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Editorial Musings

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A short time ago I had never heard of something called ChatGPT. Since then, however, it seems to have taken the academic world by storm. Conversations about it are occurring frequently, and I see articles on the topic almost everywhere. Reactions range from despair (“Plagiarism will become the norm!”) to optimistic assessment (“We’ll be able to save so much time!”), in combination with side remarks about how the AI writing system misuses commas and supplies inaccurate references. What is a dedicated researcher to think about all this? Is the end of the world in fact nigh?

I’d like to think not, but I do have some deep and abiding concerns. My primary concern stems from what I hear consistently from people a good deal younger than I am. In response to such questions as “Why do you like this?” or “Why did you do it this way?” I now hear, “Because it’s easier!” That is now the word that gives me pause: “easier.” Has that in fact become the standard of measurement for value, that some task or other is “easier”?

If so, then I become even more concerned about ChatGPT. From what I have read, all one has to do is go to the website, download the appropriate app, and then simply say something along the lines of, “Write an essay explaining the value of meditation.” Lo and behold, the program coughs up an essay of decent value—perhaps with a few misplaced commas—without an actual person doing anything beyond asking. That is indeed “easier” than coming up with an original idea and following through that idea by doing significant research. Am I really to believe that numerous students will refuse this easier route to fulfilling academic tasks?

Of course, it’s possible that some will resist. Some will resent having their autonomy and their individual intellect usurped by an AI program. I refuse to stop believing that there will always be those who are not convinced that easier is necessarily better. But I am also realistic enough to recognize that Google has persuaded most of us

that finding answers can and should be simple and easy. With that logic, why shouldn't writing an essay be the same? And in the face of that attitude, any lecture on the value of doing something right, doing something independently and thoroughly—and honestly—might well be a pointless undertaking. After all, there is no denying that telling ChatGPT to write the essay is indeed “easier.”

I am a Humanities person, and I suppose if students were to turn to ChatGPT to produce an essay on, say, a play by Shakespeare, no ongoing damage would result, except, perhaps, to the student's sense of ethics and integrity. But what about the use of ChatGPT in the sciences? Will students be producing essays that sound so plausible that they are accepted as valid? And if so, could serious consequences result from such acceptance? I am reminded of a “study” many years ago that purported to assert that sugary cereals did no damage to young children—a study that was funded by Kellogg's in the company's own interests. Fortunately, the truth of the funding behind the study was revealed, and sugary cereals failed to be elevated to a health food. But what are the odds of a ChatGPT-written essay being discovered to be such, and not the original work of an actual student? In other words, what if something of a scientific nature were to be asserted, then accepted as truth, then put into effect? What might be the consequences?

Call me “old school,” but I believe with all my heart that writing and research must be original, done carefully and conscientiously, and with hard work as part of it all. I also believe in the value of honesty in all things, but most particularly in scientific research that ultimately can affect many thousands of people. We have seen a disturbing and pervasive social trend to putting honesty secondary to making money. Just how likely is it that those who produce essays through ChatGPT are going to be honest about it? We can tell students that if they lie about their papers, they are really only cheating themselves of a genuine education, choosing “easier” over training their own brains to learn and explore. But will such lessons have any significant effect?

I don't know, nor does anyone at this stage. But the potential for misuse of ChatGPT and for dishonest outcomes is obvious. Without any data as yet to direct my thinking, I can only say that I am seriously concerned about the long-term effects of ChatGPT, not just on the scientific community, but ultimately on all of us.

Bio:

Dr. Kendra Gaines received her doctorate in English Literature from Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois. She taught at Northwestern, as well as University of Michigan, before moving to Tucson. At the University of Arizona, she served for 16 years as Senior Tutor and Instructional Specialist in, first, the Department of English, and then at the UA's Writing Skills Improvement Program. Dr. Gaines has taught at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base for almost 30 years, teaching for Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Chapman University, Park University, and Pima College. Dr. Gaines teaches online as well. She is completing her seventeenth year teaching both English and Philosophy courses for Colorado Technical University. She has also been teaching online

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