DIRECTIONS IN COMPUTER ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT WRITING

Bill Wesch, University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point

This presentation categorized the primary approaches people use in computer assessment of writing.

The first group is the "Usage Police." Programs such as Right Writer and Grammatik review a text and identify "errors" such as homonym confusion, passive voice, and minor grammar mistakes. I pointed out that accuracy is still a problem with such programs, with students being told something is wrong even when it may be correct. A bigger problem is triviality. While confused homonyms may be a nuisance, they are hardly central to the task of writing.

The second group was "Stylists." A primary program here is HOMER, which looks for "bureaucratic" writing by checking for such traits as long sentences, heavy preposition use, passive voice, and nominalization. With this and similar programs, the computer has a model of "good" writing and marks elements that vary from this norm. The problem here is that students may take the computer too seriously and come to believe that nominalization or passive voice are never acceptable.

I named the third group "Visionaries." These programs reposition text so writers can more easily see for themselves what revisions are necessary. Example programs are Quill, Writer's Helper, and Writer's Workbench. An example activity is Writer's Helper's Outline module that automatically prints the first sentence of each paragraph so writers can more easily see if they moved logically from one idea to the next, or jumped around erratically. Other modules print sentences individually, print the first and last sentence of each paragraph, count word frequencies, etc. In every case the writer must take responsibility for deciding what revisions to make, if any.

I named the last group "Phone Operators," newer networks that allow writers to communicate with each other as they write. Such networks promote peer revision. This approach once again uses the computer as a facilitator, but leaves responsibility for changes to writers themselves.

ASSESSING THE COMPOSING PROCESS

Lee Odell, Texas Christian University

Over the past several years, TCU has developed a number of procedures to help students engage in the composing process. Students keep journals, discuss topics in collaborative thinking groups, and present drafts to peer response groups to stimulate their thinking processes and refine their ability to articulate to others their ideas, perceptions, and feelings.

There are strong theoretical reasons for asking students to do this sort of work. But in order to improve our basic understanding of what we are asking students to do, and to help them make full use of these procedures, we must have some way of describing and assessing the work students do when they write in journals or take part in small group discussions. Since one goal of these procedures is to help students through the topics they are writing about, we need some way to describe the thinking that is reflected in students' work. And we also need some way to describe the interpersonal strategies students use when they work in groups.

The means of describing thinking can be synthesized from current work on thinking (work that includes rhetorical theory, cognitive psychology, and critical thinking). Six principal concepts have proven useful: Selecting and encoding; creating and acknowledging dissonance; considering alternatives; seeing relationships; drawing on prior knowledge; and using metacognition.

For analysis of interaction, the theory of Carl Rogers and the interaction process analysis of Robert Bales provide useful definitions of listening, one of the key factors in successful group interaction. Specifically, it can be useful to determine whether students are doing such things as: avoiding interruptions, paraphrasing or reiterating others' comments; responding to others' questions, comments or requests; inviting information or opinions from others; developing
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