

COMPUTER APPLICATIONS IN WRITING ASSESSMENT

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At The University of Minnesota, Lillian Bridwell and Don Ross have the luxury of a three-year contract to look at the use of computers across the entire college curriculum. They traveled the usual route into "compuwriting": from testimonials about how writers use and like computers to software programs to finding their own way into incorporating computers into writing courses. Then they had to find out how to assess compuwriting.

Bridwell stated that computers themselves can be part of the assessment. A computer can, for example, keep records of the number of trials it takes a user to master a writing skill. It can also count and record how many key strokes per second a user makes while composing, and replay that record at real time speed or in slow motion, thus allowing teachers to question students about their composing technique and help to refine it. There are many software programs in use with a wide variety of assessment capabilities. Some are programmed to analyze and respond at three levels of usage. Some programs respond to a user's composition in written letter form, informing the user of such things as how many polysyllabic words he used, and how the ratio of those to shorter words compares to the "normal" ratio for other writers at the same level of usage or writing for the same purpose.

Although computers may assign scores, most computer assessment is aimed at helping users revise.

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Such revision is based on text analysis software programs. Bridwell provided a checklist of what such programs can and cannot do. They can find and count features that can be specified precisely, such as the number of words, sentences, "to be" verbs, abstract words, frequently misused words and phrases, misspelled words, "Th-" openers, and punctuation in limited contexts (e.g., double quotes, single quotes, and parentheses). They can also compute indices such as "readability," average word length, average sentence

tages of sentences that contain certain constructions (e.g., prepositional phrases, "to be" verbs), and comparisons of these counts and percentages with pre-set "standards." Text analysis programs cannot, however, phrase sentences with 100% accuracy, create standards for style in different kinds of documents or for different audiences, decide whether a construction is appropriate to a given context, make rhetorical judgments about the ideas or the organization of an essay, and scan a handwritten document. length, total number of words and sentences, percent-

Bridwell emphasized that there is also no way a machine can judge "creativity." She ended her talk by pleading with her audience to use computers as tools, not to let them dictate to or dominate them. She compared the lie detector and the computer. The lie detector isn't very good at detecting lies, but has lots of power to control what its subjects say. The direct analogy to compuwriting is that the computing machine can exercise power over its users, and do so in the worst possible way—by emphasizing the superficial aspects of writing.