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Editorial Musings

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AI. Artificial Intelligence. Which of these two words should one pay most attention to? The “artificial” part, or the “intelligence” part? If you’re thinking I have the answer, sorry to disappoint, but I do not. I do know that it’s everywhere now, and it’s just the beginning. Already there’s a divide; some will say hooray, it will solve so many problems and streamline all that boring work. Others will say, but it’s going to make everyone lazy. People will stop thinking altogether. They’ll just believe everything that AI tells them, and if it’s wrong, they’ll never know! AI will infect and destroy everything! What is the truth here?

In the past few months, as an online English professor, I’ve been required to engage with AI more than I might like, simply because one of the courses I teach—English Composition—has incorporated AI into its syllabus. Students absolutely must engage with AI, whether they wish to or not, because various assignments throughout the course include an AI component that is unavoidable. As for me, I had to undergo rigorous training with AI before I was even allowed to teach the course. So at least now I’m not as ignorant about it as I was, and my opinions are based on substantial interaction with it.

What do I think? On the positive side, it can be great fun to interact with. One of my students said she asked AI to “roast”—criticize—her and she enjoyed it. So, I gave it a try and I have to confess that I enjoyed it too. I used Claude, rather than ChatGTP, and I found that Claude can be quite engaging. I can also see the potential for addiction to AI, primarily because any interaction with it does come across as personalized. In our society that seems bent on isolating people in their homes with food deliveries, online banking, and lots of Netflix movies, Claude can seem like a caring friend to many.

On the negative side, the old expression, applied originally to early computer programming, still applies: GIGO. Garbage in, garbage out. What a person types into any of the AI programs dictates what the person will get in return. AI cannot serve on both sides of the interaction but can only respond to what the individual decides to tell it. So the burden of receiving an intelligent, believable, and thorough response to any question falls upon the person asking that question.

And that brings me to the issue of complementary health care, also known as integrative medicine, naturopathic medicine, chiropractor work, and any number of euphemisms. These are not all the same, of course, but they are all on the outside of standard, Western, allopathic medicine. It seems that AI seeks to replace the human practitioner of complementary medicine with its own version of health care, based on what the would-be patient types into the computer. That means that the diagnosis and treatment are fundamentally in the hands—or fingers—of the person typing. Think about that. I ask you to consider, just how proficient are you at describing your own symptoms? Can you name all the various parts of your anatomy? Can you tell AI exactly what sort of pain you're experiencing and when it began? How precise can you be in your descriptions? Because if AI gets it wrong and therefore recommends a treatment that is potentially dangerous for you, the onus is on you and your inadequate description of your symptoms.

No human being, medically trained, is present to advise you on the wisdom of following whatever advice you might receive from AI. No one is there to double-check your symptoms, to refer to many years of training and experience, to help you and support you. With AI, YOU are treating YOU—and if something goes wrong, YOU are to blame!

Interesting to me, the majority of my students told me outright and bluntly that they had no desire to interact with AI, that they'd much rather think for themselves. I was frankly surprised by this reaction, because I thought they might be pleased by how much commentary and support they could receive. But no, they wanted to write for themselves and receive honest feedback from their professor. How refreshing! If I were a patient, I would feel exactly the same way about my health care. I want hands-on. I want a trained professional person, preferably a specialist in some form of complementary medicine, to check me out and give me their well-considered assessment. Only that personal interaction would give me the peace of mind that artificial intelligence cannot hope to provide.

After all, it's unquestionably artificial, and its intelligence is only as solid and helpful as the guidance we give it. That's not good enough for me. Is it for you?

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

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