CHAPTER 12. THE MACHINE GENIE: INSTRUCTIONAL METAPHORS FOR LLM TEXT PRODUCTION

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The comic book miniseries *Eight Billion Genies* is, in my opinion, a charming and affecting piece of speculative fiction. It chronicles the aftermath of "G-Day," on which every human on earth was visited by a personal genie offering to grant them exactly one wish. Suddenly, millions of often selfish, impulsive wishes created a dangerous, ever-shifting reality (Soule and Brown). The series explores how human social structures creak and buckle under the weight of (even limited) omnipotence. I was struck by the parallels to large language models (LLMs), where a short textual prompt (a wish?) is all anyone needs to instantly produce seemingly polished communication. This odd metaphor has helped me grasp how GenAI is reshaping our writing reality.

Metaphor, described by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson as "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another," is so essential to our everyday thinking and communicating that it can become nearly invisible. GenAI is steeped in metaphor; platforms (e.g., "assistant," "co-pilot") and concepts (e.g., "artificial *intelligence,*" "machine *learning*") are named with parallels to human labor and knowledge-making. Writing centers too are metaphor rich. We create and challenge metaphors for writing centers like "fix-it shops" (Haviland) or "cozy homes" (McKinney). We define tutor roles with metaphors like *The Bedford Guide*'s "hats" we "wear" (Ryan and Zimmerelli). We render concepts relatable with metaphors like comparing an essay's introduction to a "funnel" or "bridge." If we employ these metaphors because we believe they influence how writing or writing centers are experienced and understood, then the same should be true for GenAI. The associations we give to GenAI tools as we seek to explain and understand them will shape how we and our clients understand and use them.

To suggest metaphorical approaches that might promote writers' effective and responsible GenAI use, this chapter identifies common metaphors used about LLMs by writing center practitioners and examines their potential implications.

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METHODS

This study was approved by James Madison University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Protocol #24-4789). I invited participants from the WCenter listserv, a long-running email forum for writing center practitioners, and from our center's internal mailing list to first complete a Qualtrics survey and then opt in to semi-structured interviews on Zoom. From 61 respondents, I conducted 21 interviews, primarily with members of my undergraduate student staff (15) but also with some of our graduate consultants (2), writing center clients (2), and peer educators from other institutions (2).

In each interview, I asked participants to characterize their understanding of and user experience with LLMs, describe writing center sessions where they discussed LLMs, and offer salient metaphors they've used either internally to conceptualize or externally to explain LLMs.

I collected audio recordings of each interview, transcribed them using AI-assisted speech-to-text tools, and coded them manually using an emergent topical coding scheme.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the following sections, I offer some examples of metaphors invoked often in my qualitative data with my commentary on their potential instructional benefits and/or challenges.

Writing Process Metaphors

Many interviewees used metaphors about when in the writing process they use LLMs or felt like a writer "should."

Starting Point or Last Resort

Some respondents described LLMs as a "first resort," "jumping-off point," or "starting point." They felt GenAI was most useful early and it either lost usefulness for them as the task developed or they felt they were ceding writing autonomy if they used it beyond brainstorming.

More common was framing LLMs as a "last resort." Respondents said: "[GenAI] might be something I consult … in a time of need, when, honestly, I feel at my weakest;" "I really only use it when I'm like super stuck;" and, "I don't think I've ever encouraged someone to use ChatGPT … the only situation [I would do so] would be if they're super last minute to do an assignment…."

The metaphorical framework of "starting point" vs. "last resort," also explored well in this collection's Chapter 6 (Cleary and Rymer), may be useful to get clients talking about their writing processes and integration of GenAI tools. I encourage consultants to push back against the "last resort" framing, as, if used too late in a process or only under duress, the likelihood of uncritical or unscrupulous GenAI use likely increases. I could imagine saying to a client: "Some feel they can only use LLMs when stuck or up against a deadline; I've found that when I integrate it in my process earlier (if allowed), I have more time to check outputs, find sources to corroborate, and employ my own phrasing and written voice."

Shortcut

A common metaphor in the interviews was GenAI as "shortcut" or way to "cut corners." Many students expressed guilt: "I feel very guilty because I was like: I should be doing the work. I should be reading. I should be finding this on my own. It felt like, I guess, like taking the easy way out." Another said, "I didn't love how I felt after [using an LLM] … like I didn't get to go through the process of coming up with my own ideas." The "shortcut" metaphor may be another that consultants can try to steer clients away from. For one thing, saying "shortcut" implies one would arrive at the same destination (written product in this case) only quicker, whereas writers should be aware that the GenAI-derived prose is necessarily different from what they would arrive at independently.

When employing this metaphor, consultants might choose to communicate that overreliance on "shortcuts" could hinder learning. In this way, consultants can motivate clients to tackle writing tasks "the hard way" to build skills. Fostering clients' motivation and active investment in writing proficiency acquisition might be an important role of consultants in an era where writing tasks can be automated.

Be All, End All

One common refrain was respondents describing that they did not want AI text generation to be the entirety of their writing process (i.e. generating machine prose and submitting that as a finished product). One respondent said, "I like to keep my tone of voice in my pieces [which] helps me stand out…. So, I don't think I would use [an LLM] as an end all, be all just because it just doesn't feel like it's my own."

The consultants I talked to were almost universally critical of this framing, viewing it as something their peers were doing but that they felt inauthentic or inadvisable. One interviewee said, "A lot of [my classmates] would just be using ChatGPT on these tests that we weren't supposed to be using anything on …

that just puts a bad taste in my mouth because I'm one of the few people who didn't do that."

Many of the interviewees articulated using GenAI technologies to supplement rather than replace their writing processes: "[An LLM] is what helps get you to a finished product. It's not the finished product itself," and "[An LLM] can be a tool to help you write that paper, but it should not be the paper." Such language can be useful in tutorials to foster writers' motivation and agency and again aligns with discussions in this collection's Chapter 6.

Product Metaphors

In a natural extension of "process" metaphors, many interviewees employed metaphors describing LLMs' output text.

Uncanny Valley

The term "uncanny valley" was coined in Japanese by Masahiro Mori for the perceived psychological and aesthetic reactions of humans to non-human constructs with proximity to human-like appearance (Mori). The "valley" refers to a perceived space wherein an item closely resembles a human but not fully, which Mori argues creates discomfort. The uncanny valley has subsequently shifted into public discourse to describe off-putting, near-human figures in media.

A few participants used this phrase directly ("I'd say sometimes it's a little like uncanny valley. Like this thing is pretending to be a human, but it's not"), but many others described such a tension, attributing the discomfort to either subtle markers of synthetic writing in the text or their meta-knowledge that the text was not human generated. One respondent said, "ChatGPT has this feeling where it's a conversation … with like a fake person. But they can give you very real and emotional responses … that to me felt weird and scary." Another said, "Having [ChatGPT] be conversational … put[ting] on kind of a human mask … helps people trust the information more…. But, I mean, it's not a person. Just, not-a-person trying to sound like a person."

This metaphor could aid rapport building. For example, a consultant could invoke "uncanny valley" to validate clients' discomfort with GenAI or even create levity (one interviewee noted: "I think [calling ChatGPT] a 'fake person' is almost funny").

Word Salad

Word salad, referring to unintelligible diction, is another phrase originating

in academic contexts that broadened to popular awareness. With the "word salad" metaphor, I distinguish between poor-sounding or ineffective prose (see the later "entity" metaphor of "idiot") and that which is syntactically (structurally) coherent but semantically (meaningfully) incoherent. For example, Noam Chomsky's famous sentence, "colorless green ideas sleep furiously," is grammatically correct but self-contradictory to the point of meaninglessness. While pure "word salad" can even lack syntactic coherence (e.g., words purely selected at random), for LLMs, it is often coherent in structure but not meaning.

This term was explicitly invoked in a few interviews: "[AI-generated text] does feel like word salad because it's just picking words that kind of go together and just throw[ing] [them] together without actually connecting [them]." It was also referenced indirectly by others: "I often study while I'm tired, and [I'll] read a paragraph and be like, 'wait a minute, I didn't actually comprehend any of that,' but it was constant with [AI-generated text]. I finally realized it wasn't me. It was the writing," and "The language in [my AI-generated] paper was scholarly sounding but didn't make a whole bunch of sense when you broke down the sentences."

The "word salad" metaphor can spotlight how LLMs function differently from human writers. When humans write, we generally have an intended meaning we wish to convey and then choose signs (like words or gestures) to express that meaning. In contrast, LLMs select and arrange signs (typically words) based on their training protocols and datasets. While they are often trained on human-written texts, this probabilistic approach still differs fundamentally from how humans order words, which can make machine-written text harder to read and understand. Additionally, due to limitations in data and algorithms, machine-generated text can sometimes produce probabilistically related but ultimately meaningless text. Consultants can use this metaphor to help clients understand this specific limitation of LLMs and the importance of checking and revising machine output. As one consultant put it, "I think [we] can help students understand [that] even though it sounds coherent, it doesn't mean that it is."

Plagiarism

Perhaps the most common metaphor for LLM output was "plagiarism." One participant said, "I think about how people used to pay [others] to write their papers…. When I hear ChatGPT, my mind just goes to cheating." Another said, "I'm probably not going to explore [LLMs] because I don't want to be caught plagiarizing or whatever." For many, this can feel more literal than metaphorical. However, machine-generated text is meaningfully distinct from a human directly taking credit for another's work in intention, process, and perpetrator. Many

compelling arguments frame GenAI processes as inherently "theft" or "plagiarism," but I argue these still invoke metaphor. Some participants engaged with this complexity directly: "I'm protective of my writing. I wouldn't appreciate, you know, a machine taking [it] and then someone else taking *that* and passing [it] off as their own."

This metaphor is useful in explaining GenAI functioning and warning of uncritical use. However, as a dominant metaphorical frame, it may dissuade writers from developing GenAI literacy or from disclosing GenAI use to tutors or instructors. Consultants employing this metaphor should be prepared to discuss the complexity of defining LLM output as plagiaristic and to empathize with clients' difficult negotiation of GenAI ethics.

Crowd Sourcing

The "crowd sourcing" metaphor, like the previous, highlights how LLM-generated language closely resembles uncredited texts. This metaphor compares querying an LLM and receiving the "most likely" responses based on its dataset to crowd sourcing that information from, say, an online poll or message board.

This metaphor arose when respondents compared LLMs to platforms like WikiHow, Yahoo Answers, or Reddit. A few respondents invoked the "crowd sourcing" metaphor as it relates to the accuracy of LLM-derived information:

> Maybe [ChatGPT] has three sources saying the sky is blue, but four sources saying the sky is green … ChatGPT will take those three sources and those four sources and … when someone asks [it], 'what color is the sky?' [it] will spit out, 'the sky is green.' [Because of this] there are racist [and] sexist algorithms because it pulls from information … written by people who are biased.

Put another way by another interviewee, "[ChatGPT] is borrowing from other people. Sometimes those people might not necessarily know what they're talking about either."

By framing patterns in training data as an average response from a "crowd," this metaphor may help dispel the notion that LLMs draw from a singular "intelligence." Consultants may find this metaphor helpful to explain algorithmic bias or difficulties with attribution, originality, and accuracy in AI-generated text.

Ontology Metaphors – Objects, Concepts, and Entities

This category contains metaphors describing the LLM itself (not its output), further divided by whether they frame it as an "object/concept" or as an "entity."

Threat

A concept metaphor that arose in most interviews was casting LLMs as an existential threat, increasing in severity and harm over time. One respondent described AI as a "looming dark cloud," and another said, "There's a whole new realm of possibility surrounding [AI], but … [my] biggest [reaction] is just scared." One of the perceived threats was an often science fiction-mediated future conflict between humans and AI. Interviewees referenced films like *The Matrix* or characters like HAL from *2001: A Space Odyssey* or Ultron from *The Avengers* franchise. A survey respondent offered "AI Overlord, Evil AI" as a metaphor they've used, and an interviewee said, "Maybe I read one too many dystopian novels in high school, but I just feel like ChatGPT is going to fight me in 50 years."

Participants also voiced concerns about GenAI overreliance and human replacement. One interviewee said, "Writing has been a coping mechanism for [my] mental health issues [and a] way to communicate when I find it hard to talk…. Seeing a machine do it was hard for me. It pose[s] a real threat to my whole career as a writer." Another said, "When I worked at the writing center, I had to do pretty simple tasks for clients like explaining what a thesis is. I'm worried that if younger generations are getting access to [GenAI] … they're never going to develop writing skills."

An interesting phenomenon I noticed in these discussions about GenAI as "threat" was a consistent blurring of present and future. In interviews, we found it difficult to discuss the technology as it exists in the present without worrying about future capabilities and impact. I found this present/future interplay so prevalent and striking that I started thinking of it as figurative language unto itself: a sort of "chrono-synecdoche" where rather than referencing a part for the whole (e.g., calling one's car one's "wheels"), interviewees were referring to something in the present as it would exist in the future (e.g., calling an "acorn" an "oak tree"). Respondents used the term AI or even ChatGPT to describe a potential future technology and its catastrophic consequences.

Awareness of the pervasive anxiety around GenAI—and the natural propensity to dive into future hypotheticals when discussing it—might be valuable to consider in the writing center. When we assist clients, we can make sure we help them become savvy users of the technologies as they exist today, acknowledge the volatility and speed of AI developments, and validate their future-directed fears, which are often compounded by mixed institutional or instructional messaging (e.g., some instructors telling students never to use this technology because it is the death of writing, and others telling them to become proficient with the technology as a future job necessity).

Tool

The "tool" metaphor was the most pervasive object metaphor across the surveys and interviews, likely due to the ubiquity of "tool" to describe web-based resources. This metaphor also feels literal; LLMs certainly are human-created tools. I argue, though, that when we conceive of GenAI as a tool, and especially as a specific kind of tool as many respondents offered, we are still creating metaphorical associations.

Participants often used modifier words to describe the type of tool with phrases like "productivity tool," "efficiency tool," or "brainstorming tool." Some respondents described LLMs as "organizers" or "re-organizers," implying that they compile or sort knowledge more than generate it. This metaphor was also invoked when interviewees used verbs like "regurgitate," "rehash," or "remix" to describe LLM text generation.

The metaphor of a "stencil," "template," or "sketch" was also mentioned in some interviews: "I've been thinking of ChatGPT as a stencil…. You use it to maybe get started then add details in your own voice after." One of the survey respondents' qualitative comments echoed this: "I asked ChatGPT to write a letter of recommendation for tenure/promotion. I'd never written this kind of letter, and I'd never seen one. The AI-produced draft was poor, but it did provide a useful structure for me to follow…. I used [it] as a model and wrote my own letter."

Another metaphor mentioned in a few interviews was "calculator." One respondent began jokingly, "My math teacher would always say, 'The calculator is only as smart as you are.' I [responded], 'Well, I must be pretty dumb because it's kind of not working.'" They continued, "ChatGPT is similar. You've got to know the long equation to do it the short way, and you've got to show your work." This metaphor may be useful to encourage student transparency about GenAI use and to ensure they themselves understand the tasks they are asking LLMs to automate.

One of the interviewees used a "fishing bait" metaphor: "[Like] fishing, … sometimes you get [LLM output that is] … cool, and sometimes it's just garbage and doesn't make any sense. [I] had to figure out how to give it the right bait … to figure out … if I want this kind of response, here's how I need to work my prompt." This metaphor may be useful to position prompt engineering as an acquirable skill and emphasize that not all outputs will be useful or high quality.

Analogies to other web-based resources were frequent in the interviews, most commonly search engines. Anecdotally, some of my first-year writing students told me that querying ChatGPT had dethroned Google as their first step for information foraging, which a handful of interviewees corroborated about their own processes. One said, "When I was studying, I saw a couple of acronyms I

wasn't sure about and quickly put [them] into ChatGPT…. I might not have even looked for the answer if I didn't have that tool available to me…. It would have taken too much time."

Many interviewees drew comparisons to smart assistants predating LLMs (e.g., Siri and Alexa), citation generators, online grammar checkers, predictive text/autocorrect, and earlier "chatbots" using prior AI architecture or pre-programmed responses. These analogies might make GenAI more accessible to clients and communicate that existing information literacy skills still apply. For instance, we already tell writers not to simply Google a question, take the first result, and paste it into their work; while they technically could, they understand it's not best practice. Similarly, with LLMs, we can guide writers away from copying responses verbatim. We also train writing consultants to help students make informed judgments and double-check output from, for example, auto-correct software and citation generators. Drawing parallels between LLMS and these familiar tools could alleviate some stress. Writing consultants might offer tips for prompt engineering in the same way they might offer tips for crafting search queries, as long as they emphasize that the process generating those outputs is different. This aligns with the multiliteracies approach taken in this collection's Chapter 25 (Hayward Marcum and Bell).

In many of the interviews where the "tool" metaphor was invoked, interviewees noted that overreliance would make GenAI no longer a "tool" but a "crutch," which usually echoed the "threat" metaphor in cautioning dire consequences. Despite the ableism in the metaphor, I think it has some utility beyond a cautionary tale. If one expands the world of the metaphor to say that someone is using crutches while, say, healing from a recoverable leg injury, the injured party is often encouraged to, in a scaffolded way, wean reliance off of the assistive technology and put weight back on the injured foot as they recover. If a consultant is willing to employ all that metaphorical grounding, perhaps that depiction can help motivate clients to embrace the struggle of writing without LLMs as a means of furthering their own individual growth and capabilities.

Although it blurs the line between "tool" and "entity," the metaphor of a "robot" arose in many surveys and interviews. One respondent described ChatGPT as a "robotic puppet" controlled both by user inputs and the programming and policies of parent company OpenAI. Others referenced science fiction directly when conceiving of LLM chatbots as "androids" or "supercomputers." These metaphors can be approached similarly to the "calculator," we can teach LLMs as a powerful and advanced processing "tool" worthy of taking time to understand and utilize but not overly rely on. Care should be taken with the "robot" metaphor not to veer too far into science fiction (and accompanying "threat" metaphor) or to imbue the technology with more agency than the user.

Person

One common and occasionally subtle metaphor was participants' personification of LLM platforms by referring to them with gendered pronouns. Respondents would often do so seemingly automatically or offhandedly (e.g., "When I asked ChatGPT, she told me…"). In fact, many of the respondents gendered ChatGPT female, which could be a feminist reclamation of "he" as the "default" gendered pronoun, a case of the respondent identifying herself with the LLM (most of my respondents used she/her pronouns) or, perhaps more troublingly, rooted in traditional gender roles (i.e., taking ChatGPT's polite, conciliatory tone, helper/assistant ethos, and comparison to Siri or Alexa to mean it "must be" a she). Whatever the reason, the compulsion to assign a gender to a genderless technology did manifest often in the transcripts.

Personifying names or titles for LLMs were also referenced in the surveys and interviews. Some respondents said they referred to ChatGPT as "Dr. GPT" either ironically or to imbue expert credibility. Others mentioned naming the program "Chad GPT," and one client talked about using a jailbreak prompt they found online to create a character called DAN (standing for Do Anything Now), which they referred to as "Do-Anything-Now Dan." They indicated that they would "bring out Dan" when bored of ChatGPT's default responses and often felt more personality from and connection to "Dan" than vanilla ChatGPT.

Another way this personification metaphor arose in interviews was respondents describing an LLM as a "rhetorical audience," which they believed could be textually persuaded. One respondent said, "I once spent about an hour and a half of a shift trying to convince ChatGPT that it deserved rights," and another said, "You can almost trick [ChatGPT]. You can almost convince it that an answer is incorrect."

The "personhood" of LLMs sparks interesting conversations, but may be confounding to students by overstating the sapience of current AI, shifting agency away from the user, and creating cognitive dissonance between the metaphorical framing of querying an AI as "using a tool" and "asking someone for help."

Wizard

Despite science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke's adage that "any significantly advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (and that the "genie" metaphor was my personal impetus for this research), comparisons to science fiction were much more salient to respondents than metaphors of fantasy. These notions only arose in a few interviews when people talked about the processes by which LLM inputs become outputs as being "magical." One interviewee said,

"Maybe if I put more effort into understanding the science of AI, it would feel less [like] magic. But I feel like it's magic that I can send a text message or have a phone call." This metaphor can be useful for rapport building but is likely best avoided as it may be disempowering (and inaccurate) to imply that GenAI processes are fully inscrutable.

Service Employee

The comparison of an LLM to a service employee came up in most of the interviews, usually to a customer service representative or personal assistant. "Assistant" was tied with "robot" as the third most used metaphor in my survey data (after "computer" and "tool"). Interviewees cited the programmed servility and politeness of ChatGPT, coupled with what some respondents described as an intense "eagerness to please."

Although some may balk at considering "professors," "teachers," "tutors," and "consultants" in the category of service employee, I am opting to include them in this category because they often came up in the same breath in the interviews. One of my respondents quipped, "ChatGPT *is* a writing consultant. Wait, JK. I'm saving our jobs!" This metaphor might not be ideal in instruction, as it imbues the LLM with a great deal of agency and stokes fears of job replacement. We could emphasize that LLMS can play a role *like* a consultant, tutor, or teacher if used to supplement, but not replace, such supports in a writer's existing process. I feel that arguments for the irreplaceable humanity of writing consultants will be continuously important for us to make.

Liar

A handful of the respondents referred to an LLM as a "liar" or "BS-er," citing a tendency to talk in circles, attribute information to a source that is not present in said source, and confidently present factual inaccuracies. One interviewee said, "To fulfill that prompt, … if [an LLM] has gaps [in its data set], … it still needs to say something, so it will make something up. I don't see it as just lying. I see it as trying so hard. It's a people pleaser!"

The "people pleaser" construct evoked here (and in many of the interviews that compared LLMs to service workers) might be instructionally useful to spotlight how most commercially available LLMs attempt to accomplish a queried task even when it is impossible. For example, I was a fan of asking ChatGPT 3.5, "What is the longest 5-letter word in the English language?" and receiving responses like, "The longest 5-letter word is 'queue,' as it's pronounced with only one syllable yet uses five letters (OpenAI)." Though as reasoning algorithms improve, LLMs can more readily identify oxymorons or paradoxes, and such humorous GenAI outputs are becoming quaint memories.

This "liar" metaphor has similar instructional value to "crowd sourcing" since it can be used to emphasize the importance of critically examining LLM outputs and explain their functioning. However, I prefer the forthcoming metaphorical construct to this one as "liar" can imply malicious intent whereas, here, I trust another time-tested adage: "never assign to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity" (Bloch).

Idiot

The name I have chosen for this metaphorical construct might seem harsh, but I selected it because it was specifically written in by a survey respondent who, when asked to provide an additional metaphor for LLMs, offered the succinct diss: "[I call ChatGPT an] idiot (because of its responses)." That survey respondent was not alone in that feeling; Many interviewees said they felt LLMs performed poorly at a variety of queried tasks from creative writing ("I asked it to write me an opening scene…. And the result was so terrible that I stopped using it for like two months.") to computer science ("When it comes to coding, it either runs or doesn't run. So, if I give it code that runs in Python, I'm expecting that it gives me code that runs in Java, and sometimes it wouldn't work"). Others shared similar sentiments: "I have asked ChatGPT to do my homework before and almost 80 percent of the time it will get my answers wrong," and "When I ask it about areas that I feel like I am an expert on, I will notice [issues] that are more nuanced or inaccuracies."

The related but compassionate "novice" metaphor was also invoked, as one interviewee said: "For the research paper [I had ChatGPT generate], it was hilariously bad. The writing … was so surface level [and] repeating itself … it actually reminded me of writing I have seen by real people … who, like, don't write very often and just have less experience."

This metaphor might be surprisingly valuable in writing centers. It can validate the frustrations of clients who might be expecting LLMs to exhibit "intelligence" matching or surpassing humans' but finding themselves running up against responses limited by probabilities, training data, and corporate paywalls. This metaphor also provides an instructional opportunity to explain how the "intelligence" of responses is mediated both by the sophistication of the LLM and the users' proficiency with prompt engineering (which reminds me of that one respondent's anecdote about a calculator only being as "smart" as its wielder). We might also use this metaphor to illustrate how LLMs' perceived "idiocy" is rooted in the way they operate; since LLMs gravitate toward providing an "average" response from the broadest patterns in their datasets, they can often appear "idiotic" in situations that demand creativity or context-sensitivity.

Fallible Collaborator

One respondent combined the metaphor of the "idiot" with that of the "consultant" to create one that I found particularly amusing and insightful:

> I think of [ChatGPT] like a bad study partner…. He gets [most] answers wrong…. He is also overconfident. [LLMs] will say something with their full chest when they don't really know. I'm like, "What? Who are your sources!?" But he's really good at the process and can … point you in the right direction. As I'm solving a problem … on my own, writing down the math, I'll punch in numbers [to ChatGPT] and get a different answer. I'll say, "Where'd you get that from?" Like, that's something I'll type in. Then, it will say, "Oh, you're right, sorry. It should have been this." And then I keep going. I'll say, "Well, why'd you use that formula? Shouldn't you use this one?" They'll say, "Oh yeah, sorry about that," and they'll fix it. Through that back and forth, as if I'm studying with a friend who's making errors, we get to the right answer in the end.

Other interviewees echoed this sentiment of a confused but eager collaborator, "It feels like I'm trying to talk to someone [who] has a book that's wrong about the topic. But they have so many books that, when they go to the first one, and it's wrong, they say, 'Oh, let me consult this other book.'"

One respondent described this "fallible collaborator" metaphor as an LLM being "like a beta reader but a beta writer." This respondent cited that, as a creative writer, she sometimes gets uninformed feedback from human peer reviewers or early readers. Thus, by keeping those experiences in mind, she manages her expectations of what an LLM can accomplish as a "beta writer." She said, "[I'm] bouncing ideas off of [LLMS]. And [outputs are] not always helpful because they don't actually know what [I'm] writing about."

Though this metaphor shares the challenge of many "entity" metaphors in that it grants LLMs human-like agency, it also emphasizes the dialogic nature of prompt engineering and the writer's active role. Viewing LLMs as "collaborators" for "bouncing ideas" emphasizes that effective (co-)writing with LLMs involves leveraging the technology's ability to revisit its own prior responses. We could use this metaphor to reinforce that the LLM does not necessarily possess more "right answers" than the human writer and that an effective writing process still involves a human leading authorship with a machine-in-the-loop (Knowles) The idea that student writers are working with a "fallible collaborator" in an LLM raises a parallel to group writing consultations, which invites practitioners to devise strategies for effective human-AI collaboration, such as those explored

in Part 4 of this collection (Cochran et al.; Crull and Stillman; Vinyard and Schnitzler; Mason and Dvorak; Adams and Baker).

IMPLICATIONS

Due to how we construct them through metaphor, LLMs are surrounded by complex and contradictory notions: they are simultaneously object and human, simultaneously intelligent scheming overlords making humanity obsolete and bumbling morons incapable of completing simple tasks. LLM proliferation has asked us to reckon with possible futures. The technology calls to mind utopian visions of shared knowledge and effortless idea exchange for humanity, but also a dystopian hellscape where machines have eradicated human expression and learning. The ethical, philosophical, technological, and pedagogical complexity of LLMs has felt difficult for me as a writing center administrator (and human) to unpack. I hope one takeaway from this chapter can be to encourage our tutors to level with clients, who may also be overwhelmed, and say, "Yeah, this is complicated." I hope this analysis of the strengths and challenges of some common metaphors can help writing center practitioners feel prepared for such conversations. Based on these interviews, I recommend writing consultants choose metaphors that seek to center human agency and motivation, demystify the probabilistic, coherence-focused functioning of LLMs, and position GenAI as a fallible supplement, not replacement, for a writer's own ideas, hard work, and human collaborators.

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