

THE AUSTRALIAN

UTS trials automated feedback on essays

ANDREW TROUNSON THE AUSTRALIAN JUNE 03, 2015 12:00AM

Students at the University of Technology, Sydney, will soon be able to get their essays marked before they are ... marked. This year the university is to pilot its newly developed language analytics software tool, which will assess a student's draft essay and provide instant feedback on how to better structure their writing and argument.

Based on work and analysis by linguists, the program works a lot like a highly sophisticated spelling or grammar checker. It looks for markers of coherent and educated argument and highlights problematic areas. It scans for evidence of contrasting ideas, open questions, significance, surprise, novelty and background knowledge.

“We want students to take responsibility for their learning and this will be a tool that does that. It doesn't write their essay for them but it does give them feedback,” said Simon Buckingham Shum, head of UTS's Connected Intelligence Centre.

Professor Buckingham Shum said the program, dubbed Academic Writing Analytics, was aimed at providing more and faster feedback to students to help them improve their academic writing and argument skills, while also freeing up academics to provide higher level feedback.

AWA has come out of Professor Buckingham Shum's previous work at Open Universities in Britain where he teamed up with Xerox researchers in France to develop software aimed at synthesising the findings of reports. Since joining UTS in August he has maintained the connection with Xerox to develop AWA.

Professor Buckingham Shum said he was conscious of the potential for automated feedback to drive conformity among students. So while the feedback is couched as suggestions rather than prescriptive instructions, it also recognises that many students may need to learn the basics: “We don't want to create blandness, but you do have to learn before you improvise,” he pointed out.

He said it could also reduce demand for “essay mills” and take some of the pressure off students who might be tempted to cheat by buying essays.

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