

# ... Graded by Machine

The New Mexico State University system was proud enough of the invention by two faculty members to announce it on its Web site: "Computer software grades essays just as well as people, professors announced." When assistant psychology professor Peter Foltz and University of New Mexico colleague Thomas Landauer presented the software to a conference on educational research, they got the expected burst of attention and press coverage, but probably mixed with a significant component of dismay.

This educational breakthrough comes courtesy of the Intelligent Essay Assessor, a complex computer program that is fed information about an essay topic from online texts and encyclopedias and then calculates how many of the key words and concepts a student's paper manages to hit. It also rates how much its formulations deviate from programmed-in papers graded by a human being.

It's not that the concept is so radical a departure. Bits of the educational process are being translated into software at a steady pace, and with the growth of "distance education"—the packaging and networking of classes and classwork beyond the campus—there's constant pressure for more. Foltz and doctoral student Darrell Laham's students of psychology, on whom the software was tested for a semester last fall, preferred to have their essays graded by machine rather than by the professor; the professors said students thought their grades would be fairer, and, as Laham told the Associated Press, "the system does not get bored, rushed, sleepy, impatient or forgetful."

The idea of having an objective standard for the grading of essays on, say, national standardized tests seemed destined to attract interest too: Think of the possibilities for the SAT, or for the essay-heavy Advanced Placement exam, whose steep cost to test-takers partly reflects the cost of convening large groups of high school and college

teachers every summer for manic, round-the-clock sessions of reading and grading.

But as the educators seek their patent, it's worth trying to focus on which of the many ways this seems wrong are important, and which of the many bad trends in education it is symptomatic of. Is it, as some critics suggested, because it represents the cynical abandonment of any pretense that an essay is an exercise in communication? Is it because the essay-reading software gives no weight to what its inventors call the "surface," or manner of expression—so that you could put in a jumble of the "right" points and do just fine? (Defenders note that the only sure way to hit all the right points, really, is to write a decent essay.)

Or is it just the growing sense of the educational endeavor as a closer and closer approximation of the kind of interaction you get when a computerized telemarketer calls up your computerized answering machine and fills the tape with messages? (You can picture college students cruising the Web for one of the many sites that sell pirated term papers, downloading a likely block of text on the subject and submitting it to the computer that will do quantitative analysis to determine its relevance to the assignment.)

What's strange about the Intelligent Essay Assessor is the sharp turn it reveals—despite its futuristic sound—toward a very old notion of education. To make an essay assignment over into a covertly multiple-choice exercise, even such a sophisticated one as this, harks back to the once firmly established view that the role of the teacher in the classroom was to make sure the student mastered and could recite back a set body of information.

Could the much-touted high-tech education of the future be nothing but a covert return to the old ideals of drillwork? It's not such a bad prospect—except for one crucial difference. Reciting dates in high school history, competing in grammar and

spelling bees, learning "dead" languages through painstaking translation of already-translated classics—all these were reflections of the belief that, before you could fly intellectually, you needed to stand on a firm hill of accumulated solid ground.

The Princeton University Bulletin recently dug up a 1748 quotation from former college president Aaron Burr saying no student should be admitted who could not "render Virgil and Tully's orations into English; and to turn English into true and grammatical Latin; and to be so well acquainted with the Greek as to render any part of the four Evangelists in that language into Latin or English." *Entering* students, mind you. But after that, presumably, they would fly.

All the touchy-feely educational movements, from new math to whole language to "expanding environments," were versions of the idea that you'd do better on the drillwork if you were given a glimpse, right from the beginning, of what that flying would be like. That idea, too, was taken way too far. But here the goals and the drills are all confused, the drillwork masquerades as the final flight. A glance through the boastful accounts of up-to-date classroom "applications" finds too many where elementary schoolers are taught to surf the Internet and "expertly paste" paragraphs into their word-processed reports. Here both flying and drilling are lost.

Student writing may start out as drillwork, but somewhere along the line it is supposed to give a glimpse of writing and communicating as their own justification. With college-level essays graded by computer, what happens to that *why*? Without the lovely illusion that they might say something interesting or new, how will students ever get the notion that setting down words on paper is worthwhile?

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*The writer is a member of the editorial page staff.*