

# Engaging in a New Practice: What Are Students Doing When They Are “Doing” Debugging?

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**Abstract:** Debugging has been identified as a significant practice of programming in particular, and computational thinking more broadly. However, there is still much to learn about how debugging is learned, how it is connected to particular activities, and what seems to influence students’ strategy use and ultimate solution paths. This paper considers students’ activity on their first formal debugging task using a platform called NetLogo. Our analysis focuses on the ways that students appeared to frame the task, and how that framing influenced their overall approach to the task. Our findings suggest that it is compelling for new coders to approach debugging first by focusing on single elements of code without thinking broadly about their interactions. Implications for design and future studies are discussed.

## Introduction and significance

Debugging has been identified as a significant practice of programming in particular, and computational thinking more broadly. It is both an inherent aspect of programming—that is, figuring out on the fly what something might not be working—and also a separate practice that could possibly be learned and perfected outside of specific programming environments (Lee et al., 2014; Rich et al., 2019).

As with much of Computer Science Education, much of what we know about debugging comes from studies with undergraduate students, as up until recently, this population was most likely to contain novice programmers. However, as computer science is introduced to more students at significantly younger ages, we must ask how what we know might be relevant, or irrelevant, for these children.

In fact, what we know about how people learn about debugging is still fairly thin. Some researchers have compared the strategies utilized by novice and expert adult debuggers (Bednarik, 2012; Lin et al., 2016), while others have focused specifically on strong and weak novice debuggers (Ahmadzadeh, Elliman, & Higgins, 2005; Fitzgerald et al., 2010; Murphy et al., 2008) or expert professional software developers (Perscheid, Siegmund, Taeumel, & Hirschfeld, 2017). Lin et al. (2016) examined the cognitive processes of computer science undergraduate students and found that high performance students organize the code into chunks, while lower performance students debug aimlessly and do not follow the program’s logic. Murphy and colleagues (2008) compiled a list of 12 strategies used by undergraduate students in Java, including tracing, testing, understanding code, using tools, isolating the problem, and tinkering, and categorized them as good (effective), bad (ineffective), or quirky (surprising). Recently, research has turned to younger coders, with the goal of understanding strategies that K-12 students use in debugging. Liu, Zhi, Hicks, and Barnes (2017) observed that middle school students tend to edit code before locating the bugs, make frequent runs on minor edits, or treat the entire code as incorrect and start from scratch. Contrastingly, Lee et al. (2014) observed that some teenagers trusted that the original code was correct or avoided trying new ideas when playing their debugging game. Chen, Wu, and Lin (2013) found that finding the bug is the most difficult aspect of debugging, and discovered that more than half of their 12<sup>th</sup> grade participants claimed to modify code without any plan.

Given the centrality of debugging to the act of programming, it is clear that we need continued work to understand how debugging is learned, how it is connected to particular activities, and what seems to influence students’ strategy use and ultimate solution paths. This paper thus contributes to the literature by offering a *thick description* of students’ first formal debugging activity, undertaken after three full days of summer camp that involved using the environment NetLogo. Our analysis focuses on the ways that students appeared to frame the task, and ultimately how that framing was misaligned with the frame that guided the design of the task. In documenting students’ experiences as novice debuggers, we explore the following: 1) How do students approach a novice debugging task—what are they immediately attuned to, and 2) How do students seem to frame their task?

As a field that is still beginning to explore CS learning in the K-12 literature, we lack rich examples of novice students’ coding. Thus, a thick description of early debugging helps to advance the field to better understand how students approach debugging activity.

## Theoretical framework

Our approach to investigating students' activity begins with an assumption that what students do is directly tied to what they have opportunities to do. This *ecological* approach (Greeno, 1994; Gresalfi, Barnes, & Cross, 2015) assumes that activity is an interaction between the affordances of an environment, one's attunement to aspects of those affordances, and ultimately, one's effectivities for acting on those affordances. Said differently, trying to understand what students do requires equal attention to what it might be possible to do, or to what clues and cues in the environment suggest. One particular challenge in unpacking these interactional spaces can be in understanding students' attunement--what influences why and how students might notice and attend to different aspects of the same instructional environment? In this paper, we draw on Goffman's (1974) notion of framing, specifically the idea that frames help us to understand "what is happening here," we explore how two intentionally different frames position students to engage similar tasks differently. Frames are people's (often tacit) answers to the question, "What is it that's going on here?" (Goffman, 1974, p. 8), and these expectations influence the ways students respond to curricular tasks and to others in a setting.

For this work, we draw on the work of Schable, Klopfer, & Raghavan (1991) to consider the possible frames that students might bring to bear on the task of debugging. Schable et al's study provides two models of experimentation by which students explore science experiments, the scientific model and the engineering model. In this framework, children use the engineering model of experimentation to manipulate variables to produce or optimize a specific outcome, while children use the scientific model to more broadly understand causes and effects within that system by interpreting evidence to look for relationships between variables. While utilizing an engineering model, students will focus on specific variables that they believe will cause the outcome they desire and compare highly contrasting cases within that variable. They will tend to conclude their experimentation when they have achieved the desired outcome. This model is generally consistent with everyday problem solving. In contrast, within the science model, students will systematically test as many combinations of variables as possible to investigate the cause of each variable on the system. In this model, the student will conclude the experiment when they have completed testing and interpreting each of the combinations of variables. As in Schable et al's study, we should have expected that the child would take up either an engineering or a scientific model of inquiry dependent on the affordances and the framing of the debugging task at hand.

## Context of the study

Data for this paper comes from a free five-day summer camp for middle school students, held in a southeastern U.S. city. The camp was titled "Code Your Art," and was advertised as a camp involving computer programming and art. There were two classrooms or groups during the camp, with 16 students in each class. Each group was co-caught by two teachers, so there were four teachers total. The teachers taught elementary or middle school mathematics during the regular school year. There were also six researchers and two teaching assistants present during the camp, rotating among the classrooms as needed.

The goal of the camp was two-fold. First, the project was funded to explore how mathematical thinking might co-develop or connect with the algorithmic thinking that is central to programming. Second, we wanted to understand how the design of tasks and activities invite participation from students who might not see themselves as computer programmers or have any prior experience with programming. To meet both needs, we designed a set of activities that were sufficiently open to be seen by students as spaces for design and self-expression, but sufficiently constrained to make algorithmic thinking useful. Image design, with its attunement to position and movement, was an ideal fit for that goal. The five days ultimately included a variety of activities using computers, physical materials, and embodied activities. The programming activities used NetLogo, a multi-agent environment developed by Uri Wilensky and his colleagues (Wilensky, 1999). We chose NetLogo because it had functionality to import and edit images, and included multiple, accessible ways to think about modifying images (thinking about patches and turtles, the latter offering opportunities for dynamic animation). Because NetLogo uses text-based language for programming, we developed a set of introductory models that included buttons that allowed students to explore possible features and functions. Such buttons can be opened so that the code is shared, meaning that students can both explore what a button does and how it does it.

At the end of the third day of the camp, teachers and researchers felt that although the students had learned a lot about NetLogo, there were still some common but pervasive challenges that many students were facing in designing their own projects. We wanted to create a set of activities that served both to help students notice what they had learned, and also intentionally grapple with, and solve, some key challenges that many were facing. For that reason, we designed a series of debugging models, which addressed specific issues that we had seen come up in the camp. These debugging models are the topic of the analysis.

Figure 1 shows the first debugging model that students worked on, called "White Square." Each debugging model offered a description of what the model should do when working properly, directions about how to begin exploring the model, and code embedded within a button that did not initially produce the outcome

described in the directions. Students engaged with this debugging model by reading the directions, running the code, right clicking on the “make white square in center” button, and then reading and editing the code to try to correct the model. When students clicked the “Setup” button the NetLogo window turned blue. When they clicked the “make white square in center” button a white rectangle appeared in the middle of the blue NetLogo window. When students right-clicked on the “make white square in center” button they view and edit the code in the button, run the model again, and see what changes their edits made to the window.

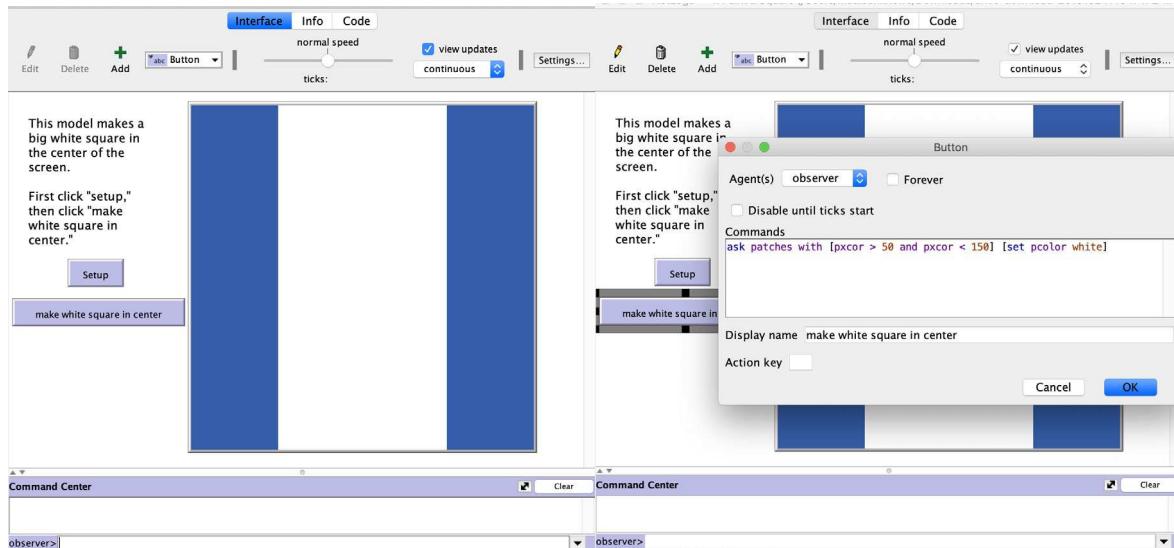


Figure 1. White square debugging model (left) with “make white square” button opened for editing (right).

## Methodology

This paper focuses on students from one classroom who were working independently on the debugging activity. “Independently” is defined here as one student per computer--students were allowed to talk with each other and help each other, which they often did. However, each student ultimately typed and tested code on their own computers. Of the nine students who gave consent in this classroom, one pair of students was eliminated from the analysis as they worked together on a single computer as they completed the debugging activity we analyze. We additionally focused only on students who ultimately fixed the bug in the code, which eliminated one additional student from the analysis. Thus, the analysis we present focuses on six students. We focus here on the first debugging activity, with the goal of learning more about students’ initial approaches to debugging. Each debugging activity was captured using screen capture software installed on each computer. On some videos we are able to see both the entire screen and the student’s face, on other videos, only the entire screen is visible.

As stated, we were not able to find significant information in the literature to attune us to the kinds of issues that we were likely to see students grappling with as novice debuggers, and thus we relied on methods of emergent coding to begin to identify patterns in our data. We began by reviewing students’ first debugging activities, both independently and as a group, offering conjectures about what we were seeing, what was interesting, and what was significant. Following several rounds of such conversations, we identified a common pattern across all videos that was analytically useful, which we call *Edit-Test-Pairs* (ETP). An ETP refers to a chunk of time (similar to the idea in Conversation Analysis of an *utterance*) that begins when a student starts to edit code and ends when the student has completed the code editing and tested the change.

Our first approach to documenting students’ debugging activity involved using the video editing software *V-Note* to identify each ETP and then characterize the ETP based on what specifically was edited. These codes were based on what kinds of edits were possible (see Table 1). We also, on a second pass, noted the points in the video when the student was talking with another student (peer interaction) and with a teacher or researcher (teacher interaction). After completing this coding of all six videos, we produced reports of the coding both at the student level and across all cases that included: the type of edits for all ETPs, the percent of time students created an ETP with a peer or with a teacher, when students added new code (which was required to fix the bug), and under what circumstances the code was ultimately fixed.

Our response to watching students’ debugging activity was one of profound surprise. Students did not work on the models the way we had envisioned when designing them. We saw no evidence that students were pausing to read the entirety of the code, working deliberately to understand what in the code was producing the

mistake, or systematically exploring aspects of the code to see how it was working. Instead we found that students made changes quickly, pausing very little between opening the button to edit and making a change. We also saw students persisting in making changes to the same variable repeatedly without exploring different combinations or alternatives. We were also surprised to see that most changes students made to the code could be described as “tweaks,” such as changing constants or inequality signs, or substituting one attribute for another, rather than adding or subtracting larger units of code. These observations led us back to the literature to better understand what might be going on, and to Schable et al’s (1991) framework that offered a way of making sense of what students might be doing. As discussed above, Schable et al suggests that young children’s understanding of experimentation can be understood as deriving from different ideas about their goals, or purpose: in other words, different framings of the debugging enterprise. Debugging is a kind of experimentation, and thus we found this framework to be very useful in helping us to make sense of our own data. In what follows, we share the results of students’ debugging activity, addressing our RQs in turn.

Table 1. Codes generated to classify changes made to code for each Edit-Test-Pair

First approach	Tweak pxcor/pycor	Teacher interaction
Edit/test pair	Tweak constant	Peer exchange
Uses tool	Tweak inequality	Positive reaction/discourse
Add new code	Tweak conjunction	Negative reaction/discourse
Remove code	Tweak color	Visible math reasoning
Restarts NetLogo	Tweak other	Math tools

## Findings

### RQ1: How do students approach a novice debugging task?

As stated, our first goal was to understand how students approached this debugging task. The code they were given, **ask patches with [pxcor >50 and pxcor <150 ] [set pcolor white]**, creates a full stripe down the center of the screen as the code defines a restriction only to the x coordinates (see Figure 1a). To “fix” this bug, students need to realize that they also need to restricting patches based on their y coordinates. In viewing the video, we found that students rarely added code, but instead almost always started by quickly focusing on one aspect of the code and tweaking it. For example, four of the six students immediately tweaked one of the constants in the code (usually by changing the 150 to 50 or vice versa). One student tweaked the pxcor, changing one instance to pycor. The final student first tried to solve the bug by asking the patches to set their *shape* square (based on an activity they had just completed), but this is not a possible command, and it failed. His second attempt looked exactly like all other attempts, as he too tried changing a constant.

In fact, this attention to a single element of the code at a time characterized all students’ debugging behavior, with students routinely focusing on a single element for an extended time before moving on to another element. Overall, students’ efforts were almost always focused on tweaking a single element of code, as seen in Table 2. Additionally, it was almost always the case that students only added code when talking with a teacher or researcher, and only resolved the bug after extensive discussion with a teacher. This was both surprising and disappointing to us, and it became the question that we wished to better understand.

Table 2. Percent of Edit-Test-Pairs that focused on particular types of changes, averaged across all cases

	Percent of ETPs
Tweak pxcor/pycor	12%
Tweak constant	68%
Tweak inequality	9%
Tweak conjunction	2%
Tweak color	3%
Tweak other	6%
Add new code	16%

Remove code	7%
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## RQ2: How do students seem to frame their task?

As mentioned, our first views of these videos demonstrated that students did not appear to notice that they needed to add code to solve the problem. In fact, students generally did not seem to be reading through the code to make sense of it in the ways that we anticipated, but instead focused on changing a single element multiple times. Further, the fact that all final solutions took place in relation to conversation with an adult represented a kind of failure in our design, from our perspective. Thus, we set out to try to understand both what students were doing when they were working alone, and what was different when they were working with teachers. That is, we asked ourselves what the teachers added to the students' learning environments that enabled them to re-frame the activity in a way that led to their exploring the space of possible changes to the code that included a solution to the problem. Using a lens of thinking about the kind of experimentation students took themselves to be doing helped us to make sense of this.

As previously stated, *frames* (Goffman, 1974) can serve as a kind of storyline that organize our understanding of and predictions about what is happening in a given situation. Like interactional roadmaps, they mark a path for the activity to follow if everyone is playing their part correctly. Frames become a way of understanding or anticipating the norms and expectations of an experience, and while they are almost always tacit, they are also powerful insofar as they shape what we think we are doing, what we notice, anticipate, and expect. Frames are shared and recognizable, as ultimately, they become interactional resources. In our analysis, we have found the specific idea that students might adopt frames for their experimental activity that are more consistent with what Schable et al (1991) call "engineering" than what we anticipated, which is more like "science," to be a useful resource in seeing the sensibility in students' activity, and ultimately, in offering to us important feedback about the ways that our designs set students up to debug in different kinds of ways.

To delve more deeply into the frames that students seemed to adopt, we share specific excerpts from students' work to demonstrate the differences in their approaches at different points in the debugging process. For example, Bryan demonstrates a common initial debugging behavior; moreover, Bryan also talked aloud as he worked, offering additional insight into what he might have been thinking. Bryan's initial attempts to debug the model focused on changing the constant, which he did repeatedly.

Bryan: I need to fix this.

Bryan: [to the student sitting next to him] Here just change the pxcor to something else.

### **Deletes 50 and writes 60**

Bryan: Just keep changing it to see what you get.

Teacher: Keep changing it to get a square.

Bryan: Sounds about right.

Bryan's comment that he needed to "just keep changing it to see what you get" suggests a kind of exploration of an element, which is indeed what he did. In the subsequent Edit-Test-pairs, Bryan changed the constant multiple times before moving onto a different strategy (for each line, new text is written in bold).

- 1 ask patches [if pxcor >50 and pxcor <150 ] [set pcolor white]]
- 2 ask patches [if pxcor >**60** and pxcor <150 ] [set pcolor white]]
- 3 ask patches [if pxcor >60 and pxcor <**100** ] [set pcolor white]]
- 4 ask patches [if pxcor >**100** and pxcor <100 ] [set pcolor white]]
- 5 ask patches [if pxcor >**50** and pxcor <**50** ] [set pcolor white]]
- 6 ask patches [if pxcor >**100** and pxcor <**100** ] [set pcolor white]]
- 7 ask patches [if pxcor >**200** and pxcor <**200** ] [set pcolor white]]
- 8 ask patches [if pxcor >**500** and pxcor <**500** ] [set pcolor white]]

As he made these changes, Bryan repeatedly stated: "you have to make it even," which appeared to refer to his changes to the constant so that they were the same number (beginning with change #4). As Schable et al suggest, a goal of a student who takes an "engineering" perspective to experimentation is to "make a desired or

interesting outcome occur or reoccur,” using a search that “focuses on variables believed to cause the outcome.” Bryan’s repeated changes of a type that did not yield a result (there is no whole number that is both less than 100 and greater than 100, and thus *no* patches change color when the code is run, see Figure 1) was challenging to watch, and we repeatedly wondered at Bryan’s seeming lack of attention to other aspects of the code that would have predicted why these changes didn’t work.

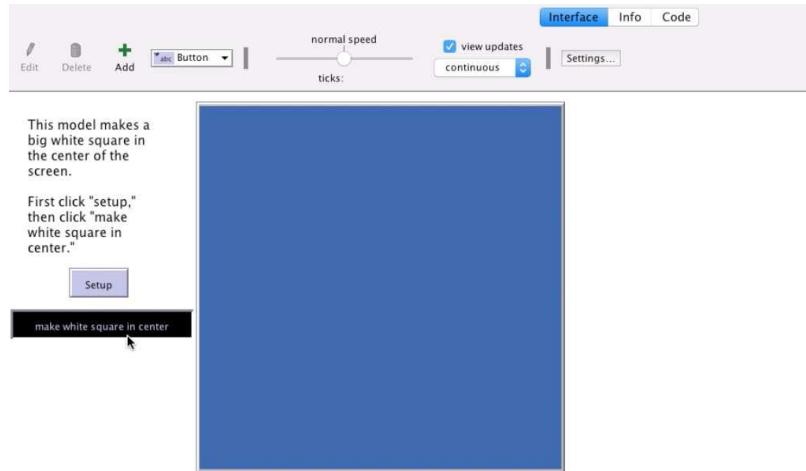


Figure 2. Bryan’s model each time “make white square in center” is clicked in lines 4-8 above.

As with Bryan, the shift to look beyond the target of the experimentation to offer a causal explanation was not one that we saw students making independently. Instead, a focus on how aspects of the code were interacting with one another almost always happened in conversation with a teacher. In these conversations, the teacher attuned the student to how the code was operating on the visual model by asking students to think about the relationship between elements of code, what Schable et al (1991) characterize as a “Science model.” In this model, the goal is to “understand relations among causes and effects,” and to “test all combinations, if feasible.”

An example of this shift can be seen in a conversation between another student, Brianna, and one of the researchers on the project. At this point, Brianna had been working independently for quite some time and had gotten frustrated with her lack of progress. When the researcher came over to check in, Brianna recruited her assistance. This conversation takes place when the researcher sits down next to Brianna and looks at the code she has produced, resulting in the image display in Figure 3.

Brianna: I’m trying to change this into a square but it’s not working!  
 Researcher: Let’s see. What’s going on?  
 Brianna: I added 2 more pxcor because there are supposed to have 4 equal sides.  
 Researcher: Ok, so now it says, ‘ask patches with pxcor = 150 and pxcor = 150 and pxcor = 150 and pxcor = 150 set pcolor white.’ Ok, so when it says, ‘pxcor = 150,’ where are all the patches with pxcor = 150?  
 Brianna: I don’t know.  
 Researcher: Well, what does that mean? Let’s look.

In this exchange, the researcher immediately opens the conversation by doing something that was rarely observed in students’ independent debugging: reading the entirety of the code and then trying to understand what it means. Brianna has a clear idea that she shares: squares have four equal sides, and she has said 150 four times. What she thinks that 150 *is* is unclear from this work and the work that preceded it, but what is clear is that she hasn’t yet thought about how the other aspects of the code are connecting with the constant 150. The researcher’s first question attunes the student to the connection between the code and the representation by asking: “where are all the patches with pxcor = 150?” This question attunes the student to the “relationship between cause and effect” by asking how the code that is written produces the effect that they are seeing. Once the researcher introduced this frame, Brianna was able to contribute to it, as seen in the exchanges that follow:

Researcher: Ok, so if I'm looking on the xy plane, where are all my x coordinates? Are they horizontal or vertical?

Brianna: Horizontal

Researcher: Horizontal, awesome. So where do you think the x coordinate 150 is?

Brianna: Somewhere over here.

Researcher: Somewhere over here. Ok. So what did you ask the patches to do? When you say, 'ask patches with pxcor equals 150, turn your color white,' what are the patches doing, which ones are turning white?

Brianna: The ones over here

Researcher: So should we be surprised that we got a vertical line?

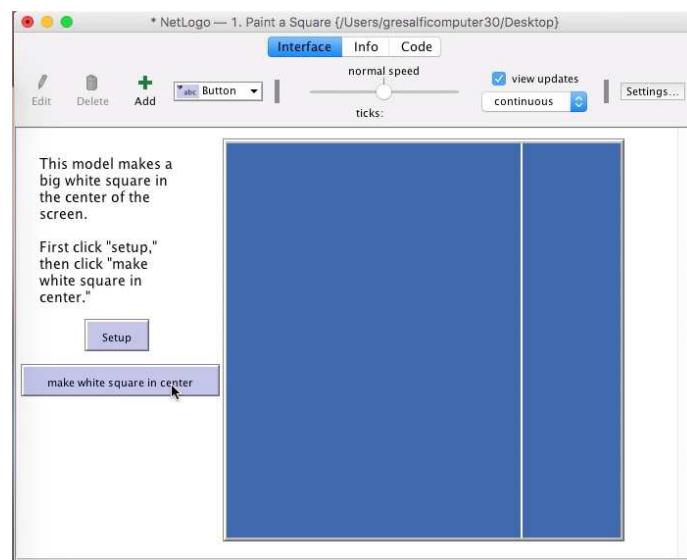
Brianna: No

Researcher: No because that's what we asked it to do! We said just the patches with x coordinate 150 turn white. Those are the only patches we talked to.

Brianna: How do you talk to the y coordinate?

Researcher: Hey, we can do that too!

Brianna's conversation with the researcher offered an opportunity to shift the frame of the activity away from making changes to elements of the code to "see what happens," and towards reading across an entire line of code to think about how it is working together. Such was Brianna's focus on specific elements that she did not appear to notice that, initially, she had written the same command four times. Once the researcher joined her and asked her to connect elements of the code to the representation, and to coordinate elements of the code to make sense of that representation, Brianna's frame shifted also to thinking about "the relations between causes and effects." Brianna was then able to shift to do that kind of thinking herself, when she articulated a goal that would help her to achieve the outcome she desired--talking to y coordinates as well.



**Figure 3.** Brianna’s display for the code: Ask patches with [pxcor = 150 AND pxcor=150 AND pxcor=150 AND pxcor =150] [set pcolor white].

## Conclusions and implications

As is often the case, our analysis reveals that students are often doing something very sensible, even if, on first glance, it appears to be confusing. Looking across cases suggests that at least with this initial activity in the context of NetLogo, there is something attractive for novice coders about focusing on single elements of the code without thinking broadly about their interactions. This is consistent with the findings of Liu, Zhi, Hicks, and Barnes (2017), but also consistent with findings that are now almost 30 years old that demonstrate the attractiveness of a strategy for experimentation that focuses on outcome rather than interrelations. At least in these data, the

“engineering” frame on this activity was so strong that it took a significant intervention—always in the form of a conversation with an adult—to shift frames.

One implication of this work therefore has to do with the resources that we draw on to make sense of these novel practices for K-12 students as we introduce computer science to younger grades. On the one hand we know little, as a field, about what novice debugging looks like, how it develops, and what role particular kinds of environments and languages play in supporting students’ debugging. At the same time, we know quite a bit about how students learn to problem solve, how they learn to think about experimentation and tinkering. Although these are different activities, and although we are not in any way dismissing the contribution of specific content demands on students’ activity, we find it useful to think about how we can draw on these other well-established areas of inquiry in making sense of this new territory.

A second significant implication of this work relates to design. This analysis made clear to us that when designing these models, we framed our goals as supporting students to interrogate relations among cause and effect. Instead, as is clear, students brought a different frame to the task. That frame had the potential to be productive, but not with the systems that we had created. This offers us new insights into ways that we might think about the designs we create, and how to ensure that we anticipate the different frames that students might bring.

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## Acknowledgments

This work was supported by Grant number (DRL-1742257) from the National Science Foundation. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.