

'My Access' helps students write

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Created Nov 27 2009 - 12:22am

Standard-Examiner staff

OGDEN -- Don't look now, but students are actually starting to like writing assignments.

For more than a year the Weber School District has been using a Web-based instructional writing program that helps students learn and apply the fundamentals of writing.

The computer program "My Access" instantly scores students' essays through advanced artificial intelligence technologies. With the immediate feedback, teachers can more easily monitor the writing performance of each class and cater to the individual progress of each student. Students can access the program at school or home.

Jeff Stephens, the district's assistant superintendent, was skeptical of "My Access" at first because the district has tried online writing programs before that weren't user friendly or provided low-quality feedback.

But this software has been different. The program, developed by Vantage Learning, has two critical components: instant feedback and the ability to have numerous attempts at writing assignments with detailed feedback, Stephens said.

"We're impressed with the quality of feedback. Not only does it provide a holistic score, but also specific feedback, in terms of traits or qualities of effective writing, so they know what they need to do to improve," he said. "They want to write more and get higher scores."

With a \$10,000 grant, the district used the program in several schools at different levels two years ago. Results were positive and last year the program was implemented primarily in grades 8-10. The Weber School Board allowed schools that wanted to use the program to apply an \$8 per student fee. Some schools paid for seventh or 11th grade students to use the program out of trust land funds.

Stephens disagrees with those who worry that the program eliminates the human element of the writing process.

"The human element is enhanced, not neglected, as teacher and student work together. The teacher can always override the score," he said. "This allows them to work more closely together as they dialogue about the writing and the feedback. It accelerates the progress. The teacher is more of a coach than a judge. It's a remarkable program."

Preston Warren, an English teacher at Bonneville High, says he has seen both good and bad with "My Access." He says students have a tendency to be frustrated with the revision process because sometimes they make the corrections and changes and still get the same or a lower

score.

"It's important that teachers go back and explain that the score is not necessarily reflective of their overall writing," said Warren, who teaches advanced placement and honor students. "As far as the mechanics go, it's dead-on with the spelling and grammatical errors."

Warren likes the program because it works great for rough drafts of papers.

"It's not a cure-all or a fix-it for every student, it's just a tool. You still need to have the human element, the teacher," Warren said.

Students acknowledge the frustration, but also acknowledge the improvement in their writing.

"It's frustrating at times, but it makes you work harder," said Cosmin Harris, a junior at Bonneville High.

When asked if students have tried to cheat the system, Harris replied: "Is there a way to cheat the system? I would like to know."

Overall, Harris and other students agree they like the system.

"It makes the process easier than just having the teacher at the chalk board. I like the instant feedback, where you should strengthen your comma usage or sentence structure, use more adjectives or whatever."