

Computer program may simplify grading

By LINDSAY YOUNG
Senior staff writer

A computer program that can actually grade an essay.

That may sound like just a dream to professors who have to grade more than 100 essays in one sitting, but some professors claim they can make that dream come true.

Thomas Landauer of the University of Colorado at Boulder and Peter Foltz of New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, N.M., helped develop the Intelligent Essay Assessor and have been using it in their classrooms.

The technology for the Intelligent Essay Assessor was in development as many as 10 years ago, Landauer said.

An earlier digital essay grader looked at the mechanics of an essay such as sentence structure, counting commas and the length of words.

The Intelligent Essay Assessor, in development for three years, can determine what students have learned and what they have not, Landauer said.

Developers hope schools have to wait only another couple of months before they can get their hands on the new invention.

According to Landauer, the program works like this:

The student types the essay into the computer, or the student can bring a disk with the essay on it. It works well for distance education and other Internet-based courses.

The program starts by analyzing reference material and sample-graded essays the professor enters into the program. It looks at how words in the reference material and the sample-graded essays compare with the students' essays.

If the essay is similar to several good ones, he said, the machine gives it an A.

Some University of Nebraska-Lincoln professors said it was too hard to tell whether such a program could be helpful without trying it first.

But they said regardless of its benefits, they may want to add a human touch to a computer-graded essay.

"I like the opportunity to do that," said David Allen, an assistant English professor. Allen works with the department of distance education and the division of continuing studies.

Allen had the opportunity to look last week at a sample of the program and said, so far, he wasn't impressed.

"Is there a real advantage to this?" he said. With what he has seen of the program, it hasn't given back information that would necessarily be helpful to a student or a teacher, he said.

People can try out the assessor by going to <http://isa.colorado.edu/>. The site allows people to see examples of scored essays and allows people to feed in their own essays.

It analyzes factual material only in classes such as history, political science, economics and science.

One benefit of the grader is that

"It allows the professor to spend time in better ways than grading exams."

THOMAS LANDAUER
computer program developer

it is consistent, Landauer said. "It will give the same grade to the same essay every time," he said.

He said the scores usually agree with a professor or an expert grader's marks.

Also, if the essay is "very original" — either because it's creative or completely off the topic — the grader will flag it and say that the professor should look at it.

It also benefits the professor, he said.

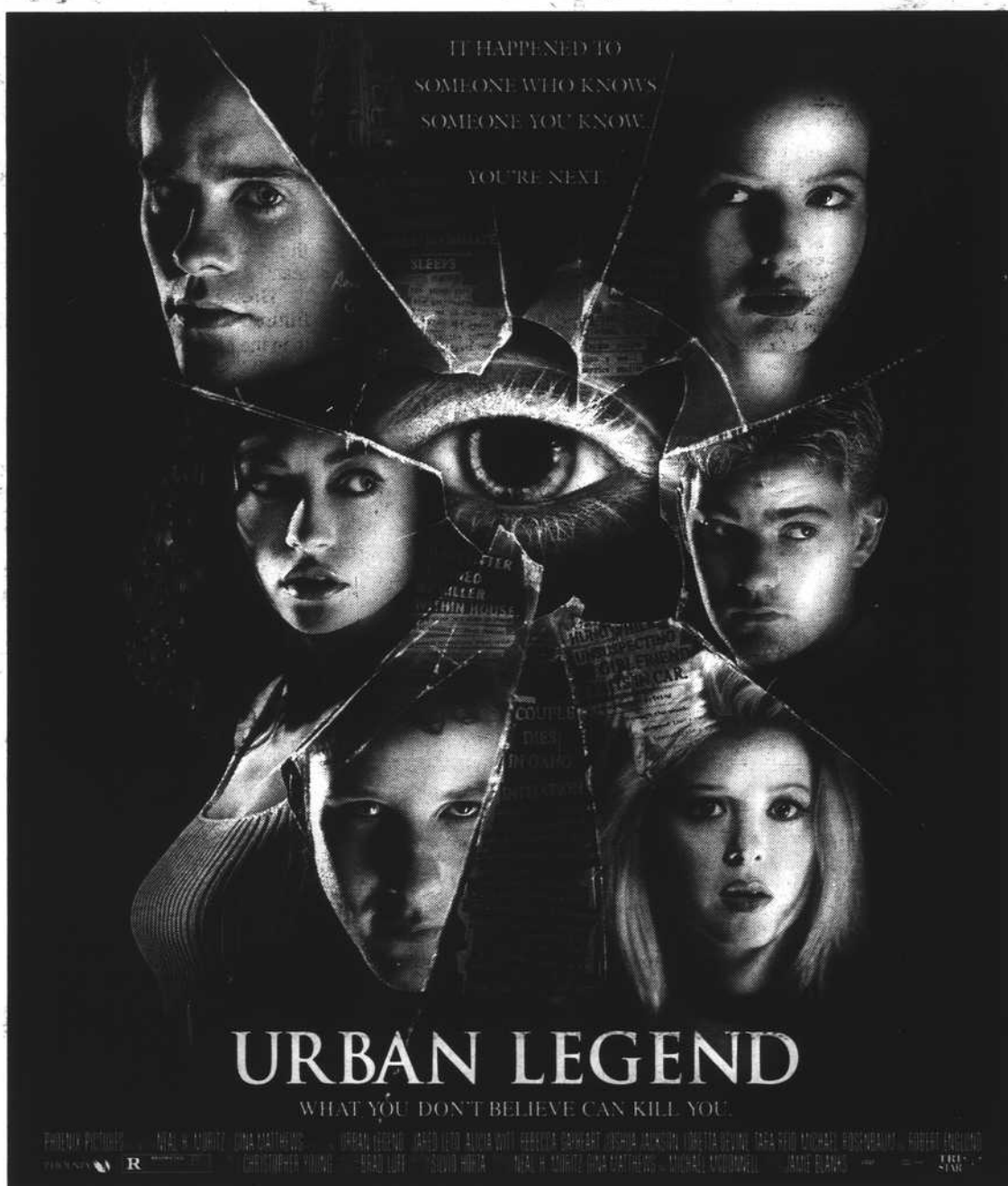
"It allows the professor to spend time in better ways than grading exams."

David Forsythe, a political science professor, said it would take him time to look at and figure out the program.

But, "it might be time-saving in the long run," Forsythe said.

So far, Landauer said, the response from those who haven't tried it hasn't been completely positive.


"Unfortunately the people don't know anything about it," he said. "Computers didn't used to be able to



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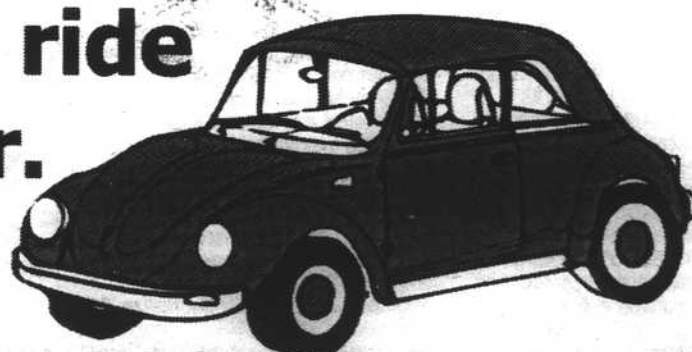
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