

Teachers, students benefiting from Web-based writing program

by Patrick Timothy Mullikin



Kameron Barr and Jordan Maynard, both 13 and eighth-graders at Vernal Junior High, log on to MY Access! at the school's English computer lab.

English class ain't what it used to be.

In years past, Rachelle Durrant, who heads the English department at Vernal Junior High, would have taken pencil to paper and circled that offending "ain't."

Not this year.

The junior high is one of several schools in the state that has begun using MY Access!, a Web-based program designed to help students with their writing skills.

And students are not the only ones who are benefiting; English teachers are spending less time correcting papers and more time teaching, says Durrant, an 11-year-veteran of correcting and grading reams of English papers.

"It reduces some of our paper load and their paper load. There's no waiting for them to hand write a draft, turn it in, spend two weeks correcting them by hand, with suggestions for improvement, then handing them back, saying do it again. That usually is a two-month process to do a normal paper," she says. "I don't have to go through so many paper drafts, trying to decipher their handwriting," she adds with a laugh.

Say goodbye to penmanship skills and hello to instant feedback. This is, after all, the era of text-messaging where the keyboard and key pad reign supreme.

English students at Vernal Junior High now log onto MY Access!, at the school's English computer lab. The writing program prompts the student to write an essay in a narrative, informative, persuasive or expository format – whatever the teacher has selected for the week's topic.

Technology then takes over.

"The really nice thing about it is that they go in there, and they write. It's just like Microsoft Word in terms of all the features and the buttons," says Durrant.

The submitted piece is scored on six traits, traits that are part of the state's writing program: idea development, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency and conventions.

MY Access! "reads" the submission and highlights misspelled words and grammatical errors. "It will explain what a clause error is with an example so that they can understand," she says. It also evaluates a student's organizational skills and scores the student's work.

In short, the Web program does what a teacher would do, but instantly. The teacher's red pen is replaced by a "virtual" instructor who highlights typos and errors in grammar and syntax. Real-life instructors like Durrant have full access to their students' online work and can see what revisions have

been made and the number of drafts a student has submitted. Durant is quick to point that the program is just one component of her department's approach to writing.

"It doesn't take us (teachers) out of the picture at all. I still have to teach them what a good introduction is, what a good conclusion is, how to write a paragraph. The computer can give suggestions, but it doesn't replace us."

Though it's still too early in the school year to come to any conclusion about the program, she says reports from the other five English teachers has been positive. The subscription-based program is being used in 24 Utah school districts to date.

While the program is a boon to helping young writers learn the basic skills, practice, she says, is key to becoming a good writer.

"This (the program) will actually allow students to write more, and the more you write, I think the better you become."