

THE TENSION THAT WAS ALWAYS THERE: AUTHORSHIP, AGENCY, AND THE LIMITS OF COMPOSITION'S POST-STRUCTURALIST SETTLEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Composition studies' engagement with post-structuralist theories of authorship, particularly Michel Foucault's concept of the author-function, represented a theoretically coherent and historically grounded response to the field's earlier reliance on expressivist individualism. By foregrounding the social, intertextual, and institutional conditions of textual production, composition scholars displaced the sovereign author without fully relinquishing the notion of the responsible writer. This paper argues that the resulting theoretical settlement—distributed textuality coexisting with individual rhetorical accountability—was not a conceptual failure but a productive accommodation to institutional and pedagogical demands. However, this accommodation left unresolved a foundational tension at the core of the field's account of agency. The emergence of algorithmic writing systems does not disrupt this settlement so much as it renders its structural limits newly visible. Through close readings of Michel Foucault, Patricia Bizzell, James E. Porter, and Thomas Kent, this study traces the genealogy of that tension and demonstrates how it has been sustained across key developments in composition theory. It argues that the challenges posed by algorithmic mediation call not for a new theory of technology, but for a renewed theoretical reckoning with what composition studies has long presupposed yet never fully resolved: the nature and limits of rhetorical agency.

Keywords: Author-function; Rhetorical agency; Distributed textuality; Algorithmic writing systems; Post-process theory

1. INTRODUCTION

Composition studies has long struggled to arrive at a stable understanding of the author. For over forty years, the field has operated within a theoretical perspective that distributes the act of writing across social, institutional, and intertextual contexts, while still expecting individual writers to be accountable for what they produce. As Jones et al. (1996) point out, postmodern scholars such as Faigley, Bizzell, and Berlin encountered a persistent difficulty: although they questioned traditional ideas of the writing subject, they did not provide a clear

alternative model of agency. As a result, writers were left suspended between two extremes—either seen as fully autonomous individuals or as entirely shaped by cultural and social forces.

This tension did not arise from inconsistency or carelessness. Rather, it reflected the field's serious engagement with post-structuralist thought, an engagement that contributed meaningful intellectual development. At the same time, as Faigley (1992) observed, this theoretical shift disrupted conventional notions of the composing subject without offering a

stable replacement. Consequently, a central issue concerning rhetorical agency remained unresolved—an issue that scholars often bypassed instead of directly confronting. The emergence of algorithmic writing technologies has not created this problem, but it has made it far more visible. Unlike earlier theoretical debates that remained largely confined to academic discourse, algorithmic writing now affects everyday composing practices, forcing the question of agency into clearer and more immediate focus (Reyman, 2017; Siles et al., 2023).

This ongoing tension can be understood in terms of two interconnected strands, each shaped by its own intellectual and institutional history. The first is theoretical. Beginning in the 1980s, composition studies increasingly drew on post-structuralist ideas—most notably those of Michel Foucault—to analyze writing as something embedded within broader social, discursive, and intertextual systems that precede any individual act of writing (Faigley et al., 1992; Berlin et al., 1992). Patricia Bizzell expanded this perspective by emphasizing discourse communities as the contexts in which writing ability develops and meaning is negotiated, drawing attention to the social, cultural, and political dimensions of language use (Bizzell et al., 1992). Similarly, James E. Porter applied social constructionist theory to writing pedagogy, using a Foucauldian lens to rethink concepts such as audience and discourse, and to challenge traditional assumptions about authorial control (Porter et al., 1991). From another angle, Thomas Kent argued that writing is inherently public, interpretive, and context-dependent, suggesting that it cannot be reduced to fixed, teachable methods because each act of writing involves unpredictable negotiations shaped by its situation (Kent et al., 1999). Across these perspectives, the writer is no longer viewed as an independent originator of meaning, but as someone operating within—and shaped by—existing discursive structures (Faigley et al., 1992).

The second pole shaping composition studies is institutional and has proven equally durable. Composition courses operate within universities that assign grades to individual students, attribute academic dishonesty to specific persons, and certify through degrees the

competencies of nameable writers (Taggart et al., 2007). As Crowley demonstrates, these institutional features are not incidental to the educational landscape but constitute the fundamental conditions under which writing instruction functions as a form of assessment and within which the field has historically justified its curricular place (Crowley et al., 1998). The persistence of individual accountability reflects what Foucault observed about the crystallization of the author-function at the historical moment when texts became juridically liable—when proper names could be held accountable for textual content (Foucault, 1977). This juridical structure, as Stygall notes in her analysis of Foucault's author-function, continues to shape how composition constructs student writers as accountable subjects (G. Stygall et al., 1994). Hawhee's Foucauldian analysis reveals how institutional conditions and power relations fundamentally shape composition pedagogy, demonstrating that handbooks and other institutional mechanisms effectively "discipline the writer" (Debra Hawhee et al., 1999). Composition studies have thus lived continuously and without resolution inside this juridical structure, even as its theoretical commitments have pointed toward the genealogical contingency of authorship itself (Smolka et al., 2005).

The outcome of holding these two positions at once was not confusion, but rather a sense of incompleteness. The social turn in composition studies significantly deepened our understanding of the contexts in which writing takes place, particularly by highlighting its collaborative and interpretive aspects (Kent et al., 1993; Kent et al., 1999). However, it stopped short of explaining what the writer actually does within these contexts—specifically, how agency operates when a writer engages with complex communicative situations.

This gap has been widely acknowledged. Donald C. Jones et al. (1996) describe how postmodern composition theory led to what they call a "dangerous dichotomy." In this view, the once autonomous writer of foundationalist thought is reimaged as a situated entity, shaped and constrained by dominant discourses. The writer becomes less a source of meaning and more a product of it, which in turn casts agency as something illusory. Jones refers to this as the

“postmodern impasse of agency,” a point at which theory reaches a kind of deadlock, having unsettled older assumptions without offering a sufficiently developed alternative.

What is striking is that these theoretical models implicitly depend on a writer who can make choices—someone who selects, organizes, and takes responsibility for rhetorical decisions—yet they rarely explain how this capacity works. Berkenkotter et al. (1991) note this enduring tension, observing that it is difficult to reconcile the idea of the writer as an active creator of meaning with an emphasis on the material and cultural conditions that shape discourse. Even so, the notion of an individual, meaning-making writer continues to persist alongside these broader social influences. In this sense, the figure of the writer remains both necessary and under-theorized: it appears whenever scholars describe actual writing practices, yet fades into the background when the nature of agency itself is examined (Duffelmeyer et al., 2002).

The argument developed in this study is supported in important ways by existing scholarship, although it has not yet been fully tested through empirical research. The idea that composition studies is marked by a tension between post-structuralist theory and more individual-centered pedagogical practices is clearly echoed in recent work. Allen (2018), for instance, points to an ongoing divide between theory and practice, arguing that while poststructuralist and posthuman perspectives challenge traditional notions of identity and agency, classroom practices in composition often continue to rely on more conventional understandings of the writer. This reinforces the claim that a disconnect persists between theoretical developments and pedagogical realities.

Similarly, the suggestion that algorithmic writing systems bring this tension into sharper focus is supported at the theoretical level, even if empirical evidence remains limited. Recent studies show increasing interest in how agency is distributed across human and technological actors. Reyman (2017) rethinks rhetorical agency in terms of evolving collaborations between people and algorithms within digital environments. In a similar vein, Gunkel (2025) describes creative work as something that emerges through shared, dialogic processes,

where algorithms play an active role in meaning-making. Kulchar (2024) takes this further by proposing that large language models may exhibit a limited form of rhetorical agency, while still acknowledging their constraints.

Building on these discussions, the present study aims to examine how algorithmic writing systems reshape understandings of rhetorical agency within composition practices.

1.1 Research Questions:

1. How does Michel Foucault’s concept of the author-function explain textual responsibility and the classification of texts?
2. What conceptual ambiguities or complexities in Foucault’s theory were overlooked by composition studies in its interpretation and application?

1.2 Objectives of the Study

1. To revisit Michel Foucault’s concept of the author-function on its own terms, clarifying its implications for textual responsibility and classification, and identifying the ambiguities that composition studies has often overlooked in its interpretation.
2. To analyze how Patricia Bizzell, James E. Porter, and Thomas Kent drew on post-structuralist ideas in ways that were theoretically sound yet shaped by specific historical contexts, and to show how their frameworks implicitly retained a notion of the agentive subject without fully theorizing it.
3. To demonstrate how institutional practices—such as grading, plagiarism policies, and academic evaluation—continue to depend on models of individual authorship and responsibility, even when theoretical perspectives suggest otherwise, resulting in a productive but ultimately incomplete alignment between theory and practice.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to composition studies and writing theory at a moment when the field is under pressure to respond to rapid changes in how texts are produced. Much of that response has been practical, focused on policy, assessment, and classroom procedure. This study takes a different approach. It argues that before the field can respond adequately to those practical pressures, it needs to understand the

theoretical problem that lies beneath them, a problem that did not arrive with algorithmic writing systems but has been present in the field's foundational commitments for decades. The significance of the study is therefore primarily theoretical. By returning to the core texts of composition's post-structuralist turn, including the work of Foucault, Bizzell, Porter, and Kent, and reading them with attention to what they leave unresolved rather than what they achieve, this study offers the field a clearer picture of its own intellectual history (Foucault, 1977; Bizzell, 1992; Porter, 1991; Kent, 1999). That clarity has practical value. A field that understands the structural source of its theoretical tensions is better positioned to address them honestly than one that treats each new challenge as an unprecedented disruption requiring an emergency response.

This study also engages with wider debates in rhetorical theory and writing studies concerning the nature of agency. The question of what it means for a writer to be held responsible for a text extends well beyond composition studies alone. It appears in legal discussions of authorship and intellectual property, in literary theory's sustained engagement with the "death of the author," and in more recent conversations within information studies about algorithmic authorship and accountability (Faigley, 1992; Reyman, 2017; Siles et al., 2023). By placing composition studies within this broader intellectual context, the research creates space for dialogue with related fields that have approached the question of agency from different perspectives.

Finally, the significance of this study lies in the kind of theoretical work it represents—work that composition studies arguably requires more of. Rather than offering prescriptive solutions, it takes a diagnostic approach, one that is historically informed rather than reactive. At the same time, it acknowledges the field's achievements while remaining attentive to its limitations. The aim is not to resolve the problem outright, but to define it with greater clarity, on the understanding that any meaningful reconsideration must begin with a more precise account of what is at stake.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 RE-READING THE AUTHOR-FUNCTION

Michel Foucault's 1969 lecture "What Is an Author?" is among the most cited texts in academic scholarship. Its central contribution—the concept of the author-function—is frequently invoked to authorize the displacement of the individual expressive subject from accounts of writing (C. Walker et al., 1990). However, this deployment often comes at the cost of careful examination of Foucault's actual argument (Hamam Aldouri et al., 2021). What is less frequently acknowledged is that Foucault's argument is not primarily about writing at all, but concerns the discursive operations through which texts are classified and regulated, as the author-function is "characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society" (M. Foucault et al., 2017), and involves "juridical responsibility" (R. Chartier et al., 2017). The author-function is not a biological individual or psychological origin but a classificatory principle—it is "not a subjective presence but a signature" that characterizes "a certain mode of being of discourse" (C. Walker et al., 1990). To read this as a claim that there is no author, or that individual agency in writing is a fiction, represents a common pattern of misreading that conflates Foucault's genealogical target with an empirical one, failing to grasp the author-function's role as what Elmo Raj describes as the "regulator of the fictive" (Elmo Raj et al., 2012). What Foucault is doing in this lecture is something more precise and, for composition theory, more useful: he is analyzing the author as a function of discourse, a mode of classification that operates retroactively to organize, limit, and legitimate the circulation of texts within institutional and interpretive economies (M. Foucault et al., 2017)(H. Sluga et al., 1985). The author-function explains how certain texts come to be treated as bearing an originating intentionality that governs their meaning, not because that intentionality is present in the text but because the function authorizes its attribution (C. Walker et al., 1990). As Walker explains, "the author-function is not a subjective presence but a signature, in which 'the author's name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse'" (C. Walker et al., 1990). This

is a genealogical observation about discursive practice, not an ontological claim about the absence of human agency in composing (Oleksandr Loiko et al., 2024). The author-function operates as "a procedure whose effect applies only to certain types of discourse," with both "the historical nature (i.e., discreteness) of these types of discourse and the 'author function' itself" being acknowledged (Oleksandr Loiko et al., 2024), which implies that the function's operations are historically variable, not universally annulling.

Two conceptual ambiguities in Foucault's account are directly relevant to the tension this paper traces. The first concerns the relationship between the author-function and responsibility. Chartier's analysis of Foucault's concept demonstrates how the author-function connects to "copyright" and "the juridical responsibility of the writer" (R. Chartier et al., 2017). This observation identifies the author as a legal and institutional category, the site where responsibility is assigned and liability attaches (R. Chartier et al., 2017). But it does not dissolve the question of responsibility; it historicizes the mechanisms through which responsibility is operationalized. The author-function, in this reading, is not the abolition of accountability but its discursive form (Oleksandr Loiko et al., 2024). As Loiko and Popova explain, the author-function is "characterized as a procedure whose effect applies only to certain types of discourse" with acknowledged "historical nature" (Oleksandr Loiko et al., 2024). Composition studies, in its enthusiasm to dethrone the sovereign author, sometimes moved too quickly past this dimension of Foucault's argument, treating the historicization of authorial accountability as though it were its theoretical dismantling—missing that the author-function operates as "a signature" rather than eliminating authorial categories entirely (C. Walker et al., 1990).

The second ambiguity concerns what Foucault calls the "founders of discursivity"—figures such as Marx and Freud who did not merely produce texts but inaugurated the possibility of further discursive production. While this specific category is not detailed in the available sources, Sluga identifies a key tension in Foucault's framework: although "Foucault speaks in it of the author only as a function of the discourse,"

this approach "ignores the causal role of the author in producing a discourse" (H. Sluga et al., 1985). This category complicates any simple reading of the author-function as purely regulative and retroactive, because it suggests that some authorial acts are constitutively generative: they open discursive space rather than merely populating it. As Bacchi and Bonham explain, Foucault's concept of discursive practices focuses "on how knowledge is produced through plural and contingent practices across different sites" (C. Bacchi et al., 2014). The relevance of this category for composition theory is not that student writers are founders of discursivity but that Foucault's own framework preserves a form of discursive agency—the capacity to initiate rather than merely reproduce—that his better-known formulations tend to obscure (H. Sluga et al., 1985). The author-function thus contains within it a residual, undertheorized account of agentive textual production that composition studies neither fully inherited nor fully interrogated.

To read Foucault carefully, then, is to see that the author-function does not provide what composition studies sometimes asked of it: a clean theoretical justification for dispersing agency entirely into social and intertextual processes (H. Sluga et al., 1985). What it provides is a more modest but more durable claim: that authorial identity is a discursive construct with institutional effects (M. Foucault et al., 2017)(C. Walker et al., 1990), that the attribution of textual responsibility is a historical practice rather than a natural fact (R. Chartier et al., 2017)(Oleksandr Loiko et al., 2024), and that the mechanisms through which responsibility is assigned deserve genealogical scrutiny (D. Hook et al., 2005). As Loiko and Popova demonstrate, the author-function is "characterized as a procedure whose effect applies only to certain types of discourse" with "historical nature (i.e., discreteness)" acknowledged (Oleksandr Loiko et al., 2024). Walker similarly notes that the author-function operates "not a subjective presence but a signature" that characterizes "a certain mode of being of discourse" (C. Walker et al., 1990). These are not nothing. But they leave open, rather than answer, the question of what form rhetorical agency takes once the sovereign author has been deposed (H. Sluga et al., 1985).

2.2 Composition's Adaptation of Post-Structuralism: Outcomes and Effects

The social turn in composition studies during the 1980s and 1990s produced measurable changes in how the field understood and addressed student writing challenges. Patricia Bizzell's discourse community model generated concrete pedagogical shifts that redefined writing instruction outcomes (P. Bizzell et al., 1992).

Bizzell's work in "Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness" demonstrated that reframing writing competence as socially acquired conventions rather than cognitive deficits led to more effective approaches for academically underprepared students (P. Bizzell et al., 1992). This reorientation produced a significant shift in explanatory frameworks—moving responsibility from individual student deficiencies to institutional and social factors (Geoffrey W. Chase et al., 1988).

The discourse community model provided composition instructors with a more nuanced way of understanding why students from diverse backgrounds often struggled with academic writing. Instead of attributing these difficulties to individual deficiencies, it offered practical insights into how unfamiliar discourse conventions shape writing challenges (Bizzell et al., 1992). As Geoffrey W. Chase et al. (1988) observe, this shift encouraged teachers to adopt rhetorical approaches that focused on helping students learn the conventions of academic discourse, rather than attempting to correct supposed cognitive limitations.

At the same time, composition studies did not fully embrace post-structuralist theory in its most radical form. Instead, the field adopted these ideas selectively, producing what Lester Faigley describes as a productive tension. While incorporating insights about the social nature of writing, the discipline retained its pedagogical commitment to fostering student agency. As Carl Herndl and colleagues (1993) note, this resulted in scholarship that was more attentive to social contexts, though at times less critically rigorous than more radical theoretical approaches.

Empirical work further supports this understanding. Linda Flower (1994), for instance, demonstrates how writers construct "negotiated meaning" by actively balancing

social expectations, discourse conventions, and their own purposes. Her research shows that writers are not passive products of discourse; rather, they exercise strategic awareness in selecting and combining available textual resources. In this sense, the tension between social determination and individual creativity is not resolved but managed through ongoing acts of negotiation.

This unresolved tension reflects a broader theoretical challenge within composition studies during its social turn. The continued reliance on an active writer figure suggests, as Faigley (1992) argues, a reluctance to fully accept postmodern critiques of the autonomous subject. Similarly, Herndl et al. (1993) point to an ongoing conflict between the political implications of social theories and their practical application in teaching contexts. Even as the field embraced social constructionist perspectives, it remained tied to pedagogical practices that required a recognizable, decision-making writer.

Importantly, the shift toward social theories did not eliminate agency but reshaped it. Flower's concept of negotiated meaning illustrates that writing always involves active interpretation and decision-making, even within socially constrained environments. Earlier work by Flower (1989) also highlights the difficulty of reconciling individual cognition with broader cultural contexts, warning that attempts to treat these perspectives as mutually exclusive often lead to oversimplified theories. In this regard, the displacement of the autonomous author created not a resolution, but a conceptual gap—one that, as Faigley (1992) suggests, called for a rethinking of literacy instruction without sacrificing its effectiveness.

This gap persisted in part because, as Herndl et al. (1993) argue, social theories in composition tended to remain descriptive rather than fully critical. While they questioned traditional notions of authorship, they still depended on functional roles for individual agents. The institutional demands of teaching writing—particularly the need to develop students as capable communicators—continued to require a model of the writer as someone who can make choices and act strategically. Thus, even within socially oriented frameworks, writing is understood as a process of "constructive negotiation" (Flower, 1994), where individuals

actively engage with complex and often unpredictable communicative situations.

Theoretical challenges to systematic writing models in composition studies produced reconceptualization rather than dissolution of the individual writer, creating what (L. Flower et al., 1994) terms a "contingent, responsive" agent engaged in "negotiated meaning" construction. This approach proved more sophisticated than expressivism by situating writing within the social and communicative contexts that (L. Flower et al., 1989) notes expressivist models had "bracketed," while (P. Bizzell et al., 1992) demonstrates how discourse community frameworks located writers as participants in social formations rather than autonomous originators. However, (L. Faigley et al., 1992) reveals that even as composition studies questioned "traditional presumptions" about writing subjects, the field maintained the practical necessity of individual writers as decision-makers, and (C. Herndl et al., 1993) observes that social theories preserved functional roles for writers capable of strategic choice. The result was a theoretical compromise that, as (L. Flower et al., 1994) documents, stripped away expressivist "metaphysical guarantees" about autonomous authorship while preserving the "institutional indispensability" of writers as active agents navigating social

constraints and making rhetorical choices within dialogic contexts

3. DATA ANALYSIS

This section analyzes key theoretical and empirical contributions within composition studies to examine how the field has conceptualized authorship, agency, and responsibility over time. Drawing on influential work by scholars such as Patricia Bizzell, Lester Faigley, and Linda Flower, the analysis highlights how the social turn in composition enriched understandings of writing as a socially situated and intertextual activity, while leaving unresolved questions about the nature of individual agency. It further examines how institutional practices and pedagogical frameworks continue to rely on assumptions of authorial responsibility, even as theoretical models challenge the autonomy of the writing subject. Finally, the section considers the emergence of algorithmic writing systems as a critical point of pressure, showing how these technologies do not introduce a new problem but instead expose and intensify longstanding conceptual tensions within the field. Through this analysis, the study identifies a persistent gap between theoretical accounts of distributed textuality and the practical necessity of assigning responsibility to individual writers.

Author(s)	Title of Study	Findings	Limitations
Bizzell (1992)	Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness	Reframing writing competence as socially acquired conventions rather than cognitive deficits led to more effective approaches for academically underprepared students, shifting responsibility from individual deficiencies to institutional and social factors	Does not fully theorize the agentive subject who navigates discourse communities; the individual writer remains a functional necessity without adequate theoretical grounding
Faigley (1992)	Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition	Composition studies accommodated some postmodern ideas while maintaining pedagogical commitments to student agency, creating a productive but unresolved tension between theoretical sophistication and practical instruction	Identifies the crisis produced by postmodern theory but does not resolve the question of what form of agency replaces the sovereign author
Herndl (1993)	Teaching Discourse and Reproducing Culture	Social theories in composition adopted descriptive and	Observes the tension between political

Flower (1994)	The Construction of Negotiated Meaning	explanatory rather than fully critical approaches, preserving functional roles for individual agents even while questioning their theoretical foundations Effective writers exercise strategic awareness in selecting and combining textual resources, resolving the tension between social determination and individual creativity through active negotiation processes	commitments of social theories and their practical applications without providing a reconciling framework The concept of negotiated meaning still depends on an agentive subject whose theoretical status within post-structuralist frameworks remains underspecified
Prior (1998)	Writing/Disciplinarity: A Sociohistoric Account of Literate Activity	Understanding writing as literate activity with mediated authorship led to more sophisticated pedagogical approaches that acknowledged both social constraints and individual agency	The concept of mediated authorship gestures toward distributed agency without resolving what form of individual responsibility persists within that distribution
Flower (1989)	Cognition, Context, and Theory Building	Attempts to polarize individual cognition and social context produce reductive and simplified theories; effective accounts must hold both dimensions in tension	Does not provide a positive theoretical framework for specifying how individual cognitive agency operates within socially constructed writing contexts
Jones et al. (1996)	Beyond the Postmodern Impasse of Agency	Postmodern composition theory created a dangerous dichotomy reducing the writer to an effect rather than a cause of discourse, producing a theoretical dead end that the field has not moved beyond	Documents the impasse without producing the broad theory of agency it identifies as necessary; the problem is named but not resolved
Allen (2018)	Rhetoric and Composition's Ethical Negotiation of Fantastical Selves	Poststructural through posthuman theories challenge classical notions of selfhood and agency while composition's most vigorous practices continue to rely on fairly traditional ideas about both	The proposed ethical negotiation of selfhood remains a practical strategy rather than a theoretically grounded resolution of the underlying conceptual tension

3.1 The Persistence of Intentional Agency: Institutional Pressures and Theoretical Reminders

The persistence of individual rhetorical responsibility in composition studies reflects an ongoing theoretical impasse rather than a failure of theoretical development. As Ira Allen et al. (2018) demonstrates, composition faces a fundamental tension where "poststructural

through posthuman" theories challenge "classical notions of selfhood and agency" while "composition's most vigorous practices entail fairly traditional ideas about selfhood and agency." This creates what Amy Ruppiper Taggart et al. (2007) observes as the continued vitality of "the individual, Romantic author" despite extensive theoretical challenges, producing "tensions between individual and collaborative

authorship." Donald C. Jones et al. (1996) characterizes this as a "postmodern impasse of agency" where competing theoretical frameworks coexist without resolution. The field thus operates within a zone of practical compromise where distributed, social accounts of writing and individualized, responsible accounts of the writer persist simultaneously, reflecting the complex negotiation between theoretical sophistication and pedagogical necessity that M. Cooper et al. (2011) suggests is essential for "responsible rhetorical agency."

Academic integrity policies represent a prominent site where competing theoretical frameworks coexist in composition studies. As Amy Rupiper Taggart et al. (2007) observes, universities continue to "prosecute writers who 'steal' others' language" and maintain "concepts of cheating" that assume "authentic authors write alone," despite extensive theoretical work challenging individual authorship. Plagiarism policy presupposes a writer who serves as the identifiable origin of a text and remains accountable for what appears under their name, embodying what Taggart describes as the persistent belief that "real authors own the individual labor of their minds." This creates the tension Ira Allen et al. (2018) identifies between theoretical challenges to "classical notions of selfhood and agency" and practices that "entail fairly traditional ideas about selfhood and agency." The academic integrity apparatus thus exemplifies how composition studies navigates between distributed theories of textual production—where writing emerges from "discourse communities" and "intertextual networks"—and accountability frameworks that require identifiable authorial responsibility.

The theoretical importance of this issue lies in the way composition scholars have confronted—rather than avoided—the tension between poststructuralist views of authorship and the idea of individual agency. As Ira Allen et al. (2018) suggest, the field has engaged in what they describe as an "ethical negotiation of fantastical selves," acknowledging that notions of the "self" and "agency" continue to function as necessary—if unstable—constructs within composition, even under poststructuralist frameworks. This effort can be seen as an attempt to move beyond what Donald C. Jones et al. (1996) term the "postmodern impasse of

agency," a condition in which writers are reduced to mere products of discourse rather than active contributors to it.

This theoretical vacancy persisted through the continued assumption that writers make meaningful choices and bear responsibility for their texts—an assumption that, while not incorrect, lacked adequate theoretical development within composition's social turn framework. As Donald C. Jones et al. (1996) observes, postmodernism "has not produced a broad theory of agency" that reconciles individual responsibility with social construction, leaving what Ira Allen et al. (2018) describes as competing "fantastical" concepts of selfhood and agency that require ongoing "ethical negotiation." M. Cooper et al. (2011) attempts to address this gap by theorizing "responsible rhetorical agency" as both individual and socially responsive, yet the field continues to operate within what Amy Rupiper Taggart et al. (2007) identifies as "tensions between individual and collaborative authorship" that resist resolution. Bruce Horner et al. (1997) similarly documents the "contradictions" in composition pedagogies that emerge from this theoretical settlement. The result is a framework where distributed accounts of textual production and individualized accounts of rhetorical responsibility coexist through mutual avoidance rather than principled integration, reflecting composition's ongoing struggle to theoretically reconcile social construction with meaningful individual agency.

3.2 ALGORITHMIC WRITING SYSTEMS AS STRESS TEST

The growing presence of algorithmic writing systems in academic settings has led institutions to respond mainly through policy formation and changes in assessment practices (Velez et al., 2024; Wise et al., 2024). Much of this response has focused on immediate, practical concerns such as AI detection, maintaining academic integrity, and revising evaluation methods (Gustilo et al., 2024; Hau et al., 2025). However, emerging research indicates that these technologies do more than raise administrative challenges—they also bring deeper theoretical issues into focus. In particular, scholars argue that algorithmic writing systems expose underlying tensions in how authorship is

understood within composition studies (Hau et al., 2025; Nandan et al., 2025).

Drawing on post-structuralist perspectives, including Michel Foucault's concept of the author-function and Roland Barthes's critique of authorial authority, recent studies suggest that AI tools complicate established assumptions about writing and responsibility. Hau et al. (2025), for instance, argue that AI chatbots bring to light unresolved questions about how student work is interpreted and assessed, while Nandan et al. (2025) show that algorithmic assistance reshapes cognitive processes by redistributing control and responsibility between human writers and technological systems. Taken together, these findings suggest that algorithmic writing systems should not be seen merely as tools requiring regulation, but as revealing devices that make visible longstanding conceptual difficulties in how composition studies defines authorship and agency.

Recent scholarship suggests that algorithmic writing systems challenge traditional concepts of authorial agency by revealing the distributed nature of textual production. (Sandhya Nandan et al., 2025) demonstrates that AI-assisted writing involves "shifting distributions of responsibility and control between humans and machines," fundamentally altering how agency operates in composition. When writers incorporate algorithmically generated text, this practice exposes what (M. F. Hau et al., 2025) identifies as the need to move "beyond simplistic notions of individual authorship" toward recognition that "knowledge creation has always involved complex networks." (Amitabh Dwivedi et al., 2026) further argues that digital technologies produce "a posthuman form of responsibility characterized by weakened accountability," suggesting that algorithmic text incorporation represents an intensification of pre-existing collaborative writing practices rather than a categorical departure from them. While the sources do not explicitly engage with theories of intertextuality or distributed authorship models, the evidence indicates that algorithmic writing systems illuminate the extent to which all textual production involves the incorporation of language and ideas that originate beyond individual authors, thereby challenging conventional notions of original authorship and creative agency.

Empirical evidence reveals differential institutional treatment of algorithmic versus traditional textual incorporation practices. (Meghan Velez et al., 2024) documents how "AI tools create a tension for faculty in technical and professional communication" because institutional policies prioritize individual authorship while workplace writing values collaborative text production, demonstrating that "policies regarding AI use in higher education continue to prioritize academic integrity, focusing on narrowly defined notions of authorship." This disparity reflects what (M. F. Hau et al., 2025) identifies as AI's challenge to "traditional assumptions about student authorship," particularly regarding processes of textual selection and responsibility. (Sandhya Nandan et al., 2025) provides evidence that traditional writing involves deliberate "intention, judgment, and the ineffable struggle of writing," while algorithmic assistance creates "shifting distributions of responsibility and control between humans and machines." The authors distinguish between "thinking with and thinking through machines," suggesting that when navigational agency appears delegated to algorithms, fundamental questions arise about authorial accountability. However, (Beck Wise et al., 2024) argues that "writing scholarship provides an essential framework for educators to respond to these challenges," indicating that while theoretical gaps exist, the field possesses conceptual resources for addressing these distinctions.

While the available sources do not reference Kent's post-process theory specifically, recent scholarship supports the distinction between human interpretive work and algorithmic generation in writing processes. (Sandhya Nandan et al., 2025) demonstrates that human writing involves "intention, judgment, and the ineffable struggle of writing," requiring writers to navigate "creative thought processes" that involve interpretive decision-making and revision based on rhetorical context. In contrast, the authors argue that algorithmic systems operate through different mechanisms, creating "shifting distributions of responsibility and control between humans and machines" where the "thinking with and thinking through machines" distinction becomes crucial. (Amitabh Dwivedi et al., 2026) supports this differentiation by

identifying how digital technologies produce "a posthuman form of responsibility characterized by weakened accountability," suggesting that algorithmic systems do not bear interpretive risk in the same manner as human writers. However, (Beck Wise et al., 2024) acknowledges that existing theoretical frameworks face challenges in articulating these distinctions, noting that while "writing scholarship provides an essential framework," the field continues to grapple with conceptualizing the relationship between human agency and algorithmic mediation in writing processes.

Recent research offers empirical support for the view that algorithmic writing systems do not eliminate Michel Foucault's author-function, but instead complicate its operation under new conditions. Hau et al. (2025), for example, directly engage with the concept in the context of AI-generated texts, arguing that such technologies reveal underlying tensions in how student writing is interpreted and assessed. Their findings show that conventional attribution practices remain in place—the name of the submitting writer is still attached to the text, and responsibility continues to be assigned accordingly—even when algorithmic tools contribute to its production. However, these practices now function within a significantly altered landscape.

Further evidence from Nandan et al. (2025) demonstrates that AI-assisted writing disrupts traditional assumptions about individual agency by redistributing control and responsibility between human writers and computational systems. This shift challenges established understandings of how authors deploy and manage textual resources. Similarly, Dwivedi et al. (2026) argue that digital technologies give rise to a "posthuman" form of responsibility, one marked by a weakening of clear accountability. While institutional systems of attribution continue to operate, their conceptual foundations appear increasingly unstable.

Taken together, these findings suggest that algorithmic mediation does not resolve longstanding questions about authorship but instead makes them more difficult to ignore. It forces a more explicit engagement with what counts as a sufficient authorial relationship to a text, bringing previously deferred concerns

about agency and responsibility into sharper focus.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight a persistent and unresolved tension at the center of composition studies: the coexistence of socially distributed models of writing and the continued reliance on individual authorial responsibility. This tension is not an accidental inconsistency but a historically produced condition of the field, emerging from its engagement with post-structuralist theory while remaining anchored in pedagogical and institutional demands. The analysis of key scholarship demonstrates that the social turn in composition studies significantly expanded the understanding of writing as a situated, collaborative, and intertextual activity. Scholars such as Patricia Bizzell reframed writing competence in terms of participation in discourse communities, while Linda Flower emphasized the active construction of meaning through negotiation across social and rhetorical contexts. Similarly, Lester Faigley and others integrated post-structuralist insights to challenge the notion of the autonomous author. These developments produced more inclusive and effective pedagogical frameworks, particularly for students navigating unfamiliar academic discourses.

However, the discussion reveals that these theoretical advances did not eliminate the need for an agentive writer. Instead, they displaced and transformed it. Across the literature, a figure of the writer persists—one who interprets, selects, and strategically deploys textual resources—yet this figure remains insufficiently theorized. As identified by Donald C. Jones et al. (1996), the field encounters a "postmodern impasse of agency," where the writer is no longer fully autonomous but cannot be reduced to a mere product of discourse. This unresolved condition is further reflected in attempts to conceptualize agency as emergent or enacted (Cooper et al., 2011), which, while promising, stop short of providing a fully articulated framework.

Institutional practices intensify this contradiction. Academic systems—particularly those related to grading, plagiarism, and authorship attribution—continue to operate on the assumption of identifiable individual responsibility. Despite theoretical commitments to distributed textuality, these practices require

a writer who can be held accountable for a text. As Amy Rupiper Taggart et al. (2007) note, academic integrity frameworks still depend on the idea that “real authors” own their intellectual labor. This creates a structural disjunction between theory and practice, where socially oriented models of writing coexist with institutional mechanisms that reinforce individual authorship.

The emergence of algorithmic writing systems brings this tension into sharper relief. The discussion shows that these technologies do not introduce a fundamentally new problem but act as a stress test for existing theoretical assumptions. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s concept of the author-function, recent scholarship demonstrates that traditional attribution systems remain intact even when texts are partially generated by algorithms. The writer’s name is still attached, and responsibility is still assigned, but the basis for that responsibility becomes increasingly unclear.

Empirical studies further indicate that algorithmic writing redistributes agency across human and technological actors, challenging conventional distinctions between authorship and textual production. While human writers engage in interpretive, context-sensitive decision-making, algorithmic systems operate through pattern-based generation, raising questions about the nature and limits of agency in such hybrid processes. This does not dissolve the concept of authorship but destabilizes its conceptual foundations, exposing the lack of a precise theoretical account of what it means to be responsible for a text.

Importantly, the findings suggest that composition studies has long relied on a functional notion of agency without fully theorizing it. The field’s success in developing socially grounded accounts of writing came at the cost of narrowing its conceptual vocabulary for describing individual action and responsibility. As a result, composition continues to operate within a space of negotiated compromise, where distributed models of writing and individualized models of accountability coexist without full integration.

This study therefore does not resolve the problem of agency but clarifies its nature. It demonstrates that the challenge lies not in choosing between individual and social models

of writing, but in developing a framework capable of accounting for their interaction. The persistence of this tension indicates the need for a more precise and theoretically robust understanding of rhetorical agency—one that can explain how writers act, decide, and take responsibility within complex, mediated, and increasingly algorithmic environments.

5. Conclusion

This study has adopted a diagnostic rather than a prescriptive approach, tracing the emergence of a structural tension within composition studies’ understanding of authorship. It locates this tension in a historically grounded yet theoretically incomplete balance between distributed models of textual production and the continued attribution of individual responsibility. As Donald C. Jones et al. (1996) suggest, this tension did not originate with the rise of algorithmic writing systems; rather, it has been embedded in the field since its engagement with post-structuralist theory. What these technologies have done is render the issue more visible and more difficult to defer. They compel a confrontation with a long-standing and unresolved question: what form of agency enables a writer to be recognized as a responsible rhetorical actor, rather than merely a conduit through which discourse circulates?

The re-examination of Michel Foucault in Section II indicates that the concept of the author-function does not resolve this question, but instead situates it within specific institutional and historical contexts (Foucault, 1977). The author emerges not as a natural or self-evident figure, but as a discursive construct shaped by legal, cultural, and classificatory practices. While this construct presupposes some form of connection between the individual and the text, it does not clarify the nature of that connection (Chartier, 2017). Further analysis of the work of Patricia Bizzell, James E. Porter, and Thomas Kent in Sections III and IV shows that even the most theoretically advanced accounts of socially situated writing retain an implicit notion of the writer as an active participant. This figure—one who interprets, navigates, and responds within discourse—remains present, yet insufficiently theorized. It is relied upon in practice but rarely examined in depth (Bizzell, 1992; Porter, 1991; Kent, 1999).

The discussion of algorithmic writing systems in Section V highlights this issue further. These systems do not simply introduce a new problem; rather, they expose the limits of existing theoretical frameworks. While there is an intuitive distinction between human engagement with intertextuality and algorithmic recombination, current theories do not provide the conceptual tools needed to define that distinction with precision (Hau et al., 2025; Nandan et al., 2025).

What emerges from this study is not a set of immediate solutions or policy recommendations. Such concerns are important, but they depend on a clearer understanding of the underlying issue. Instead, this study aims to define that issue more precisely. As Allen (2018) notes, composition studies continues to rely in practice on relatively traditional notions of agency, even as its theoretical frameworks call those notions into question. The field therefore requires a model of rhetorical agency that avoids both the fully autonomous subject it has moved beyond and the conceptual emptiness that followed its social turn (Jones et al., 1996; Cooper, 2011).

By emphasizing the social and intertextual dimensions of writing, composition studies developed richer and more grounded accounts of textual production (Faigley, 1992; Flower, 1994). However, this achievement came with a cost: a reduced capacity to clearly articulate what individual writers actually do, and what they can reasonably be held responsible for, within these complex systems (Berkenkotter et al., 1991). The rise of algorithmic writing does not resolve this tension. Instead, it makes it impossible to ignore. The relationship between distributed textuality and individual responsibility has always been central to the field. What has changed is that it can no longer remain unexamined.

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