# Digital revolution is changing what it means to be an author, says Stanford professor

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In her long career teaching writing and rhetoric, Andrea Lunsford became increasingly intrigued by the many forms in which students write. Credit: L.A. Cicero

Between LOLs, emoticons and 140-character rants, it may seem like digital communication has only served to stunt young people's writing abilities.

But according to Stanford English professor and rhetorician Andrea

Lunsford, students today are writing more than ever before – just in forms unseen or unacknowledged in writing instruction.

The former director of Stanford's Program in Writing and Rhetoric, Lunsford said that in today's world of instant online publication, anyone can potentially have their written work distributed to a wide audience.

"Turn on your computer, write a blog post – and you're an author," said Lunsford, the Louise Hewlett Nixon Professor, Emerita.

The co-author of the digital-age writing guide Everyone's an Author, Lunsford said that students are "writing more today than they ever have in the history of the world, and it's because of social media." Students themselves "may think it's not writing, but it is writing, and it's important writing," said Lunsford.

Everyone's an Author includes samples and instruction on how to write online reviews, project proposals, articles on health policy and even Wikipedia articles. Lunsford wants to teach students about writing that makes things happen and is "growing and living."

Lunsford has authored several widely used writing guides. But with Everyone's an Author, Lunsford and her co-authors Lisa Ede, Beverly J. Moss, Carole Clark Papper and Keith Walters wanted to provide an alternative to typical writing instruction that "seemed to assume an audience of middle-class, white students that are monolingual and who were writing still on paper."

The co-authors, English, writing and linguistics professors, developed a textbook that assumed "multilingual, multimodal, multimedia discourse and students of extraordinarily varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds."

In addition to the more traditional writing forms addressed in other writing texts, such as the academic research essay, the co-authors placed emphasis on areas often overlooked in writing instruction. Their text shows students how to write effectively on media-sharing and crowd-sourcing platforms by integrating words and images and other types of multimedia communication.

For example, a chapter on "Designing What You Write" helps students think about their genre, audience, context, medium and other concerns before making stylistic choices like color schemes, infographics and video and other such narrative tools that are not typically discussed in a writing class.

Lunsford wants today's writing instruction to challenge assumptions about who is authorized to communicate and in what ways.

"With web 2.0 came participatory experiences by the billions. Young people today are not content to sit back and just consume – swallow – what's been thought and written in the past 2,500 years. They want to produce things themselves," said Lunsford.

## Teaching the hybrid medium

Lunsford, who has taught writing and rhetoric courses for four decades, became increasingly intrigued by the many forms in which students write while examining the results of the Stanford Study of Writing. The study centered on over 15,000 pieces of writing from 2001 to 2005, produced by a random sampling of undergraduates for assignments in and outside of class and which showed that students were writing across a wide variety of genres.

According to Lunsford, the students preferred to talk about the writing they were doing outside of class.

"They would wax eloquent about a newsletter they were putting out for temporary workers at Stanford, for instance," Lunsford said, "but only spend a couple of minutes talking about their IHUM [Introduction to the Humanities] assignments," which were formal academic papers.

Lunsford saw some of this enthusiastic, socially engaged student writing when she recently taught in a Semester at Sea. In the study abroad program sponsored by the University of Virginia, more than 600 students from all over the world sailed around the world while studying college-level courses.

Lunsford said her students got excited about writing for purposes they initiated, like using web-based programs to address issues in countries they visited: One group of students built a website to raise funds for an inexpensive homemade water-purifying device, while another group started a Kickstarter campaign that within a month raised enough money for a young man in Ghana to attend college for a year.

"He's now in his junior year at the university funded by this group of kids who just got online and started writing," Lunsford said. "So that's what I mean when I say there are profound ways in which authorship is happening on the web through social media and other things like Kickstarter campaigns."

The authors give students examples of how to represent themselves or their causes on platforms like Facebook or Twitter. They suggest amplifying a status update with a "rhetorically arranged" photo, or with special attention to audience and tone – elements that can carry over to academic writing. The authors explain how a convincing Yelp review reflects research skills like how one observes and collects evidence.

Students are now more adept at using different media.

"Students today are capable of producing those forms," Lunsford said. "Students want to make little films for an assignment. They want to draw a comic."

Lunsford advocates including graphic narratives in pedagogy and is fascinated by their innovative combinations of image and text. Comics are represented in Everyone's an Author, as well as in Lunsford's courses. She finds the hybrid medium works to "engage with our brains in different ways."

## Quality control

The often collaborative nature of multimedia texts and the digital writing environment reinforces Lunsford's belief that no writing is truly solitary. The rhetorician points out that even the comments we write in response to online articles are miniature, interactive, published compositions.

The authors point out that students today "write and research not just to report or analyze but to join conversations. With the click of a mouse they can respond to a Washington Post blog, publishing their views alongside those of the Post writer."

One might question where quality control and ethical responsibility come into play. Internet "trolling" and various form of aggressive, hateful speech are all too common these days.

Lunsford explains that in the Program in Writing and Rhetoric, the instructors define rhetoric as "the art, theory and practice of ethical communication," with emphasis on the word ethical. "We are responsible for what we write and say," Lunsford said.

She added that when it comes to quality, "the buck stops with you in some ways. If you're not trying to control your own quality, you're

expecting other people to do it for you. I think that's a big cop-out."

That shift in editorial control is part of the contemporary reality of writing.

"Young people today," she said, "want not just their voices to be heard. They want some control and some authority – some authorship."

Provided by Stanford University

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