing and coding websites.

When choosing topics, I directed students to consider the implications connected to a food or food-adjacent topic and critically examine what Peter

Naccarato and Kathleen Lebesco (2012) define as culinary capital, which is the status and power conveyed through food and practices such as cooking, eating, and buying ingredients (p. 3). There were four central research questions based on Julier’s work that students set out to explore in their projects:

- How is food “part of a larger system”?
- “In what ways is that system shaped by conflicting or consensual economic, social, material, and cultural goals?”
- Who benefits from the system?
- And “How is power—and inequality generally—inscribed in these skills, practices, ways of organizing sustenance and social life?” (p. 23)

Through spending the semester conducting foodways research, our goal was to examine food and power and use food to tell stories. Foodways, according to Stephen Alvarez (2017), take culinary practices (e.g., how we cook) and the foods we eat “as social research that intersects with public advocacy” (p. 151). We began with our eating habits to learn more about food’s social, cultural, and political ingredients to write content that would teach visitors of our websites about a food-related belief or practice. While reading Anna Zeide’s (2023) *US History in 15 Foods*, students began working with food as a cultural tool by researching where their favorite food comes from. They found what Carrie Helms Tippen (2018) refers to as recipe origin narratives, stories about where foods originated and by whom—what restaurant, group, or individual (p. 11). They searched for the food’s origin (country, state, and city), investigated when the food was invented and what was happening around the world to begin crafting context, considered who was credited with inventing or popularizing the food, and found several recipes online to explore ingredients and modifications. Their initial foray into researching their favorite food prompted them to critically examine food stories and laid the foundation to move into the course’s three major projects: creating accessible content for Instagram, writing short and long-form blog posts, and coding a website to feature their writing.

Applying Foodways and Design Thinking to Build Assignments

Writing for the Web consisted of three projects, which made up our semester-long study to examine food’s connections to social life, culture, politics, and power and how food constructs gender, race, ethnicity, and location as it converges to create identities. In this section, I provide a brief overview of each major assignment and how they apply design thinking—primarily empathize, prototype, and test—to students’ writing and web design.

As I planned the course, I used design thinking to determine how to scaffold assignments that built into students' final hand-coded websites. According to Jason Tham (2021), "Design thinking is a combination of a methodology and mindset for innovative problem solving" that takes a recursive approach (p. 8). By incorporating empathizing with the ways users engage content, prototyping initial designs by having informal discussions about works-in-progress, and testing websites throughout the building process, students embraced recursivity to implement feedback into writing content for and designing their final websites.

Although design thinking played a role in my overall course design to implement opportunities for students to problem-solve and collaborate (Tham, 2021, p. 18), I opted not to use the term. Even though most students take Technical Communication before Writing for the Web, the course content varies depending on the instructor. When I teach Technical Communication, students learn about design thinking and user-centered design; however, six of the ten students took Technical Communication before I started at Western, so they didn't have the same pre-existing knowledge as some of their peers. To account for this, I tried to keep jargon to a minimum and focused on teaching inclusive design strategies by implementing design thinking's phases (empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test) into our project scaffolding.

Across our projects, empathy was a key ingredient. Each project asked students to consider what users need to engage their content. Project 1: Storytelling on Social Media tasked students with exploring project ideas by creating Instagram posts to introduce them to accessibility practices like writing alt text. Instead of writing a formal topic proposal, students pitched their semester-long research project by optimizing their Instagram profile (Figure 3.1). Students' profile pictures reflected their topic, and bios included their food-related interests, a link to their favorite local restaurant or café or food content, a call to action with a link to a food-related initiative, and the class hashtag (#ENG388) to ensure we could find each other's work.



Figure 3.1. The Instagram bio for Writing for the Web student Jamariah. They signal their topic choice (barbecue food) and indicate their project might make connections between barbecue and Chicago foodways.

Although simple additions to an Instagram profile, such optimizations required students to consider their audience from the beginning by asking, “What does my profile communicate to users, and how does it reinforce the political, cultural, and social elements of my foodways research project?”

With empathy in mind, the central purposes behind Project 1 were to learn about creating accessible digital content (specifically, writing alt text and visual hierarchy) and practicing design thinking by employing ideation to explore foodways topics before finalizing their research focus, prototyping their ideas by making Instagram post mock-ups, testing their prototypes by workshoping posts with their peers, and making necessary revisions based on how their users, in this case, their workshop partners, interacted with their content before posting. Applying design thinking, we discussed and implemented a recursive process relying on self-teaching. Using Dan Lawrence’s (2022) *Digital Writing: A Guide to Writing for Social Media and the Web*, we emphasized that self-teaching is “the most important skill for any professional” and that they’d need to be patient and resourceful later in the semester when we dove into HTML and CSS (pp. 42–43). Additionally, I wanted to emphasize that we would, especially when it came time to code a website, experience failure. I was reminded that design thinking is “about going back and learning and thinking, a recognition of failure and revision as a natural and expected part of creation” (Purdy qtd. in Pope-Ruark, 2019, p. 441). With empathy and recursivity in mind, our image-driven content focused on accessibility using Disability:IN’s (2022) accessible social media guidelines (Figure 3.2).

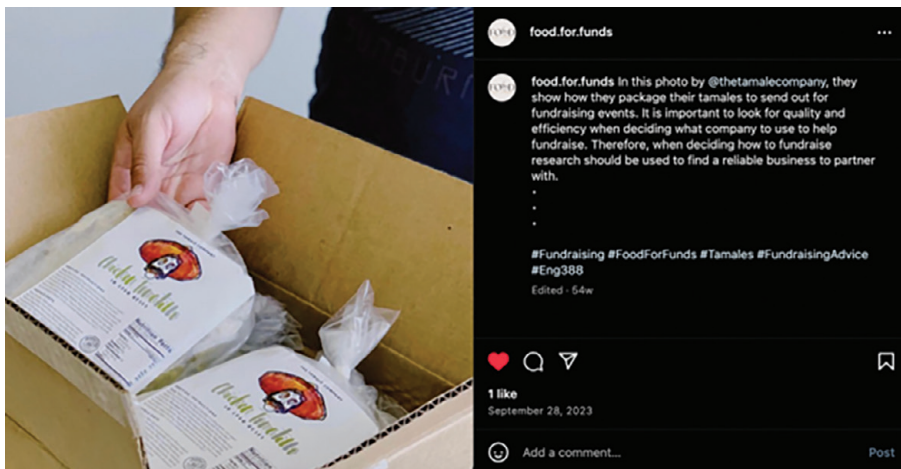


Figure 3. 2. @food.for.funds shared an accessible social media post that briefly describes what’s happening in the image, uses camel case for the hashtags, and chooses not to use emojis to ensure the information isn’t obscured by a screen reader.

Additionally, we needed to discuss alt text because even though Instagram users can add it to their posts, it is not easily viewable. In 2023, accessing alt text on a post required the user to inspect the webpage and view the post's source code in a browser.² Therefore, students included a project memo alongside their Instagram posts that provided quick access to and demonstrated students' understanding of alt text.

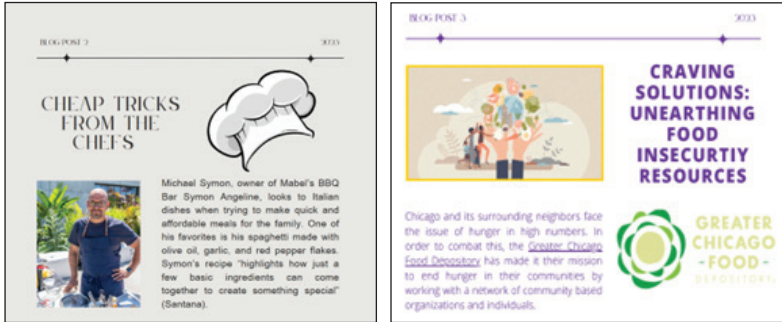


Figure 3. Madison's second blog post prototype (left) featured celebrity chefs who, in addition to Michelin Star quality food, provide followers with recipes for simple, affordable meals. After workshop, Madison applied WIU's Brand Guidelines to format a post on her new topic: food insecurity in Illinois.

As we moved into Project 2: Content Creation and Initial Website Design, we continued this recursive approach to prototyping websites rhetorically designed to fit the writer's content. Project 2's purpose was to research foodways and draft eight blog posts to generate content for their website. I provided a list of topic ideas—origin story, important chefs/cooks/scholars, media and your topic, gender-race-class politics, misconceptions and racial stereotypes, rewriting history, and defining community—and their final blog post required them to expand their ideas from posts one through seven to present their foodways research as a whole (am-beardsley, n.d.-a). They drafted blog posts and used Canva to test initial design concepts. Through workshoping their content and blog post layout, students played with and discussed accessible design like image placement, font style, size, and color and text alignment, which furthered their understanding of foodways. Initially, Madison's foodways research focused on the history and affordability of Cajun chicken pasta, one of her favorite dishes. But after our first workshop, she grew

2 The inaccessibility of alt text was still true when this article was written. Although users can enable "accessibility and translations," alt text was not included as a feature. Threads, Instagram's text-driven platform, includes automatically generated, editable alt text for all images, and users can enable the alt text feature via the accessibility tab (Meta, 2023). Because of its textual focus, we did not discuss Threads; however, one modification for future iterations of this class will include comparing platforms' accessibility.

more interested in the cost of food and food insecurity in Illinois, taking on a foodways research project that combined food and public advocacy to collect resources for audiences experiencing or working to combat food insecurity (Figure 3.4). Through blog post prompts that tasked students with empathizing to understand food and communities, prototyping, and testing, Madison discovered how food fits into her passion for community advocacy. Her work is just one example of how foodways and design thinking are interconnected.

For Project 3: Digital Portfolio – Hand-Coded Website, the final deliverable, students revised six blog posts and followed an inclusive design strategy that utilized simple design, arranged content logically, supported accessibility through self-explanatory wayfinding options, included alt text for all images, and had captions and transcripts as needed (Horton & Quesenberry, 2013). They created a multi-page website by modifying a website template. Although revising blog posts often meant conducting additional research, by Project 3, most of our foodways research was done, and it was time to apply the semester-long conversation about accessible design to website building. With foodway’s emphasis on the interconnection of food and public advocacy, our time researching food’s political, social, and cultural components prepared us to continue designing with accessibility at the forefront.

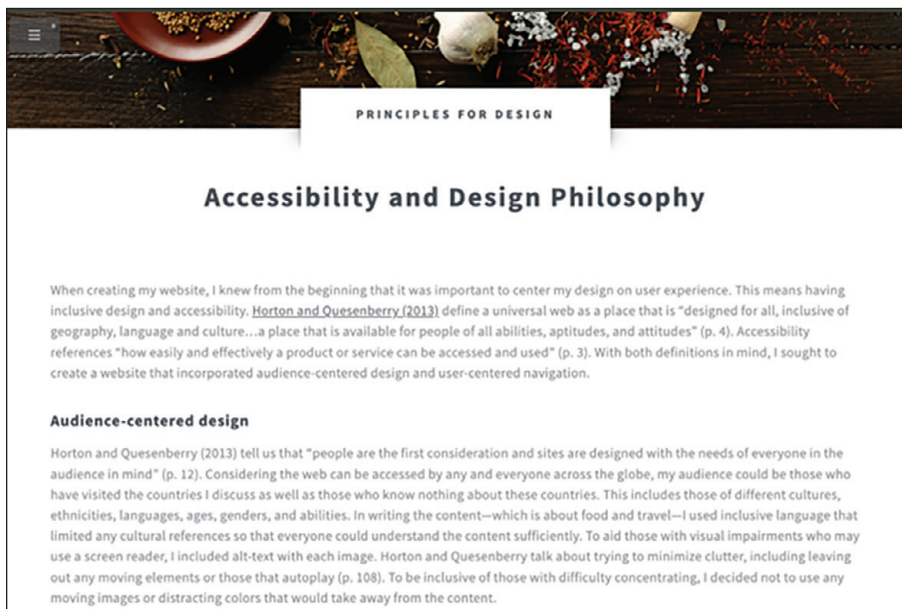


Figure 3.4. Emma’s foodways research and website brought food and culture to the forefront through content and design. Her website’s header used a map of the continents filled in with spices and grains. The image reflects Emma’s food and travel blog posts while implementing a simple design.

Throughout all the projects, students reflected on how accessibility informed their content. Project 3 required them to write a statement that articulated how their design reflected their audience's needs and explained inclusive design (am-beardsley, n.d.-b). In Emma's accessibility and design philosophy, she expressed how audience-centered design and user-centered navigation informed her website (Figure 4). By writing the content, creating multiple prototypes, and testing design features during workshop, our design thinking approach embraced iterative design throughout the semester, prioritizing the user's experience. Overall, focusing on foodways across all projects encouraged students to think critically about the way they engage with two things that seem relatively commonplace: food and the Internet. Content drafted, we were ready to move into the *how* of web design.

GitHub Codespaces: Let the Coding Begin!

"Instead of beginning with writing code," said Stephen Quigley (2022), "perhaps we should start by reading it. Just as we introduce children to the sounds of language, we might begin by learning to listen to what the code is doing and saying." This was the approach I took, with a few additions, to introducing English majors to code because jumping into reading embraced design thinking in a way that gave students the space to succeed, fail, and learn to use their failures to move their projects forward. To provide some coding background, students first read about HTML and CSS. I assigned a chapter from Sarah Horton and Whitney Quesenbery's (2013) *A Web for Everyone: Designing Accessible User Experiences* that covered coding structure, defined essential HTML elements like tags and headings, and introduced the importance of stylesheets (pp. 49–64). Second, Quigley's (n.d.) Open Fuego instructions direct readers to download Brackets or Notepad++. While both code editors are free, open-source tools, I was concerned that students wouldn't have consistent access to the same laptop. I wanted to make sure they had access to their work wherever they were coding from, so I looked for a cloud-based alternative.

We used GitHub Codespaces, an instant cloud development environment, and had two classes dedicated to learning by reading and playing with code. The Codespaces editor uses a VS Code web client, so I felt comfortable introducing students to it because VS Code is my chosen editor. To get started, I directed students to the repository I made based on Quigley's (n.d.) Open Fuego index.html page (am-beardsley, n.d.-c). Then, I turned on a low-fi beats playlist and let them begin. Despite the chill music, the atmosphere in the room was panic-ridden. As they worked through the instructions in the index.html file, they grew frustrated when they couldn't figure it out

immediately. Incorporating design thinking's recursivity, we always closed class with a discussion board post reflecting on our work and what we still needed to do to keep track of our projects. Their reflections, which we used to redefine concepts and answer how we could move forward next class (Tham, 2021, p. 10), captured their experience.

One student said:³

Today, I honestly haven't learned anything. I was thrown into a new world with an entirely new language that I didn't understand. I thought I followed the instructions well, but nothing was working and I had to scrap everything multiple times. I still don't have a working webpage, nor do I have a clue on where to restart. I can't even figure out how to add a link to what probably doesn't exist. *This feels really defeating and a huge blow to morale at the end of my school day* (Beardsley, 2023a, emphasis added)

I was crushed. I immediately began questioning if I was failing them as a teacher. What would I do if students couldn't create websites and produce a final project? Feeling defeated, I kept reading reflections.

Another student said:

This has been a whole new experience for me, which was overwhelming at times. But overall, I am learning a lot and I know these skills are invaluable in the professional writing realm. I was able to get to the point of writing content for the page, but I still have things I'm unsure of. I found several things challenging, but one thing I still have questions about is how to insert photos into the code and change fonts. I learned that with coding, you cannot have typos and you have to know where to type the code so that it works correctly.

Overall, this student's response isn't too negative. They could see why we embarked on this project and noted that they needed to review the instructions regarding images and font color, indicating they knew the information was there. However, I still felt I'd made a substantial pedagogical blunder.

Returning to the course's foundation in design thinking, I realized that I, too, needed to embrace failure and use empathy to understand students' experiences as captured via the discussion board. Focusing on their needs, I reworked the next class's lesson plan and added a frequently asked questions and common

3 Thank you to the students who gave permission to be anonymously quoted.

errors section based on their struggles with the coding instructions. Before day two of what became fondly referred to as coding chaos, we started class with a what-do-you-know-about-coding freewrite. Students took five minutes to list everything they knew about HTML and CSS. I wanted them to see that they knew things. They defined elements like hero images and knew that HTML files begin with `<!DOCTYPE html>` followed by the language. The reflective approach I took to starting this class was informed by design thinking in that it embraced leaning into a perceived moment of failure—the struggle felt during coding day one—and highlighted what students knew about coding to show their success and empower them to apply their knowledge in response to the problem of coding. We were off to a better start. With everyone slightly more confident, I took them back to the repository with the instructions to show them the FAQ & Common Errors addition to the README file (am-beardsley, n.d.-d). I wrote the content based on what I saw them struggling with during the previous class, the conversations I had while helping, and the struggles they mentioned in their discussion post. The FAQs covered adding files to a GitHub repository, opening Codespaces, what a tag is used for, and how to open a port to view their website. Then, they partnered up.

They showed their partner what they had so far and asked them to help troubleshoot the issues they ran into last class, embracing collaborative problem-solving. Overall, their end-of-class reflections were much less abysmal.

Again, I ran into several small challenges, but today was definitely better than Tuesday. My main struggle for today was trying to figure out how to change the width/height of images within the code so that they gel well on my site. This is still something I need to research/play around with. We helped each other here and there with things such as how to insert images into code,” said the second student (Beardsley, 2023b)

And even the previously defeated student felt better:

On Tuesday, we were thrown into the deepest abyss of coding in a 300-level English class with cinder blocks around our feet. I was having problems opening my site in another browser, but my partner figured out that we needed to drag the unzipped files into our photos file and it all finally displayed...I’m attempting to make small changes to percentages and text before doing anything drastic.

They emphasized how they helped each other problem-solve, which was exactly where I wanted them to be as they embarked on building their websites and saw that testing changes was a good way to see how the code responded.

Final Thoughts

When I began learning to code, my professor had us use a basic text editor and learn by writing. We, those of us taking ENGL 5133: Teaching Technical Writing, wrote that iconic first line of code: `<p>Hello, World!</p>`. Although we started by writing instead of reading, the atmosphere in the room was much like what I experienced with my students. The difference was we learned some code as graduate students interested in teaching tech writing with a user-centered design focus, while I expected my undergraduate students to go on and make a functional, multi-page website. Despite early frustrations and feelings of defeat, it was amazing to see the progress everyone made for their final websites. But one thing I didn't mention at the beginning of this article was that this was the first time I taught coding. So, what did I learn by giving students assignments where they had to problem-solve using an unfamiliar language and embrace self-teaching and failure? And how did I ultimately see foodways connected to coding? I learned I'd continue using Stephen Quigley's (2022) Open Fuego method and implement reading code as the first step, but I have four modifications to the course overall:

Teach design thinking's five phases (empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test) and be transparent about their connection to our recursive process.

I chose not to include these terms in the course because I didn't want students to feel like Writing for the Web simply repeated what they learned in Technical Communication; however, reviewing the terms would only strengthen their understanding while other students would more explicitly learn how to apply design thinking.

Introduce HTML and coding earlier in the semester.

Students were familiar enough with social media that Project 1, which required them to apply empathy to create Instagram posts, was pretty simple. By learning HTML earlier in the semester, students will have more time to implement the recursive design process and usability test their website.

Develop a set of class templates to decrease the mental labor needed to simultaneously review 10 unique websites.

I introduced HTML5 templates and encouraged them to have ChatGPT create the initial HTML and CSS, but they opted to use HTML5 UP templates. I assumed most of them would use the about me pages they created as a starting point; however, only one student chose that option (ecortelyou, n.d.). While this choice wasn't terrible, it meant I had to move between different

templates and re-orient myself each time a student asked a question. Currently, I'm modifying a few HTML5 UP templates to build a class set that students will use so that when I *do* need to step in and assist, I know more about the code they're working with.

Build in more in-class coding and mini-website review days to foster collaborative problem-solving.

We had a fair amount of in-class work time, but incorporating more days where we're in the same room reading and writing code will give us more opportunities to fail (and succeed) together.

To that end, having students conduct foodways research while learning how to code embraced the ways that both food and web design are connected to public advocacy. Students explored how the two come together to rhetorically construct public-facing texts examining how food and design are connected to power. By combining foodways and design thinking, students foster greater empathy for themselves and the users who interact with their work.

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Roll\$20: Economies of Labor in Online Role-Playing Games

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Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs) exploded in popularity during the COVID pandemic. This is in large part due to the proliferation of online tools such as Virtual TableTop services (VTTs)—audio-visual conferencing software that digitally recreates pen-and-paper games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. These services are marketed as time-saving measures for gamemasters (GMs), but in actuality, VTTs request additional labor from GMs, who must learn the intricacies of their chosen service and navigate digital barriers of access and ability. This labor compounds the already present tasks of managing player expectations and desires, of creating interesting stories and adventures to play, and of making visual aids like handouts and battle maps to give shape to the game’s abstract concepts. Additionally, the increased visibility of TTRPG play via streaming, podcasts, and online video can skew perceptions of what role-playing is or should be. Although some role-playing games have put forth their own solutions to easing the GM’s burden, special attention must be made to the ways the digital turn in TRPGs encourages a further stratification of play, labor, and imaginative worlds.

In many tabletop role-playing games, one player volunteers to be the game’s referee, overseeing the chosen rules of play in addition to ensuring that the other players—tasked with maintaining a single character—can engage with their shared storyworld by performing as helpful townsfolk, villainous minions, and other non-player characters. This is on top of other responsibilities that regularly come with the role of gamemaster, including (but not limited to): purchasing miniatures and props for combat encounters, painting and modifying said props, hosting gatherings at their home or working with a third-party to secure a play space, settling out-of-game disputes between players, preparing or purchasing food for players to eat, curating a pre-made adventure or creating an original story for the players to participate in, and acquiring and memorizing multiple rulebooks to address player questions and rules conflicts.¹ This work reflects Julian Kücklich’s conception of “playbor,”

1 The term “gamemaster” will be used as a catch-all for the player assigned this role; however, various games will introduce their own terminology to further establish this player’s relationship to the rest of the table. *Dungeons & Dragons*, for example, uses the widely used “Dungeon Master” title to refer to the upkeep and creation of dungeons for players to explore and loot, while *Cyberpunk RED* alternates between Gamemaster and Referee to highlight the

wherein players volunteer their time and energy as unpaid labor within structures recognizable as play yet still produce some benefit (Kücklich, 2005). Playbor builds on Tiziana Terranova's concept of "free labor," which describes the paradoxical nature of "productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited," but motions towards the ways games can appear to be un-productive through their players' joy in play (Terranova, 2000). Because of the immense labor involved in the role of gamemaster, many players simply refuse to take on the role either due to a fear of inadequacy or to relish the comparatively lighter workload of playing a single character. Despite this, other players take to the role of gamemaster happily, as it allows for greater creative freedom and can provide personal satisfaction if the other players become emotionally involved with the evolving story.

Despite this labor disparity, role-playing games have rapidly grown in popularity since the release of the fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Dungeon Master's Guide, 2014). One part of this growth has been the creation of Virtual TableTop services (VTTs) like Roll20, D&D Beyond, and Foundry, wherein players can create characters, play on digital game boards, and incorporate a variety of software to streamline dice rolls and rules queries. While each service offers unique perks and capabilities, the primary draw of VTTs remains the ability to play tabletop role-playing games with people from around the world. As role-playing remains a niche hobby, VTTs enable players in rural areas or those who lack an interested local network to try new rule systems, meet up with friends, and create memorable stories without needing to gather around a physical table. This proved vital for many players as COVID-19 shut down many in-person gatherings. Through VTTs and other software like Discord and Zoom, players could navigate the pandemic by constantly socializing with peers, maintaining their social skills, and experimenting with their identity (Allison, 2021; Proudman, 2021). Additionally, gamemasters who have crafted intricate storyworlds for their players to build upon through play can either use a virtual tabletop as a repository for their work or publish their writing as a supplement via online marketplaces like DriveThruRPG or Dungeon Masters Guild. This ability to self-publish their narrative settings and creative twists to popular adventures could also help recoup some of the costs of play while encouraging gamemasters to engage in something akin to a gift economy, wherein they use the proceeds of their work to purchase the work of other gamemasters (Scott, 2019). Continuing on that notion, a playgroup may decide to broadcast their play sessions as Actual Plays, which demonstrate both the collective narrative of the table and the moment-to-moment gameplay that helps to define whether efforts to change

player's purpose of settling rule disputes in addition to running the game.

the story are successful; to accomplish this, players may turn to podcasting and audio recording, Twitch or other streaming services, and YouTube as a video repository.

Yet, this push for online play is not without its drawbacks. VTTs promise “powerful tools to automate the tedious stuff,” yet in doing so, tabletop role-playing is made more inaccessible by gating those automations behind additional purchases, requiring gamemasters and players to develop literacy in their chosen software, and placing the entire genre of role-playing in direct comparison to video gaming through the use of graphical engines and purchasable art assets (Roll20, 2024). DriveThruRPG has come under fire for unfairly removing queer content from its marketplace and thus limiting its reach (Hoffer, 2020). And the overwhelming popularity of Actual Plays like *Critical Role* has caused some players to either push for or lament against the professionalization of the hobby. In this article, I will examine notable discourses surrounding the labor economy of online tabletop role-playing games, analyze the digital tools and marketplaces introduced as aids for casual play, and connect these developments to both the professionalization of play and how the labors of tabletop role-players should be counted.

Imbalanced Play

Tabletop role-playing games that designate a gamemaster present an imbalance of power and of labor by their very nature. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* for the fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* describes the gamemaster as simultaneously the “Master of Worlds,” “Master of Adventures,” and “Master of Rules;” in so doing, the rulebook claims that gamemasters are “in charge of the game,” yet they must keep players “coming back for more” by sacrificing their personal enjoyment for the group’s collective benefit (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, 2014). This dual identity—as master of the in-game universe and servant of the table—often leads to players forgoing the role entirely. In a post to the r/rpg subreddit, u/MercSapient describes how the massive popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons* in recent years has led to a labor crisis, wherein players are unable to find gamemasters who will “run the game, remember all the rules, host, coordinate scheduling, coordinate the inevitable rescheduling when [one] or more of the players (*sic*) flakes, etc.,” adding that they “chafe under the expectation that I need to do all of this or the group will instantly collapse (which HAS happened to me)” (u/MercSapient, 2022). The comments on this post reflect the general attitudes of gamemasters to their labor, with some lamenting how “D&D has players desperate to find a GM, most other games have GMs desperate to find players” and that “DM'ing is mostly, never, casual. So you have a bunch of players who . . . Show up and

expect entertainment.” In other words, the act of running a TTRPG session is viewed as a thankless job performed at the expense of gamemasters to the point where common parlance often refer to playgroups as players and gamemasters—a separation of those who “play” and those who labor.

This conflation of play and labor—playbor—is built into the fabric of the TRPG. Every player at the table is expected to create interesting characters using the framework of their chosen game and to use those characters to explore a jointly constructed storyworld. Yet the bulk of the storyworld is developed by the gamemaster, who must embody everything from a bookstore clerk to the villain’s enchanted suitcase. Compared to the dozens or hundreds of characters a gamemaster must keep track of, other players are only tasked with a singular character’s performance. Though TRPGs often include pre-written adventures or characters for the gamemaster to utilize at home, these are exclusively leveraged towards gamemasters’ eyes only to prevent the campaign from being “spoiled.” In fact, if players have experienced an adventure before, gamemasters are often encouraged to radically alter the narrative flow and characters to keep things entertaining and surprising. One article even encourages gamemasters to combine two different campaigns together to “end up with a custom weaved adventure that nobody could predict” (Heinz, 2019). This emphasis on creating bespoke adventures operates as part of a gift economy, where players give their free time and rapt attention in exchange for a gamemaster’s homespun tales of action, glory, and pathos. This gift economy works in the TTRPG developers’ favor, as gamemasters can “capitalize on significant free labour by fans modding, extending, improving, translating, or advocating for a game without formal recognition, let alone payment” (MacCallum-Stewart & Trammell, 2018). In short, the work that players perform as a part of their practice of play is not often recognized *as* labor by themselves or by others, even if that labor is integral to both the function of TTRPG play and the industry that profits from their playbor.

This labor is made even more visible with the rise of professional gamemasters, who take all the unpaid playbor of the hobby and assign monetary value to their time and efforts as part of a movement to recoup the opportunity costs of play. Because players outnumber gamemasters at the table as many as six-to-one, this professionalization is seen as a market solution to connect players who desire high quality play. Reporting on the growing field of professional TTRPG play, Henry Solotaroff-Webber (2022) found that many players became gamemasters-for-hire at local game stores like Hex & Co. “where players pay the store \$90 per month for four sessions, and the proceeds are split between the store and DM.” This arrangement grants gamemasters the opportunity to craft new adventures, engage in other aspects of the hobby like miniature painting, and reinvest their newfound funds back into their

TTRPG of choice. It should also not be overlooked that developer/publishers like Wizards of the Coast and Paizo (of *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder*, respectively) have developed frameworks for organized play at local game stores that are designed to standardize the play experience and, as a result, set a standard for professionals to build from (Bernier, 2024; Paizo, 2024). As professional gamemaster Lauren Bilanko argued, “I look at it that professional DMing is becoming a professional freelance artist, and there needs to be support around it” (Solotaroff-Webber, 2022).

Alternatively, those looking to monetize their role-playing can turn to creating an Actual Play series such as *Critical Role*, *Dimension 20*, or *Dice Funk*—using the rules and structure of tabletop as a basis for an ongoing, heavily improvised narrative experience. These play sessions can take the form of livestreamed adventures as the audience watches in real time, recorded sessions that are very lightly edited for uploading onto YouTube or as a podcast, or tightly edited and directed experiences. The randomized elements of TTRPG gameplay can thus combine with infectious personalities and polished acting in myriad ways, resulting in no two actual plays being alike—even if they play through the same pre-written adventure module such as *Curse of Strahd*. While some actual plays are ways to share their personal adventures, Alex Chalk (2023) noted that actual plays “lean heavily on their listeners for income;” these shows often seek out funding through Patreon subscriptions, Twitch donations, and merchandise sales. But with now hundreds of series either in development or complete with dozens of multi-hour-long episodes, the ability to compete for views with already established series continues to dwindle without pushing the envelope of what is possible via editing, production, acting, and narrative design.

The ongoing professionalization of role-playing has not gone unnoticed by players, however. As *Critical Role*—the Actual Play series helmed by gamemaster and voice actor Matthew Mercer and streamed via Twitch—grew into a subcultural juggernaut, gamemasters began to report that players at their tables would compare them to Mercer, often to critique their personal style of running the game or to describe something about Mercer’s techniques that they wanted in the games they played. This “Mercer Effect” even got the attention of its namesake, who responded on Reddit that “we are a table of professional actors, and I have been DMing for well over 20 years. We have spent our lives training in particular skills that allow us to get as immersed in the characters as we enjoy doing” (u/MatthewMercer, 2018). While Mercer himself advocates against replicating his style of play, what the debate around the Mercer Effect reveals is that the proliferation of professional game masters in online spaces and in person has made more casual players feel inadequate in comparison and have caused some groups to be unable to retain players

because veil somehow lack the professional quality that game masters like Mercer can bring. However, Mercer’s recognizable style and ability to procure finely painted miniatures, set his adventures in a studio capable of providing mood lighting, and craft extremely fleshed out storylines and worlds for his players to build off of—one that can later be sold to his online audience as setting guides and pre-written adventure books—obscures the fact that he and his players are on the job; though from an outsider’s perspective Mercer is ultimately playing a game with his friends and allowing people on the internet to see it, *Critical Role* is a part of Critical Role Productions and just one arm of a multimedia company’s efforts to create entertainment. As Rowan Zeoli noted (2024) in an article for *Rascal News*, “Many who have achieved exceptional success, such as *Critical Role*’s Matt Mercer, rarely have ‘Actual Play performer’ as their exclusive full-time job. . . . Mercer still works as a voice actor in film and video games.” Although the cast of *Critical Role* was able to make \$14 million from 2019 to 2021 via Twitch, the ability for players or gamemasters to “go pro” remains deceptively difficult (Young, 2022). While playing TTRPGs online for fun and profit remains enticing, these games are also enabled and constrained by the very technologies they rely on.

Digital Dragons

The ability for people to experience role-playing games—either as a player or as a spectator—has rapidly grown with the rise of digital technologies, but that growth has come at a cost. The social pressure to adopt digital tools and participate in online spaces encourages the professionalization of play. The virtual tabletop service Roll20, for instance, promises gamemasters the ability to “automate tedious game mechanics” and to use artwork from a “Marketplace of talented artists,” in order to “lessen the technical burden on the participants, facilitate the formation of new gaming groups, and to make barriers to entry as few as possible when gathering around a table for camaraderie” (Roll20, 2024). And to be fair, the options Roll20 provides are useful for playing online games, including dynamic lighting that can limit a player’s perspective to a portion of the map and search functions for core mechanics of the game. However, these functions are irrelevant if players opt to play without maps or battle grids (“theater of the mind”) or, alternatively, opt to play a system that is not been made available on its software, such as *Blue Rose* (2017) or *Good Society: A Jane Austen RPG* (2018). While Roll20 does offer the ability to add custom scripts, players would either need to know or learn JavaScript to do so, and they would need to purchase a “Pro” subscription (\$99.99/year). Those who opt not to purchase a Roll20 subscription will not only be unable to use the dynamic lighting feature, but they will also be

limited in how many games they can play and be subjected to ads while loading. Additionally, players who want to use official content from their chosen TTRPG would need to choose between painstakingly adding their character's characteristics and abilities to their game or, by purchasing a license through Roll20, skip that tedium and be able to complete their character in minutes. Roll20 does allow paid subscribers to share their rulebooks with the table; this is also limited to encourage players to purchase their own licenses, which are solely limited to Roll20 and are non-transferable to any other VTT. In a sense, Roll20 offers convenience in the aspects of tabletop play that are difficult to replicate (rolling dice, a shared board to play on), yet it is emblematic of how VTTs can add more to a gamemaster's workload and further strain both players' wallets and patience.

These features also presume that all players of an online role-playing session will have equal access to devices that can run these digital tools, internet connections consistent enough to allow for voice/video calls, the luxury of a steady schedule, and the knowledge of how to navigate online spaces in general. I have personally seen players lose internet due to the weather, spend hours trying to navigate the VTT to find information on a gadget their character found, discover they were muted while trying to give an inspirational speech, and fail to coordinate players across time zones. Players also must contend with the VTT itself. In their examination of Roll20, Lawson & Wigard (2021) find that although "the platform has three built-in modes of communication, freely available to all users: text chat, voice chat, and video chat . . . if one user's microphone is functionally out-of-commission, a rhetorical imbalance emerges wherein users with microphones are able to assert more rhetorical agency over the game than the audibly silent participant." Even if everyone's equipment is functional, players may still be thrown off by slight delays in audio, causing players with weaker internet connections to consistently be slower to react to in-game events. This digital divide can thus significantly affect both who gets to play and what kinds of experiences they will have.

Supposing players are on equal technological footing, play can still be disrupted when a player states that they want their character to do something not strictly handled by the TTRPG mechanics. Because a VTT transcribes the rules of a chosen role-playing game to code (which may or may not be edited by players), the table may find itself at a loss as to how to manipulate the VTT to emulate the requested action quickly and effectively. In a similar vein, the promise of a smooth play experience has also stoked fears that players may be unable to understand the underlying game systems. As documented in one thread on a TTRPG forum, players appreciate that VTTs can automate rules-heavy games like *Pathfinder* but worry that complexity may make in-person play appear too tedious to learn; at the same time, another fan

decries “animation and graphics replacing imagination,” as VTTs incorporate 3D graphics or special effects to compete with video gaming and each other (TheRPGSite, 2024). These examples relay an anxiety about how TTRPG play is being altered to fit within the parameters of virtual tabletops.

Should everyone at the virtual tabletop have equivalent access to play and possess a strong understanding of how to play, online TTRPG gamemasters and players must then contend with the wealth of other readily available games, distractions, and pleasures that can sap away one’s attention. Though players at every table—virtual or hardwood—may find themselves checking their phones or flipping through rulebooks during lulls in play, “these absences cannot be easily and immediately noticed during [online] games,” and though some gamemasters may tell players “Do not surf,” players must constantly police themselves and others to ensure that games do not suffer from a player’s “lack of self-control” (Roques, 2021). Even if digital distractions are moderated, players often connect from home, which can create additional interruptions in play from familial commitments and responsibilities to a mischievous pet taking advantage of a player’s lapse in attention or attempting to co-opt said attention.

And these issues of labor and access are in addition to and intersecting with already established barriers to the medium of role-playing games and to online spaces. Tabletop role-playing games have historically been either dismissive of or outright hostile to non-White, non-heterosexual, and non-masculine characters and players, both within the game world and in various supplemental works. For example, Steven Dashiell highlights how “most gamebooks and sourcebooks use ‘he’ as the principal, and generic, pronoun,” and though efforts were made to further generalize players in source material, hobby magazines like *Dragon* constantly used masculine pronouns to refer to hypothetical players, further entrenching the male as default (Dashiell, 2022). As *Dungeons & Dragons* gained a surge of new players during the pandemic, these players quickly connected the game’s usage of race and depictions of “non-human” races like orcs to well-trodden stereotypes of real-world populations. These stereotypes are then ingrained into the rules of the game itself by game designers “translating these racial differences into numerical scores” (D’Anastasio, 2021). In contrast, LGBTQ+ characters and experiences were largely absent from TTRPG sourcebooks, save for the occasional gag item a *la girdle of masculinity/femininity*. As TTRPG production grew in size and scale, some publishers “considered queer people a part of their audience” and included LGBTQ+ characters as examples for character creation, in-fiction entities, and potential allies and villains, although “representations of gay male sexuality are obviously much more prominent and varied than, say, those of transgender people” in TRPGs (Stenros & Sihvonen, 2015). Often, players

desiring play experiences based on their own culture or community will create supplemental rules for use in popular TRPGs or create their own games entirely, but these have been met with hostility for being a “fandom killjoy” and spoiling the fun of (normative) players (Scott, 2019). Although it might be easier to find a play group online, these prejudices and social norms can and have been replicated in other online games, such as through toxic voice chat (Gray, 2020; McLean & Griffiths, 2019).

Although virtual tabletops like Roll20 often have rules against hateful content and can enforce a code of conduct, Roll20’s emphasis on its marketplace for art, maps, and tokens hints at the kinds of experiences that the platform desires from its userbase: polished, marketable, and reusable. In this vein, supplement platforms like DriveThruRPG marketplaces encourage gamemasters to upload their homebrew rules for others to use, but to do so in a standardized format (PDF, JPEG) fit to required specifications. These rules are understandable, as these marketplaces act as publishers for this content, and forums and social media sites can provide avenues for less stringently prepared rules and worldbuilding ideas. Yet the popularity of these marketplaces and the difficulty of sifting through years of Twitter posts for an idea-someone-had does mean that many players will be presented with and encouraged to use publisher-approved work, which can further entrench normative expectations of play. At the same time, those opting to publish their work are entering into a reciprocal and financial relationship with both the publishing website *and* the publisher/developer of the rules system they are supplementing, a relationship that is heavily weighted in the latter’s favor (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012). This lopsided relationship was tested when Wizards of the Coast attempted to alter the Open Gaming License—the legal agreement that allows fans to create *Dungeons & Dragons* content and generate revenue from it—to force supplement writers to report their revenue and operate under a separate commercial license (Codega, 2023). While this attempt was aborted (and eventually shifted to publishing the core rules of the 5th edition to a Creative Commons license), the precarity of becoming a full-time writer of supplemental materials for role-playing games—let alone a more casual gamemaster wanting to share their work—on these platforms highlights how the hobby is grappling with its digital dragons.

Conclusion

Wizards of the Coast’s attempt to extract more profit from *Dungeons & Dragons* players and the ways that virtual tabletop services instrumentalize play-labor for capital gains frames a recent announcement of a VTT service owned and operated by Wizards—Project Sigil—as a further shoring up of players’

ability to play within the confines of a larger, corporatized vision of the hobby. Lin Codega recalled how, in a live actual play special for Sigil, “when [Brennan Lee] Mulligan’s cleric transformed from a dwarf into a dragon, and, after pressing a button to make the minis change shape, Mulligan immediately moved on. His usual flair for the dramatic detailed, and specific was lost . . . replaced by a graphic in a computer program” (Codega & Zeoli, 2024). While technically impressive by virtual tabletop standards, Sigil’s lackluster reception undercuts the rapid expansion of role-playing online as players, fans, and developers have struggled to reconcile their frustrations with these digital spaces with new opportunities to share and profit from their passion.

While in-person games have long since resumed following the pandemic, online role-playing games still remain the only way by which some players are capable of participating in the fandom, in the hobby, and in the craft of RPGs. This may be due to the sheer distance between players, a lack of interest in a particular TTRPG in one’s locale, or a matter of accessibility. VTTs, online supplement distributors, and streaming can all be used to provide these players with a connection to one another and to encourage the creative potential that role-playing can spark. Players also make use of these digital affordances to supplement their income or devote themselves to TRPGs full time. Online games nevertheless incorporate digital tools in order to make up for the affordances lost as a result of the shift from the table to the screen. These affordances can exacerbate already present divides in role-playing and online spaces by increasing the financial cost of play, brokering competition and the professionalization of casual play, reinforcing normative expectations of play, and further devaluing the playbor of gamemasters and players. Though there are no easy solutions to these problems, it remains important to both acknowledge where improvements can be made and what dangers lie ahead.

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Listening *For* and Listening *To*: Narrative Inquiry in Pandemic Health Communication

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Stories and narratives play an increasingly important role in healthcare contexts. While much work in writing studies and technical and professional communication has explored how stories and narratives can improve healthcare outcomes, increase opportunities for collaboration between stakeholders, and assist in consent and information accessibility, more work is needed to understand how narratives play a central role in facilitating systemic reform. This paper presents the stories of participants in a project about pandemic health communication practices, revealing how narratives aid in identifying the causes and manifestations of healthcare disparities, amplifying marginalized voices, and taking collective action towards a future of equitable healthcare amidst an ongoing public health crisis.

Methodologies that center stories and narratives have a long history in writing studies (Barton & Barton, 1988; Jones, 2016; Vealey & Gerding, 2021; Yam, 2018; and more). Because stories are so effective at communicating complex technical ideas and because narratives provide needed context and depth to complicated situations, they are both effective and efficient communication strategies in settings like healthcare. As such, much research has recently been done to examine how stories and narratives can improve healthcare outcomes (Gray, 2013), increase collaboration between providers and patients (Campbell & Miller, 2023), and facilitate consent and information accessibility (Green, 2021) across the rhetoric of health and medicine and technical and professional communication.

And yet, stories and narratives are not just practically useful; they support a commitment to acknowledging and redressing systemic injustice (Kalodner-Martin, 2022). A narrative inquiry methodology, for instance, asserts that the stories and narratives of people who have directly experienced marginalization should guide—not just support—researchers' understanding of what injustices exist and what actions might be taken to address them (Moore et al., 2021). This requires intentionally listening *for* these stories, rather than just listening *to* them (Mangum, 2021) in order to challenge the space and status that is so often automatically granted to the voices of those in positions of power.

Given the precarity of patients in clinical settings, particularly those who are multiply-marginalized or underrepresented (MMU) by nature of their race, class, gender, linguistic background, and more, a narrative inquiry methodology can serve as a critical entry point for disrupting the top-down models of knowledge-creation that contribute to patients' silencing and dismissal and compound the risk of physical and psychological harm. Storytelling and narratives also hold particular promise in health crises like pandemics, which often introduce new challenges to the healthcare field while amplifying existing inequities for diverse patient populations (Baniya & Chen, 2021; Joyner et al., 2023). This methodology also works particularly well with frameworks like Black rhetorics of health communication, which emphasizes that lived experiences of marginalization, particularly along racial lines, must play a central role in "understand[ing] and deal[ing] with issues of ethics and health disparities in American medical culture" (Mckoy et al., 2020).

In what follows, I share how listening *for* stories about pandemic health and communication practices has the potential to not only enrich individual healthcare outcomes for MMU patients but can also facilitate identifying and redressing barriers to equitable healthcare that have increased in public visibility throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. I demonstrate this by revealing how participants in this project—a subsection of those involved in a larger study on women's chronic illness communication practices on social media—use stories strategically to share problems, provide context, and offer solutions, all while attending to complex issues like power, positionality, and privilege (Moore et al., 2021) that inevitably shape our healthcare experiences. I first overview the methods that have guided this project, discuss themes that emerged as a result of the data collection process, and describe the opportunities for further research on narrative inquiry's role in technical and scientific environments.

Methods

This project was guided by a narrative inquiry, a methodology that draws from Black feminist epistemologies (Collins, 2008; hooks, 1981; Taylor, 1998) to "encourage an epistemological shift away from the empirical and imperial logics . . . and towards an embrace of lived experience and stories as legitimate and valuable sources of knowledge" (Moore et al., 2021, p. 11). One of the strengths of this framework is its broad applicability, as it reveals both micro and macro experiences of injustice and opportunities for resistance. In studies of health and medical communication, a narrative inquiry methodology helps to destabilize the unilateral influence that quantitative testing and provider evaluation is often granted; by shifting to

see stories and narratives as different (but still valuable) expressions of evidence and expertise, the opportunity for collaboration between those who have experienced oppression and stakeholders who are implicated in hegemonic structures of power is opened and embraced. As a result, barriers can more easily be identified, acknowledged, and sustainably resolved. And yet, because power imbalances are not just implicated in *who* is granted the space to speak but *where*, I turned to social media platforms to explore how patients engaged with and produced narratives about coronavirus-related concerns, information, and resources without the institutional gatekeeping that is so dominant in many clinical settings.

Data for this project is made up of two complementary data sets: first, I collected a broader textual corpus of 818 public social media posts from Twitter/X, TikTok, and Instagram, and then I conducted a more focused set of 20 interviews with content creators on those platforms. I recruited interview participants through a combination of direct messaging and snowball sampling methods and conducted the interviews on Zoom or phone, depending on participant preference. I used Rev.com for interview transcriptions, which I then shared with participants for optional edits and addendums. Participants reflect a diverse array of backgrounds pertaining to race, class, disability status, language, religion, sexuality and more, but every participant was required to create public social media content about health and wellness, identify as female, and be over the age of 18. Because dismantling barriers to participation in conversations about health equity was a cornerstone of this project, all interview participants were compensated \$25 for their time.

Both interview and textual corpus data was coded deductively to identify initial themes, and of this larger data set, 271 posts and 17 interviews discussed concerns related to COVID-19, including vaccination access and side effects, infection risk, symptom management, and long-term complications. Because the initial goal for this project was to understand how women with chronic illnesses use social media for health communication purposes and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically reshaped the landscape of health-care experiences and concerns regarding medical justice, I then completed another round of abductive coding (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022) to identify how participants understood the relationships between systemic clinical reform and the ongoing pandemic.

Results

After two rounds of coding, separated by a reflective memo, codes coalesced into what one participant, Renuka, described as “a roadmap for COVID

equity”: identifying disparities, amplifying marginalized voices, and taking collective action. This next section offers three mini case studies from project participants whose insights and work reflect the above themes and grounds suggestions for future research in the work that is already underway.

Identifying Disparities: Tools and Technologies in COVID Care

One of the first themes that emerged across content and conversations about COVID-19 was the confusion and frustration that many people experienced when information about risk, transmission, and interventions changed. One prevalent message, however, was that the best way to understand COVID-19 was to seek information (and care) from medical institutions. However, for Sherelle, who is a Black woman in her mid-forties, seeking clinical treatment for her COVID-19 symptoms served as the impetus for bringing storytelling and medical research together to confront manifestations of medical racism in COVID-19 treatment. As she put it,

I started talking about medical racism because of my own experiences with COVID, where I went to the hospital because I couldn't breathe. At first they just told me that I was having a panic attack, and then when they finally ran tests, they said my pulse ox reading was fine and to go home.¹ I just knew that didn't seem right and so I was doing some research, and there is all this data about tools like that being inaccurate on Black people . . . So my account had mostly been about my experiences with arthritis before and after that I decided to make a quick pivot and do some educational work for other people, just about what medical racism is and what it looks like, just because I think people would be more mad about it if they knew that it exists.

Sherelle acknowledged that, even prior to COVID-19, the impact and extent of medical racism was just something that “Black people already kind of knew about.” However, though she had “heard stories about doctors or other kinds of racist [healthcare] policies, it was always about a person who directly enforced them, but it wasn't a lot deeper than that.” Now, by bringing together personal experience and clinical research, she wants her content to “tell a new story” about how tools and technologies employed in COVID-19 diagnosis and treatment can increase disparities in patient experience and healthcare outcomes. Take, for example, her post about pulse oximetry, seen in Figures 5.1 and 5.2.

1 A pulse oximeter measures oxygen saturation in the blood. Pulse oximetry is typically conducted by clipping a small device onto the fingertip.



Figure 5.1. A racism.in.healthcare Instagram carousel post introducing the link between pulse oximeters and medical racism.

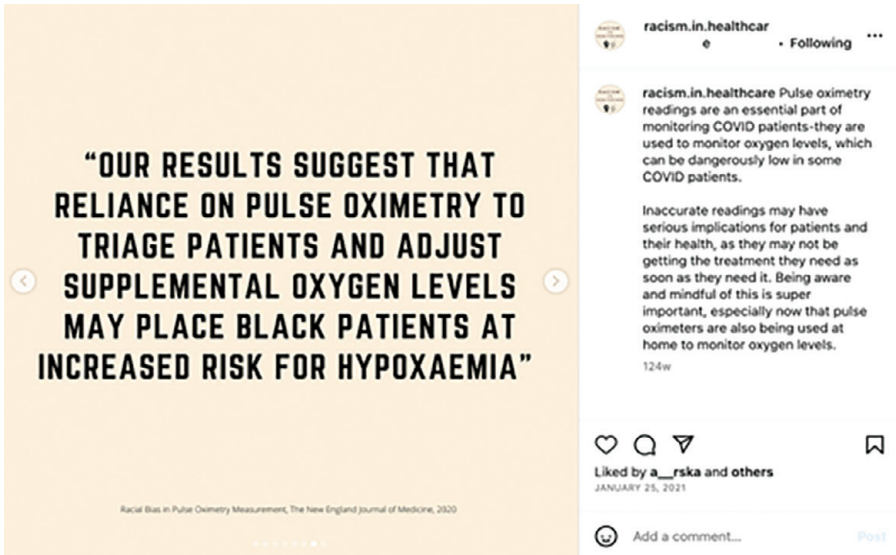


Figure 5.2. Another image from the racism.in.healthcare Instagram carousel post demonstrating the stakes of incorrect pulse oximeter readings for Black patients.

In talking to Sherelle about this post, she noted that:

The goal here was really to do a few things: explain what pulse oximeters are and why they’re important in COVID

treatment, use the research to explain that they may be giving incorrect readings for Black patients, and hopefully help people see how real and widespread racism in healthcare is so that they will hopefully be fired up and ready to band together and demand some change. . . . I want to challenge this idea that a little medical device can't be racist or that a reading means that someone's life isn't in danger just because of what it said. We're in enough danger as is and we don't need ignorance working against us.

In making this statement, Sherelle continues to challenge the idea that medical devices or quantitative testing is unbiased, instead revealing how one recent study from a medical journal was able to document disparities in pulse oximeter readings between patients of different racial backgrounds. This is because the fingertip pulse oximeter was calibrated primarily on white patients, meaning that darker skin tones may “interfere” with the passage of the light sensor, rendering inaccurate results (Gray, Subramaniam, & Huang, 2023). As such, it is not just because Black patients are more likely to experience discrimination at the hands of medical providers, but because the tools designed for patient care were *simply not tested with the health or safety of Black patients in mind*. This example reinforces one of the primary challenges of doing racial justice work within health and medicine, which, Veronica Joyner et al. (2023) noted, is that so many barriers to equitable healthcare are “rooted in racism as an embedded, often invisible, practice” (p. 126). Making these stakes and connections clear is thus at the core of Sherelle's work; as Figure 2 explains, incorrect readings may lead to hypoxemia, or potentially fatally-low levels of oxygen in the blood.

It is through revealing these consequences—and the way that racism is embedded into the healthcare system from medical device design down to implementation—that Sherelle hopes to compel her audience to “understand how real experiences of medical racism actually line up with the medical research.” In other words, by invoking personal storytelling as a complement to, rather than a detractor of, peer-reviewed clinical scholarship, Sherelle demonstrates that storytelling, particularly on a public account where circulation of content is a primary goal, can be a valuable way to reject biases about medical disparities and reframe public understanding of what medical racism is, its historical roots, and how it manifests in contemporary healthcare practices.

Amplifying Marginalized Voices: Social Media for Social Change

Participants in this project also emphasized the importance of amplifying other marginalized voices to influence systemic change alongside individual stories of discrimination and inequitable healthcare experiences. Take, for

example, Chimère, who, like Sherelle, has been active in using her personal social media to discuss race-based disparities for women with endometriosis but shifted her platform to focus on the intersections of racial injustice and COVID-19 after being diagnosed with long COVID in early 2021. Also like Sherelle, Chimère is a Black woman who has long valued storytelling from what she calls her “Black elders” in making decisions about health, safety, and risk. When it came to her diagnosis, Chimère noted:

I just wanted to hear from other Black women about how they handled it, who they talked to, what resources were helpful . . . and then I realized that our voices were hard to find. So I was like, okay, I have a little bit of a following already. I can start sharing my story and actually create the space for other people to do the same. A lot of voices are louder than one.

As seen in Figure 5.3, Chimère used Twitter to directly reference the Western healthcare system’s long history of racial disparities and dismissal in care outcomes and connects it to her observations regarding whose voices have been amplified in COVID conversations. In talking about this post, Chimère also reflected on the stakes of hearing these stories: “It’s not just having long COVID voices; it’s about having the ones that can talk about what it’s like to be Black and a woman and have long COVID at the same time because that might be more applicable for someone whose already at risk for being unbelievably than advice from people who don’t know what that’s like.” In other words, Chimère reflects an awareness of how intersectionality shapes healthcare outcomes and perceptions of safety and risk in clinical settings, connecting the ability to access stories from other vulnerable patient populations as particularly critical for disrupting patterns of silencing and harm that are most keenly experienced by those already at disproportionate risk for poor healthcare outcomes.



Figure 5.3. Twitter user Chimère Smith calls out the lack of Black women’s voices in long COVID discourse.

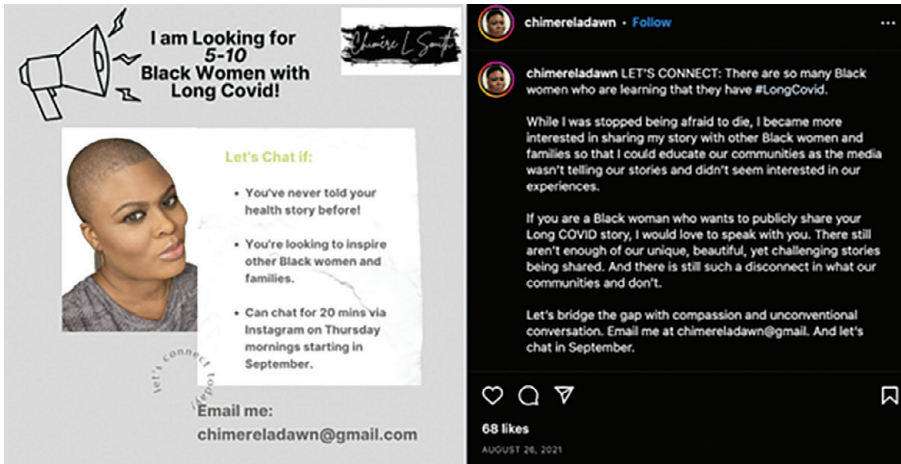


Figure 5.4. Instagram user Chimère Smith solicits patient stories from Black women with long COVID.

It's this gap that led Chimère to her work in amplifying Black women's stories, first on her own Instagram page (Figure 5.4), and then through her documentary project, *Black and Unbelieved: Finding #LongCOVID Care in Ancestral Care*. In this film, she is working to amplify the experiences of other Black women with long COVID to share how "racism props up the healthcare system and vice-versa, and how Black women have to find all these creative and alternative means to take care of each other's brains and bodies" both inside and outside institutional medical settings. Like her social media posts refer to, her desire to take on this project came out of her awareness that only some long COVID experiences were being circulated by media outlets (which, especially early in the pandemic, played a pivotal role in providing access to rapidly-evolving COVID information) and that the lack of diversity in stories at the intersection of chronic COVID complications, disability, and racism was further contributing to healthcare disparities for Black and Brown women. While Chimère is currently engaging in documentary crowdfunding at the time of this writing, she still maintains her own social media pages and runs an Instagram broadcast channel called Black Babes with #longCOVID to "make sure that there are always options for getting someone's voice out there because you never know the impact that a story is gonna make in someone's health journey."

Though Chimère is the only project participant who is working on a film, other participants have used similar creative rhetorical strategies like digital and print publishing, podcasts, YouTube channels, community event organizing, and more to amplify the perspectives of those grappling with the risks and complications of COVID. These efforts all begin by acknowledging that

silencing is both a symptom *and* perpetuation of healthcare inequities, and as such, that amplifying marginalized voices can offer a richer and more holistic perspective regarding what healthcare inequities exist, the efforts that people have taken to redress them, and whose voices—and knowledge—matters.

Taking Collective Action: Partnerships Across the Medical Care System

Though participants like Chimère make it clear that participants in this project are invested in building and maintaining community with other patients, they also reflected on their investment in collaborating with medical professionals and other stakeholders to *collectively* work towards health justice. This is for two primary reasons: first, participants understand that medical equity is a multifaceted goal, comprising of direct patient care, policy, medical research and development (R&D) and more; as such, working with stakeholders across these different areas has the potential to facilitate more holistic interventions. Secondly, participants also recognize that, as Lisa put it, “we’re not the most powerful people in the room, so if we can work with the people who have that authority, we can get more done.” In other words, using stories to foster collaboration also serves as an effective strategy to circumvent barriers with legitimacy that patients often experience when identifying healthcare disparities and working towards sustainable, systemic change.

This is something that Lisa, a white, disabled, and queer patient activist and disability rights lawyer knows well. Like Chimère, she was diagnosed with long COVID in 2021 after six months of persistent symptoms and noted that, even though patients were the ones who “facilitated” the prevalence of long COVID conversations, their voices and expertise were absent from much of the clinical scholarship and funded projects that determined the trajectory of COVID-19 research. As such, she, alongside a team of other patients with long COVID and professionals in areas like biomedical research, cognitive science, machine learning, and more, formed the Patient-Led Research Collaborative for Long COVID (PLRC). As Lisa explained, the PLRC’s mission is to:

facilitate patient-led and patient-involved research into Long COVID and associated conditions while following rigorous research methodology, and to advocate for policies that enable patients, particularly the most marginalized, to access care and live with dignity. We ground our work in the principles of disability justice and participatory research methods, and in the knowledge that those who experience an illness are best able to identify research questions and solutions.

Because the PLRC acknowledges that patients’ expertise is conferred both by lived experience with illness and their myriad diverse professional

backgrounds *and* that this knowledge is fruitful for guiding conversations about necessary interventions, the PLRC works in a wide variety of arenas in which patients' perspectives can enrich clinical practice, research projects, and healthcare procedures. Current initiatives range from an award committee, made up of patients, policymakers, and physicians, that collectively decides how the PLRC's \$5 million in grant money will be spent, to a collaboration with the Council of Medical Specialties Societies (CMSS), an international organization committed to advancements across healthcare, to create a scorecard and action plan for patient involvement in research. As Lisa explained, working with CMSS is particularly valuable for calling attention to the ways that patients can be involved in ongoing COVID research and facilitating opportunities for collaboration in other areas of healthcare.

Take, for example, the PLRC's scorecard (Figures 5.5 and 5.6), which awards healthcare research organizations a score from -2 to 2 based on patients' integration in the research process, patient/partner governance, patient burden, and the "readiness" of stakeholders to work with each other. Organizations with a negative score are invited to work with a PLRC advisor on organizational strategies for incorporating patient input, though organizations with positive scores are also welcome to attend. Lisa explained that these sessions include "stories from organizations and patients who have found these partnerships beneficial or from patients about their long COVID expertise. What we really want to emphasize is that these relationships are mutually beneficial."

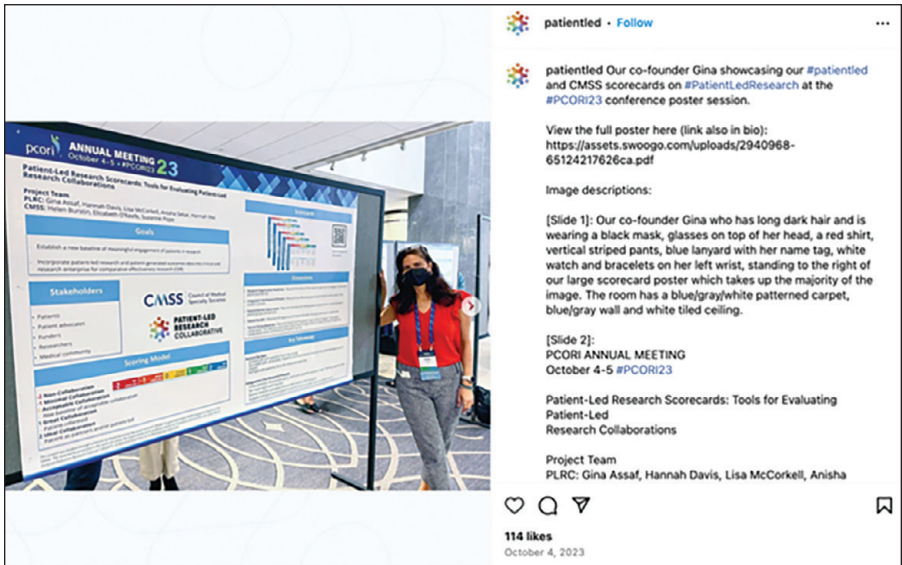


Figure 5.5. A PLRC member, Gina, stands with a PLRC-CMSS poster at the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) 2023 Annual Meeting.

patientled • Follow

patientled Our co-founder Gina showcasing our #patientled and CMSS scorecards on #PatientLedResearch at the #PCORI23 conference poster session.

View the full poster here (link also in bio):
<https://assets.swoogo.com/uploads/2940968-65124217626ca.pdf>

Image descriptions:

[Slide 1]: Our co-founder Gina who has long dark hair and is wearing a black mask, glasses on top of her head, a red shirt, vertical striped pants, blue lanyard with her name tag, white watch and bracelets on her left wrist, standing to the right of our large scorecard poster which takes up the majority of the image. The room has a blue/gray/white patterned carpet, blue/gray wall and white tiled ceiling.

[Slide 2]:
 PCORI ANNUAL MEETING
 October 4-5 #PCORI23

Patient-Led Research Scorecards: Tools for Evaluating Patient-Led Research Collaborations

Project Team
 PLRC: Gina Assaf, Hannah Davis, Lisa McCorkell, Anisha

114 likes
 October 4, 2023

Add a comment... Post

Figure 5.6. A section of PLRC-CMSS poster, detailing the scorecards, dimensions, and key takeaways.

What Lisa reveals is that, in the case of this initiative, stories—whether from patients who can contribute to external work in health and medical research, policy, and practice or from organizations that have benefited from such partnerships—serve a critical role in acknowledging and disrupting in the same imbalances of power that continue to place patients at risk. And yet, Lisa also pushes back against the idea that patients are the only group invested in clinical reform. As she shared, “So many people we talk to care so much about healthcare equity and see COVID as an opportunity to make a lot of headway in this area. So it’s exciting, in a way, to hear their stories about the knowledge they have, what they bring to the table, and what we can really do when more people can share and actually get listened to.” In this way, stories do not just represent the *outcomes* of successful partnerships, but also are the method through which various stakeholder groups can share knowledge, decide on goals, and facilitate taking collective action. Notable examples from the last year include translating COVID-19 vaccine resources to eleven new languages, facilitating a “vaccine on wheels” bus to travel to encampments for people experiencing homelessness, and drafting patient education materials for long COVID management and treatment options.

Each of these cases represents how different kinds of professional and personal expertise can facilitate health equity. Though the PLRC explicitly approaches these partnerships by working with those in diverse medical arenas—including, but not limited to, direct clinical settings, research labs,

insurance companies, and state and local policy—the central goal of using stories to redress areas of healthcare disparities is reflected across other participants in this project. Like Sherelle and Chimère also refer to, stories, whether told on Instagram, documentaries, or medical conferences, represent vast rhetorical possibility for taking action against injustice or, as Lisa put it, “even knowing that there is work to be done.”

Conclusion

Though these are just three examples, they demonstrate how participants in a study of online health communication practices used storytelling to reveal the causes and manifestations of injustice, to push back against silencing that compounds the disproportionate risk of harm for MMU patients, and to facilitate taking collective action through sustainable partnerships across the medical system. And yet, as COVID-19 continues to evolve and circumstances surrounding health crises and risk persist, research is still urgently needed to attend to the role stories and narratives play in identifying and redressing these uncertainties. As Baniya et al. (2022) noted, there is a dearth of scholarship that examines COVID-19-related research in transnational contexts, while Campeau’s (2022) research further emphasized the need to investigate how patients navigate the tensions between mitigation efforts, such as vaccination, and their experiences of marginalized identity and structural precarity (Mckoy et al., 2020).

While these also represent fruitful places for ongoing examination, participants in this project demonstrate listening *for* stories, particularly in spaces that are overlooked in conversations about what knowledge “counts” in health and medicine, is one way to begin centering local needs, circumstances, and expertise in the pursuit of justice, equity, and inclusion—both inside and outside the clinic.

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From Writing Texts Towards Writing Platforms: A Story of Mastodon

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Twitter's 2022 buyout and subsequent decline caused many writers to explore alternative platform spaces and created an opportunity for teachers of writing to reevaluate what literacies digital writers need. This paper follows the story of writers who joined Mastodon and struggled with the design decisions and governance protocols of the platform. Guided by these writers' reflections, I argue for expanding the definition of writing from writing texts to include writing platforms. I ground this notion of writing platforms in a set of four literacies: platform geographies, governance, technical reasoning, and identities. By teaching these literacies, we may better position writers to develop the tools they need to create, participate in, and maintain equitable digital spaces.

We all know the modern tragedy of Twitter: a vibrant, if imperfect, public sphere that was bought by billionaire Elon Musk in 2022 and turned into an uneasy, more dangerous version of its former self, full of disinformation and sponsored right wing content. In response to the platform and policy changes since then, some 30 million writers left Twitter. This paper asks: where did they go, what did they create, and how do their stories change what it means to teach digital writing in what Kalodner-Martin (2023) called the era of "platform precarity"?

To answer these questions, I draw from a textual corpus of users' online writing to tell a story of Mastodon, an open-source alternative to Twitter where writers create and maintain their own servers and communities. In the two years since Musk bought Twitter, some five million writers joined Mastodon to try its federated communities and decentralized ActivityPub protocol. In theory, decentralization should lead to a more democratic and involved public sphere; in practice, writers almost immediately came into conflict with the governance model of Mastodon. These tensions surrounded several key areas: platform governance, server structure, content moderation, interface design, and circulation protocols. This paper outlines how these tensions serve as an entry point for disrupting traditional notions of what a digital writer can, and should, be able to do in online spaces.

Guided by these writers' reflections, I offer a framework for shifting notions of writing beyond just writing *texts* to writing publics, platforms, interfaces, and networks. Using this framework, I argue, we may better position writers to

develop the tools they need to create, participate in, and maintain equitable digital spaces. This paper advocates for the role of centering users' stories in efforts to reimagine digital platforms and offers writing teachers and digital scholars specific suggestions for helping writers develop these literacies.

Governance in Action: Mastodon

Mastodon is a free and open source, federated, decentralized social networking site created by German computer science and philosophy student Eugen "Gargron" Rochko in 2016. In terms of functionality, it is similar to Twitter: users write and post messages, called "toots," that can be read, responded to, "boosted" (or "retweeted" in "bird-talk"), and "favorited" ("liked") by other users. Toots appear on a scrollable news feed in reverse-chronological order and can be indexed and searched for using the #hashtag and @handle systems that many of us are familiar with.

Since its beginning, Mastodon has grappled with tensions over how the platform should be run and designed. The source of the tension between Mastodon's developer and its users is rooted in the platform's "benevolent dictator for life" (BDFL) governance model. BDFL describes a governance structure in which the original developer of the project, who often feels a sense of authorial ownership, retains permanent control over changes to the code, as well as to the direction and values of the project. Though these developers may be quite good-natured (indeed, they often begin the project in response to a social problem or community need), the "authoritarian" nature of their control can create tensions between themselves and the community that the project intends to serve. As a project grows and its user base becomes more complex, more varied, and more engaged, conflicts can emerge between users and developers that are not appropriately mediated by a single person's communication strategy, however well-intended they are. In short, software in a BDFL structure very quickly becomes subject to the whims of the creator rather than the needs or wants of its users.

While Mastodon operates as free and open-source software, Rochko must approve each change to the code and design of the platform. This BDFL model worked well enough when Mastodon was quite small, but as it attracted more writers with varying interests (including some who disagree with Rochko's original vision of the platform), tensions over key design decisions emerged between its writers and its developer. We can sort these issues into three categories: disagreements over design decisions, frustration with the platform's governance structure, and struggles over feature recognition.

Rochko's original vision of the platform was as an alternative to Twitter that would not become inundated with the latest political news and hot takes,

and that explicitly banned hate speech. To accomplish this, Rochko fostered a platform culture that encouraged writers to hide political news under content warnings or to not post them at all. As the digital journalist Ana Valens (2019) wrote, “Visiting Mastodon feels like strolling through the first ‘apolitical’ social network. There’s no urgency to talk about the Trump administration’s policies or break down ongoing political events.” Early writers on Mastodon took pride in the platform’s apolitical circulation policy; the space came to be seen as a kind of safe reprieve that, by disinvesting from political content, also disinvested from toxic and politically-oriented users. Rochko also—to much praise from Mastodon’s writers—aggressively banned far right Nazi’s from the platform long before pre-Musk Twitter would admit to even considering that kind of content moderation. And so, Mastodon came to be known as a kind of alternative space where one could practice social media without being bombarded by a toxic news cycle and without engaging with the worst users of corporate platforms.

This kind of public may have been nice for some, for a while, but for other writers the deemphasis of political discussion made it difficult to write about important events affecting their lives. This sentiment became especially strong among the vibrant community of queer writers and servers that were a large portion of Mastodon’s writers and that, over time, grew uncomfortable with Mastodon’s apolitical feeds. For these writers, Mastodon’s circulation policy became a much-discussed design feature that denied them the ability to write about crucial events that impacted their lives (Cassian, 2018; Hart, 2017; Valens, 2019). As Valens (2019) put it, queer writers “cannot be apolitical by nature. Being queer isn’t a hobby; it’s a political identity. And so while Mastodon seems fine on the surface, there’s a much larger schism at play.”

In addition to circulation policy, Rochko pursued a number of design decisions—specifically, anti-harassment design decisions—that writers like Cassian became uncomfortable with. As Cassian (2018) wrote in a much-circulated Medium blog, queer writers who came to Mastodon to escape harassment commonplace on mainstream platforms found themselves having to continually block what Cassian calls “White Guy Avatars,” or other writers who offer unsolicited criticism or make abusive comments. But they found that after blocking abusive writers, they continued to see posts from those writers in other timelines. When the community brought this up as an issue with Rochko, Cassian wrote, they were met with ridicule and indifference; Rochko believed that this is a positive feature that comes with the server-oriented communities on Mastodon. Likewise, when Rochko proposed a “trending tags” feature that would work similarly to Twitter’s, writers expressed concerns on Github that the feature is too often used on Twitter to attract and abuse vulnerable people. These concerns, Cassian argued, went unheard.

In short, queer community concerns were not always heard by Rochko, who gained a reputation for being dismissive and for pushing his own vision of the platform. The disparity between Rochko and the platform's queer community was especially noteworthy given the size of that community. As Allie Hart (2017) wrote, while the queer community "made up a significant portion of [Mastodon's] early adopters and have contributed to the project in meaningful ways, they have never had any real decision-making power." In other words, while queer writers like Cassian and Hart were engaging quite meaningfully in the platform's development, and were practicing what I would describe as highly sophisticated forms of platform-level design-thinking, their status as "agentive" writers was very much in question in a BDFL governance structure.

Finally, this sense of being "left out" extended to recognition. Rochko became notorious on Mastodon for refusing to credit writers for development or feature ideas. He is known to ignore features requested by writers for some time until later implementing them and attributing them in release notes to himself or, on one occasion, to "community consciousness" (Valens, 2019). In an interview with the Dailydot, Rochko defended this practice, arguing that he doesn't credit writers with feature ideas because they don't actually design the system or write the code (Valens, 2019). He also defended his BDFL model and decision-making practices as more "efficient" than other forms of governance. As he puts it:

When you separate the decision making between different people that can come and go, you sort of have a tragedy of the commons where nobody is fully responsible for it and people have disagreements over all sorts of things, and you add the bureaucracy of [a] voting system, etc. . . . Often times you'll get requests from the community that are directly mutually exclusive to each other, and you have to make a choice, like, which direction will you go or how do you make a compromise. (Valens, 2019)

For writers who come to Mastodon seeking to exert more control over the "social" nature of the spaces they write in, these kinds of responses can be quite alienating. I find that Rochko's apparent division between *programmers who contribute* to a project and *writer/users who consume* a project is a direct cause of this alienation. By suggesting that only those who write code can have a sense of authorial ownership over a feature or platform, Rochko has effectively divested Mastodon's nonprogramming writers from meaningful agency (an attitude not uncommon in tech circles). These decisions have had consequences; while Mastodon is relatively successful among alternative social media platforms, it experienced a kind of exodus of queer writers who

have sworn off the platform until its governance structure changes (Cassian, 2018; Hart, 2017). As Valens (2019) put it, Mastodon is at a kind of crossroads. It has to choose what kind of platform it wants to be: a “community-driven government system to protect vulnerable users” or a BDFL governance model that matches Rochko’s vision of the platform.

In this situation, the question of governance becomes central to how writers experience and express their agency in digital platforms. Writers like Cassian and Hart clearly felt that their input, expressed as a community concern in response to oppressions and experiences they felt on other platforms, was devalued and unrecognized on Mastodon. They ultimately left the platform for it. Their stories suggest that there is quite a bit for users, writers, and developers to figure out if we are to enact equitable governance practices on writing platforms. The next section explores what it is we can take away from these stories.

Writing Platforms

It would be easy to see Cassian’s and Hart’s frustrations and departures as yet another failure in the history bin of overly ambitious, obscure, and alternative tech projects. It seems almost instinctual to do so; however, many writing publics criticize Web 2.0 corporations. When I mention Mastodon to people, the initial reaction is often dismissive. How could any platform contend with Facebook and Twitter? There is a logic to this response, but for writing scholars it misses the point. Cassian’s and Hart’s stories are in many ways a resounding success, both for them and for the platform. Mastodon set out to center the rights of its users in response to the failures of mainstream, centralized platforms. In doing so, it created the space for writers to engage with platform literacies in ways they never could on Facebook or Twitter. Cassian and Hart employed a number of highly sophisticated critical literacies, including:

- applying a combination of technical and design thinking needed to understand platform decisions;
- evaluating the implications of these technical design decisions across identity categories, including and especially queer writers;
- pursuing productive communication practices between developers/users/writers of different knowledge backgrounds and skill sets;
- articulating a critique of the design decisions of Mastodon when the platform failed to suit their needs; and
- reflecting on how to theorize and assess governance in particular spaces and for particular purposes, etc.

When given the chance to engage with platform design as a practice of agentive writing, Cassian and Hart did so until their ambitions exceeded what the platform had to offer. What Cassian's and Hart's stories show, I argue, is that writing in the era of what Kalodner-Martin (2023) called "digital precarity" shifts beyond just writing *texts* to writing *platforms*, publics, interfaces, and networks. That is, writing becomes more than just producing content, remediating texts, or cultivating an audience; it comes to include designing the space in which writing is produced and circulated. Writing scholars have been familiar with this direction for some time—see, for example, Selfe and Selfe's 1994 "Politics of the Interface." But the set of literacies that Cassian and Hart employed acquire new importance in a digital era where mainstream platforms are becoming increasingly hostile to writers. New spaces are necessary, and the question of writing the platform comes with them.

I call this set of knowledge practices and habits *platform literacies*, and identify four platform literacies in Web 2.0:

- platform geographies,
- design reasoning,
- platform governance, and
- platform identities.

Jim Brown (2015) has described a version of these literacies in his notion of "ethical programs." Ethical programs, as he describes them, are ways in which individuals or communities make protocol decisions about how information flows to them and through what channels (p. 160). We make and modify our own ethical programs daily anytime we choose who to follow, choose what to read, choose where we go, etc. To make an ethical program is a procedural and deliberative practice, a means of practicing agency by controlling a local interface with others. I want to take Brown's notion of an ethical program and expand it to include this broader set of platform-level design decisions. My central argument is that writing with agency in Web 2.0 requires platform literacies, and that as writing teachers we should commit to theorizing and teaching these literacies. Without these literacies, it is difficult to imagine writers having the tools they need to create, participate in, and maintain equitable platforms. My vision here is that they involve teaching not just *passive* user roles ("how do I write effectively *on* this platform?") but active design thinking¹ and contribution ("how do I effectively *write the platform?*"). To

1 By "design thinking," I mean a shift in thinking about the platform from the perspective of a writer to the perspective of a designer. Part of my argument here is that to write *well* in the current configuration of the web requires blending these perspectives, and by extension the intellectual traditions and disciplinary communities that comprise them. The space between writing/rhetoric and design is shrinking, and productive interplay between those communities is increasingly valuable.

do this, writers need to be able to do some new things. In the next section, I define and describe four platform literacies.

Platform Literacies

Platform geographies: First, writers need to be able to think through how platform design impacts communities and publics. How does the design of the platform create or cultivate certain kinds of publics or ways of relating to each other? Benjamin Bratton (2005) calls this method of inquiry “platform geography”: the mapping of design decisions onto social relations (p. 110). There are many illustrative examples. To return to Mastodon, for instance, the platform’s interpretation of a news feed creates new rhetorical dynamics for writers and their communities. Where Facebook has a single feed dictated by the content friends write, Mastodon has multiple feeds, including a server-wide feed that displays not just content you follow but content others on your server follow. This creates a new rhetorical consideration in which choices about who to follow become not just a matter of personal interest but an interpretation of community values. Writers must learn to cultivate an awareness of community interests and then contribute to or perform those interests through their everyday follows. Different servers on Mastodon have their own ways of dealing with this, from anything-goes to community-drafted rules for what kinds of content writers are encouraged or discouraged from following. In other words, the design of the platform—its decentralized server structure and feed design—creates ways of relating to each other that require different rhetorical considerations and literacies.

We can find similar considerations of platform geography in the design choices of mainstream platforms. How does Facebook’s closed network of friend-only, personal posts change how writers engage or imagine publics in comparison with Twitter’s more open, public-oriented follow and hashtag system? How might a platform’s content moderation policy—say, Reddit’s empowered moderators vs. Facebook’s algorithms and hired screeners—affect the kind of content that circulates? We can also extend design thinking beyond cloud or interface architecture to the physical geographies of place: as Dustin Edwards (2020) has shown in “Digital Rhetoric on a Damaged Planet,” the centralized servers of mainstream platforms demand large-scale data centers that demand millions of gallons of water a year but are built in dry, drought-stricken areas. The network design of the platform, then, creates new relations between the writers of the platform and people who live near the centers where the writing is stored, relations that may be inequitable or unsustainable.

Composition and rhetoric scholars have mostly worked with platforms through a form of critical interpretation. Michael J. Faris (2018) in “How

to Be Gay with Locative Media,” examines the rhetorical effect of Grindr’s homonormative advertising given its unique power as popular a platform for gay men. Michael Trice and Liza Potts (2018) in “Building Dark Patterns into Platforms” show how determined Gamergate activists disrupted publics on Twitter, Reddit, and Github through an organized communication strategy. We need to take this work further and “get under the hood” in more direct ways. Scholars outside writing studies—Safia Noble’s (2018) *Algorithms of Oppression* or Cathy O’Neil’s (2016) *Weapons of Math Destruction*—have begun this work, but there is still a lot to think through. As Bratton (2005) put it, though platforms like Facebook and Google may operate at the scale of historical institutions like the state or market, we have yet to fully attend to them: “As opposed to the public rights of citizens of a polis and the private rights of homo economicus in a market, we are severely lacking in robust and practical theory of the political design logic of platforms, even as they remake geopolitics in their image (or demand a different language to describe what the political is now or ever was)” (p. 44). A good example of recent work that attempts to do this might be Gelms and Edwards’s (2019) “A Technofeminist Approach to Platform Rhetorics,” which identified five tenets or lines of inquiry for evaluating the rhetorical work of platforms: social inequalities, labor, material infrastructures, networks of support and activism, and lived experience. The ability to identify and critically assess the social relations that follow from design decisions is a new, high-level, and iterative literacy that writers must develop and practice.

Design reasoning: Second, writers need to be comfortable engaging in technical discourse without necessarily fully understanding everything about platform design. I see this as a technical writing skill that is becoming more broadly necessary now. For example, I don’t know how to set up a server or how to create an information protocol. But to participate fully on an equitably governed open-source platform, I would need to know what a server is, what a protocol does, where computation occurs, and where data is stored to have some sense of the effects of design. A little bit of technical knowledge about computer systems can go a long way towards understanding the social impact of those systems, and thus to making informed decisions about the appropriateness of a system for a given platform or user.

Platform governance: Writers need to be able to negotiate writing the platform across different levels of technical knowledge. Writers working on or with open-source platforms come with a variety of technical backgrounds. Some have programming backgrounds, others design backgrounds, and many (most) are simply everyday users looking to read and produce content. But every writer, I argue, should have a sense for what a productive deliberative relationship is between people writing code for a platform and people

talking about what they want the platform to do but who don't necessarily know how to create an interface. This does not mean that everyone needs to be able to code for the project or develop assets, but rather that writers should be involved in the governance and design of the platform, or at least know what models of governance exist and which might suit their needs as writers. The idea is to avoid the "Mastodon" model, where expertise is assumed to lie only with those who have technical knowledge, and where developers only listen to developers because they feel everyone else doesn't count as a knowledge producer. As writing teachers, we are well positioned to offer strategies for identifying and practicing productive deliberative discussions that overcome the expertise/ignorance binary.

Historically, achieving distributed governance in the context of software development has been quite tricky. What tends to happen over time is that a small number of developers (those who are more active or, especially in corporate settings, those who are assigned as project managers) come to acquire the most decision-making powers while most writers become shut out. This process is exacerbated by a pervasive attitude in software development that privileges those with technical coding knowledge—or, as Brock (2019) noted, those who are *perceived* to possess coding knowledge—over other users (p. 82). The result is that decision-making in development communities tends to skew to those who appear to have the most coding experience, regardless of their other qualities. Naming and challenging this dynamic, I believe, is important for creating a space for non-programming writers to participate.

Platform identities: Finally, writers need to be able to negotiate writing the platform across different identity backgrounds. As we saw with Cassian (2018) and Hart (2017), there's a continued need to think through how identity mediates platform design, how experiences on a platform are uneven, and what design decisions can be made in response. Writing and literacy studies folks have a long tradition of scholarship linking identity and literacy to build on here. Here, writing the platform well means going beyond the true but trivial observation that design impacts different writers differently; rather, it means contextualizing design affordances within larger contexts social inequities and historical trajectories. Bridget Gelms and Dustin Edwards's (2019) articulated a writing-oriented example of this practice in their concept of a "technofeminist" approach to platforms, emphasizing the social inequalities that mediate through platform design. Likewise, critical design theorist Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020), drawing from sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, offers a "matrix of domination" framework for identifying how design principles "erase certain groups of people, specifically those who are intersectionally disadvantaged or multiply burdened under white supremacist heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism" (p. 19). Costanza-Chock argued for what

they call “design justice” or a “framework for analysis of how design distributes benefits and burdens between various groups of people . . . focus[ing] explicitly on the ways that design reproduces and/or challenges the matrix of domination” (p. 23). If writers are to practice writing the platform and participate in design decisions, I argue, they need to frameworks like design justice to identify the causes and consequences of design decisions across identity categories.

With these kinds of questions in mind, we turn now to examining each tenet and why we see them as necessary points of entry into platform rhetorics.

Conclusion

These ideas represent an expanded and ambitious idea of what it means to write. We’ve already seen arguments that Web 2.0 has changed definitions of writing (see Dush’s [2015] writing as content, Vee’s [2017] coding literacies, Gallagher’s [2017] writing to algorithmic audiences). What we might call “platform writing” is no different.

The four platform literacies I outlined are in some ways a new and unique response to existing configurations on the Web, but are also in other ways familiar to writing studies and intuitive to many writers. However, the design of mainstream platforms today keep us from developing them further until we are pushed to, like Cassian and Hart. I see in open-source platforms like Mastodon the potential to challenge this dynamic, but even there it is only a potential because of the inequitable governance policies that exist on Mastodon. But still we saw users like Cassian and Hart engaging in many of these literacies on their own as writers. As writing teachers we have the unique power to model and teach the activity of “writing” in a way that corresponds with our vision of how the web should be structured.

We can do this, first, by studying in more details those writers, like Cassian and Hart, who are already pushing the bounds of literacy in digital context. Ultimately, I think, we learn what Web 2.0 writing is by looking at what writers are doing and why. But we can also begin formalizing what we do know to prepare writers for the digital literacies I have discussed. We can do that by building better relationships with computer science, data science, and informatics departments that are closely tied to the task of design in Web 2.0. We can reimagine our teaching of technology and writing to be more ambitious (beyond tired proclamations of multimodality) by building in these four literacies.

The steps I have outlined above are just a beginning. A great deal of work remains to think them through more thoroughly and to realize their potential in practice and in pedagogy. To do this work, writing scholars will need to

continue to reimagine what it means to be a writer across changing digital contexts, mediums, and political economies. This work is very much worth doing, though, if writers are to take ownership in the production and circulation technologies through which we write and share texts.

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Forging New Practices: AI Use Cases and the Need for Experimentation

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Exploring generative AI in writing instruction, we advocate for experimentation with AI. We also introduce *Techne Forge*, a platform inviting scholars and educators using generative AI to share their uses and experiences.

In one of the first large studies of AI in communication classes, Peter Cardon et al. (2023) found that among hundreds of business communication instructors, educators broadly agree that change is necessary due to AI-assisted writing tools, but the majority are also concerned about plagiarism, critical thinking, creativity, and more. The survey showed that we are in a difficult position: we must adapt to a technology that seems to challenge and undermine the core values and goals of writing classes. Digital tools that contain AI present opportunities and challenges for writing instruction, but adapting to new systems has many complications and requires significant effort (Blakely, 2015; Harrison & Van Dyke, 2023; Selfe, 1999). Still, educators must adapt—and quickly. Generative AI is already being used widely, showing up in our software, classrooms, and student deliverables. As we contend with AI in writing, education, and across our lives, we are likely, at different times, to feel awe, surprise, exhilaration, frustration, and fear, or what Ethan Mollick (2024) described as three sleepless nights. As educators, we believe that managing our learning environments is crucial to the learning process, and AI has certainly caused disruption. We are also cautious about rapid change. At the same time, the disruption brought by AI is a call to action in which we must examine our values and our relationship to technology.

Our presentation explores the urgent need for scholars and educators to examine the practical uses of AI by discussing the ways experimentation and play can help address the uncertainty caused by disruptive technologies. We highlight the gaps in norms caused by AI, proposing *Techne Forge* as a means to bridge them. *Techne Forge* is a platform for publishing generative AI uses and experiences aligned with our goals in the fields of Technical and Professional Communication (TPC). Our argument is that the field needs to directly encourage and support AI use, which requires venues that are capable of

making experimentation visible. An example we discuss here, accessibility, is a central concern of TPC that GenAI may disrupt. To effectively advocate and design better practices, our field must embrace the disruption to meaningfully center humanistic goals.

Stances on AI - Optimism, Fears, and Questions

The wave of highly capable generative AI over the past two years is impacting all areas of content creation and knowledge work, which is why Mollick (2024) categorized AI as a general purpose technology that can “touch every industry and every aspect of life” (p. xv). Given the broad capabilities and potential uses, AI tools like ChatGPT are difficult to categorize and address for the purposes of teaching and reskilling. While scholars in TPC have begun working with generative AI, the discussion about the place of AI in writing and communication is filled with uncertainty. The goal of *Techne Forge* is to provide a space where discussions about AI can be grounded in the use of the technology, leaving space for us to evaluate and understand the new in context of our existing knowledge, practices, and values.

For a field that is focused on both education and professional practice, the questions we face are numerous and complex. While our field is well suited to address AI, the technology is also new. Selena Anderson’s (2023) discussion of ChatGPT outlined the implications of how we categorize and understand AI, noting that in our attempts to understand AI, we employ metaphors that significantly shape how it is understood. Like Anderson, we know that a reductive or singular presentation of AI is inadequate. To address the many challenges being posed by AI, we believe that there is an urgent need to address a shared social problem—the lack of AI literacy. It may take several years for definitive models of AI literacy to emerge, and in the meantime, AI will continue to advance and evolve.

From several perspectives, AI tools threaten and challenge many of our models of learning, teaching, and writing instruction. While AI might enable individualized learning, it may also discourage critical thinking by doing too much work for students (Cardon et al., 2023). Stories of cheating are rampant, as are stories of false accusations and confusion about which writing tools and practices are acceptable and how to reimagine our work as we are navigating the dual challenge of moving forward while also holding back (Fyfe, 2022; Gallagher & Wagner, 2024; Jiang et al., 2024; Marche, 2022). The impulse to create and enforce a strong defensive stance to protect and guard established practices is understandable, but this comes with problems, too, as the necessary trust and goodwill of the classroom are undermined by zealous enforcement practices.

Our response to AI is marked by concern, curiosity, excitement, frustration, alarm, wonder, and more. Our concern is that the sudden and dramatic rise of highly capable generative tools is disruptive and has caused a lot of uncertainty. We believe that understanding and teaching about AI requires us to engage and reflect on the potentials and pitfalls. *Techne Forge*, conceived of and developed by two of the three authors of this paper, started as a response to several statements by publishers discouraging or banning AI content, an approach that discourages scholars and practitioners from learning about AI because our success depends on our ability to share our work. *Techne Forge* encourages experimentation with AI, providing an opportunity for peer-review and open discussion about the merits and limitations of AI use.

Focusing on What matters

At any point of significant disruption, a useful exercise is to take stock of what we value most. Gavin Johnson (2023) described the escalating discourse of crisis as the pace of AI continues to present an escalating set of challenges. An alternate framing is that AI represents a significant exigence for the importance of critical thinking and language instruction, which means our work is more important than ever. The history of TPC scholarship is filled with lessons of addressing disruptive communication technologies. However, the panic about new technologies is a widespread phenomenon in which the TPC community has an opportunity to lead.

Outside of TPC, the disruptive nature of AI has significant consequences. At the start of the millennium, higher education was grappling with discussions about technological literacies, and the pattern of alarm and adjustment is familiar. For example, Marc Prensky (2001) coined the term ‘digital natives,’ to represent the widely held view that younger people (i.e. our students) are naturally comfortable and familiar with digital technologies, a view that suggests that they do not need formal instruction. Shortly after, Sue Bennett et al. (2008) critically described the concept of ‘digital natives’ as a moral panic, and they argued that the assumption that young people have a naturally developed competence with technology is flawed at best and negligent at worst. We are now at a time where we must face a similar challenge. Developing AI literacy will require systematic, formal training. It will not simply spontaneously emerge.

In the scholarship of TPC, we have established that comfort, knowledge, and skill with technology requires systematic education. We agree with Johnson’s (2023) argument that our response should be grounded in the existing scholarship and frameworks. Johnson points to the foundational maxims about technologies as embedded in human systems, developed over time, and requiring specialized knowledge and training. Johnson’s final reminder that

“policing is not pedagogy” (p. 172) is central to our argument that our field needs to create space for supporting AI use to foster the kind of discovery and applied knowledge that is prerequisite for AI literacy.

The positions we take on AI technologies will shape the skills and perspectives of students for decades to come, but to craft effective skills and policies, we must take the time to discover and understand the technologies ourselves. TPC has a long history of promoting experimentation and play with new technologies. Unforgettably, Cynthia Selfe (1999) advocated that we dive in. We are now at a similar moment in which scholars and educators must seek out opportunities to meaningfully engage with disruptive technologies to find the opportunities, to understand the limitations, and to advocate for the core values at the heart of TPC.

The rich theory and practices in TPC are a necessary element of the social response to AI, and through our work as educators and practitioners, we are now positioned to advocate. We can advocate for our students and for practices that are ethical, effective, and human. AI may do some impressive work, actually designing good content to solve specific problems still requires significant amounts of effort, knowledge, skill, and critical awareness, regardless of AI’s involvement. In a manifesto for AI in technical communication, Stuart Selber (2024) made the case that students need to know more about technical communication, not less. We would add that we need to encourage and support more engagement with AI, not less. As Selfe declared more than twenty years ago, now is the time to dive in. Our field must take stock of how we understand AI, and how we position AI relative to our work.

One clear way we see our work with AI as necessary is through the rhetorical and humane grounding of TPC work. Our work with language and technology is about human empowerment, so we argue that simple narratives of AI as *dangerous* or AI as *the solution* need to be avoided because there are clearly significant opportunities emerging. For example, AI is increasingly an integral aspect of human-machine interaction by users with disabilities. This is one example of empowerment and general use. Smart devices have been taken up as a means to provide more users the ability to “overcome physical and cognitive challenges” (Snow, 2019, n.p.) when interacting with technology. But, after ChatGPT went public in 2022, articles about AI users with various cognitive and neurological experiences began to appear in mass media, claiming AI solves or improves disabled users’ day-to-day communications and their professional lives (Harwell, Tiku, & Oremus, 2022; Henneborn, 2023; Weitzman, 2023; Levin, 2024). These publications often present reductive narrative traps as light human-interest stories often do.

While some of these editorials provide clear examples of how users with various experiences and abilities are making use of AI tools, others offer those

examples as license to assume and assert that AI is some kind of a digital ‘solution’ to accessibility problems. Such claims are appealing because they absolve us from needing to create accessible and inclusive designs. While there is reason to be optimistic, most if not all of these publications offer little more than anecdotal evidence. Importantly, the idea that disability is a problem to be solved’ is reductive and harmful (Ringo, 2013; Erard, 2017; Gallagher & Gallagher, 2024), and more work should be done to fully determine the ways people with disabilities can and want to use AI. So, we ask, how should we consider the relationship between AI and people with disabilities? And we argue that, again, we need to know more, not less, about these topics. Similarly, we need to examine and explain AI’s potential precisely because the value is contextual, in much the same way all communication practices are.

The Need for Experimentation and Play

Carving out time for ourselves to experiment and encouraging our colleagues to explore AI are necessary tasks for developing awareness and competencies that can inform effective curriculum and program development. Timothy Ponce (2024) suggested an empathetic approach to encouraging colleagues to work with AI. Together, we can apply the same approach ourselves to reflect on our own concerns and to address our own misunderstandings about AI. Our classes and programs cannot successfully adapt to AI in the contemporary educational landscape without this work.

While writing may be a product or a process, it may also be classified as problem-solving and design work, and Jim Purdy’s (2014) discussion of design thinking as iterative problem-solving underscores the value of experimentation, which we see as a necessary mindset as we explore new AI technologies. Similarly, Andelyn Bedington et al. (2024) reflected on a semester in which students engaged with AI, finding that successful use of AI requires critical engagement and sustained problem solving. They illustrate the important point that critical use of AI is the result of sustained, meaningful practice. Sustained practice is difficult, however, when policing practices discourage and prohibit AI or obfuscate what is allowed.

The impulse to avoid AI is not just felt in the classroom. As aforementioned, some disability groups and communities have not been quick to adopt AI into their lifestyles, while others may forsake them. According to Philip B. Gallagher and Marci J. Gallagher (2024), the societal push for adopting new technologies to address disability “problems” is traditionally “an ableist point of view” (p. 4). That is, what society labels “problems” is actually the normal state of being for many people, and they may not want to change how they live—and they shouldn’t have to be “fixed” (Ringo, 2013). No technology

should be forced on users; but instead, users should have the opportunity to self-select technologies. According to Liz Hutter and Halcyon Lawrence (2018), as designers we should think less about how we experience the world, push less for changes to others' experiences, and seek to include diverse experiences and voices in our work. So, anyone looking to AI as a digital panacea to address disabilities should instead pivot to support all users of today's technologies via an access-first design method (Gallagher & Gallagher, 2024). We need spaces to explore these processes and study users, study everybody and our approaches to AI for all.

There can be no doubt that generative AI is worthy of scrutiny and criticism. We are concerned, for example, about the ecological impact of training and use of AI, the use of AI to promote disinformation, questions of intellectual property and law, and more. Additionally, we are concerned about the accuracy of information that AI produces, the impact that this technology will have on critical thinking, and our ability to effectively motivate students to do the hard work of learning. Worries about AI have even led to claims about the end of college writing (Lieberman, 2024; Marche, 2022). Collectively, these concerns may result in the understandable impulse to create distance from AI altogether. However, we believe that the problems with AI are, instead, a significant reason to pay attention. Managing the risks and promoting the benefits requires us to dive in. Tracking the development of AI policies, engaging new applications and capabilities, and mapping the practices surrounding implementation are all necessary steps for informing a robust and usable response and the only way to address the challenges caused by AI. Choosing to avoid and stigmatize the use of AI undermines the very conversations that are necessary.

Discussing Priorities: AI and New Techniques

Our field of TPC is well-suited to the challenge of evaluating new resources and designing new practices, and the mission of *Techne Forge* is to encourage and promote a space for the necessary experimentation that will foster the development of applied AI communication. In examining key priorities for AI integration in our field, the short sections below address several critical areas. We begin by emphasizing the human elements in AI interactions, exploring how user judgment and engagement shape AI outputs and ownership considerations. We then analyze *The Death of the GUI* as an exemplar of critical AI exploration on *Techne Forge*, particularly its examination of accessibility and visual communication in the transition from GUIs to AIUIs. The discussion then turns to AI's role in research and learning, including both its practical applications and ethical considerations. Finally, we explore the importance of

experimentation and knowledge-sharing through *Techne Forge* as a venue for developing AI literacy practices.

Emphasize the Human Elements of AI

The use of AI to solve problems can be a process of experimentation and exploration. For example, human judgment and interaction play an important role in managing the level of detail and refining outputs. AI tools and language models vary tremendously, and the variations allow users to actively engage with, not just discover. The amount and nature of human engagement has implications for determining ownership and navigating questions of intellectual property (Hilty et al., 2020). Human use of AI through guidance, evaluation, and corroboration are necessary, and the human effort involved needs further examination and consideration in discussions about AI use. AI is not simply doing the work alone, as there is an ongoing exchange between humans and AI constantly. A design and problem-solving approach that recognizes the contributions and efforts involved in effective AI use is a necessary part of establishing models of AI literacy.

Exploring an AI and Access Exemplar

As an example of this type of critical exploration on *Techne Forge*, “The Death of the GUI” offers a compelling reflection on the potential shift from graphical user interfaces (GUIs) to AI user interfaces (AIUIs) and their implications for visual communication and accessibility (Gallagher, 2024). Through critical engagement with viewpoints from various stakeholders, including industry leaders like Sam Altman (CEO of OpenAI) and AI agents like Google’s Gemini, the author navigates the complexities of this technological paradigm shift. His expertise in visual communication and commitment to accessibility enriches the discourse by highlighting the importance of preserving visual elements in human-computer interaction while advocating for inclusive design practices and working with generative AI at the same time to find a path forward for the GUI. The article exemplifies a thoughtful exploration of AI’s impact on user experience and accessibility, demonstrating both engagement with generative AI and human accessibility in order to examine the changing AI literacy landscape. Jay Dolmage (2017) argued for combating ableism that is overlooked in many ways on our campuses; the works of *Techne Forge* aim not to perpetuate such mistakes with AI. Rather than diminishing AI and disability through avoidance, the work pushes the limitations of our knowledge about technology, bodies, and minds (Dolmage, 2017, p. 20).

As the first discussion article on our site, “The Death of the GUI” exemplifies the type of resources necessary for spurring discussions of AI. It offers insights into the intersection of AI, visual communication, and accessibility

fields and brings these subjects into discussion with both human and machine agents. By incorporating perspectives from academia, industry, and generative AI, the article illustrates collaborative dialogue and encourages a holistic understanding of the implications of AIUIs. Through collaboration and reflection, this work contributes to shaping a more accessible and equitable future in the realm of collaborating with AI technology on topics of communication and user experience.

AI for Research and Learning

AI's abilities are perhaps best used as a resource to quickly develop ideas and gather initial ideas to work with. AI is being used in many ways across research practices, literature reviews, and multiple forms of analysis (Christou, 2023). While the capability may not be in question much, the ethics of its use are. Discussions about the appropriateness of using AI in the writing practice are often sweeping and discouraging, while at the same time the uses and capabilities are expanding and increasingly powerful. Thus, we are led down a rabbit hole of contradictions.

Researchers are always balancing ethics, novelty, and new possibilities by the very nature of conducting research. While caution is warranted, so too is seeking out and using the most efficient and advanced methods. Where possible, encouraging and supporting the use of AI is an ethical imperative because of the potential gains. Discouraging AI use can create undue limitations on research and education. A crucial part of any research is familiarizing oneself with the data being researched as a data analysis method (Belotto, 2018). It may be that researchers using AI do not develop a high level of intimacy with data, or it may be that AI can encourage new and deeper relationships with data. Carefully attending to when, where, how, and why AI is used is more important than simply asking if AI is used.

Reframe, Reimagine, Play, and Share

Opportunities to experiment with AI are omnipresent in the work of scholars, professors, students, and communication practitioners, and *Techne Forge* offers a venue where such work can be shared and encouraged. Developing a better sense of AI may begin with experimentation during regularly occurring knowledge work like developing course materials, creating templates, responding to emails, advising students, and more. Developing familiarity with the possibilities and dangers requires us to test, explore, and play with the technologies, whether gathering information, finding helpful examples, or soliciting advice. As a field, we need to share successes, discuss new approaches to common problems, and highlight the clear limitations or dangers. Use cases that reflect attempts at experimentation are what we want to

feature on *Techne Forge*, and it is our hope that we can collectively reflect on AI literacy practices.

Ultimately, we aim to share practical ways to establish a foundation and reflect on what we are facing with generative AI. Now is the time for thoughtful experimentation by scholars, practitioners, and educators who dive in—a time for a collaborative approach to explore and apply AI responsibly. *Techne Forge* is our invitation to academicians to join this vital exploration. *Techne Forge* can be a place of realization and comfort as its purpose is to shine light on AI, its processes, and how we can work with it better, instead of being apprehensive about it. *Techne Forge* is thus a collective space that pulls credible information into a singular domain offering a practical space for AI reflection and progress.

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The Autistic Me, Produced Digitally: Experienced Responses to Digital Storytelling

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After presenting this project at Computers & Writing 2024, the author departed higher education for a position in local government. Remaining in higher education became untenable for his physical and emotional health. This personal narrative explores the tension between the public advocacy of digital Autistic self-identity and the embedded values of some academic departments. The narrative opens with an explanation for the author's exit from higher education, framing the author's academic journey as difficult and ultimately futile. His path took him from student to educator to "AltAc" (Alternative Academic), and along the way, he experienced troubling responses to his online identity as an Autistic person. The author highlights obstacles he encountered as an Autistic self-advocate engaged in digital storytelling. On X (formerly Twitter), LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms, self-advocates have adopted hashtags, notably "#ActuallyAutistic" and "#AutisticsInAcademia," identifying publicly as Autistics within higher education. The need to preemptively label oneself "actually" Autistic reflects the frequent dismissals and often aggressive attacks Autistics experience in online spaces. This narrative describes the physical, emotional, and career tolls the author endured, at least in part, for self-advocacy through a digital Autistic self-identity.

Leaving Higher Education

I intended to spend the 2024–25 academic year designing a project on Neurodiverse self-identity and digital authoring. As a foundational project, I proposed conversing with Autistic content creators, listening to their stories, and reviewing the similarities in our collective experiences as digital storytellers. Significant differences among Autistic authors might also be affirmed. As M. Remi Yergeau observed, "While new media scholars bemoan the death of the blog, the autistic blogosphere thrives" (2018, p. 23). The Neurodiverse blogosphere merits scholarly exploration.

There is a rich trove of material authored or coauthored by Neurodiverse writers, including an expanding body of self-published works. As a blogger and podcaster, my inbox is filled with a steady stream of requests for me to

review books and interview authors. There is also a body of work addressing Autistic writers. These range from attempts to diagnose long-deceased writers, such as Julie Brown's *Writers on the Spectrum: How Autism and Asperger Syndrome Have Influenced Literary Writing* (2010), to efforts to dismiss the Autistics as incapable of reflective self-expression, notably Francesca Happé's 1991 paper on Autistic autobiographies, which I critiqued in my dissertation (Wyatt, 2010). Focusing on digital storytelling would allow me to craft an autoethnographic project critiquing existing scholarship when appropriate, especially challenges to rhetorical agency (Yergeau, 2018).

However, my physical and emotional health suffered while working as a full-time lecturer at a flagship state research university. My online identity as a digital storyteller suffered, too, with only ten blog posts and eight podcast episodes released during the 2023–24 academic year. The brief blog posts addressed exhaustion and burnout. I was on edge, shaking and trembling as I forced myself through sensory and social overload on campus. Lacking time to express myself as *The Autistic Me* increased my isolation and anxiety. I clung to my identity as a university instructor while my body rebelled. My doctor told me that my working conditions had to change.

In late July, I presented a letter from my physician to human resources seeking accommodations. For the fall, I had been assigned a Monday-Wednesday-Friday schedule, teaching back-to-back courses in three different rooms on different floors of the same building. The doctor recommended a Tuesday-Thursday teaching schedule and a single-room assignment. In response to the letter, HR requested that I complete a Family and Medical Leave Act form. There was no offer to compromise. Previous experiences taught me that such requests do not end with accommodations. A settlement with another university prevents me from discussing these experiences in detail. Some stories cannot be told.

Two days before I had to either accept or reject a reappointment at the university, I received an offer for a position in local government as a digital media specialist. The communications team manager explained that *The Autistic Me* influenced the hiring decision. The city wanted someone familiar with communicating complex concepts to a non-technical audience. I now work with several Neurodiverse colleagues, creating digital content. These colleagues encourage me to create new content for *The Autistic Me*. I found a place where my identity and my creative interests are valued.

Writing, Technology, and Identity

Despite struggling with the physical act of writing and the mental process of decoding words, I declared myself a creative writer during second grade.

I wanted to craft compelling stories like the ones I saw on screens and local stages. A partially paralyzed right arm and palsy episodes make handwriting slow and painful. During those elementary years, I discovered the magic of typewriters. Then came computers. Apple and Atari computers sat unused in some classrooms. The word processors required memorizing unintuitive key-stroke combinations, but I enjoyed the power of moving words and sentences on screen. I learned to program in junior high because there was no usable word processor for the Commodore VIC-20 my family had purchased. Decades later students and I would discuss how writing is technology, drawing from Denis Baron's *A Better Pencil: Readers, Writers, and the Digital Revolution* (2009).

Growing up in the 8-bit era of Apple, Atari, Commodore, and Tandy computers, I taught myself computer programming and applied the skills I gained to writing, designing, and publishing content. While others were interested in creating video games, I learned to design digital typefaces and how to control printer output. By high school, my refuge was the journalism and yearbook classroom, where I maintained the new IBM PCs and connected them to an Apple LaserWriter printer. I coded a text editor, which the publication staff used to compose newspaper and yearbook stories.

In the 1980s, I began exploring virtual spaces, where I felt more comfortable than in classrooms. Accommodation goes beyond designing for physical differences. As Sarah Parsloe's 2015 analysis of 561 discussion posts on "Aspie Central" (AC) found, computer-mediated communication (CMC), accommodates various traits common among Autistics and other Neurodiverse individuals. The benefits of text-based communication for Autistics include that it "avoids nonverbal cues that are difficult for people with ASDs to process" (p. 340).

Asperger's Syndrome was christened "The Geek Syndrome" by *Wired* magazine reporter Steve Silberman (2001). As Silberman later noted, we gathered online in our *Neurotribes* (2015). The exhaustion of decoding vocal tones, facial expressions, body language, and social cues no longer drove us from interacting with others. We still experienced some frustration, and synchronous chats proved more difficult than asynchronous discussion threads.

Scattered geographically and isolated socially in physical spaces, we located others online with whom we shared traits and preferences that others labeled "odd." We shared complaints about how unclear most people are, with their tendency to hint and suggest instead of simply telling us what is expected of us. We took turns mocking confusing idioms and aphorisms. We had been told throughout childhood and into adulthood to sit still, make eye contact, and pay attention—even while we were absorbing everything around us. We commiserated about loud noises, strong smells, uncomfortable clothes,

and other sensory annoyances. We shared labels: lazy, works below potential, unfocused, and worse.

We shared our narratives, digitally constructing an even larger identity. We created an advocacy community without realizing it. The Internet expanded our community dramatically. Before the browser-based World Wide Web, the (mostly undiagnosed) Neurodiverse gathered in USENET newsgroups, Relay chat rooms, LISTSERV email lists, and FIDONET forums. A virtual version of me frequented those virtual spaces in the 1980s and 90s, joining Compu-Serve, America Online (AOL), and other dial-up services. During college, I used a mainframe account to access the Internet Relay Chat channels.

Online acquaintances shared stories of self-discovery and new labels: Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), and Pervasive Developmental Disorder—Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). Over time, some were relabeled with “Asperger’s Syndrome” by doctors. These online friends embraced the identity of “Aspie.” They also began to argue they didn’t have a disorder or syndrome. They were simply Neurodiverse. As Sarah Parsloe observed, online Autistics “have worked to counteract the biomedical understanding of autism by exchanging it for the discourses of neurodiversity” (p. 337). In our stories, we are not flawed—we are part of human diversity.

This emerging online Autistic community would evolve into the broader Neurodiversity Movement. We faced some internal and external conflicts as debates raged about who was entitled to the various and changing labels (Parsloe, 2015; Silberman, 2015). Yet, in a text-based, self-selected online universe, the debates were contained to spaces few people visited—and many did not know existed. Autistics want to preserve our early history, including these early digital stories (Botha et al., 2024). The online forum “Wrong Planet,” founded by Alex Plank, was named for the experience of Autistics: we were outsiders on a strange planet, like extraterrestrial anthropologists trying to decode human nature (Boyce, 2022). Plank has been a guest on my podcast, indicating the interconnected nature of the Autistic community.

Our online Neurotribes of the 1980s and 90s brought together people with similar traits and experiences. However, we were so similar that it limited our understanding of Neurodiversity. We were mostly young white males from middle-class households. Forty years later, young white males continue to be diagnosed more frequently with Autism than other demographic groups (Cruz et al., 2024).

I received formal diagnoses of ADHD and complex partial seizures in the late 1990s. I didn’t consider myself disabled, though I have physical limitations from a complex birth: partial paralysis, Erb’s palsy, and base membrane dystrophy. Without school as a focal point, my mind and body were beyond

my control. I only felt well when I was at a computer keyboard. Feeling lost, I did what many of my Autistic friends have done: I returned to school where I could focus on writing stories.

Graduate School Struggles

Researching autism was not my intention when I entered graduate school at 35. I sought an MFA in creative writing, filling my schedule with courses in film and theater alongside the required courses in composition and rhetoric. My stage plays have won awards and juried contests. Before returning to school, I had taken to stages at poetry jams and story nights. I changed my degree path from the MFA to an MA after a faculty member suggested that I focus on technology and writing to improve my chances on the job market. My thesis addressed how a learning management system (LMS) altered traditional student-teacher relationships in writing courses (Wyatt, 2006).

My wife and I moved to Minnesota in 2006, where the University of Minnesota had accepted me as a doctoral student in Rhetoric, Scientific and Technical Communication. Things did not go well. Apparent seizures increased, with shaking and palsy-like symptoms impossible to control. I experienced migraines weekly. I endured neurological tests, brain scans, and more. It was one test after another, alongside my efforts to remain in graduate school. In November 2006, I was referred to a neuropsychologist for a reevaluation of my ADHD and learning disabilities.

In December 2006, the neuropsychologist added the label “autistic” to my diagnoses. The DSM-IV-TR had been revised (American Psychiatric Association, 2000); many of us with other diagnoses were now gathered under the heading of “Autism Spectrum Disorder.” Now that I was officially Autistic, the program faculty suggested I adjust my research focus toward Autism.

To meet a project requirement for a digital composition course, I launched *The Autistic Me* on Blogger in 2007. Blog entries were posted without my name displayed. I planned to archive or delete the blog at the end of the course and made no effort to promote the blog. I assumed the story of how I came to be labeled Autistic would be of little or no interest to other people. By not completing Blogger’s online profile, I believed that my digital footprints and real identity were obscured. Had I written a book, someone would have had to locate the text in a store to read my thoughts. As a Google service, Blogger posts were given priority in search results. The more recent a resource, the more weight it receives in search algorithms. Those first few posts to *The Autistic Me* appeared at the top of searches, leading to significant traffic.

Many early readers of *The Autistic Me* were parents of Autistic children. Within less than two weeks of launching the blog, I began to receive aggressive

emails. Some of the senders would be familiar to other autistic creators, “autism parents” who cling to a narrow and outdated concept of Autistic. My autism diagnosis was challenged, as were my lived experiences. The vitriol, which continues today, takes an emotional toll on many of the self-advocates I know. These were not the general attacks posted in communities; they were targeted and personal. My digital composition classmates did not respond to the blog for a couple of weeks. When a handful of peers finally did read *The Autistic Me*, there was a less aggressive, yet still skeptical, reaction to my disclosure. Their skepticism was disappointing.

Disclosure came with unanticipated consequences. Faculty began suggesting I focus my research on autism. Classmates expressed sympathy, as though I had contracted a fatal disease. Autism became the one and only aspect of my identity that seemed to matter within academia. These experiences were not unique. Edited collections including *Aquamarine Blue 5: Personal Stories of College Students with Autism* (Prince-Hughes, 2002), *Neurodiversity in Higher Education: Positive Responses to Specific Learning Differences* (Pollak, 2009), and *Scholars with Autism: Achieving Dreams* (Perner, 2012) were published as awareness of Neurodiversity among students (and faculty) increased.

Despite the negative emails from strangers and expressions of sympathy from classmates, I received far more positive feedback for my blog posts. Soon, I was being asked to share my stories in person. I spoke at school districts, regional conferences, and support group meetings. *The Autistic Me* had followers and subscribers, people who noticed when I posted—and when I didn’t. When I had various medical emergencies and didn’t post updates, I would return online to dozens of emails asking if I was well.

A handful of readers located my other blogs. My Blogger profile displays that I joined in 2004 and lists my other blogs that originated on Blogger. My primary blog was, and still is, *Poet Ponders the Digital*, a blog about technology and writing. From that blog, people discovered my name and were then able to locate my old USENET posts and other online artifacts. Some used the other blogs as further evidence that I could not be autistic since I had more than one interest.

When the digital composition course ended, I decided not to archive *The Autistic Me*. Readers, especially Autistics, wanted to learn from my experiences. Though my guidance to students would be to never write about negative experiences in school or the workplace, my blog became a coping mechanism for isolation and anger. I shared my medical challenges, especially those that might be connected to autism. When I faced an expulsion hearing for being perceived as “aggressive in tone and movement,” I blogged about that, too. My Autistic traits were used against me by a respected scholar who still works in the field. Two other major figures in rhetoric critiqued my Autistic traits,

likely not realizing how hurtful their observations were. Having a renowned professor tell me that I lacked the ability to understand complex theories led me to drop her course.

Yet, I found myself in agreement with these experts. How could I deny their wisdom? For assigned readings, I located sentences I understood and hoped the rest of the text supported those arguments. I memorized recurring phrases and repeated them to pass exams. I understand the complex technical aspects of digital media production, but decoding the language of rhetoric remains beyond my capacity decades later. I still cannot grasp theoretical works considered foundational within rhetoric. I envy Yergeau's ability to navigate the field of rhetoric while simultaneously calling out its traditions that exclude Autistics based on assumptions of what it means to be Autistic (2018, p. 36). To complete my coursework, I selected courses from other departments, such as advanced statistics—a topic I do understand.

I also adjusted my research plans and composed a dissertation that connected user interface/user experience design (UI/UX) to the experiences of Autistic students in online writing courses (Wyatt, 2010). By focusing on data from surveys and coded interviews, I avoided theoretical frameworks. The dissertation reflected an effort to please others.

A portion of my project relied on coding online forum posts. I felt guilty for conducting grant-funded research projects that relied on publicly accessible Autistic online communities. I had violated the trust of my community. Researchers should announce their presence in an online community, even if the forums are visible and accessible, without joining the space. I made no effort to convert my dissertation to a series of articles or a monograph. As I prepared to defend my dissertation, I entered the job market.

Teaching while Autistic

To my surprise, members of several hiring committees were familiar with *The Autistic Me*. Some interview questions displayed ignorance and a lack of professionalism. I was asked how I could relate to students. Other questions were even more personal and inappropriate. I should have let go of the interview experiences. Instead, I blogged. I was not alone in experiencing micro-aggressions, as demonstrated by the chapters in *Disability and the Academic Job Market* (McGunnigle, 2022). Too often, disclosure leads to problematic assumptions, yet failing to disclose a disability can lead to conflicts in the workplace. Of course, I entered interviews having disclosed my differences.

In my first full-time university position, I succumbed to pressure to perform as an Autistic and agreed to an Autism-related research agenda—an analysis of public blogs composed by self-identified Autistics to identify

features of “Autistic writing.” After several attempts, I found myself unable to pursue the project. I began resenting assumptions about Autistics, pushing me away from the research. During my brief time on the tenure track, a colleague joked, “Autistics? We don’t need no stinkin’ Autistics.” Supposedly a humorous nod to Mel Brooks’ *Blazing Saddles* (1974), I knew I didn’t belong. I taught at several other universities before accepting that I needed to take drastic action if I wanted to teach something other than first-year composition. I went back to school, of course.

I returned to creative writing and had several plays produced between 2014 and 2017. I found a supportive arts community and made friends with whom I remain in contact. We collaborated on theater and film projects. I shared these new adventures on the blog and podcast. In 2017, I finally completed a Master of Fine Arts in Film and Digital Technology. My thesis project was a documentary on typography within cinema (Wyatt, 2017). With the MFA in hand, I was determined to teach media production.

And yet, after obtaining the MFA, I ended up teaching first-year composition at two more universities. I brought media production into my course sections when possible. My students produced video essays and audio interviews. I encouraged students to consider academic papers as a special form of storytelling. I managed to present conference papers and publish articles on media creation. However, I felt isolated within the English departments in which I found myself.

Through the Pandemic and Beyond

My students seemed more likely to locate *The Autistic Me* and ask questions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated online courses. Several students disclosed their own diagnoses or self-identities as Neurodiverse. In 2020, I began adopting the hashtags #ActuallyAutistic, #AutisticsInAcademia, and #AuADHD on social media. These hashtags also helped me locate other Autistics connected to higher education. They also proclaim to the doubters that I am a genuine, officially diagnosed, Autistic. “Listenership to *The Autistic Me* podcast quadrupled, and readership of the established blog nearly doubled. Posting more content to *The Autistic Me* blog during the pandemic attracted more readers and followers. The podcast shifted from a monthly to a bimonthly release schedule. In response to another creator’s suggestion, I renamed the podcast *Perspectives on Neurodiversity* to reflect that it features conversations, not just monologues. The rebranding led to another increase in listenership and readers.

I received grateful emails and messages for discussing life as a Neurodiverse parent of two Neurodiverse daughters. My daughters joined the podcast, using pseudonyms, to discuss their Autism, anxiety, and ADHD. Following

their episodes, I received praise and criticism. How dare we vaccinate children! How dare we keep them home when school resumes! How dare we do whatever it was we were not supposed to be doing. With a single post, podcast, or video, you can be exiled as a heretic. When I wrote and talked about the decision to seek medical support for my daughters, both of whom have severe ADHD, I received a flurry of negative responses from within the Neurodiversity community. Parenting choices are prone to controversy; the dilemmas faced by parents of Neurodiverse children seem uniquely fraught because we're often blamed for our children's differences.

Concluding Thoughts

To my knowledge, none of my departmental colleagues maintained blogs or podcasts. One colleague noted that digital media are for the “mass market,” accompanied by an observation that I invest a lot of time and energy in “less serious” writing: scripts, stories, essays, and online content. It seems ironic that a scholar of literature was critiquing my creative passions. I write thousands of words weekly, which I track compulsively, but few of those words target academic audiences. Digital storytelling connects me to people, especially other Neurodiverse creators facing skepticism regarding their identities and abilities. That seems as valuable as writing for academic readers. Our words matter greatly.

I appreciate that I never compartmentalized my personal life, teaching, and storytelling. I accepted conference invitations and honoraria to speak on Neurodiversity, aware that my academic credentials contributed to these opportunities. Those appearances led to media interviews and podcast appearances. My identity as an Autistic with a doctorate helped me reach parents, caregivers, and educators. I let people assume whatever they wished about my research.

Research from within the Neurodiverse community should be taken up by scholars willing to build on Remi Yergeau's autoethnographic work in rhetoric and the works of other Neurodiverse writers inside and outside higher education. Yergeau's 2018 work was followed by award-winning journalist Eric Garcia's 2021 *We're Not Broken: Changing the Autism Conversation*. Garcia deftly moves across the Autism spectrum and the spectrums of race, socioeconomic, gender, and sexual orientation. Public awareness of the diversity within the Neurodiversity movement is increasing, and so are opportunities for scholarly projects that engage in more complete conversations. Most of my Autistic friends identify with at least one additional, and often several, marginalized communities.

As the parent of two young Neurodiverse daughters encountering obstacles similar to those I met, I reconsidered my avoidance of research exploring

Autistic experiences. My daughters should not find suppressing—masking—their Neurodiverse traits necessary for social, academic, and professional success. Nor should educators expect them to limit their identities to Neurodiversity. Contributing to an evolving understanding of Neurodiversity would be the greatest legacy I can leave my daughters. Leaving higher education might change my audience, but not my purpose.

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THE PROCEEDINGS OF C&W 2024

This book includes selected proceedings from the 2024 Computers and Writing conference, exploring topics in archival work, gaming, artificial intelligence, and pedagogies. Contributions engage the 2024 conference theme—*Seriously Digital: Work, Play, and Digital Storytelling for “Post” Pandemic People*—using a variety of theoretical, pedagogical, and research-based approaches familiar to scholars of digital rhetorics, multimodal composition, and closely related fields.

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