

Justin Lewis

Euphoria, alienation, transformation: Vignettes of friction in AI writing

1 Introduction: Writing instruction and the US community college context

In December 2022, the advent of ChatGPT launched me on a journey from pedagogical euphoria to institutional panic, to a renewed, conditional hope for writing instruction. As a writing instructor in an open-access community college in the US, I work with a diverse student population in a resource-constrained environment where the promise of truly individualized AI assistance initially felt like a democratic dream fulfilled. Twenty-four months later, I find myself sad and hopeful about the prospects of teaching writing in an age of artificial intelligence.

Each phase of this journey reveals a different dimension of “friction”¹ between AI and writing: first, as pedagogical euphoria; then, as alienation from the cognitive processes that make writing pedagogically valuable; and finally, as a site of potential transformation. The three vignettes that follow trace this evolution through lived experience, examining how friction between human writers and artificial intelligence might reshape rather than simply threaten the future of composition pedagogy.

2 Vignette 1: Euphoria

The digital “stack” of portfolios sat unopened in my Canvas LMS when I opened ChatGPT for the first time in a work context. It was nearly 9 p.m., twenty-five essays awaited feedback, and I was exhausted. In a moment of desperation, I typed my first work-related prompt: “Help me write feedback for a student essay about community college transfer challenges.”

The response appeared in seconds—not generic platitudes, but genuinely thoughtful feedback addressing the student’s specific arguments about transfer credit policies. The AI had identified strengths (clear thesis, relevant examples) and offered constructive suggestions (stronger transitions, more evidence). More remarkably, the tone struck the balance I struggled to maintain after hours of grading: encouraging yet analytical, specific yet accessible. By offloading the laborious aspects of response, the AI was smoothing away friction in the assessment process; and, at first this, felt like a pedagogical breakthrough.

¹ In this essay, I draw heavily on Collin Gifford Brooke’s (2025) notion of “friction” in the context of generative AI as discussed here.

A week later, I introduced ChatGPT to my research writing course. Twenty-five students, ages 15–56, representing three first languages. We projected the interface and brainstormed together: “Should community college be free?” The room erupted as ideas cascaded across the screen—economic arguments about workforce development, social justice frameworks about educational equity, counter-arguments about funding mechanisms. Students who typically struggled to generate thesis statements were suddenly debating which angle would be most compelling. Maria, who had told me she “wasn’t a writer,” was explaining why the AI’s suggestion about student debt didn’t capture her experience as a working mother. The tool had become a thinking partner, reducing the blank-page friction that often paralyzed novice writers.

This seemed to fulfill the vision of process pedagogy (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Murray, 1972) by externalizing brainstorming and revision processes, finally making Murray’s dream of truly individualized, iterative writing instruction feasible. What Flower and Hayes had theorized about making complex mental operations visible was happening before my eyes. The AI wasn’t replacing student thinking; it was scaffolding it, giving students access to rhetorical moves that expert writers internalize but novices struggle to reach.²

The implications for multilingual students felt particularly profound. Students such as Carlos, whose insights about immigration policy were obscured by surface-level errors, could now focus on developing arguments while AI helped with syntactic complexity. Fatima, whose rich knowledge about educational systems in Eritrea was difficult to express in academic English, found in the AI a patient translator bridging linguistic communities. This wasn’t replacing their voices, but amplifying them by providing access to linguistic resources that native speakers took for granted.

By spring quarter, the democratic promise felt tangible. Students would draft with AI support, then bring those texts to peer review workshops. The recursive, social, meaning-focused writing process that process pedagogy had long envisioned finally seemed within reach for every student regardless of linguistic background or preparation level. The friction that had historically constrained both instructor feedback and student ideation was dissolving.

There was only one small discomfort, barely noticeable then. When I used AI to draft my own research proposals that winter, the writing flowed more smoothly than usual . . . perhaps too smoothly. But that unease was easy to dismiss amid the excitement of pedagogical possibility. In hindsight, I realize my winter euphoria masked deeper questions about what happens when the effortful processes that make writing pedagogically valuable become frictionless. The very ease that felt so liberating would soon reveal cracks in our understanding of what writing instruction actually accomplishes.

3 Vignette 2: Alienation

The call for a regional conference on AI and pedagogy sat open in one browser tab while ChatGPT waited in another. Six months after my initial discovery, AI had become routine for everything from email responses to assignment sheets. But this felt different—this was my own scholarship, my voice in the academic conversation. The 500-word abstract needed to capture months of thinking about AI’s impact on student agency while positioning my work within debates about digital literacies and writing pedagogy.

² This reminds me of Stuart Selber’s call for multiliteracies and challenges us to consider that tools do not simply expand fluency but reshape what counts as functional, critical, and rhetorical literacy in digital spaces (2004).

I crafted a prompt: “Help me draft an abstract for a conference presentation about AI writing tools in community college courses. Focus on student agency and democratic access” The response was technically excellent—coherent academic register, relevant theoretical frameworks, compelling research questions. It mentioned Freire’s (2018) critical pedagogy, referenced digital divide scholarship, and positioned the work appropriately. Yet something felt profoundly wrong. The prose was smooth—too smooth. It sounded like everyone and no one, a perfectly adequate academic voice that could have emerged from any scholar in our field.

I stared at the screen with growing unease. This wasn’t the excitement I had felt watching students discover ideas through AI collaboration. This was a hollowing sensation, as if my scholarly voice were being translated through some institutional algorithm that preserved form while evacuating substance. The abstract was good enough to submit, which was precisely the problem.

This anxiety demanded a different theoretical lens. As a graduate student, I had embraced Roland Barthes’ declaration of the author’s death with theoretical enthusiasm. His 1967 essay had liberated me from anxieties about originality by arguing that all writing draws from an “immense dictionary” of existing language—the author merely a “scriptor” arranging pre-existing materials rather than creating *ex nihilo* (145–146). What felt theoretically liberating in graduate school felt personally devastating in practice. ChatGPT seemed to perfectly embody Barthes’ vision, yet confronting this algorithmic realization of poststructural theory felt nothing like liberation. Instead, I experienced what Foucault might have recognized as the return of the author-function in its most anxious form.

Jody Shipka’s work on embodied literacies offered vocabulary for what was being lost. In *Toward a Composition Made Whole* (2011), Shipka argues that writing is never purely cognitive but always “a dynamic, embodied, multimodal whole—one that both shapes and is shaped by the environment” (p. 26). The physical act of composing, including pauses between sentences, false starts, the tactile experience of revision, constitutes meaning-making itself. Likewise, Kristie Fleckenstein’s (2003) account of embodied literacies extends this point: Composing emerges not only through words but through images, gestures, and the sensory imagination she calls “imageword.” What AI erases is not just effort but this embodied friction: the tactile, imaginal dimension that makes writing feel lived.

Taken together, Shipka’s and Fleckenstein’s accounts remind us that composing is always textured, bodily, and imaginal . . . the precise conditions that AI’s smoothing begins to strip away. Likewise, as Brooke notes, friction serves as a defining condition for intellectual growth inasmuch as it constitutes the inherent effort, resistance, and negotiation required to learn and create. As he puts it: “we don’t improve our physical or our mental abilities by removing the friction from our lives,” (para. 7) for we “learn by initiating friction (by encountering and engaging things we don’t know) and then by negotiating it, through reading, reflecting, note taking, memorization, associating it with other things we do know, etc.” (para. 25). Yet the promise of AI is precisely to offload that difficulty: “It’s the tyranny of convenience: in any given moment, it’s easier to ‘shove a few sloppy words’ than it is to take the time and effort to develop them. And as you rely more and more upon that convenience, the alternative becomes increasingly distant” (para. 5). In my own writing, the sentence-level struggle I had previously regarded as laborious was not simply a precursor to meaning but integral to it. With AI assuming this syntactic and conceptual labor, I had shifted from sustained structural engagement to superficial prompt optimization. I was becoming, in Brooke’s terms, less writer than prompt engineer.

Back in the classroom, I noticed similar patterns. An, whose personal narrative about overcoming addiction had been raw and powerful in early drafts, submitted a final revision that felt curiously flat:

grammatically perfect but emotionally distant. He admitted to “cleaning up” his draft with AI to “sound more academic.” The algorithm had indeed made his prose conventionally scholarly while smoothing away the very experiences that gave his argument force. This wasn’t the democratic access story I had celebrated; instead of amplifying An’s voice, the AI had normalized it, translating lived experience into academic lingua franca that met institutional expectations while diminishing its distinctive power.

Looking back, one might argue it was predictable that such unbridled enthusiasm would meet this reality check. Indeed, the initial “frictionless” promise carried the seeds of this alienation. Yet even as I grappled with these losses, I wasn’t ready to abandon AI entirely. I still remembered the genuine improvements it had offered, the students who had found their voices through its scaffolding.

I returned to my conference abstract with new awareness. Ultimately, I deleted the AI-generated text and painstakingly rewrote it myself, trading polished fluency for authentic voice, creating a draft that was rougher but genuinely mine. What had felt like personal inadequacy was revealing itself as institutional transformation, a crisis of authorship that extended far beyond my individual struggle. As the new academic year began, my private epiphany about friction’s importance was about to become a very public reckoning about academic integrity itself. What I experienced as a hollowing of voice, my colleagues were now experiencing as a hollowing of the assessment process. The friction that once made writing instruction meaningful was no longer just my problem; rather, it had become a crisis for the profession.

4 Vignette 3: Transformation

I spent Fall quarter 2024 listening to colleagues discover what I had begun to suspect: Our writing pedagogy was a broken system. Faculty emails filled my inbox with concerns about student work that “didn’t sound right.” Through either willful ignorance or administrative paralysis, the college provided no guidance on AI policy, leaving us to address instances of what we dubbed “Algiorism” case by case, instructor by instructor.

Beneath procedural questions around “Can we prove it?” and “What’s the policy?” ran deeper professional anxiety. These were colleagues who had spent decades perfecting their pedagogy, who prided themselves on meaningful assignments. Now they sounded like detectives, trading theories about linguistic tells. “I’m using Google Docs revision history to review composing processes,” one colleague told me, looking drained. “They’re just copying and pasting. A full third of the class is going to fail.” Another colleague, preparing materials for Student Affairs, discovered there was “no one at the wheel. We can’t reliably know if essays are composed by robots or students. The institution doesn’t care about the reliability of our assessments.”

This crisis felt familiar because it was. Academic integrity has always been haunted by questions of authentic authorship. The surveillance model that had dominated institutional responses since the 1950s treated plagiarism as character defect rather than complex negotiation of textual practices. Rebecca Moore Howard’s (1992, 1995, 1999) research on “patchwriting” had revealed that what instructors labeled plagiarism was often evidence of students learning to engage academic discourse (1992).³ Chris Anson’s *We never wanted to be cops* (2008) captured writing teachers’ frustration about being cast as academic police rather than literacy educators. Yet here we were again, defaulting to

³ Rebecca Moore Howard’s work on patchwriting (1995, 1999) showed us that what we call plagiarism often marks developmental writing, not deceit—a reminder that our responses to AI risk repeating old errors under a new name.

surveillance when faced with new textual technology. This seemed to me to be evidence that our approach to writing assessment was fundamentally broken.

To address our collective anxiety, a group of faculty formed an ad hoc AI Academic Integrity Workgroup during winter and spring 2025. Our report deliberately resisted surveillance models, instead drawing on decades of scholarship challenging punitive approaches to academic integrity. Where traditional responses focused on catching and punishing, we advocated systemic reform addressing the ecological conditions of assessment. We called for alternative assessment methods, labor-based grading systems that prioritize learning processes over policing products (following Asao Inoue's, 2022, work),⁴ and critical AI literacy courses. In short, we channeled Kathleen Blake Yancey's (2004) vision of writing in the 21st century to use assessment ecologies as evolving networks in which multimodal and process-driven practices better reflect how students actually compose today. When we recommended protected faculty time to develop ethical frameworks for AI engagement, we echoed Anson's argument that teachers should be educators, not cops.

In essence, we were acknowledging that students using AI to write traditional essays wasn't breaking our system—rather, it was revealing how broken the system already was. AI didn't introduce these cracks; it illuminated them. The crisis had forced recognition of pedagogical possibilities that required institutional disruption to become visible: If multimodal, process-focused, labor-based approaches were more effective for student learning, why had we defaulted to traditional essays for so long?

At heart, this raised fundamental questions about education's purpose, concerns Paulo Freire (2005) had articulated in his critique of banking education. In Freire's banking model, students are passive recipients of knowledge deposits, with teachers making "deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (p. 72). Generative AI threatens to perfect this model, offering students the ultimate deposit system: not just receiving knowledge, but having it instantly transformed into seemingly original work. Where Freire saw banking education as dehumanizing, AI-mediated learning risks being posthuman altogether.

But learning requires friction. Echoing Collin Brooke's (2025) argument, writing builds capacity through resistance. As he notes, you cannot develop stronger muscles by having machines lift weights for you, and you cannot develop critical thinking by having AI do your thinking. The struggle with ideas, wrestling with language, the frustration of multiple drafts are not inefficiencies to optimize away. They are the mechanisms through which learning occurs. When students who have never constructed thesis statements ask ChatGPT to generate them, they're not learning argumentation. Instead, they're learning to outsource intellectual labor.

Kenneth Bruffee's (1984) work on collaborative learning offers a pathway forward, but only if we resist including AI as collaborator before students develop their own voices. True collaboration requires participants who bring knowledge, experience, perspective to conversation. When novice students collaborate with AI, they're not engaging in knowledge construction—they're being acted upon by a system with no investment in their learning, no commitment to their intellectual growth.

⁴ Asao Inoue's (2022) arguments about antiracist assessment clarify what is at stake here: Grading systems that privilege polished products over labor and process inevitably marginalize those for whom friction is greatest.

Ironically, the same technology that sparked panic about academic integrity is pushing us toward more ethical, more pedagogically sound assessment practices.⁵ The AI crisis has accelerated conversations about equity and authenticity that have simmered in composition studies for decades, forcing innovation in assignment design and grading practices. My hope for AI in writing education is conditional. It depends on our commitment to preserving productive difficulties that make learning possible, on designing assignments that maintain necessary friction, on understanding that dialogic pedagogy cannot include AI as dialogue partner until students develop their own capacity for dialogue. Taken together, these episodes of initial euphoria, to alienation of voice, to institutional reckoning suggest that friction is not simply an obstacle to overcome but the very condition of meaningful writing education.

The institutional response remains uncertain. Without administrative support for the labor-intensive reforms our report advocated—including process-based grading, multimodal assessment, and critical AI literacy—I suspect colleagues will default to surveillance approaches. But the crisis has at least clarified what’s at stake: not just preventing cheating, but ensuring educational environments in which students develop capacity to think, struggle, grow. We cannot prevent the AI revolution, but we can ensure that in this brave new world of writing, the friction that makes us human, and learners, is not optimized away.

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⁵ In this sense, Bob Broad’s (2003) model of *dynamic criteria mapping* (DCM) becomes instructive. His work challenges teachers and students to co-construct evaluative values rather than relying on static, surveillant standards. DCM rejects the idea that assessment criteria can or should be fixed in advance, instead treating them as contingent, negotiated, and embedded in the lived practices of particular classrooms and institutions. In the context of AI, where machine-produced text tempts institutions toward rigid rubrics or detection protocols, Broad’s model highlights the pedagogical value of making evaluation itself a site of dialogue. If friction is what sustains learning, then assessment must also preserve friction: the push-and-pull of perspectives between faculty and students about what makes writing meaningful, what counts as labor, and how quality is defined. DCM reframes evaluation from a top-down policing mechanism into a generative practice that resists automation, reminding us that the criteria by which we judge writing should evolve in concert with the very communities most affected by AI’s disruptions.

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Author's address:

Justin Lewis, Olympic College, 1600 Chester Avenue – Bldg. 4, Room 330, Bremerton, WA 98337, USA,
jlewis2@olympic.edu