

Estancia Middle School Estancia, N.M.

Case Study: New Mexico Students Find Their Voice With WriteToLearn

In the high desert of central New Mexico at the base of the Rocky Mountains is Estancia Municipal Schools, a rural district with a population spanning miles of terrain. In this district of five schools all located on one campus, teachers and administrators are dedicated to helping their 933 students find enthusiasm for learning and to meet and exceed federal Adequate Yearly Progress goals.

“We are always trying to find ways to help our students achieve at a higher level”

*-Michael Jenkins, a language arts teacher
Estancia Middle School*

To that end, Mr. Jenkins recently introduced them to WriteToLearn™, an innovative Web-based learning tool from Pearson for developing writing and reading comprehension skills. “I’m not a computer person, and I had never thought about using technology to build writing skills,” he said. “But it didn’t take me long at all to see how much I liked it. This is one of the best tools I’ve ever seen.”

With WriteToLearn, students practice essay-writing and summarization skills, and their efforts are measured by Pearson’s state-of-the-art Knowledge Analysis Technologies™ (KAT) engine, which automatically evaluates the meaning of text by examining whole passages. The KAT engine is a unique automated assessment technology that evaluates the meaning of text, not just grammatical correctness or spelling.

The essay feedback provided by WriteToLearn is specific to six traits of writing – ideas, organization, conventions, sentence fluency, word choice and voice – and allows students and teachers to focus on each of these important dimensions of writing.

Building Excitement for Learning

Mr. Jenkins has seen a change in his 130 students since they started using WriteToLearn. “Lights are going on, and they’re excited about learning,” he said. “When I say it’s time to go to the computer lab, they jump up and go, and I have no problem keeping them on task.” He added that during a recent visit, Estancia’s superintendent was surprised to see that the students were so immersed in WriteToLearn that they didn’t even notice when the dismissal bell was about to ring.

Mr. Jenkins assigns each of his students one essay-writing and one summarization activity each week. He has them start with pencil and paper in the classroom, later moving to the computer lab to input their work to a word-processing program. While the students could write their first draft directly into WriteToLearn, Mr. Jenkins finds benefits in using the features of the word-processing software and having the students learn about cutting and pasting and moving from program to program.

From his computer screen, he can see how the entire class is doing and where students need additional instruction. For example, in an early essay, he saw that sentence fluency was difficult for many of the

students. Displaying WriteToLearn on an interactive whiteboard, he was able to provide instruction to correct a widespread problem. "I am able to help those who are having problems immediately – and to do so individually or for groups or the whole class," he said. "It's more of a coaching process."

Challenging Students, Building Confidence

WriteToLearn helps him "seize the moment" in a way he couldn't on his own, he said. "By the time I would grade and hand back 130 papers, it was too late. My students would have had 10 million thoughts since they wrote their essays, and those thoughts certainly weren't about the essays."

Mr. Jenkins' students are currently working on a summarizing assignment about American citizenship, and he is using WriteToLearn to set the bar high, allowing them to use only four words from the reading passage; they may refer to a thesaurus for help. "They like a challenge," he said, and noted that the exercise is helping them build their vocabulary much better than memorizing lists of vocabulary words.

He said students love the colored bars that show their progress and are eager to fix problem areas. "You can't get that with pencil and paper," he said. "With WriteToLearn, there's a goal instead of just a grade at the end."

And because students can see their success with WriteToLearn that brings on competition he said. "They can't wait to get to the feedback. They tell the person next to them, 'look what I got!' It's really building their confidence."

For those students who lack skills to write well with pencil and paper, WriteToLearn is leveling the playing field, he said. "One young man had struggled

to get his ideas on paper, but when I put him on WriteToLearn, he became a different person."

Developing Literacy Skills for the Real World

Mr. Jenkins is sharing his success using WriteToLearn with others in the district and beyond. "Anyone who talks to me hears about WriteToLearn quickly," he said. When he showed an essay written by one of his eighth graders to teachers at the high school, they took notice. "The 12th-grade teacher said this paper was as good as what many of her seniors write, and I said 'there you go,'" he said. That teacher is now planning to use WriteToLearn with her seniors "to prepare them for the real world."

Because WriteToLearn is Web-based, students can log on from anywhere they have Internet access. Mr. Jenkins is even using it with one student who is studying at home. In addition, the district's alternative program, serving 147 students across the state through online and correspondence courses, is looking into boosting its writing program with WriteToLearn.

His goal is for students to use the skills they're learning with WriteToLearn in everything they write – whether on a computer or with pencil and paper. With the skills his students are gaining, they are sure to see great gains, he said. "I can't imagine how WriteToLearn could possibly not help them. I just know the scores are going to be much improved. I have no doubt about it."

The greatest result since adopting WriteToLearn is that his students are "100 percent engaged," said Mr. Jenkins. "And when they are engaged, they are learning."

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