Review of Literary Theory for Robots: How Computers Learned to Write

Amar Bahadur Sherma[1*]

[1] The University of Texas at Arlington, U.S.A.
[*] Corresponding author's email: amar.sherma@uta.edu
[*] https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2134-8340
https://doi.org/10.54855/ijli.25444

Received: 05/11/2025 Revision: 22/11/2025 Accepted: 24/11/2025 Online: 24/11/2025

ABSTRACT

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Robots, computer, policies

This book review examines the idea of collaboration between AI and human intelligence. The book review explains that, for many years, these two entities have been working together, and their collaboration has led to numerous discoveries and innovations. This review shares key insights of the book in conversation with other prominent scholars.

Tenen, D. Y. (2024). *Literary Theory for Robots: How Computers Learned to Write.* W. W. Norton & Company, pp. 158, ISBN: 9780393882186

In every domain of human life, artificial intelligence is becoming increasingly prevalent, and people are discussing how they can benefit from it and mitigate its harmful impacts. As AI (Artificial Intelligence) integration into academia becomes a reality, scholars, students, parents, stakeholders, and concerned parties are expressing ambivalent feelings about it. Some want to know why AI intelligence or machine intellect is going to support humans. As a first-year writing instructor, I have found myself on the same page and have been researching AI issues. Fortunately, I recently picked Dennis Yi Tenen's *Literary Theory for Robots: How Computers Learned to Write* (published 2024) because the internet, electronic gadgets, and artificial intelligence profoundly influence modern education. This book attempts to use several rhetorics to convince a broad audience that the idea of separating human learning from machine intelligence is absurd. Artificial intelligence is one of my research interests, and I have written some papers about it. Tenen is an associate professor of English and Comparative Literature at New York's Columbia University. His research interest includes the intersection of humans, text, and technology. Sandhu (2024), in his review published in *The Guardian*, claims that the title of Tenen's book can be peculiarly rephrased as "do robots need literary theory? Are we the robots – that has little in common with the techno-theory of writers such as Friedrich Kittler, Dona Haraway and N Katherine Hayles?" (par. 2). Sandhu (2024) states that Tenen's arguments about emerging technologies somehow reflect the works of Kittler, Haraway and Hayles, but his theoretical framework is not on a par with theirs. In other words, Tenen adopts rhetoric more than theories.

Readers can be bewildered because AI has not suddenly entered human spheres. Machine intelligence has been collaborating with human brains for centuries. In the industrial age, Tenen, without specifying any particular application, argues that automation was born to work

CITATION | Sherma, A. B. (2025). Review of Literary Theory for Robots: How Computers Learned to Write. *International Journal of Language Instruction*, *4*(4), 61-65. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54855/ijli.25444

alongside laborers. Today, machine intelligence, or AI, is working with students, teachers, writers, nurses, and engineers—with everyone. Despite our preferences, AI is on the way to becoming an indispensable part of our lives. Educators and scholars have been researching its significance and impacts on education. Regardless of research findings, we, as humans, must live with technology. Therefore, Tenen suggests that "we must also learn to become part software engineers and part" (p. 2). He goes on to claim that the idea of machine intelligence dates back to the time when Arab Philosopher Ibn Khaldun's 1377 Muqaddimah, which included "zairajah"—a kind of letter magic to make predictions.

However, Tenen does not deny that old and new AI algorithms, data, and computational power are still grappling with " external validation" (p. 21). A human brain must eventually validate AI output. For example, ChatGPT generates grammatically correct sentences; nonetheless, it sometimes fails to activate human faculties to understand the overall meaning, because not every ordinary person can master or become good at Aristotle's invention[1]. The author brings up Noam Chomsky's insightful statement, "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously." Despite acceptable syntax, here this sentence does not "make sense sense." (p. 21). Mere syntactical perfection does not bring words to life and meaning. The evidence that exhibits why human brains transcend machine intelligence is that "machine intelligence" entails coded programs but lacks lived experience, sensory input, and context. This issue has been troublesome, especially in academics.

The author highlights the intrinsic relationship between internal and external entities. He rather focuses on the collective goal to achieve "intelligence." Complying with Aristotle's notion of "intelligence" that "We don't have to concern ourselves with 'what's really going on, on the inside." (Berlin, 1984, p. 36). Tenen himself shares that he learns better by taking notes, reading books, chatting with friends, browsing different websites, and more. AI does not erode a student's talents but ignites them, serving as a "booster" or a "smart assistant." This idea closely resembles the theory of extended cognition—learning accelerates in response to the surrounding environment. Effective learning does not occur in isolation. He argues that gifted students rise to the top in the international arena, but those who are average or below may need support to be on par with their more talented peers. This is where AI steps in. Tenen (2024) opines, "Artificial intellect thrives in the gap between the average and the exceptional . . . AI was created specifically to make us smarter (mistakenly not lazier). Spell-checkers and sentence autocompletion tools make better (at least, more literate) writers" (p.59). Endorsing Tenen's argumentation, I would like to bring two questions to educators' and policymakers' attention outrightly: "What is the difference between getting ideas from writing center teachers or private home tutors and instructing an AI chatbot to produce a modal answer before adapting the answer and submitting it as if it were someone's sole creation? Is every human act not influenced by any other external entity, such as cultures, interactions, readings, and observations?

The answer is that learning or language cannot be pure. Learning happens in social contexts through interactions and dialogue between interlocutors and audiences (Bakhtin, 2010; Bruffee, 1984). Unlike in the past, students tend to interact more with non-human entities for various purposes. This clearly indicates that human creativity or original responses have always originated from collaboration and socialization. Given the changing dynamics of society, the definition of "originality or creativity" must be redefined in education. What I mean is new assessment rubrics that recognize, limit, and evaluate AI's contribution alongside students'

[1] In *Practical Elements of Rhetoric,* Genung and A.S. Hill mention that "invention is a natural gift that can be cultivated by habits of observation, thought, and reading" (Berlin, 1984, p. 65).

unsupported ideas, fostering ethics and transparency. Moreover, the collaboration between students' writing, Grammarly, and Microsoft Word's auto-correction relates to the notion of machine learning; however, it has hardly been perceived as a threat to academia. Some future studies can focus on this complex relationship.

In the final chapter, Tenen asks readers the most awaited and heavy question: "Should we embrace AI now?" Tenen presents nine compelling ideas for incorporating AI into human life. However, his overall messaging is "AI will neither destroy humanity nor solve all its problems" (121). Throughout the book, he makes his best effort to prove that humans and machine intelligence are compatible, especially as machines augment human intelligence. He also discovers that computer science has been "inextricably entwined with literary and linguistic concerns" (p. 121). His nine ideas are: AI is collective labor, intelligence is distributed, AI holds a metaphor, metaphors obscure responsibility, metaphors don't hurt, machines alone cannot become moral agents, automation has come for "knowledge work," technology encodes politics, and general intelligence leads to generic intelligence. Among his ideas, two captivated me—ethical framing and a mismatch between performance and understanding. The author sounds sympathetic to artificial intelligence. Users or humans hold AI responsible for producing discriminatory or racist language. On the contrary, the author objects to this accusation. He contends that "It's not the pen's fault that it wrote convincing misinformation" (p. 130). The human brain has programmed it, regulated it, and benefited from it. This is a strong rebuttal. And the other is a need for redefining learning, originality, and authorship. He does not advocate for the integration of AI unquestioningly. He sincerely warns readers of AI's threat. AI tools have been helping students improve their grades and writing, yet their mastery and achievement remain questionable. His warning mirrors this: "We should be preparing for a future of 'writers' and 'coders' incapable of authoring a single line unassisted" (p. 137).

Therefore, teachers and academic institutions must not excessively rely on AI policies. Instead of policing AI use in students' work, teachers should teach students how and when to use it, as ChatGPT, among other GenAI tools, has become exceedingly popular at all levels of education (Chan & Hu, 2023). Tenen boldly states that "There is no point in lecturing a 'smart' refrigerator about ethics" (p. 141). A creative and smart teacher creates questions for students that cannot be contextualized, sensed, or internalized by algorithms and redefines assessments so that they value genuine perspectives, critical participation, and original work. AI has pushed teachers to work smarter and more intelligently than before. AI has become a "wellwisher." Nonetheless, those who are still reluctant to embrace machine learning may feel compelled "to devote energy toward outpacing GenAI. That is, trying to develop assignments for which GenAI platforms cannot provide viable responses may be impractical—if not impossible—given the velocity of AI evolution" (Dobrin, 2023, p. 17). It reminds me of my rhetoric and composition professor who, once, confidently told us that AI would struggle to respond to his unique and critical thinking questions. Since artificial intelligence is an outcome of human thought, why can't a teacher outsmart a machine and design assignments that challenge a machine's mind? Instead of treating machines as competitors or aliens, educators can work with students to encourage ethical, collaborative work that maximizes learning outcomes (Rodriguez, 2025).

As a first-year writing instructor, I can relate my situation to the complexities of implementing AI in education. In the teaching of English or writing, AI can be an additional help to students who speak English as a foreign/second language. Now, whether we like it or not, machine learning has become part of our lives. Hart-Davidson (2018) noted that, before ChatGPT existed, teaching and writing robots had already entered human lives. Humans create robots, and they later influence humans. Nonetheless, humans possess the caliber to mitigate robots' detrimental effects. He suggested "theorizing, building, and researching writing by non-

humans" (p. 254). After six years of Hart-Davidson's assertion, Tenen solidifies this notion of collaborating with robots. "The paths of 'machine learning' and 'human learning' continue to converge, destabilizing some of our long-standing pedagogical assumptions in the process" (p. 138). Throughout the book, Tenen makes compelling cases for how learning and writing are not a product of a single intellect in the 21st century. Another strength of this book lies in weighing the merits and demerits of machine intelligence. As an AI advocate, the author's merits outweigh the demerits. Another critical achievement can be reflected in his interactions with readers. He leaves readers with questions to think about. He has substantiated his claim and advanced his arguments with convincing combinations of philosophy and machine intelligence. When he cites historical references, readers may find it difficult to resist his powerful argument. My perception has been influenced profoundly. By analyzing the political, practical, and ethical aspects of works like Cathy O'Neil's *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2016), Ethan Mullick's *Co-Intelligence* (2024), and Kate Crawford's *Atlas of AI* (2021), Dobrin's rhetorical focus is enhanced. Together, these books give academics and educators a better understanding of AI as a sophisticated sociotechnical system that challenges ideas of authorship, creativity, and critical literacy rather than just as a teaching tool. It is understandable that the book's primary goal is to emphasize the theories behind the emergence of "machine intelligence" and why it is not irresistible now or in the future. He has made a wise decision by striking while the iron is hot. AI has become a burning issue across every sphere of human life. In this ongoing war between "machine learning" and "human learning," neither will win nor lose. The current situation indicates that raising ethical awareness about AI will secure a future in which machine and human intelligence work together across all domains, particularly in education (Sherma, 2024). Collaboration overpowers individual efforts.

In conclusion, the book strongly supports its argument that computers and humans have been collaborating for centuries. The combination of machines and humans works better if precautions are taken. Future findings will present more solutions and implications. At the moment, teachers may help their students understand in class how any machine or tool can generate mistakes, fake information, racial and sexual stereotypes, broad implications, and irrelevant content through its algorithmic capabilities. Even if an institutional policy is not ready, a class protocol can be developed to guide and control the misuse of machine intelligence. If students realize that working with machine intelligence itself is not problematic, but their blind faith in it can lead them to unforeseeable consequences. One thing always prevails in life. Everything comes with binary opposites—merits and demerits.

References

Bakhtin, M. M. (2010). *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. University of Texas Press.

Berlin, J. A. (1984). *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges*. CSIU Press.

Bruffee, K. A. (1984). Collaborative learning and the "Conversation of Mankind". *College English*, *46*(7), 635-652.

Chan, C. K. Y., & Hu, W. (2023). Students' voices on generative AI: Perceptions, benefits, and challenges in higher education. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, *20*(1), 43. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-023-00411-8

Dobrin, S. I. (2023). *Talking about Generative AI: A Guide for Educators.* Broadview press.

Sandhu, S. (2024). Literary Theory for Robots by Dennis Yi Tenen Review – the Deep Roots of AI. The Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/mar/28/literarytheory-for-robots-by-dennis-yi-tenen-review-the-deep-roots-of-ai.

Hart-Davidson, W. (2018). Writing with Robots and Other Curiosities of the Age of Machine Rhetorics. In *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Writing and Rhetoric* (pp. 248-255). Routledge.

Rodriguez, A. (2025). Book Review: AI-Powered Education: Innovative Teaching Strategies to Elevate Student Learning. *International Journal of TESOL & Education*, *5*(3), 182-186. https://doi.org/10.54855/ijte.255311

Sherma, A. B. (2024). ChatGPT's Impact on Students' Writing: Lessons Learned from Nepali Undergraduate Students. *Journal of NELTA, 29*(1), 83–96.https://doi.org/10.3126/nelta.v29i1.72636

Biodata

Amar Bahadur Sherma, a former Fulbright TEA fellow at California State University for cohort 2018, is a Ph.D. scholar in the Department of English, The University of Texas at Arlington, U.S. His research interest areas include composition, culture, feminism, critical theory, rhetoric, migration and refugee, human rights, technical writing, etc. His research has been published in different peer-reviewed journals. He also serves as an editor, reviewer, English textbook writer, and freelancer.