

edbizzbuzz

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Friday Guest Column: Man Bites Dog? Educators Use Technology to Improve Writing

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The Friday Guest Column

One of the greatest challenges teachers face is improving students' writing skills. In many school districts across the country, that challenge is compounded by a lack of resources and large class sizes. This was the situation for teachers in Southern California in 2004.

They faced crowded classrooms and frustrated students, all vying for much-needed attention. Plus an increasing number were (and remain) English as a Second Language students or English Language Development (ELD) students as they are referred to in California, many of whom struggle to keep pace with their English-speaking peers.

Indeed, the number of ELD students nationwide is growing two and half times faster than those for whom English is their primary language, according to national statistics. This creates a unique challenge for teachers, who now have to do more than impart academic skills. They must also support students' English proficiency, help them adjust to the U.S. school setting, and help them adapt to American culture.

It's a tall order. Teachers found it drove them to spend most of their time on group instruction and grading, to the detriment of individual students. The educators, whose districts are members of the SouthEast Educational Technology Consortium (SEETC), believed the key to unlocking students' potential was to focus on boosting students' writing skills.

They also believed they could meet or exceed California's academic standards by expanding student access to computers and Web-based productivity tools. Pairing the two ideas, the SEETC applied for an Enhancing Education Through Technology (EETT) Grant, established as part of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The grant focused on improving students' writing through technology.

Of the 20 applicants, eight of the sixteen school districts that make up the SEETC were awarded the largest part of the grant. More than \$11 million was distributed among the eight school districts, touching some 33,000 middle school students.

After an extensive search of classroom technology platforms, the SEETC settled on Vantage Learning's [MY Access!](#) instructional writing program. The program was implemented at the ABC Unified, Compton Unified, Downey Unified, East Whittier City, El Rancho Unified, Norwalk/La Mirada Unified, South Whittier, and Whittier City Schools Districts.

That's because MY Access! provides accurate feedback on student essays and analyzes over 350 semantic, syntactic, and discourse characteristics, and scores students on focus and meaning, organization, content and development, language use and style, mechanics and conventions, and

overall writing proficiency.

The Web-based writing environment instantly scores student essays, and provides immediate remedial instruction that engages and motivates students.

MY Access! gives ELD teachers the ability to adapt the program based on students' English proficiency. Its unique translation feature lets ELD students write in English, but receive feedback and corrections in their native language.

But technology in classrooms does little good without the proper training for students and teachers alike. The SEETC leadership put a 12-day institute in place to introduce coaching concepts and tools to support technology integration and innovation in the classroom. During eight days of targeted teacher training, over 500 middle school language arts teachers learned about MY Access!. "Coach/mentors" introduced teachers to the MY Access! technologies, to ensure their skills were sharp, and that integration with lesson plans and classrooms went smoothly. They also added 510 new laptops and projection units to classrooms.

The rollout could not have been better. In just days, MY Access! became an integral part of daily writing instruction.

Fast forward to 2007. The classroom technology initiative is three years running, and student writing proficiency has measurably improved—by 40 percent. Students score at least a four on a six-point scale.

And teachers report students who once struggled with writing are now vying for their turn at the computer each day. For the first time in anyone's memory, there's a palpable enthusiasm for writing in the classroom.

The technology also freed teachers to provide personalized instruction to the students who need it most. That's because the software's artificial intelligence automatically provides instant feedback, individualized remediation, and accurate grading, eliminating tasks that once required gobs of teachers' time.

EETT funding ended in 2007, but thanks to the overwhelming success of their initiative, the eight school districts of the SEETC have been able to sustain their technology programs.

Posted by Dean Millot on July 11, 2008 8:20 AM