

# Large language models in programming education

OVERVIEW OF EXISTING PRACTICES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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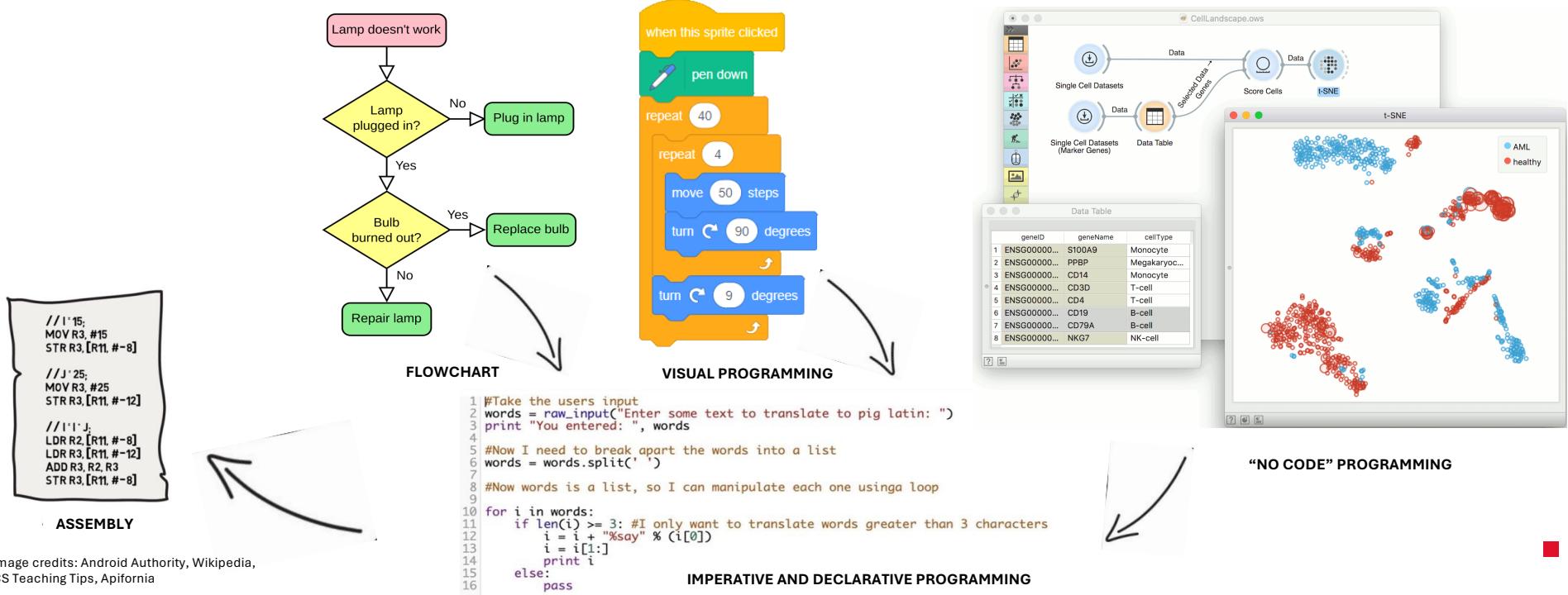
LSE Education Symposium 2024 – Education Futures

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## ■ **Outline**

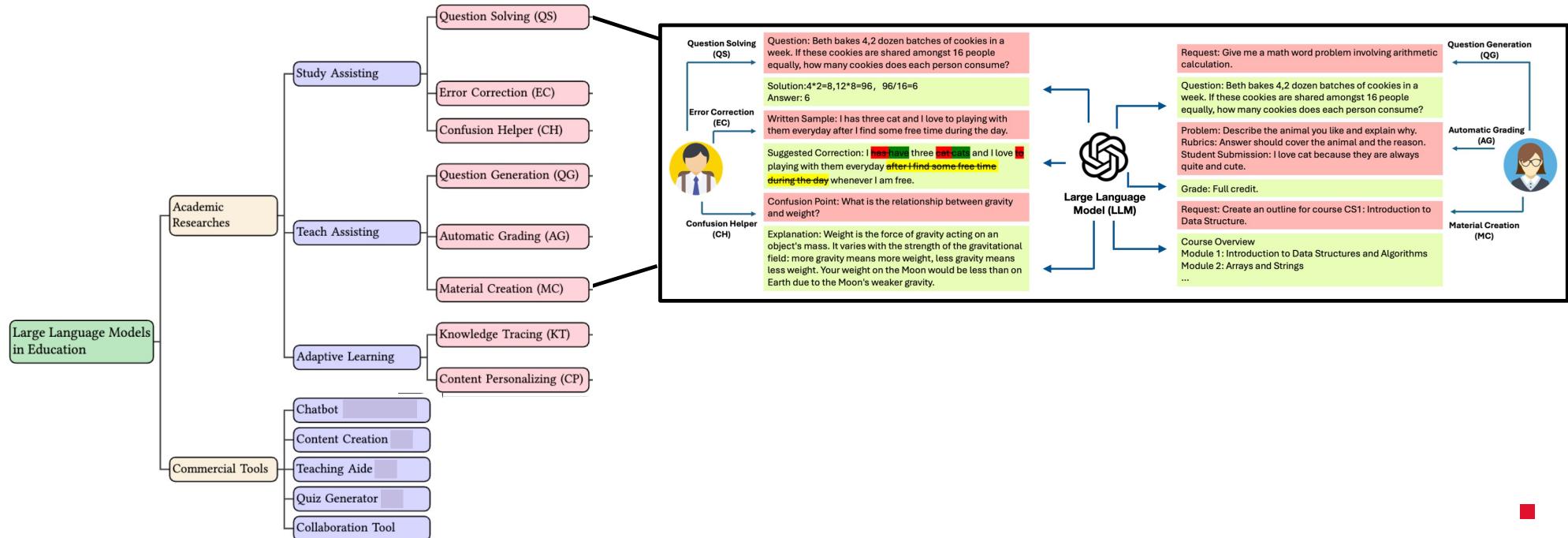
- How were we (humans) used to programming computers?
- Programming with large language models (LLMs)
- Existing practice: selected examples
- Future directions

- **Different ways we (humans) used to program computers**
- **Programming** is writing **computer code (program)**, based on an **algorithm**, to solve a **problem**.<sup>[1]</sup>



## ▪ Large language models in education

### ▪ Taxonomy of LLMs for education applications:<sup>[2][3]</sup>

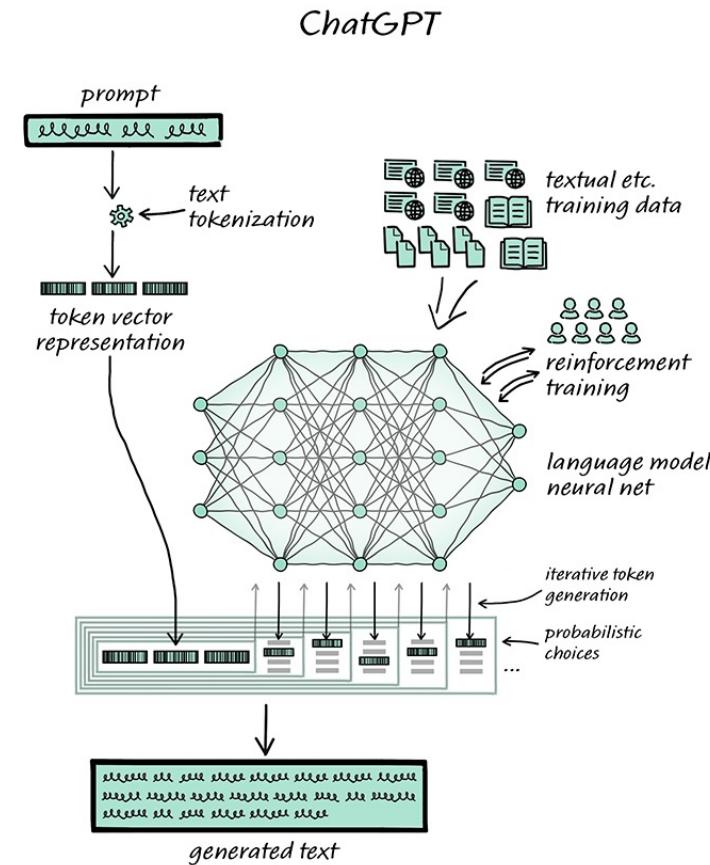




## ▪ Large language model-based programming

### ▪ Three main opportunities:<sup>[4]</sup>

- Generation of code from specification  
**(text to code)**
- Generation of ancillary tools such as test cases  
**(code to code)**
- Generation of explanations or suggestions  
**(code to text)**



<https://writings.stephenwolfram.com/2023/02/what-is-chatgpt-doing-and-why-does-it-work/>

- **Large language model-based programming**
- **Pedagogical approaches for explaining code**:<sup>[5]</sup>
  - “Explain in Plain English” (EiPE)
    - Students explain the purpose of code fragments at an abstract level
  - **Code tracing**
    - Students need to understand how the code executes and “predict” its behaviour (changes to memory and internal state) and output
  - **Pair programming**
    - Students explain their code and their thinking process to their partner
  - **Misconception-based feedback**
    - Students follow prompts based on common misconceptions to guide discussion about code



## ■ Example practices: code explanation

- Setting: e-book on Web software development [5]
- Goal: integrate explanations generated by LLMs into Computer Science classrooms.
- Research questions:
  - RQ1: How do students engage with the generated explanations, and which types of explanations do they use most frequently? For what types of code snippets do students request explanations?
  - RQ2: What are the characteristics of explanations that students rate as most and least helpful?
- Approach: Use of LLMs to generate three types of explanations:
  - Line-by-line explanation
  - List of important concepts
  - High-level summary of the code
- A total of 13 code snippets \* 5 code explanations \* 3 types of explanations = **195 explanations** were generated and added to two chapters of the e-book. ■

**Code snippet:** JavaScript program that uses the Deno runtime to launch a Web server.

```
import { serve } from "https://deno.land/std@0
  ↵ .140.0/http/server.ts";
let count = 0;
const handleRequest = (request) => {
  if (request.method === "POST") {
    count++;
  }
  return new Response(count);
};
serve(handleRequest, { port: 7777 });
```

### Line-by-line

- The first line imports the ‘serve’ function from the ‘server’ module in the ‘std’ library from version 0.140.0 of the Deno runtime.
- The second line declares a ‘count’ variable and initializes it to ‘0’.
- The third line defines a ‘handleRequest’ function that takes a ‘request’ parameter. This function increments the value of ‘count’ if the ‘request’ method is ‘POST’.
- The fourth line returns a new ‘Response’ object containing the value of ‘count’.
- The fifth line calls the ‘serve’ function, passing in the ‘handleRequest’ function and an options object. The options object sets the ‘port’ property to ‘7777’.

### Concepts/purpose

The purpose of this code is to create a simple server that counts how many POST requests it receives.

### Summary

**Codex:** # Summarize and explain the goal of the above code

- 1 A web server is listening on port 7777. The handleRequest function is called when a request is accepted. What is the structure of the Deno module system? Deno supports ES Modules.

**GPT-3:** # Summarize and explain this code snippet

- 1 This code snippet creates a web server that listens on port 7777 and returns "Hello world!" for every request.

**Measures:** (i) explanation view time; (ii) number of views; and (iii) subjective ratings.

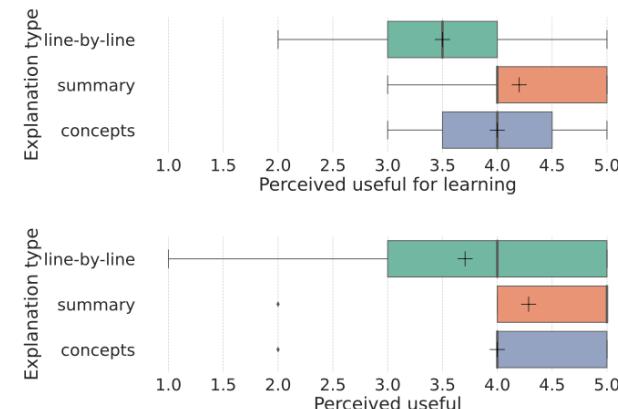


Figure 2: Boxplot of explanation usefulness ratings with + indicating mean. Although most viewed among students, line-by-line explanations were rated least helpful.

176 explanations,  
58 students,  
Summer 2022

## Comparing Code Explanations Created by Students and Large Language Models

Authors:  Juho Leinonen,  Paul Denny,  Stephen MacNeil,  Sami Sarsa,  Seth Bernstein,  Joanne Kim,  
 Andrew Tran,  Arto Hellas [Authors Info & Claims](#)

ITICSE 2023: Proceedings of the 2023 Conference on Innovation and Technology in Computer Science Education V. 1 • June 2023 •  
Pages 124–130 • <https://doi.org/10.1145/3587102.3588785>

### ■ Example practices: code explanation

- Setting: 1st-year programming course, ~1,000 students [6]
- Goal: comparison of code explanations created by students vs those generated by LLMs
- Research questions:
  - RQ1: To what extent do code explanations created by students and LLMs differ in accuracy, length, and understandability?
  - RQ2: What aspects of code explanations do students value?
- Approach: two lab sessions
  - Lab A: students created explanations (purpose and summary) for three code snippets
  - Lab B (2 weeks after): students were shown a random sample of four explanations created by the students in Lab A or generated by GPT-3, and assessed them based on accuracy, understandability, and length.

## Lab A: function definitions

```
double AverageNegativeValues(int values[], int length)
{
    int i, sum, count;
    i = 0;
    sum = 0;
    count = 0;

    while (i < length) {
        if (values[i] < 0) {
            sum = sum + values[i];
            count++;
        }
        i++;
    }

    return (double)sum / count;
}
```

```
int LargestValue(int values[], int length)
{
    int i, max;

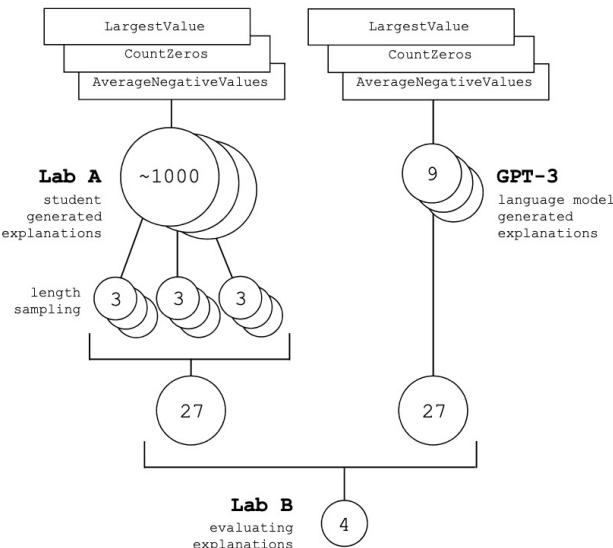
    max = values[0];
    for (i = 1; i < length; i++) {
        if (values[i] > max) {
            max = values[i];
        }
    }

    return max;
}

int CountZeros(int values[], int length)
{
    int i, count;

    count = 0;
    for (i = 0; i < length; i++) {
        if (values[i] == 0) {
            count++;
        }
    }

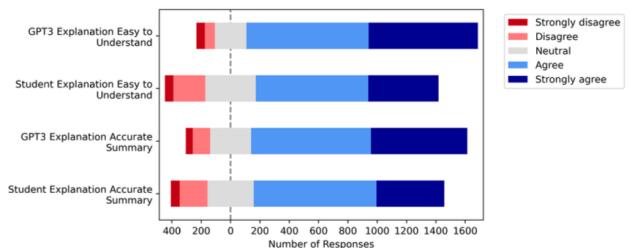
    return count;
}
```



**Figure 2: Overview of the data generation and sampling.** In Lab B, each student was allocated four code explanations to evaluate, selected at random from a pool of 54 code explanations, half of which were generated by students in Lab A, and half of which were generated by GPT-3.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics of student responses on code explanation quality.** The responses that were given using a Likert-scale have been transformed so that 1 corresponds to 'Strongly disagree' and 5 corresponds to 'Strongly agree'.

	Student-generated		LLM-generated	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Easy to understand	3.75	4.0	4.12	4.0
Accurate summary	3.78	4.0	4.0	4.0
Ideal length	2.75	3.0	2.66	3.0
Length (chars)	811	738	760	731

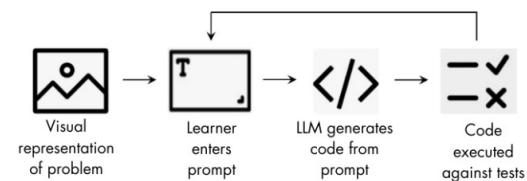


**Figure 3: Distribution of student responses on LLM and student-generated code explanations being easy to understand and accurate summaries of code.**

963 explanations (Lab A),  
954 students (Lab B),  
2022 ■

## ■ Example practices: code generation

- **Setting:** 1st-year programming course in Python <sup>[7]</sup>
- **Goal:** propose a new type of programming problem to teach coding based on Prompt Problems and related ways of assessing it
- **Research questions:**
  - RQ1: How do students interact with Prompt Problems while learning to program?
  - RQ2: How do students perceive Prompt Problems affecting their learning of programming concepts?
- **Approach:** “Promptly” tool
  - Each prompt problem consists of a visual representation of a problem (no textual description is given) and a set of associated test cases used to verify the code generated by the LLM.



## Promptly interface & example exercises

1 Class Registration — 2 Exercise #1 — 3 Exercise #2 — 4 Exercise #3

```
Enter your name: Bob
Hello Bob
> |
```

Visual representation of problem (in this case, an animation illustrates user interaction with program)

Write me a Python program that asks the user to enter their name, and then prints the word "Hello" followed by a space, followed by their name

Write your ChatGPT prompt here

[CLICK HERE TO ASK CHATGPT!](#)

ChatGPT response:

```
print("Hello " + input("Enter your name: "))
```

Code Running response:

```
You pass \(^o^)/ !
```

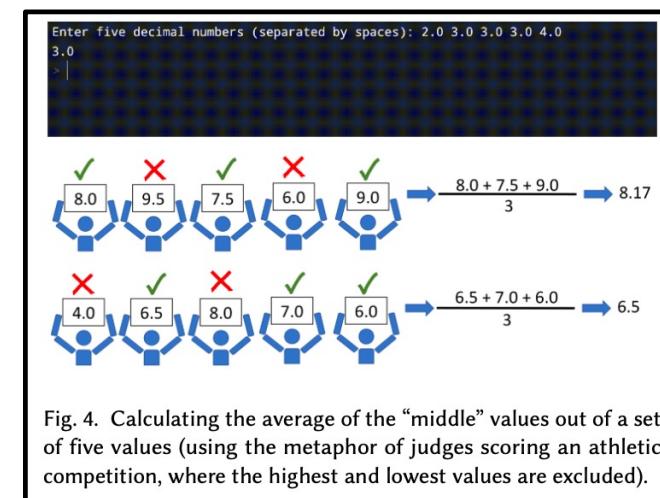
← Execution output (in this case, a success message as all tests pass)

BACK    NEXT

```
Enter a number: 3
Child
> |
```

AGE	CATEGORY
Below 8	Child
8-12	Tween
13-19	Teenager
20 or above	Adult

Fig. 3. Producing a categorization based on age.



## Results of student interactions

Pilot study  
54 students  
July 2023

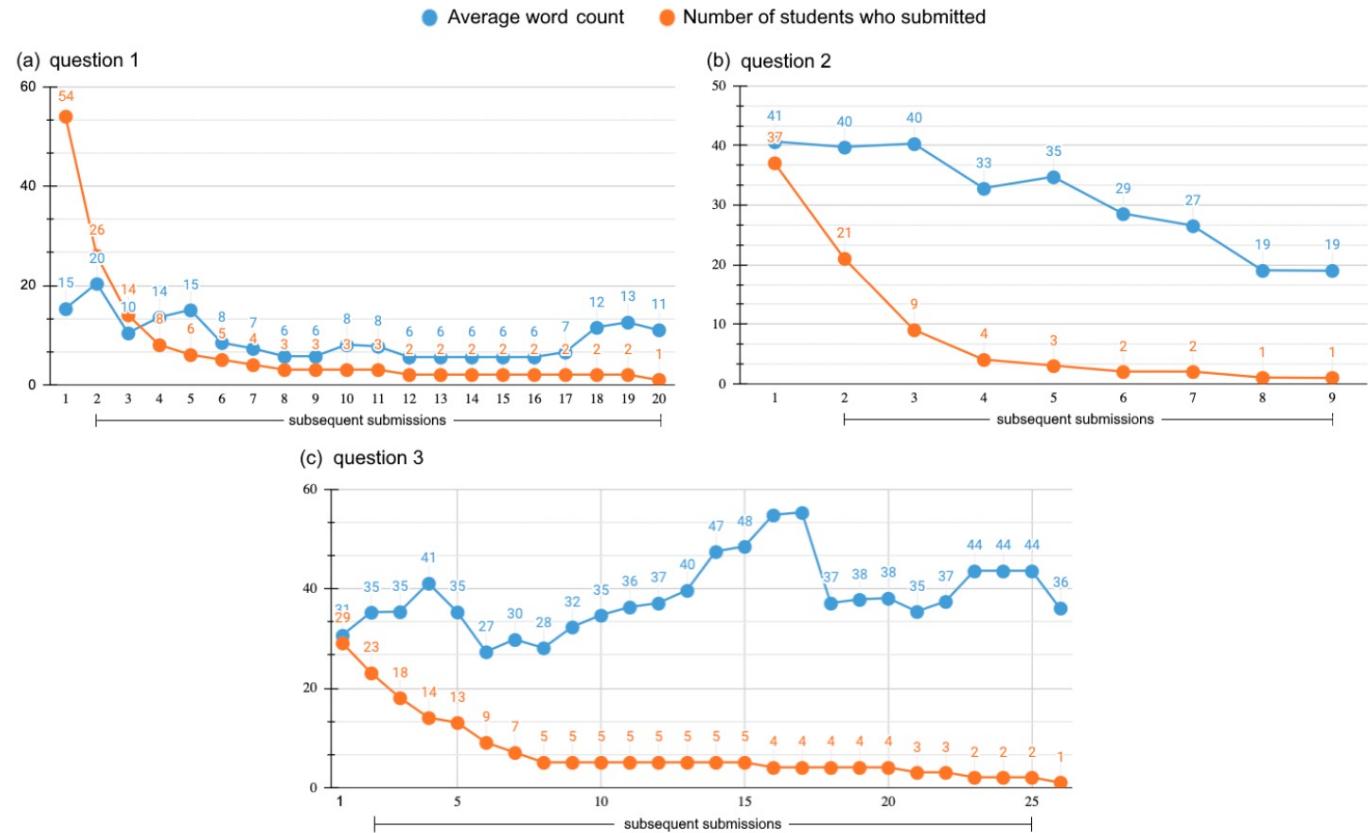


Fig. 5. The average number of words in each subsequent submission and number of participants that submitted. On the x-axis, 1 is the initial submission (attempt) per question and 2- are subsequent submissions (attempts).



## Results of student interactions

Large scale study  
202 students (Lab 10)  
147 students (Lab 11)  
2,939 prompt submissions  
August 2023

(a) Lab 10 Exercise 1

```
counter([0, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 0]) => 2
counter([10, 20, 30]) => 0
counter([0, 0, 0, 0, 999]) => 4
```

(b) Lab 10 Exercise 2

```
initials('abd def ghi') => 'ADG'
initials('xxx') => 'X'
initials('Hi world') => 'HW'
```

(c) Lab 10 Exercise 3

```
repeat([1, 2, 3, 4]) => [1, 2, 2, 3, 3, 3, 4, 4, 4, 4]
repeat([5]) => [5, 5, 5, 5, 5]
repeat([2, 0, 1, 3]) => [2, 2, 1, 3, 3, 3]
```

(d) Lab 11 Exercise 1

```
scramble("mossy", 1) => 'npttz'
scramble("racecar", 3) => 'udfhfdud'
scramble("hello", 0) => 'hello'
scramble("hello", -1) => 'gdkkn'
scramble("zoo", 2) => 'bqq'
```

(e) Lab 11 Exercise 2

```
arrange("AaBbCcDd") => 'ABCDDcba'
arrange("MOM DAD") => 'ADDMMMO'
arrange("Mom Dad") => 'DMomda'
arrange("A Testing TEST") => 'AESTTTtsnige'
arrange("A1B2 !@ C3D4") => 'ABCD'
```

(f) Lab 11 Exercise 3

```
speak("Hello World!") => 'H3ll0 W0rld!'
speak("STEAK") => '5734K'
speak("Programming is easy") => 'Pr0gr4mm1ng 15 345y'
```

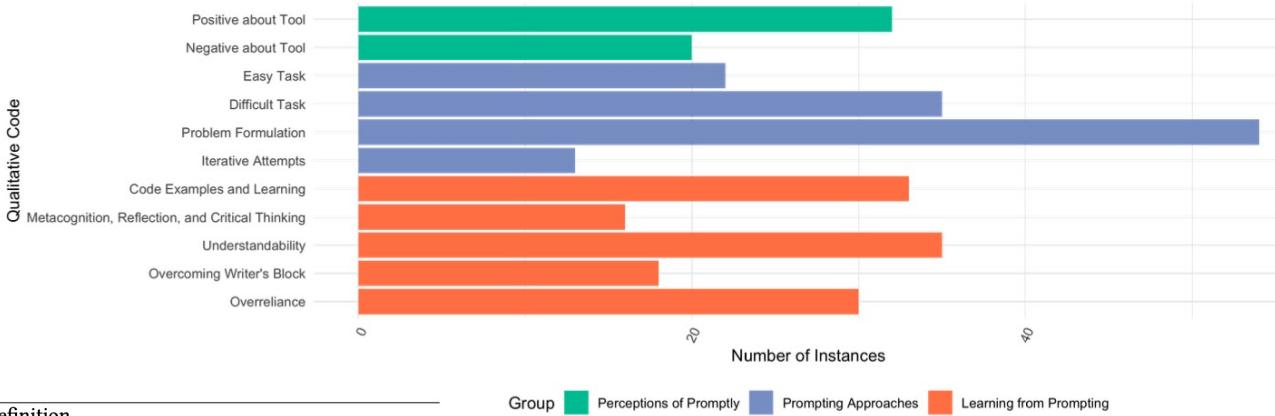
Problem	Students			Submissions			Words in Prompts			
	Total	Correct	First Try	Count	Mean	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max
Lab10-1	202	118	32	884	4.37	1	30	25.79	7	76
Lab10-2	108	108	74	212	1.96	1	10	27.39	8	93
Lab10-3	107	104	67	224	2.09	1	20	34.78	8	119
Lab11-1	147	105	39	491	3.34	1	27	41.11	9	198
Lab11-2	97	82	20	502	5.17	1	28	43.96	16	86
Lab11-3	80	60	5	626	7.82	1	47	54.07	23	115

Table 1. Summary of student interactions with the Prompt Problems in Labs 10 and 11. For students, we provide the total number of unique students that attempted each problem (Total), the number who got it correct (Correct), and the number who got it correct on the first try (First Try). For submissions, we provide the total number of prompt submissions made for that problem (Count), the mean number of submissions (Mean), the minimum number of submissions any student had to correctly solve the problem (Min), and the maximum number of submissions any student had whether correct or incorrect (Max). To describe the words in submitted correct prompts, we provide the average number of words in correct prompts (Mean), the minimum number of words in correct prompts (Min), and the maximum number of words in correct prompts (Max).

RQ1: How do students interact with  
Prompt Problems while learning to program? ■

## Results of student interactions

Large scale study  
202 students (Lab 10)  
147 students (Lab 11)  
August 2023



Theme	Code	Code Definition
Perceptions of the Tool	Positive Sentiment Towards Tool	Student expresses a form of positive sentiment towards Promptly as a tool (e.g., UI, feedback).
	Negative Sentiment Towards Tool	Student expresses a negative sentiment towards Promptly as a tool.
Prompting Approaches	Easy Task(s)	Student indicates that the task of successfully generating a prompt was easy.
	Difficult Task(s)	Student indicates that the task of successfully generating a prompt was difficult.
Learning from Prompting	Problem Formulation	Students response discusses their approach or experiences with formulating a description of the problem.
	Iterative Attempts	Student discusses their experience with or approach to iterative modifications to their initially incorrect prompt(s) or creation of successive new prompts.
Learning from Prompting	Code Examples and Learning	Student mentions learning from seeing different approaches to the solution, as generated via ChatGPT.
	Metacognition	Student mentions their thought processes.
	Understandability	Student mentions aspects of the generated code that improves or limits their ability to interpret it.
	Overcoming Writers Block	Students indicate that prompting, as a skill, is or could be useful for situations where they know the task to perform but are unsure of how to form an initial solution.
	Overreliance	Student indicates they might come to rely on prompting.

Table 2. The table of themes, codes, and code definitions.

RQ2: How do students perceive Prompt Problems affecting their learning of programming concepts?

### ■ Example practices: code generation

- **Setting:** introductory Python exercises <sup>[8]</sup>
- **Goal:** how to design prompts for LLMs to produce **next-step hints** and enhance them with explanations.
- **Research questions:**
  - RQ1: To what extent can we use LLMs to generate informative and effective next-step hints for Python introductory programming exercises?
  - SQ1 What prompt characteristics are suitable for generating effective next-step hints with LLMs?
  - SQ2 What are students' and experts' perceptions of the quality of LLM-generated next-step hints?
- **Approach:** “StAP-tutor” (Step Assisted Programming tutor)
  - Input is a dataset with sequences of steps students take when solving a programming problem (148 participants)
  - Sequences are used to engineer a prompt for generating next-step hints
  - StAP-tutor allows the students to practice Python with the help of next-step hints.

## Exercise for prompt engineering

### Pies

A single pie costs A dollars and B cents in the cafe. Calculate how many dollars and cents one needs to pay for N pies.

**Input:** The program receives three numbers

A - how many dollars a pie costs;

B - how many cents a pie costs;

N - how many pies do you need to buy

**Output:** Print out two numbers: the cost of N pies in dollars and cents.

## Example hints using different prompt instructions

Prompt	Hint
<pre>v1 = int(input()) v2 = int(input()) v3 = int(input()) v2= v2 * v3 v1= v1 * v3</pre>	<p><i>What is the next step</i></p> <p>The next step is to calculate the total cost of N pies by adding v1 and v2.</p>
<pre>Give a hint for the next step</pre>	<p>The next step should involve calculating the total cost of N pies using the updated values of v1 and v2, and then converting the total cost into dollars and cents.</p>
<pre>Explain the next step for a student</pre>	<p>It seems like you are trying to calculate the total cost of N pies. You have correctly multiplied the cents by the number of pies, but you also need to multiply the dollars by the number of pies. You can do this by updating the value of v1 to be v1 multiplied by v3. Then you can use the updated values of v1 and v2 to calculate the total cost of N pies.</p>

## StAP Tutor

[Log out](#)

Choose exercise:

Count Clumps

[Restart exercise](#)

Exercise: Count Clumps

Say that a "clump" in an array is a series of 2 or more adjacent elements of the same value. Return the number of clumps in the given array. For example, an array with the numbers [2,2,3,5,6,6,2] has 2 clumps.

**Input:** The program receives a number n, followed by n lines with one integer per line. These

**Output:** Print out the number of clumps

[Hint](#)

[Show solution](#)

[Check progress](#)

Type code here:

```
1 n = int(input())
2 list = []
3
4 for i in range(n):
5     list.append(int(input()))
6
7 def count_clumps():
8
```

Rating:

Please rate the hint

The hint is clear.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

The hint is helpful.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

The hint fits my work.

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

Other comments?

[Submit](#)

**Feedback:** In the "count\_clumps" function, you can iterate over the list and check if each element is the same as the previous element or the next element, then count the number of clumps.

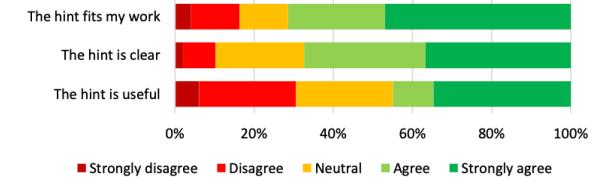
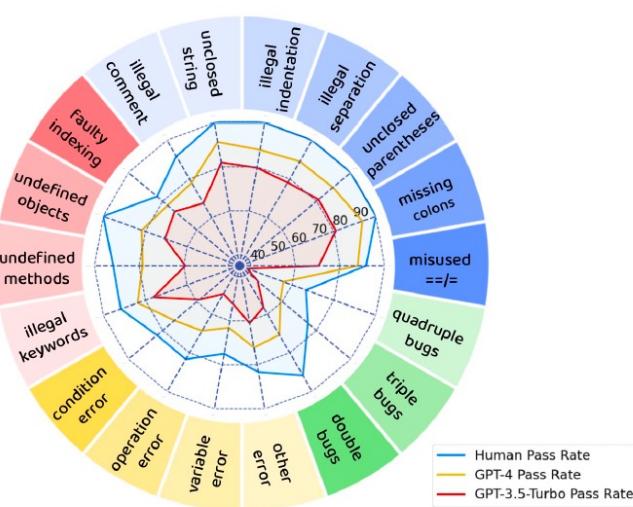


Figure 4: Student hint ratings (n=48).





## ■ Example practices: LLM debugging



- ✓ Dataset: 4,253 code examples (from LeetCode)
- ✓ 4 “bug” categories (syntax, reference, logic, misc)
- ✓ Comparative analysis (GPT-3.5, GPT-4, CodeLLama, BLOOM)

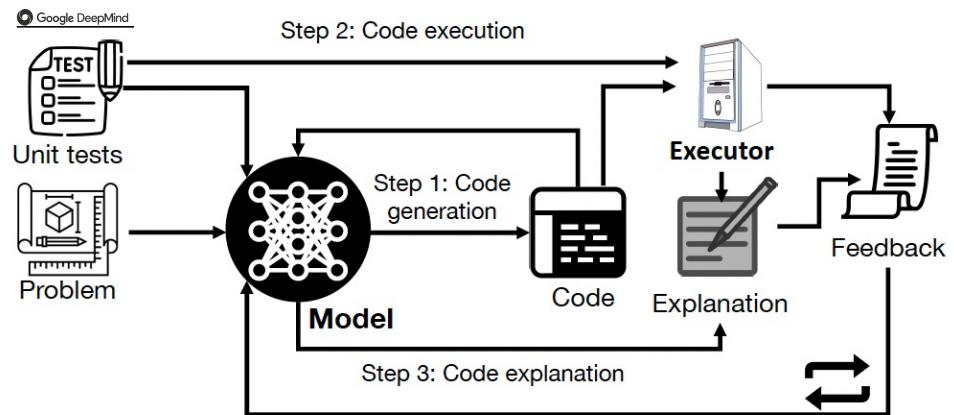


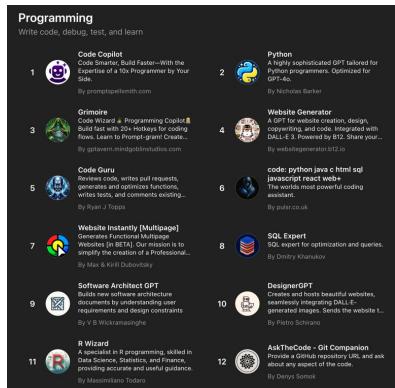
Figure 1: SELF-DEBUGGING for iterative debugging using a large language model. At each debugging step, the model first generates new code, then the code is executed and the model explains the code. The code explanation along with the execution results constitute the feedback message, based on which the model infers the code correctness and then adds this message to the feedback. The feedback message is then sent back to the model to perform more debugging steps. When unit tests are not available, the feedback can be purely based on code explanation.

- ✓ Focus on *rubber-duck debugging* (no human intervention)
- ✓ Tested against several benchmarks, with baseline improvements of 2% - 12%.



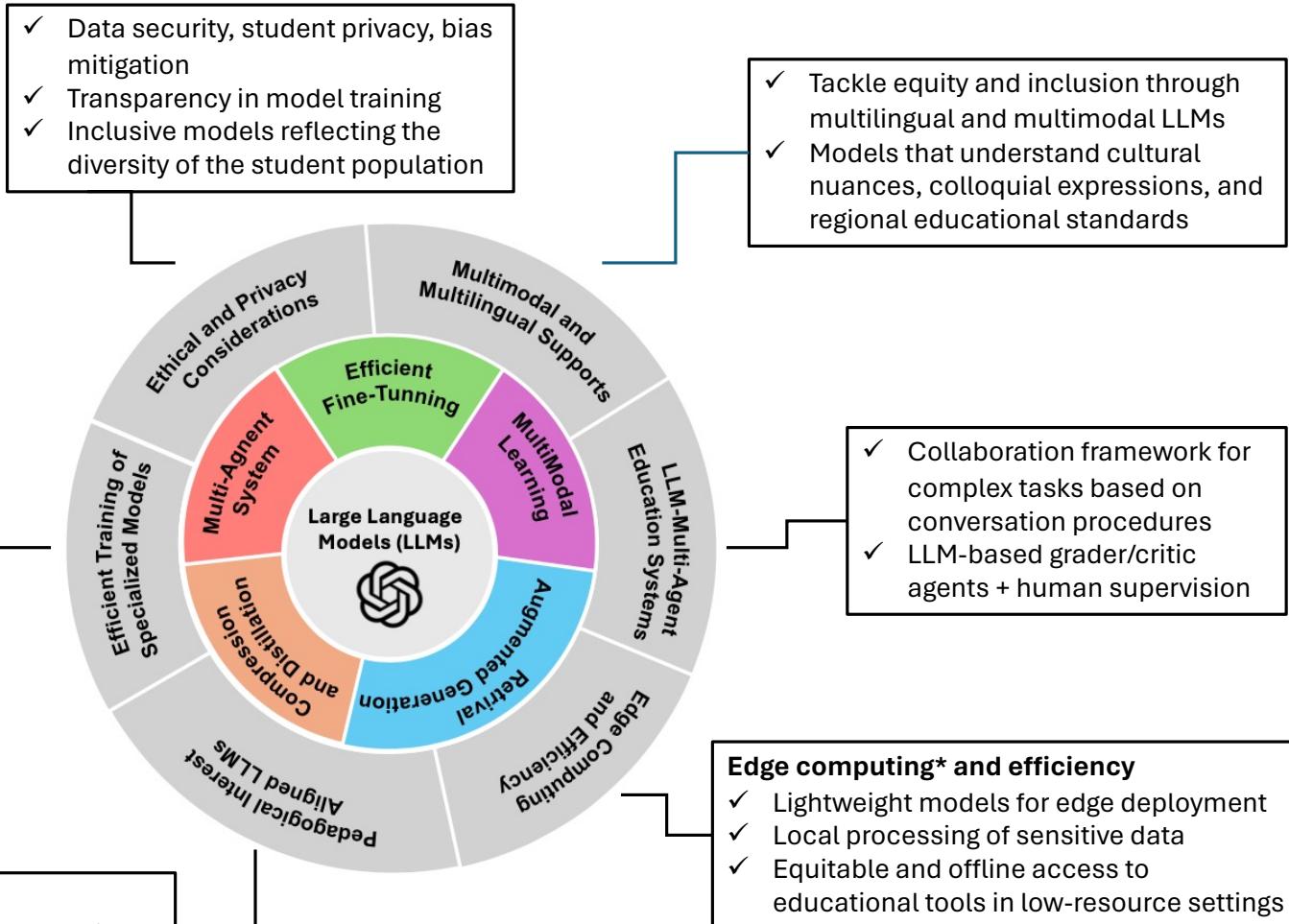
## ■ Future directions [2]

- ✓ LLMs tailored to specific domains



### Pedagogical interest-aligned LLMs

- ✓ Add prior information, through advanced generation techniques (such as RAG\*)
- ✓ Collect large pedagogical datasets to fine-tune LLMs



RAG (retrieval-augmented generation): improve the accuracy of LLMs with facts fetched from external sources  
 Edge computing: processing data closer to the end user, to reduce latency and increase content delivery speed ■

# References

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- [10] DebugBench: Evaluating Debugging Capability of Large Language Models. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2401.04621>
- [11] Teaching Large Language Models to Self-Debug. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2304.05128>

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