

Wax on. Wax off.

By Jen Artan, Canada

“Your first draft isn’t an unoriginal idea expressed clearly; it’s an original idea expressed poorly, and it is accompanied by your amorphous dissatisfaction, your awareness of the distance between what it says and what you want it to say.” (Chiang, 2023)

The rise of ChatGPT

Students have always been the subject matter expert in cutting corners; if a new tool or technology gives them the edge, they will take it.

When the internet emerged, educators prophesied the end of originality. They pondered how plagiarism will now exist on an entirely new plain. The teachers had a point. The internet made it super easy for essay mills to exist and recruit customers. Indeed, since the rise of ChatGPT, many such organizations, like Chegg, are reporting huge net losses as its shares dropped by half (Bailey, 2023).

However, not all students could afford to buy their research papers or hire an expensive tutor to help them write their college entrance essays. Generative AI, like that used by OpenAI’s tool, ChatGPT, is leveling the field for many students in this respect. If a private, personal tutor is something you would use, then presto! Free private tutor granted (at least in ChatGPT version 3.5; the 4.0 version is a premium service but still relatively affordable).

It has not even been a year since OpenAI launched ChatPGT. Today, students might be wondering what is the point in learning how to write a first draft when a few deft keystrokes and carefully crafted prompts will generate a near-perfect masterpiece in a matter of seconds.

Not just a calculator

ChatGPT has been often compared to the common calculator. When calculators were introduced, math teachers worried about their students’ abilities to learn and perform basic calculations. Eventually calculators



came to be accepted, generally with the caveat that users needed to show their work. Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI, famously makes this comparison when explaining to users the initial apprehension of the tool and the eventual integration into daily life (Anderson, 2023).

In math, as in writing, students more than ever need to show their work—how did they arrive at their final response? Offloading the crucial first draft and subsequent revisions to generative AI, like ChatGPT, ultimately means outsourcing the thinking process. Writing is thinking. In order to develop the critical thinking skills so crucial today, one has to put in the sweat equity.

The productive process of writing stimulates brain activity; new neural pathways are formed, and learning happens. It is the process that we, as teachers, know is the key. Not the end product (or artefact). This is not a new concept; academic writers have been discussing this for years (Jansesen et al., 2013; Mertes, 1991). As teachers, we carefully scaffold the writing process, give ample time, evidence and practice, as well as formative feedback. We do it in many different contexts and involve our students in the editing and reflection process. It is not exciting, quick, or instantaneous. We are, in effect, waxing on and waxing off.

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Educators of a certain age know from whence this term originated. For those that do not, it is a famous expression from the 80s movie *Karate Kid*.

What happened was this: There was this kid named Daniel who wanted to learn karate. He encountered, by chance, Mr. Miagi, who happened to know the art of karate. Mr. Miagi agreed to mentor Daniel. Daniel, excited to start learning all of the cool Bruce Lee style moves, met up with Mr. Miagi at his home to begin the process. However, his first karate lesson involved waxing and polishing every single one of Miagi's extensive collection of old cars. The wax was to be applied using a very specific process and cleared using another. No shortcuts. Wax on. Wax off. Daniel, needless to say, was initially chagrined and confused. Instead of teaching thrilling and exciting karate moves, Mr. Miagi had Daniel perform hours and hours of difficult, boring labour.

The lesson that Daniel would eventually learn is this: The mere difficulty or lack of immediate excitement surrounding an activity should not render it optional; both challenging and seemingly mundane tasks hold value.

Value in difficulty: Difficult tasks stimulate our cognitive faculties, inducing stress that, in moderation, can be beneficial (Rudland, 2020). Consider the example of a challenging crossword puzzle. Solving it



requires intense focus, and while it may be mentally taxing, it also exercises your problem-solving skills and vocabulary, ultimately improving your cognitive abilities.

Value in the mundane: Mundane or boring tasks provide an opportunity for refinement and practice. Initially, Daniel's task seems like a simple, repetitive chore. However, through continuous practice, he develops his muscle memory, and the act becomes intuitive. Ultimately he is able to use his understanding of the basics and perform the more complex and creative crane kick (i.e. higher order thinking skills), which would become the franchise's signature iconic move.

Daniel's many laborious tasks under the mentorship of Mr. Miagi are metaphors for mastering basic skills before moving on to more complex martial arts techniques. The mundane task, in this case, laid the foundation for a much larger skill set. In a similar vein, mundane office tasks like data entry or organizing files might seem unexciting, but they provide the opportunity to develop organizational skills and attention to detail, which are crucial for broader tasks like project management. Yawn-inducing grammar tasks become the grout in our language foundation. Writing is a foundational skill, not only or just a tool to get other things done. Through the writing process, students can develop and refine their communication skills, as well as learn how to express their ideas effectively.

Using ChatGPT to provide feedback and suggestions and to act like a tutor will help develop both writing and thinking skills; using ChatGPT to do the work in one's stead is about as useful to your health goals as strapping your fitbit onto a squirrel. Sure, you will rack up quite a few steps, but it is not exactly going to help you get that washboard stomach.

Not to mention, our failures and mistakes also play a part in our learning process. Producing an artificial, and perfect, first draft will not get your neurons firing. It will not get you to think critically about your assignment, argument, essay, letter, or blog post, and in turn, it will not help you to develop critical thinking skills on resources and materials that come your way from others.

Conclusion

Wayne Gretzky famously advised people to skate to where the puck is going. Today, the puck is a distant blur in the far corner of the rink. Just vaguely, however, we can see where it intersects the thoughtful, critical use of machine learning and the useful-yet-boring writing process.

While ChatGPT and similar AI technologies offer valuable assistance in writing tasks, their true value lies in aiding the learning process, not replacing it. That original idea expressed poorly is an integral first step. Writing also enhances critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and creativity. Embrace technology



thoughtfully and use it as a tool to enhance the writing process, rather than as a replacement for foundational skills. As educators, we must recognize the blurred line between technological assistance and authentic learning, always prioritizing the latter.

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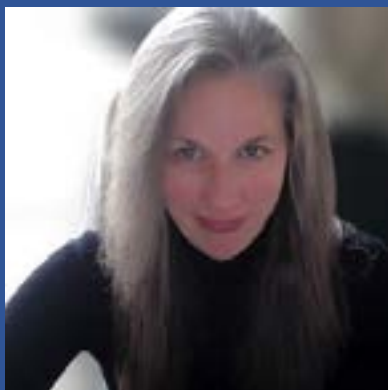
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