Big data brings you AcaWriter

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The Connected Intelligence Centre is using a range of artifical intelligence and data sceince techniques to analyse digital data. AcaWriter, which will soon be rolled out university wide, will give students 24/7 feedback on their reflective writing.

Simon Buckingham Shum, photo by Jamie Williams

In the Connected Intelligence Centre (CIC) "We're using a range of techniques from artificial intelligence and data science to analyse new kinds of digital data," explains CIC Director Professor Simon Buckingham Shum.

One example is student writing. "Of course, students writing is as old as the hills and students using word processors for writing is hardly new. But now with cloud computing, the students can submit drafts of their writing and get instantaneous feedback on that using the AI technique of natural language processing."

According to Simon, it's a world-first for UTS to provide instant feedback on reflective writing. So, how does it work? Students simply copy and paste their written work into the

AcaWriter (that's short for academic writer) website and the site's software instantly analyses the text.

> Students don't have to worry that they've made mistakes or the academics are going to see their very early drafts or anything like that. It's about improving the quality of what they end up submitting.

Professor Simon Buckingham Shum
Director, Connected Intelligence Centre

"It's not that the machine understands a piece of writing in the way that a human does," explains Simon, "but it can spot interesting patterns that correspond to good academic 'rhetorical moves' and draws your attention to areas for you to reflect on.

"We're going way beyond spelling, grammar and plagiarism here," he adds.

AcaWriter, which will be available to students 24/7, is set to be rolled out university-wide. Simon says, it's been developed with "early adopter academics and the experts in IML, the Institute for Interactive Multimedia and Learning, who are the specialists here in the teaching of writing."

It's set to be a boon for undergraduates, postgraduates and academics who will have more time to help students understand the content of their degrees.

"This isn't grading them," clarifies Simon. "Students don't have to worry that they've made mistakes or the academics are going to see their very early drafts or anything like that. It's about improving the quality of what they end up submitting."

And, hopefully, give them greater confidence in their ability to write analytically and reflectively, whether they embark on an academic career or something else.

Find out more about AcaWriter and how UTS researchers are putting people at the heart of big data.

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