

Schools should take a pass on essay grading software

Chris Warner, Executive Editor



One of the joys of high school and college was receiving my blue essay book back from my teacher or professor. I couldn't wait to read their comments in the columns of the book, especially when one of my essays was laden with jokes or sarcasm. But that was often a two-way street, as when my thesis statement would indicate my essay was going to go in a direction my instructor found dubious. My favorite professor, in fact, sometimes wished me "good luck!" next to my opening paragraph.

I can't imagine the wisdom students may or not receive when essay-grading software takes hold in classrooms and lecture halls. A nonprofit called EdX, founded by Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, recently announced its artificial intelligence-based automated essay grading software is available for free online.

According to the New York Times story, human teachers will initially grade 100 essays to establish a baseline, and they'll also provide a scoring system. "The system then uses a variety of machine-learning techniques to train itself" to provide instant grades.¹

My colleague, Jason Lomberg asks, "[Is it moral to subject students to such a system?](#) [1]"

My initial answer is likely similar to most peoples' reactions. Software simply can't determine, say, the reasoning behind a student's argument, the clarity of the argument, its organization and whether the student's view is based on their own personal experience, among other things. No doubt, one has to wonder what feedback such software would give some of the most prolific writers of previous times, and it would make a terrific debate.

But Jason's question goes beyond the importance of the blue book.

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At the high school level, where one can assume this technology will eventually be used, one of the more disturbing problems as school budgets continue to get squeezed and taxpayers and parents demand more accountability, is the increasing tendency of educators to “teach to the test”, often limiting instruction to what is expected to be on a standardized test at the expense of a broad and varied curriculum. Could the same be said for essay writing? Will professors and teachers be forced to take time out from the subject and instruct students to “write to the software?” What key words or phrases should students include in their essays to satisfy the algorithms? And to what predetermined guidelines should the essay be organized or formatted and if so, will the software vendors even let the students know what they are? (The last three questions are common criticisms of “job applicant tracking software”, another artificial intelligence-based tool that’s getting a cold reputation from everyone except those who implement it.) Do we really want our students and educators subjected to these minutiae, or do we want them to learn how to present an argument from someone who can recognize how to craft an essay?

But it won’t end there. When essay grading software takes hold, and the student does not meet expectations, there will be a whole new cottage industry waiting for the student’s – or most likely Mom and Dad’s -- credit card number, that will promise to “unlock the secrets” of the software. And each school, book, or software package will present itself as having the world-class, personalized, tools, tips, techniques, and solutions needed to get ahead of the curve. (Not really my words -- I just Googled “SAT test prep.”). And what about Mom and Dad? Are they not paying enough in taxes or tuition to merit real human eyes and judgment for their children’s efforts? Will some “underperforming” high schools implement the software while those in more affluent communities use traditional grading? How would anyone like to be a twenty-something college graduate saddled with tens-of-thousands of dollars (and growing) of debt in a pitiful job market, knowing that some of that fortune helped fill the coffers of the software company that denied them an honest, human-based grade, whose founder no doubt is living the good life?

But most important, the student has taken the time (hopefully) to research a topic, draw a conclusion, make a compelling argument, and actually write the essay. Money and efficiency aside, common decency should dictate that a fair portion of a trained educator’s time, effort, judgment, scrutiny, and wisdom be the least the student gets in return.

As always, ECN welcomes reader comments. Extra credit to those who write their response in a blue book and show their work!

¹ John Markoff, “Essay-Grading Software Offers Professors a Break,” (<http://nyti.ms/Z4q5uK> [2]) New York Times, April 4, 2012.

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