

Aesthetics, AI, & Teaching College Writing Now

Gregory Miller

University of California, Davis, the United States

Abstract

This paper argues for an aesthetic turn in composition pedagogy, based on a case study compiled from my experience as a US university instructor, teaching advanced cross-curriculum composition to first-generation, low-income and multilingual students in 2023-2025. Our era is one of increasing corporatization within and outside the university. The emergence of chatbots and agentic AI, which are influencing writing instruction and writing itself, compel us to re-examine relationships between expressive and pre-professional approaches to teaching writing at the university. As demonstrated in a case study of 15 representative students, a re-emphasis on humanistic inquiry can productively complicate ideas of “finding one’s voice” within writing curriculum often driven by pre-professional aims. Drawing from composition theory along with Christian Wiman, Ian McGilchrist, and Gilles Deleuze, this paper argues that mechanistic, consumer-driven constructs of individuality—and professional uses of AI technologies—necessitate a corrective emphasis in favor of aesthetics and humanistic inquiry. Such a shift might result in a reevaluation of the pedagogical function of expressive writing as a path to more effective transactional writing. Perhaps more importantly, this shift can better support students in university writing classrooms who, now more than ever, need to develop a robust voice and sense of self.

Keywords: Critical Theory; Curriculum and Instruction; Humanities Education; Language And Technology; Social And Ethical Issues In Communication