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Web Technology Boosts Writing Performance at Alhambra USD

by Linda L. Briggs

Can a computer really grade a composition?

Ask the initially skeptical teachers at Alhambra Unified School District just east of Los Angeles. Coordinator of Instructional Technology Linda Benafel introduced Vantage Learning's online writing program MY Access! in the 2005/2006 school year. Seventh-grade test scores on the California Standards Test writing assessment immediately zoomed nearly 50 percentage points, from 22 percent of students scoring proficient or above in 2005/2006 to 70 percent in 2006/2007.

Students use MY Access! by writing an essay assigned by a teacher, then submitting it to the Web-based software. Vantage says that the program works by analyzing some 350 semantic, syntactic, and discourse characteristics in each essay, then assigning a score from 1 to 6. The score is based on items including focus and meaning, organization, content and development, language use and style, mechanics and conventions, and overall writing proficiency.

Teachers can customize the program so that students see all, some, or none of the comments it offers. Teachers can also enter the program and change a student's score, alter the comments, or add notes of their own.

Although teachers were skeptical at first, Benafel said, they've realized the value of the product in saving them time, as well as the enthusiasm students demonstrate in using it. And the state test scores speak for themselves.

A Boost from EETT

Credit for the dramatic jump in writing scores also goes to a big increase in the number of computers available per classroom at Alhambra's 13 K-8 elementary schools. Along with MY Access and more computers, the district added wireless access and additional training for teachers. "It's the technology; it's the staff development; it's the focus on writing and revision," Benafel said. "And the kids were very excited to get laptop computers."

The improvements all tie back to a two-year Enhancing Education Through Technology grant the district received beginning in 2005 for nearly \$2 million. The main goal of the grant program is to provide funding to assist school districts in using technology to enhance teaching and promote learning. Alhambra's grant, which Benafel applied for, was based around improving writing instruction in the district's sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade classrooms.

Using grant money, the district purchased Apple Mobile Learning Labs consisting of 20 Apple laptop computers with Internet access; the computers roll into classrooms on carts. Before the grant, 42 students at an Alhambra middle school shared one computer. With the grant, those schools moved to a

ratio of four to five students per computer.

Grant monies also paid for staff development in use of the computers and software, which Benafel said is a critical component. "You have to have a strategic plan; you have to have training on teaching the teachers," she stressed. She also used grant money to hire a part-time technician to take care of computer repairs.

The MY Access! program is Web-based, so students can use it from home. For those Alhambra students that don't have Internet access at home, teachers help them identify other places for access, such as public libraries, the library media center, and the classroom itself after school.

Online Activities

Benafel also created a Web site called Community of Writers/Computers on Wheels, or COW2 (www.cow2.us) to fulfill the grant's school-community connection requirement and to ensure that writing became a priority for students district-wide.

Benafel made a short podcast for the site in which a seventh-grade language arts teacher at Alhambra's Garfield Elementary School, Denise Conseco, described her experiences with MY Access!. "The kids are competing with themselves to improve their grades," Conseco said. Through MY Access!, she can monitor student activity on the site in the evenings, watching as her students submit an essay over and over, tweaking it each time, in an effort to boost their scores.

MY Access! also supports multiple languages, which is beneficial at Alhambra, where 33 percent of the student population is learning English. The program has a multilingual tutoring and editing feedback feature so that teachers can adjust the product's settings based on students' English skills. It also allows teachers to return feedback in a student's native language, although the original papers must be written in English.

Read More:

- Alhambra Unified School District
- MY Access!
- Benafel's Project Cow2 (Community of Writers / Computers on Wheels)
- Enhancing Education Through Technology grant

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