# What, me worry?
# A Concern for the Loss of the Individual while Teaching Writing in the Cyborg Era

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Somewhere, stacked in the inbox of an e-mail account, hidden between lines of HTML code of the class web page, or resonating eternally on the fiber optic cable stretched around the globe, I used to fear that we would lose our identities as teachers of composition studies. Thus when Ann Ruggles Gere notes in the forward to James Inman's "Computers and Writing: The Cyborg Era" the significant question of "What worries you about the computers and writing community, and why does it worry you?" I had an immediate answer. I confess I have always readily succumbed to the stereotype of technology as cold, sterile and impersonal. How easy it is, I thought, to establish a barrier between teacher and student through the use of e-mail or on-line communication in order to avoid face-to-face conversation. Distance learning takes place over the Internet and allows us to evade personal interaction that can be uncomfortable, even irritating at times. Cyberspace provides a world where we can create identities so students never really get to know the teacher and the teacher never really knows her students. The potential for technology to overwhelm the quality interpersonal communication in the classroom has always seemed to me dangerously strong. My constant worry was technology – with its laudable benefits of convenience and efficiency – eventually will result in the loss of the human element in teaching, and diminish the entire educational experience. However, Inman's classification of our current place in history as "the cyborg era" has given me new hope. Conjuring up the image of a creature who is half-human, half-computer, he explains, "the cyborg reflects the dynamic synergy of individuals, technologies, and the contexts they share" (Inman, 14). Such a perspective begins to challenge my concern for the loss of the individual in a high-tech world because it does not allow us to set up a "them against us" binary of humans vs. computers. Quoting Heidegger, Inman views technology "as a mode of human activity, instead of as a mechanical innovation" (65). I am coming to value this perspective even as I witness the

stereotypes persisting: the cold, uncaring, sterile computer lab staffed by white-coated anonymous drones working steadily with little indication of any personal identities, emotions or larger contexts. However, Inman insists that technology, never to be viewed as neutral, must always be situated in political, social and economic contexts – as if technology is nothing without a person standing nearby. His perspective is grounded in his terminology of the "cyborg era". He cites several reasons for the importance of the cyborg especially to the computers and writing community: a foregrounding of the individual, an affirmation of adapting or repurposing technology, and an emphasis on agency and activism (Inman, 14-15). To further deconstruct my notion of the impersonal nature of technology, I examined James Herrick's classic definition of rhetoric and its many social functions – all of which play a significant role in the use of technology. The result, I find, is that rhetorical communication can further humanize technology, perhaps in a way that no other academic field can claim; and technology can enrich rhetoric and writing in a complimentary manner.

Inman uses the description of the cyborg era because it emphasizes the dynamism of the individual in action – in contrast to the more passive role often assigned to people in relation to technology. The more negative role occurs when "individuals are only 'users' – and generic, adaptable users at that – and little or no attention is given to their unique characteristics, perspectives and values" (Inman, 15). It is through specific contexts that the individual maintains a presence in the midst of the technology surrounding him or her. Inman states: "Instead, as the cyborg era as a term suggests, technologies should be foregrounded equitably with individuals and the contexts around them, enabling a more careful and reasonable assessment of those technologies" (15). Along with the recognition of the individual in

technology is the awareness that people will adapt technology for their own needs and situations, and Inman believes this response should be fostered. Specifically, he suggests that technology be employed for social activism and he encourages the cyborg to undertake resistance to technology itself. "The cyborg is an agent for change, never a pacified or go-along figure in any context. Using the cyborg era, then, as our term, enables us to develop and articulate specific agendas for computers and writing" (Inman, 15). Thus, by employing the aspects of this term in the high-tech writing classroom, I find that false impressions of isolated or impersonal technology can be altered to more accurately reflect the humanistic encounters that are taking place.

Implicit in Inman's explanation seems to be a call to action for us, as teachers of writing, to enable our students to become the cyborgs that he describes. How appropriate it then becomes to discuss the correlation between rhetoric and technology. Herrick identifies five characteristics of rhetorical discourse, or "the marks the art of rhetoric leaves on messages," which are that it is planned, adapted to an audience, shaped by human motives, responsive to a situation, and persuasion seeking (7-8). Even without further elaboration, it is evident that such characteristics also can be used to describe many forms and tools of computer technology. And at the same time, we can see there is a synergistic relationship between rhetorical communication and technology that has the potential to transform our classrooms into places where the practice of the two can enhance each other. For instance, the characteristic of adaptation for audience is defined by Herrick as attending to the needs of the listeners or readers. He states: "rhetorical discourse, then, forges links between the rhetor's views and those of an audience. This means attending to an audience's values, experiences, beliefs, social status, and aspirations" (9). He notes that the rhetor should not picture the audience in the traditional sense of the large crowd

seated in folding chairs in a hall, but imagine a much more diverse and widespread audience. This attention to audience also is a characteristic of technology, which is evident in the way computer software is designed and advertised for very specific users and buyers, appealing to their values, experiences and beliefs. I also find it interesting that using technology for rhetorical communication has caused writers to reconsider their sense of audience. Writing in new technological mediums, such as web pages and blogs, with their immediate access to a global audience forces us to confront ourselves and the world like the printed text never did before. In the classroom, technology helps students, writing in on-line journals and using web sites like Facebook, to come to a better understanding of issues such as personal vs. private writing. Another characteristic listed by Herrick – that rhetoric is responsive – provides us with an additional opportunity to see the interwoven nature of rhetoric and technology. He explains that a rhetorical statement is situated and dialogic in that it is "crafted in response to a set of circumstances" and typically is a response to another rhetorical statement, or invites a responding statement to it (11). In the same manner, technological inventions often are response to a situation, some exigence, in society. The value of technology is often attributed to its ability to stay current, such as the frequent updates in software that correspond to complaints, questions or new desires of those using it. Furthermore, the use of computer technology in writing has allowed our rhetoric to become more responsive. Writing no longer has the permanent, authoritative quality that the canon of printed books once had. Writing in electronic mediums allows text to be easily shared, parsed, divided, re-used, re-imagined, etc. by an infinite group of writers. Writing on the Internet or computer bulletin boards can receive responses almost immediately following its inception. The concept of hypertext on the Internet has added layered and interactive qualities to reading and writing that previously were not possible. As Bolter

states: "to say that electronic writing is flexible and interactive is to say that it is hypertextual" (26). In the classroom, technology facilitates our ability as teachers to respond to our students' work, and opens new opportunities for students to respond to each other's work. The results of responsiveness that technology stimulates in the writing class cannot be underestimated.

Herrick also notes many social functions of rhetoric: that it distributes power, tests ideas, assists advocacy, discovers facts, shapes knowledge and builds communities (15). Again, we see these are social roles shared by computer technology. Rhetoric distributes power by causing us to question who in society is allowed to speak, and on what topics, and where, and what language can be used? Herrick states: "Because speaking and writing are forms of action, and because symbols shape thought and action, rhetoric as the study of how symbols are used effectively is itself a source of power" (19). Rhetoric can be used to reinforce or destroy a dominant ideology of a group in power. Rhetoric, as well as technology, can be a source of personal power, psychological power and political power. As the personal computer and the Internet became widespread in Western culture, many people heralded technology as a way to redistribute power to people who historically had been oppressed. Technology, like the availability of publishing on the Internet to anyone with a computer, was seen as a way to allow everyone's voice to be heard. And while ground has been gained in this area, much recent discussion has focused on the notion of questioning whether there is true access to computer technology by all social, economic and cultural segments of society – let alone in third-world countries where serious improvements in infrastructure would be required to provide such access. A related social function of rhetoric – that of discovering facts – is associated with the distribution of power in that access to information grants the ability to make informed decisions to act. Herrick explains that rhetoric aids the discovery process in three ways: by requiring the

rhetor to assemble evidence to support his/her ideas, by creating a message based on critical thinking about that evidence, and by recognizing the new facts that come to light when the rhetor's ideas contrast with those of another rhetor (20). The essence of technology is invention, and the tools we use are implementations of newly-discovered facts. By employing computers in the rhetoric and writing community, with their speed in processing and sorting, the writer's tasks of research and invention have been given new breadth and depth. Scholarly work that once started with a highly limited search of the local library's card catalog can now be done via computer databases that connect the writer to search engines and library collections around the globe. The result is a discovery of facts that often is overwhelming in its magnitude. In the computer classroom, students now may discover new facts about technology, through technology and in the practice of technology. Yet another of the social roles that rhetoric plays – and technology shares – is that of building communities organized around "what people value, know, or believe in common" (22). Herrick notes that communities define themselves using language to characterize those commonalities, establishing a "community of discourse" (23). This is another of technology's lauded qualities – that it initiates and forms communities that could previously could not have come together. People with common interests can connect via the Internet and e-mail who likely never would have been able to meet in person. Teachers can see technology forming communities, such as those occurring through distance education, that previous enrollment methods had never made possible. Technology itself is a common theme of many new communities in society, who organize themselves around computer-related interests in games, socializing, academia, etc. All of these characteristics and social functions that rhetoric and technology have in common illustrate their vital roles in our society, history and culture – none of which could be portrayed as isolated or impersonal. Instead, they provide additional

evidence that computers, especially as they mediate and facilitate written communication, are very much entwined in human thought and activity.

Looking to the future, where one would anticipate technology to continue to expand, my concern is not aggravated, but I do see new pedagogical requirements arising. The presence of technology in the writing classroom encourages – perhaps even demands – that we address what Stuart Selber describes as the "multiliteracies" of our digital age. Selber believes in "situating technology broadly" (10) and questioning the technology that confronts us, similar to Inman's cyborg era. While it is important to teach technological skills, Selber advocates that such work always be done "to situate technology in social, political and economic contexts" (20). Many universities have approached computer literacy by setting requirements for students to learn software-related or computer programming and design skills, but Selber calls for less of a focus on functional literacy and more on critical and rhetorical literacy of technology. He warns: "computer literacy programs can take a rather monolithic and one-dimensional approach, ignoring the fact that computer technologies are embedded in a wide range of constitutive contexts, as well as entangled in value systems" (22). I would support this curricular direction, as I believe it also helps the student to see the importance of the individual in our high-tech world. To further strengthen the humanistic qualities of the writing class, we might also emphasize the teaching of ethos. Wayne Booth, lamenting "the neglect of ethos, of character" in modern schools, advocates that what he describes as listening rhetoric should be taught to all students – that is, a rhetoric that sincerely takes into account the thoughts and opinions of other rhetors. Booth states: "That word virtue is again important here. How many students are learning to think about why building a community of mutual trust is better than winning this or that material reward? We'll never know, but we do know that too few schools engage students in

serious ethical thinking…" (99). This approach could provide further opportunities for students to remember that behind monitors and Blackboard postings, there are actual people, which would be helpful for those who have accepted the persistent stereotypes of the cold, impersonal world of computers. Perhaps these students share my original tendency to attribute an impersonal nature to technology as part of an ideology that Bolter classifies as "technological determinism." He states that "technologies do not determine the course of culture or society, because they are not separate agents that can act on culture from the outside. Yet the rhetoric of technological determinism remains common today" (19). He does not deny the benefits and advances that technology makes possible, but cautions us to remember that the users share equal responsibility for the work accomplished. "Individuals and whole cultures do mold techniques and devices to their own purposes, but the material properties of such techniques and devices also impose limitations on their possible uses" (Bolter, 20). We would be wise to acknowledge this perspective because Selber believes the "myth of the all-powerful computer" is an obstacle to building new literacy practices for students.

> "All too often computer technologies are touted as the solution to all of our problems, an inclination deeply embedded in American culture and education. From a humanistic perspective, however, conversations about computers are often misguided by the cause-effect relationships they tend to assume, which typically attribute to computers alone the power to make deep-seated, positive transformations, above and beyond existing social, political and economic constraints" (4).

He encourages composition teachers to become aware of this trap and help our students improve their multiliteracies by understanding the complexity of individuals, society, activism and resistance that comprise our technology environment.

With a new appreciation for the personal nature of technology, especially in the writing classroom, I find myself optimistic about the potential for the enrichment of the teaching of both writing and technology, while technology can only benefit from its role in rhetorical communication. Advancements in technology can mean improvements in rhetorical communication via technology. A recognition of the need for a more critical approach to technology also has widened my perspective on the interwoven nature of technology and humanity. As Inman summarizes: "Of course, this reality is part of the normal cycle of any technology being introduced; we first look only at the technology, then finally step back and see more" (13). I am encouraged by the evidence above indicating that our humanity is not lost in the process of updating our technologies and literacies, but instead it is empowered when we learn to do more – and do more for others – through our use of technology. Reaching that point, the cyborg era quite accurately describes the coalescent natures of rhetorical communication and technology. "Wherever we start in such a chain of cause and effect, we can identify an interaction between technical qualities and social constructions – an interaction so intimate that it is hard to see where the technical ends and the social begins" (Bolter, 20).

## *Works Cited*


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