Software makes the grade on essays: [FINAL Edition]

Marklein, Mary Beth. **USA TODAY; McLean, Va**. [McLean, Va] 16 Apr 1998: 01D.

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Abstract Translate

A computer may not be able to write the Great American Novel, but new software can evaluate a student essay about as well as a teacher can, researchers say.

The Intelligent Essay Assessor software, being presented today at a meeting of education researchers in San Diego, mimics the way a teacher grades essays. The software focuses on content rather than writing ability, but "it turns out the two are highly correlated. Students who know content write well," says University of Colorado, Boulder, psychology professor Thomas Landauer, who has been working on the project for 10 years.

The idea is that "a good essay is an essay that is similar to other essays that have been good," says researcher Peter Foltz, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces.

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Here's how it works: The teacher feeds the computer material from textbooks and other sources so that it can "learn" the topic and relationships between words. Then the teacher submits a model essay written by an expert or a sampling of essays that have been graded by a human. That provides the software with a basis for comparison.

It has been tested on about 2,000 students, including sixth-graders, undergraduates and first-year medical students, and often produces the same grades that humans give, Foltz and Landauer say.

Researchers say the program examines about a dozen predictors of essay quality.

Essays that don't conform -- they could be extremely poor or remarkably good -- are flagged so humans can decide the grade. For instance, an essay that lists words relevant to the topic but doesn't use complete sentences would be flagged. So would an essay found to have sentence patterns too similar to those in the textbook. The software also provides feedback on what the essay left out, a feature that could help students writing term papers.

"We haven't dared" use the software for creative writing, Landauer is quick to note. But he hopes the software will prompt teachers to use more essay tests, which he says "encourage a better kind of learning than . . . a multiple-choice test." And because the software's methodology is consistent and efficient, he says it could lighten the load for educators, especially those with 300 to 400 students a semester.

But biology professor James Perley, president of the American Association of University Professors, says he would rather have smaller classes. And if the software were overused, he says, "we (could) produce a whole population of people who can type things into computers but have no interaction with humans who can help them understand the importance of what they wrote."

Word count: **431**

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