

CASE STUDY:

At Florida Gulf Coast University, Intelligent Essay Assessor Helps Save Required University Course



Situation

In 2000, Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) was considering canceling one of its required courses in the General Education Program. As one of the newest institutions in the Florida state university system, FGCU offered "Understanding Visual and Performing Arts" as a required course for entering freshman. Enrollment at the new university quickly exploded, and by 2000, the school had more than 800 students in 30 sections of the course taught by adjunct professors. The number of staff required not only led to inconsistency in the coursework and grading, but was also a large drain on university resources. Jim Wohlpart, Ph.D., associate dean of Arts & Sciences, was charged with revamping the course.

Implementing Intelligent Essay Assessor

Wohlpart worked with university faculty to completely overhaul the class. The first step was to put it entirely online, facilitated by one full-time professor and one full-time administrator, plus part-time "preceptors," or graduate students who assist by moderating Web discussions and meeting with students. As a next step, Wohlpart evaluated software for grading online tests, including essays in which students analyzed works of art. However, Wohlpart says, getting rid of the essay portion of the exam was not an option. "A large part of the course requires that students employ critical thinking, and we needed to keep the short essay section in the exams."

For FGCU, Intelligent Essay Assessor (IEA) from Pearson Knowledge Technologies fit the requirements perfectly. For the essay, students analyze a work of art – such as a painting, a sculpture or a piece of architecture – or a performing art – such as music, dance or theater. While the essay prompt asks students to provide an objective analysis of particular elements of the art work, it also asks them to explain the meaning created by this particular work. While grading a "creative" essay might seem to be a particular challenge for automated assessment, Wohlpart was very pleased with the results he saw from IEA. "It's really great at grading those types of questions."

To program the software, Wohlpart's team entered a digitized version of the textbook and 300 scored essays. Students prepare for the short essay portion of the exam by having Web board discussions with fellow classmates and graduate-student facilitators. They read "good" and "poor" sample essay responses and then assess additional essays to figure out on their own which are strong and which are weak and why.

"I think it's absolutely essential that we only use technology in appropriate places in our teaching. It's not going to fix everything or take over, but when it works, students come up with wonderful thoughts and ideas."

Wohlpert and his team evaluated several similar technologies before selecting IEA, which is based on PKT's Knowledge Analysis Technologies™ engine. "We chose it because it really focused on content," he said. "Similar software focuses on grammar and syntax, but in this course, students have to demonstrate that they can critically analyze a piece of art. IEA does a wonderful job." An analysis of IEA's reliability in grading showed it was more consistent than human scoring, matching human graders' scores 81 percent of the time, vs. 64 percent when scored by two separate graders.

Results

Wohlpert credits Intelligent Essay Assessor as being one of the factors that allowed FGCU to continue to offer "Understanding Visual and Performing Arts," a course he considers vital to his students' undergraduate education. "IEA has really saved us the money and the time it would take to grade the essays," he said, "which are an essential part of the course."

By including other faculty members in the decision-making process, Wohlpert quickly demonstrated that IEA graded fairly and efficiently, and he hasn't received any criticism for his use of the software. Today, the course is among the most popular with both professors and students. "We have faculty lined up to teach it, and the ones who are teaching it don't want to give it up," he said. "Of course, our students are so well-versed in technology that this captures their imagination and keeps their interest. I think it's absolutely essential that we only use technology in appropriate places in our teaching. It's not going to fix everything or take over, but when it works, students come up with wonderful thoughts and ideas."

Florida Gulf Coast University, in Ft. Myers, Fla., is a member of the State University System of Florida and was created to serve the educational needs of the rapidly growing Southwest Florida population. Growing from 1,800 students in the 1997-98 academic year to 7,200 students in 2004-05, the university population is expected to double within five years.

Contact

Jim Wohlpert, Ph.D., Associate Dean
College of Arts and Sciences
Florida Gulf Coast University
Phone (239) 590-7181
Fax (239) 590-7260
Web Site: <http://www.fgcu.edu/>

Benefits of Using Intelligent Essay Assessor

- Saved FGCU the time and expense of grading thousands of essays
- More consistent and accurate scoring than with human graders
- Able to evaluate complex content about the analysis of a work of art

For more information on Pearson Knowledge Technologies, call (303) 545-9092 or visit www.PearsonKT.com

For more information, press only:

Lisa Wolfe, L. Wolfe Communications, 773-325-9935, lwolfe@lwolfe.com

Copyright© 2005 Pearson Education, Inc. or its affiliate(s). All rights reserved.