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## The Writing Challenge

Atlanta's Therrell High School jumped from last to third place in the state's standardized writing test district scores, thanks to dedicated educators, and a novel instructional writing tool.

**By Algie Davis**

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Three years ago, my school--Therrell High School in Atlanta, Ga.--landed at the bottom of the district's rankings after our 11 graders scored an 82 on the Georgia High School Graduation Writing Test (GHSJWT).

The scores, which were just barely passing, put us in danger of falling on the No Child Left Behind 'at risk' list.

This event spurred a call to action to our Language Arts department to revamp the school's writing program. At the time, we taught the basics, but we wanted to have a more unified emphasis on the process of prewriting, drafting, and creating an acceptable draft--a critical communication skill our students needed to master, not only for testing, but for life.

Unfortunately, some teachers struggled with articulating that process to our students--some instructors didn't have enough time to grade all the essays, others found it difficult to manage various student writing levels in one classroom, often with as many as 30 students.

We tried everything, even to the point of crafting standard scripts for teachers to read during writing lessons. Still, students were not receiving nearly enough feedback as they required, and when they did get it, it rarely arrived in a timely fashion, due to teachers' backlogs in grading and commenting.

Our school found itself at a standstill, with no way to make the significant progress we were looking for.

Still searching for answers, I called in Cheryl Darville, our Language Arts department chair. I knew if anybody could resolve this issue, she could. True to form, Ms. Darville sprang into action, and began evaluating the situation and researching possible solutions. In doing so, she came across a forgotten element of the school's improvement plan: an online learning tool called MY Access! from Vantage Learning.

To our surprise, Ms. Darville discovered that MY Access! was an online writing program that our school had already bought and paid for, yet no one had ever fully implemented.

Further research revealed it to be a web-based program that instantly scores student essays. The process was simple: students could write an essay based on a teacher's assignment, submit the essay to the system, and receive immediate feedback--basically, every improvement Ms. Darville was looking to implement in our writing department.

That was April 2005. By August of that year, she had received training directly from the MY Access! technicians; learned how to retrieve and run the online programs; trained the Language Arts teachers on it; purchased 400 licenses; and installed the program in the school's computer lab and in her own classroom 'literacy lab,' which granted easy computer access to all students.

At first, we, like many others who have heard of the benefits of online essay scoring technologies, were skeptical. How could a computer program, no matter how interactive, possibly have the same teaching effect as a living, breathing teacher, we asked.

To ease our concerns, Ms. Darville got the language arts instructors together and hand-scored about 200 essays then compared our scores to those produced by MY Access! To our surprise, the program was just as accurate as our classroom full of professional teachers.

As we soon came to find out, the MY Access! program analyzes multiple semantic, syntactic, and discourse characteristics. In a few seconds, students are scored on a 1 to 4 scale on focus and meaning, organization, content and development, language use and style, mechanics and conventions, and on overall writing proficiency--essentially, every element a teacher would need to examine.

Even more appealing was that the program could be accessed from any computer with an internet connection. This feature let our students hit the site at school, at home, or at the library to see their essays and track their progress through the use of personal writing portfolios. The program's 'tutor' function showed them their errors, which they could then look up in MY Access!'s textbook for remediation.

Our school's writing department adapted beautifully to this new system under Ms. Darville's direction. Instructors particularly enjoyed the customizable writing prompts that were easily aligned to Georgia's testing standards. This benefit went a long way toward fully preparing the students come test time, and even helped Ms. Darville predict the actual test scores (which she nailed, by the way).

As it turned out, the simple fact that their essays were accessible online made students anxious to try it. Once they did, they were hooked by the web-based programming, and the new way of thinking about and processing the instructions.

Moreover, the scoring process generated friendly competition among the students. Ms. Darville described a palpable buzz in the classroom as students compared their scores after each assignment. Not only did this development help the cooperative learning aspect of the program, but it enhanced the intrinsic motivation of the program, augmenting the school-sponsored motivational activities such as pizza parties and ice cream socials.

Students finally realized that our writing exercises were not a waste of time, but a vital life skill. It heightened their level of concern, and opened their minds to the critical feedback. With this newfound acceptance, students finally began mastering the skills for the writing test.

Indeed, our work paid off this past testing period, as our school achieved an overall 93 percent passing rate on the GHSGWT--the third highest score in the Atlanta Public School District, up from very last place.

We also made the program part of the school's special education curriculum, which helped those students improve their passing rate on the GHSGWT from 36 to 48 percent--a gain we once thought wasn't possible, and which proves that the system works for all students, not just the 'Average Joe'.

Since our overall score ranking now exceeds the average ranking of Atlanta schools, we don't compare our students to the school system anymore; instead, we now compare our data on the state level to evaluate our true strengths, as well as areas for improvement or reinforcement.

As you can imagine, our success with online learning has turned us from skeptics into believers. All of our sophomores, juniors, and seniors now use the program in the classroom, and we hope to have the freshmen on board soon.

Perhaps we could have eventually improved our scores without the online program, instead relying strictly on Ms. Darville's leadership, and our capable and dedicated teaching staff. But I think our dramatic results speak for themselves. The MY Access! program excited students about writing, and that excitement motivated them sufficiently to help the school markedly improve our test scores, all within a few short years.

Today we are confident that, by the time Therrell High School students reach 11th grade, most will be capable writers; it's a transformation made possible by a top-notch faculty, motivated students, newfound passions for writing, and a phenomenal learning tool.

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