

Artificial intelligence program will help with grading

By SAM MILLER
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English teachers don't always have the reputation of being progressive.

"We're in a paper-grading fog," said Anita Mattos, an English teacher at Rancho Santa Margarita Intermediate. "We're too deep in the muck to see what's out there."

Mattos is the first teacher to glimpse what Saddleback Valley officials hope will be the solution - a computer program that uses artificial intelligence to grade students' writing. Mattos tested the program for a month in 2003.

Students used to waiting weeks or months to get grades on writing assignments will next year get immediate feedback from a program that, district officials say, appeals to the technologically savvy. Teachers, meanwhile, will get some relief from essay-grading.

"It's not replacing the teachers," said Michael Morrison, the district's technology specialist. "But it will be a valuable instructional tool."

The district will pilot the program with seventh-graders, using a technology grant. Eighth-grade teachers will try the program - likely My Access, a product made by Vantage Learning that is used to grade 5 million college placement exams annually - in 2005-2006.

Early models of artificial intelligence grading would have graded Shakespeare's "To be or not to be" as a childish sentence. But representatives of

Vantage Learning - the company that created spelling and grammar checks used on most home computers - say the newest version of its program is sophisticated enough to gauge everything from the speaker's writing voice to the clarity of his argument.

The program uses 300 to 500 samples of graded writing on a specific topic and searches for similarities in the writings, evaluating everything from sentence structure and length to word usage and persuasive strategies. Any paper can be submitted to be graded based on the grading scale in the program.

"Some of us were like, c'mon, how could this work?" said Catherine D'Aoust, coordinator of instructional services. "We really questioned this - how this could help - then found we were really excited about what this could do."

That's partly because of Mattos' experience with the program. She was skeptical when Morrison asked her in 2003 to check out My Access. But when it was installed in her classroom, she saw students more engaged in the writing process. They were eager to see whether they'd scored higher than in previous rounds of writing.

"We knew that, yes, it was going to provide equitable scoring," said John Stippick with Vantage Learning. "We knew that immediate feedback was going to score the final process. But none of us realized how much it was going to motivate the students."