

Give Students the "Write" Stuff With Online Learning Tools

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Consisting of 28 suburban and urban schools, the Red Clay Consolidated School District in New Castle County, Delaware is committed to incorporating technology into the classroom. The district's schools make strong attempts to leverage computers as valuable learning and assessment tools.

In fact, this open-minded approach to technology tools enabled us to help our fifth graders beginning in the 2002-2003 school year. At the time, I taught fifth grade at Richardson Park Elementary, and noticed, as many teachers and administrators did, the ongoing poor performance of our classes on the writing portion of the Delaware Student Testing Program (DSTP) tests.

Two kinds of writing are required for DSTP. One is text-based writing, where students read a selection and respond to that selection in paragraphs to demonstrate comprehension and organization. The other is a response to a stand-alone prompt, where students outline and organize their own ideas and opinions in a narrative or persuasive essay.

Though we covered standard writing strategies in our classrooms, we did not teach to the test format, so our students took the test cold. The blank sheets of paper further daunted the students, and left us with sub-par scores.

We knew we had to augment our approach to teaching writing, but weren't sure how. Dr. Jeanne Qvarnstrom, Red Clay's Supervisor of Assessment, suggested using computers and the available lab time for open-ended assessments and as tools for evaluating writing skills in a dynamic, interactive format that offered built-in guidance.

Her research uncovered a program called [MY Access!®](#), an online writing instructional tool. This Web-based program instantly evaluates and offers suggestions for improving student essays through a simple process: Students write an essay based on a teacher's assignment, submit the essay to the system, and receive immediate feedback and suggestions for improvement through a rubric-based score.

The writing program analyzes multiple semantic, syntactic, and discourse characteristics to generate feedback. In a few seconds, students are scored on a 1 to 6 scale on focus and meaning, organization, content and development, language use and style, mechanics and conventions, and

overall writing proficiency—basically, every element a teacher would take into consideration, too.

Students began writing to creative prompts that Vantage Learning, which offers MY Access!, specifically aligned to the Delaware Department of Education's DSTP standards. This exposure to DSTP format and style gave students a true practice test for the real thing. Deciding this new approach was worth a try, Dr. Qvarnstrom persuaded the district to run a pilot with one elementary school and one middle school.

The March 2003 DSTP Writing Assessment scores showed that 86 percent of the fifth-graders who used MY Access! at least two or three times a week during the 2002-2003 pilot program met or exceeded the State standard for mastery. This was double the 43 percent of fifth-grade students who met/exceeded the state standard but did not use My Access! during that school year.

Inspired by that success, Richardson Park joined the district MY Access! program during the 2003-2004 school year. We started with the basic assessment tools and the required DSTP prompts, but quickly expanded to other prompts and features. We were seeing that students loved jotting down their prewriting thoughts on the notepad function, then using the graphic organizer to outline their thoughts, and they enjoyed writing at the computer rather than with paper and pencil. They could easily move sections around. For additional real-time instruction, the program has a 'tutor' function to show them their errors. This also gave me the time and accessibility for students that were having trouble, while my strong writers were able to continue.

Beyond fundamentals such as grammar and word choice, the tutor function also shared ideas that improve phrasing, nuance, organization, clarity, and even suggested mini-lessons to tackle problem areas. These lessons were immediate, effective, and helpful to both student and teacher, who continues to conduct one-on-one conferencing with the student in addition to prescribing the online MY Access! assignments.

With all this available online, students also increased their fluency. Whereas before blank papers had intimidated them, working on the computer minimized their hesitation and increased their output. With all that a writing program could offer, the chance to use the computer became infinitely more attractive than just sitting at their desks writing.

Emboldened by the program's success, the District has continued to fund MY Access! for our students. With three years of experience using the program now, we have expanded our use to integrate many writing prompts into other classroom events. For instance, in March 2006, students wrote essays on "A Person I Admire" during Women's History Month. Teachers gave awards and certificates for the children that did particularly well, and I even posted some essays on a bulletin board for the other kids in the school to see.

My students also responded to the "Class Trip" assignment after their class field trip to the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. We even did a prompt about inviting Steven Spielberg to the school to be a guest speaker at an assembly. My colleague Gil Green took the project to the next level, and created a PowerPoint presentation to give the students an overview

of Steven Spielberg and his films. This extra creativity inspired the children's writing, and was reflected in their responses.

Thrilled by such positive and significant results, the district expanded MY Access! use to all middleschools in the Red Clay school district and twelve elementary schools. Within that time, I moved from a fifth-grade teaching role to that of Computer Specialist, which means I spend my days helping the students with their MY Access! assignments in my class. It's a terrific way to seamlessly integrate the program with classroom lessons, and the students consistently give the experience rave reviews.

This year, we saw terrific improvement in our school's Delaware Student Testing Program scores for writing. The percent of Richardson Park students who met or exceeded the standard increased by eight percent (8%)!

Through it all, Vantage Learning offered ongoing technical support and advice. I was able to call them directly with any questions, and they would clarify issues, troubleshoot tech problems, and address my concerns. They even offered to hand-score the student essays if I ever felt that the online scores did not accurately reflect my own grading.

Dr. Madeline Pan, Curriculum Specialist at Vantage Learning, was also a tremendous resource for my classroom. She visited us periodically to lead the students through activities, evaluate prompts' effectiveness, and learn about the students' approaches to writing. The students and I always appreciated her energy and enthusiasm for the task at hand.

Beyond test scores and grades, however, lie the true rewards of MY Access!: students' overall mastery of writing skills. Writing is a highly personal process, with some more naturally gifted at it than others. But encouraging students to write motivates them to achieve a higher score. It increases their confidence too; in fact, one of the biggest changes I've noticed is the students' willingness to tackle a writing project, knowing they can utilize all the program tools to develop and refine their ideas.

My students have made notable strides in their academic performance and also in their attitude about writing. My students are learning to write, certainly. But they're also learning to approach the creative process with enthusiasm, and that makes all the difference.

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