

Preface to the ICICTE 2023 Proceedings: Work in Process and Taming Chat GPT

Evangeline (Litsa) Marlos Varonis
Co-editor, ICICTE 2023 Proceedings

Recently, a gallery hosted the posthumous exhibit of a friend—a member of the ICICTE family—with the final piece she was working on displayed on her easel, described as “Work in Process.” While remaining true to her artistic vision and philosophy, Diane was always challenging herself to experiment with different media and even different subject matters. She never considered her learning arc as over, or her portfolio complete. She could always sharpen her technique just a little more with experimentation and revision.

In contrast, I still remember my horror at meeting a middle-aged pharmacist who explained that after so many years of school, he couldn’t even bear to read anything new – he was just enjoying the working life without having to study anymore. He was not a “work in process”; he considered himself a work completed.

We are not in a static field, and neither was the pharmacist. But many of us choose to continue experimenting with new media, exploring new subject matters, sharpening our technique, and sharing what we have learned through professional conferences and publications. The papers in these proceedings are the best evidence of that—thoughtful, rigorous, and pushing the boundaries of state-of-the-art research in multiple areas connected with Information Communication Technology (ICT). They demonstrate work in process.

Since several papers in ICICTE 2023 focus on the growing use of ChatGPT, I asked that program to “summarize” each paper in turn (minus the acknowledgements and references), looking for patterns that could provide insight into how it works and how it might be tamed. I was also wondering if I could include these summaries in the preface, with attribution of course. ChatGPT did provide decent summaries of every paper, with some big differences in the information it included from the 20 papers, which were set up identically:

1. The title was included three times (15%);
2. The names of the authors were included five times (25%);
3. The authors’ institution was included six times (30%);
4. The number of paragraphs in the summary varied from one (10 summaries, or 50%) through 14 (one summary, or 5%).

Taken together, the summaries ran 11 pages – not what I had in mind!

What does this mean? That ChatGPT is helpful but not totally reliable. It is not capable of always producing equivalent results with the same instructions, or of providing identical information when the same data is fed through a second time. It is a work in process.

I tried again, refining the directions, to standardize the summaries and then use them for an interactive “matching” quiz (included at the end of this Preface). This took multiple attempts, a consultation, some hair-pulling, many sighs, grumbles, and grimaces, and some manual tweaking, but in the end I got close enough.

What does this mean for us as educators and researchers? We can tame ChatGPT if we know the processes to use and the questions to ask and are willing to put the time into refining and improving our directions. And, we can tame students’ use of this and similar AI software so that they are using it to enhance, not cripple, their learning. Because, like us, they are a work in process.