

Program gives instant feedback to writers

By KRISTI ALBERTSON/Daily Inter Lake | Posted: Saturday, November 21, 2009 2:00 am

Fear not: Robots have not taken over Whitefish Middle School's English classes.

But for the first time this fall, teachers are using artificial intelligence to help convey crucial writing concepts.

A Web-based program, My Access, helps students improve their writing skills by giving them instant feedback on everything from spelling and grammar basics to more abstruse topics such as a narrative and voice.

"It's totally incredible," said Christy McConnell, who teaches two sections of seventh-grade English.

"To have instant feedback is an amazing thing for kids. It's a confidence-builder. It allows them to continue working and get a better product."

McConnell uses My Access for major and minor writing assignments. Students are given a prompt or a topic to write about, and instead of reaching for spiral notebooks or typing their stories in word processing programs, they write in the My Access program.

Before they submit their work, students can ask the program to help make their writing better. My Access can check their spelling or clarify a thought. It can help them with clauses and punctuation.

Using the program's suggestions, students can clean up their work before their teachers ever see it. My Access doesn't do the work for them; the program simply offers helpful hints. Once students submit their work, the program gives them a score of 1 through 6, with 4 being a proficient grade.

It works by comparing students' writing to the hundreds of samples in its database. There are 1,200 to 1,500 human-scored samples in the database for any given prompt, according to Brenda Hayes, a trainer and consultant who recently put on a training session at the middle school.

With that many papers to compare a student's essay to, the program can offer students incredibly accurate feedback, counselor Kelly Talsma said.

"It grades kids on voice and word choice, things you'd think no computer program could pick up on," she said.

Teachers can access their kids' submissions and see how they've incorporated suggestions from the program. That helps instructors know what individual students might need help with, McConnell said.

"It allows me to interact with individual students and differentiate the learning," she said. "One student might need help with clauses. One student might work on how to write dialogue.

"It tailors and individualizes the type of instruction each student gets."

Because the program is Web-based, students can work on their assignments from home. Teachers likewise can check assignments from home and send their students messages or write comments about the assignment that students will see the next time they log on.

The five middle school teachers who have used the program this fall were unanimous in their praise for it. They say their students are engaged and excited about writing.

“This is the greatest motivation for writing that I’ve seen in my 32 years of teaching,” fifth-grade teacher Brenda Moen said.

McConnell said her students seem to enjoy the program. In addition to the instant feedback the program provides, My Access helps build their confidence.

“Everybody’s a little bit shy about sharing something they’ve written,” she said. “They get to fix it up before they turn it in. It makes you feel pretty good.”

The writing she has seen from this year’s class is better than samples from previous classes, McConnell said.

“They’re more well-written, and the kids feel better about them,” she said. “When you look at the first draft compared to the second draft, you can actually compare the progress and see the thing that they’ve done to make it better.”

The program’s future at Whitefish Middle School is uncertain right now. Funding for this year came from the PTA, but at a cost of about \$20 per student, the PTA doesn’t have the money to pay for the program permanently.

The state of Montana is piloting a similar program at Whitefish High School this year, Talsma said, but “we haven’t been as thrilled with it as we have been with My Access.”

“We’re hoping the school district will see how valuable the program is” and pick up the tab, she said.

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