Vantage Learning's MY Access!® Professional Development Programs -
Grounded in Research and Theory

Vantage Learning

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Introduction

Educators today are faced with the daunting task of preparing students to become proficient learners, requiring knowledge and skills across myriad subjects. To succeed, every student must be provided with effective instruction. With the establishment of the No Child Left Behind Act, failure is not an option. Professional Development (PD) is vital to ensuring that these goals are met. The purpose of Professional Development is to improve the ability of educators to help all students achieve the intended results of the school. Not all Professional Development programs are created equal. Researchers agree that an effective Professional Development program should include the following key elements:

1) Addresses specific instructional and student learning needs in the context of actual classrooms
2) Is rigorous, sustained, and adequate to the long-term change in practice
3) Designed to be effective for every user, regardless of learning style
4) Provides adequate time for inquiry, practice, and reflection
5) Makes best use of new technologies
6) Has the goal of improving student learning as the core of every school endeavor

This paper looks at the essential elements contained in Vantage's Professional Development programs and offers a comparative discussion of these elements in relation to current research on effective Professional Development. Throughout the discussion, this paper relates Vantage's PD programs to a specific Vantage software offering, MY Access!®, an instructional writing and assessment tool for students at all levels of educational standing. Vantage Learning's Professional Development programs offer educators comprehensive training targeted at providing greater understanding of Vantage Learning's MY Access! application. This training provides educators with the knowledge of how this application relates to instructional, content, and curriculum strategies.

Experts in the field of professional development and training agree that increasing the amount of professional training and coaching is beneficial, resulting in an increased proportion of instructional skills that educators implement in the classroom. Vantage Learning's PD programs incorporate the research findings of respected individuals such as Robert Marzano, whose research offers effective strategies for increasing student achievement (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock 2001). Also, Vantage's PD programs emphasize Bruce Joyce and Bev Shower's findings that teacher opportunities for practice, observation, feedback, coaching, and modeling of essential skills are necessary instructional elements leading to improved student achievement (Joyce & Showers 1988). Finally, Vantage's PD programs reflect current research in best practices for staff development, (i.e. curriculum mapping, a systematic analysis and alignment that is a valuable component of curriculum renewal and staff development).

Participants in Vantage Learning's Professional Development programs gain the competencies necessary to successfully implement MY Access! in their schools or districts with:

- o A hands-on learning environment
- o Certified, experienced trainers
- o Observable models and examples
- o Reflection and refinement of instructional practices
- o "Real-time" coaching and mentoring in the classroom
- o Strategies for cross-curricular integration
- o Opportunities for sharing and gaining professional expertise

Vantage's PD programs provide initial and continued training in such areas as:

- o Leadership and Orientation
- o Learning to Use Applications
- o Developing a Curriculum and Assessment Plan
- o Using Data to Assess Student Achievement and Inform Instruction
- o Coaching and Mentoring
- o Developing a Local Assessment Plan
- o Utilizing Data to Assess Student Achievement and Inform Instruction
- o Test Success Writing Preparation and Intervention
- o Write to Read: Best Practices (linking good writing instruction with good reading instruction)
- o Specific Application Certification

The paper presents a summary of research that supports each key factor of an effective Professional Development program, directly followed by a discussion of how Vantage Learning's Professional Development programs as offered for MY Access! meet or excel in accomplishing that factor.

Discussion

1. Effective Professional Development Addresses Specific Instructional and Student Learning Needs in the Context of Actual Classrooms

If student learning is lacking, it is vital that educators address this need. Effective Professional Development is characterized by a shared sense of a need for change (Harwell 2003). It is derived from an analysis of student learning of specific content in a specific setting. These programs focus on a well-articulated mission or purpose anchored in student learning of core disciplines and skills (Council of Chief State School Officers 2006). The U.S. Department of Education (1995) acknowledges that Professional Development enables teachers to develop further expertise in subject content and teaching strategies to increase student learning. Finally, Reitzug (2002) claims that "Professional Development should not begin with teachers' needs", but with "a clear sense of what students need to learn and be able to do."

School districts that have selected Vantage Learning's MY Access! as a writing tool have previously determined that student deficits in writing require specific intervention(s). Vantage Learning provides comprehensive, structured, and focused Professional Development programs that allow teachers and administrators to effectively implement MY Access! in their school districts to meet their specific needs. The professional educators at Vantage Learning have developed several courses to address these needs:

1. The "Leadership and Orientation" course offered by Vantage's PD is an essential half-day planning session that establishes the core goals and objectives for school districts' use of MY Access!. The session articulates how, when, and why the program is beneficial to students, teachers and administrators by creating both a technology plan and a communications plan that are the result of a collaborative, dynamic effort between administrators and teachers. The audience for this course includes administrators and the entire project implementation team.

2. "Learning to Use MY Access!" provides participants with a one day, on-site instructional session directed at specific strategies to increase the frequency of student writing and to raise the quality of student writing through the use of MY Access!. This course provides a comprehensive, step-by-step walk-through of all functionality within MY Access!. The goal is for attendees to develop competencies as both a teacher and a student. Certain features of MY Access! may be deemed more or less vital for successful integration into the curriculum. An advantage to the on-site training sessions is learning the "how to" of customizing MY Access! to fit the particular needs of a group of educators or students.

3. The "Test Success Writing Preparation and Intervention" training package helps teachers and students prepare for specific writing events by using MY Access!. This package provides the necessary training and professional development to ensure success, both with an introduction of MY Access! to teachers and students, and with an effective, specific focus on the impending test event driving the need. The package includes two workshops: "Preparing Students for a Specific Writing Event" and "On-Site Coaching and Mentoring".

Phase I: Preparing Students for a Specific Writing Event

During this 2-day phase, participants will learn strategies in preparing for a specific writing test event in order to maximize student success. This "hands-on" program provides participants with a comprehensive, step-by-step walk-through of the functionality of the application related to preparing students for a specific writing event.

Phase II: On-site Coaching and Mentoring

During this 3-day phase, PD trainers will work directly with teachers and students in the classroom in real time as they assist in the effective integration of research-based writing instruction into operational usage techniques available in the program. This "learning by doing" approach will include demonstration, observation, feedback, and reflection to provide targeted intervention strategies that will further develop the skills necessary to improve student performance.

4. The "Developing a Curriculum and Assessment Plan" course offers teachers a full day session instructing teachers on how to align MY Access! writing prompts to standards, district goals and curriculum content/objectives, to develop a scope and sequence guide that assists teachers in their pacing of the integration of writing, and to develop an assessment plan that will be used to measure long-term growth in student writing. Teachers are instructed how to create and customize writing assignments for their students, effectively teach the stages of the writing process using MY Access!, and learn how rubrics can be used as powerful teaching tools. Teachers are also given guidance in teaching students how to manage their own writing process, while providing them with a repertoire of prewriting, drafting, organizing, and revising strategies to become independent, confident and successful writers.

By learning to use MY Access! effectively, the outcome of these programs and courses is greater student success. Teachers will be provided with research-based strategies that can be implemented immediately in the classroom to maximize student learning.

2. Effective Professional Development is Rigorous, Sustained, and Adequate to the Long-Term Change in Practice

Effective Professional Development programs are designed for educators to continuously learn new techniques, resulting in an overall change in practice. Change is not something that can be achieved overnight, nor is it something that can be achieved through a single workshop (Reitzug 2002). Researchers agree that for continuous improvement, effective Professional Development needs to sustain focus over time (CCSSO 2006, DuFour & Eaker 1998, Harwell 2003). These programs require substantial commitment, and are driven by a coherent, long-term plan (US DOE 1998). The National Center for Education Statistics found that teachers who participated in programs that lasted eight hours or more were nearly five times more likely to report that the program had significantly improved their teaching than teachers who participated for lesser amounts of time (Reitzug 2002). Professional growth should be viewed as a process that continues over time, and needs regular and long-term support by both districts and collaborating faculty if it is to be effective.

Vantage Learning offers intensive multi-day Professional Development programs which afford educators the opportunity to focus on the building of skills over time. For example, the "Write to Read: Best Practices" program is a 5-day course comprised of 40 hours of intensive instruction, planning, and reflection, culminating in curriculum and instructional resources that participants can put into immediate practice in the classroom. These practices enable teachers to link best practices in writing instruction with best practices in reading instruction to enhance existing reading programs used in a school's curriculum. The comprehensive "Test Success Writing Preparation and Intervention" program (discussed previously) also targets long term change in practices that will enhance student learning and performance. Vantage offers web-delivered follow-up instruction as a mechanism to sustain professional development and to support positive change in practice. All of these programs envelop the philosophy of researchers that effective Professional Development must be rigorous, adequate, and sustained over time in order to be effective.

3. Effective Professional Development is Designed to be Effective for Every User, Regardless of Learning Style

Effective Professional Development also incorporates the best principles of adult learning. It should reflect the best available research and practices on teaching, learning, and leadership (US DOE 1995). Programs should not focus only on a single theory of instruction. Training and development should include a variety of formats, including group collaboration, exploration, discussion, debate, practice, and coaching. People learn best when the material is live and relevant, and when they can actively participate in hands-on, interactive activities (Barkley & Bianco 2001). Joyce and Showers (1990) believe there are five basic components of sound professional development: the need to provide knowledge; the opportunity for the learner to see the skills or knowledge demonstrated through modeling; the opportunity to practice skills; to be observed; and to receive feedback and coaching. Professional Development programs that use a blend of different instructional strategies give every user the opportunity to be successful, allowing them to participate in activities that match their differing needs.

Every PD program offered by Vantage Learning has been designed to fit the varying learning styles of its participants. These programs follow The Model for Success, which includes six essential training components: knowledge, modeling, practice, observation, feedback, and coaching. Vantage's PD programs apply best practices in staff development and reflect current research. Programs feature a learning-by-doing approach that emphasizes authentic, job-embedded activities, including demonstration, observation, mentoring, and coaching. On-site and virtual group instruction and individual mentoring and coaching are offered to match specific needs and learning styles of every individual. Group programs allow teacher collaboration to expand and reflect on their repertoire of instructional writing strategies. They observe, create, and share new lesson plans and ideas. Individualized mentoring and coaching programs assist teachers in the effective integration of MY Access! into the writing curriculum. Vantage's Professional Development programs use a combination of different instructional strategies that are effective and relevant to every participant, and aligned with current research on best educational practices.

4. Effective Professional Development Provides Adequate Time for Inquiry, Practice, and Reflection

Few teachers can go straight from workshop to practice without some form of experimentation. Teachers are less likely to use techniques learned in staff development if they are unable first to model and experiment with these techniques in an informal setting (Reitzug 2002). Effective Professional Development must provide teachers with sufficient time and follow-up support to master new content and strategies and successfully integrate them into practice (US DOE 1995). Teachers need opportunities to try new behaviors in safe environments and receive feedback from their peers (Harwell 2003). Coaching combined with practice and feedback is essential for any behavioral changes in teachers. "Given time to practice skills in a safe learning environment where a friendly coach is there to guide and a teacher is allowed to reflect provides a forum for teachers to internalize the skills so they can apply them in the complex real-life applications of the classroom" (Barkley & Bianco 2001).

Professional Development programs offered by Vantage Learning incorporate the five phases of professional development identified by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (2001). These include building a knowledge base, observing models and examples, reflecting on your practice, changing your practice, and gaining and sharing expertise. Vantage PD also provides coaching and mentoring services, with literacy specialists working directly with teachers and students in "real time" to ensure successful integration of MY Access! into the writing curriculum. For example, in the second phase of the "Test Success: Best Practices" program, demonstration, observation, feedback and reflection are used to provide targeted intervention strategies that will further develop the skills necessary to improve student performance. Stand-alone coaching/mentoring and additional web-delivered follow-up instruction are also available. After teachers have practiced and implemented MY Access! into their classrooms, they are asked to reflect on their curriculum plan and instructional strategies. To help accomplish this, Vantage PD offers training sessions where participants will learn how to use reports in MY Access! to extract and analyze data in a manner that drives informed instruction for improving student writing. Participants will also learn how to review and interpret school/district data so as to aid in developing a series of intervention strategies aimed at improving student writing achievement. The comprehensive PD programs offered by Vantage Learning provide teachers with the support necessary to develop the skills essential to improving student performance and for successfully implementing MY Access! into any writing curriculum.

5. Effective Professional Development Makes Best Use of New Technologies

Technology helps teachers and students address major educational goals. However, students will not be able to experience the benefits of technology for learning until their teachers are sufficiently confident and capable to model its use (Serim 1999). Teachers should be introduced to technology not as something foreign, but as a tool that becomes a fundamental part of daily instruction (Kleiman & Johnson 1998). Teachers can greatly benefit from technology used in professional development. Specifically, the use of computers, online resources, and software provide users with the flexibility to customize and select the specific content that learners need at the moment (National Staff Development Council 2001). This technology also allows users to access programs at more convenient times, when they are ready to learn.

One primary goal of Professional Development programs offered by Vantage Learning is for educators to successfully implement MY Access! software for use in a comprehensive writing program. Courses offer teachers a hands-on, step-by-step walk-through of the functionality of the MY Access! technology. Through use of computers and online resources, teachers are able to learn how to create their own writing prompts and customized reports. They also are able to learn how to extract and analyze data on student performance from different perspectives, and at both an individual and group level. Teachers can also learn how to provide feedback to students on their assignments or progress, and how to create student portfolios. Vantage's use of Web-based technologies enables delivery of follow-up training and coaching/mentoring services. This allows educators, who are unable to attend on-site sessions or who need training post MY Access! implementation, to receive further instruction and support. Vantage Learning makes full use of existing and developing software and new technologies to ensure all of its professional development programs are of the highest quality.

6. Effective Professional Development Has the Goal of Improving Student Learning as the Core of Every School Endeavor

The goal of every professional development program should be to increase student learning. If a program is unable to achieve this, it is failing in its mission. Every program must be evaluated ultimately on the basis of its impact on student learning, using assessment and evaluation to determine whether an increase in student performance has occurred (CCSSO 2006, USDOE 1995, NSDC 2001). These programs successfully identify gaps in student achievement and focus on measuring identifiable student gains (Harwell 2003). These approaches to professional development seek to link programs with changes in student learning. The overall goals should be to improve student, staff, and organizational performance, so the critical evaluation is whether student learning has benefited in some way (Kerr 1997). Student achievement must be evaluated using specific assessments to determine if the intended goals are met. If, and only if, these goals are met should the program be judged as effective.

Where implementation of MY Access! has achieved the goal of measurable improvement in student writing skills, faculty have prepared for using MY Access! by completing structured, focused professional training programs prior to, or in conjunction with, the initial training of teachers who will be using the program. To ensure optimal success with the intended outcomes and extensive capabilities of the MY Access! software, and to ensure accompanying changes in educational perceptions, practices, and directions relating to writing, teachers and administrators are encouraged to take advantage of the truly effective professional development programs offered by Vantage Learning. These services provide teachers with the assistance, support, skills, and instructional strategies needed to guarantee proper teacher/student use and to achieve desired learning outcomes. The Professional Development offered by Vantage Learning offers educators the support and skills they need to improve student achievement and writing competence.

Conclusion

Research evidence supports the assertion that an effective professional development program must have the following elements:

1) Addresses specific instructional and student learning needs in the context of actual classrooms
2) Is rigorous, sustained, and adequate to the long-term change in practice
3) Designed to be effective for every user, regardless of learning style
4) Provides adequate time for inquiry, practice, and reflection
5) Makes best use of new technologies
6) Has the goal of improving student learning as the core of every school endeavor

This discussion demonstrates that every Professional Development program offered by Vantage Learning to MY Access! users not only incorporates these elements, but excels at offering a comprehensive, integrated, and truly effective Professional Development program. The PD programs at Vantage contain the essential training components of building knowledge, modeling,

practice, observation, feedback, and coaching. Vantage uses these elements in combination with learning techniques grounded in adult learning pedagogy to enable all educators to properly implement MY Access! in a manner that maximizes student achievement. The PD programs available feature many options, from on-site seminars, courses, and training that cater to the specific needs of school districts, to extended offerings of support, training, and professional development through effective use of new technologies, such as web-delivered instruction and coaching. Educators, administrators, and students that utilize the full range of Professional Development services offered can be assured that every program is grounded in best practices and research, employing effective techniques and strategies aimed at maximizing the capabilities of MY Access! to generate positive gains in student writing proficiency.

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