

Mae Guerra, Fourth Grade Teacher
Valverde Elementary
Denver

Case Study: Fourth-Grade Students in Urban Denver Elementary School Take Literacy Skills to New Levels With Pearson's WriteToLearn™

As the students in Mae Guerra's fourth-grade class start an assignment to read about California gray whales and write a summary about what they've read, Guerra encourages them to tap into their imaginations. "I wonder if gray whales are mammals or reptiles, I wonder how big they grow, and I wonder how they have their babies?" she asks her students at Valverde Elementary in urban Denver. "Ask 'I wonder questions' when you read, because it makes you become more interested and, as a result, you will want to pay more attention to what you are reading."

Guerra has been hard at work to help her students improve their writing and reading comprehension skills since she joined Valverde, part of Denver Public Schools, at the beginning of the school year. In her class of 22 mostly Hispanic students, 15 of whom are officially classified as English language learners, nearly all began the year with "unsatisfactory" scores in writing on the Colorado state assessment.

In this school of 427 students, 91 percent are Hispanic—many recent immigrants. The vast majority of Valverde students come from families that are struggling, with 81 percent qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The school is struggling, too, to bring up a "low" rating from the Colorado Department of Education, based on scores from state tests.

Guerra is on the right track. With her comprehension-based curriculum, and the help of WriteToLearn, an

innovative Web-based teaching tool from Pearson that combines summary and essay-writing activities, most of her students reached the "proficient" level in writing during the first three months of the school year.

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. Other 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.

The most important feature of WriteToLearn is the immediate feedback that students receive, said Guerra. "They need to be reassured constantly that they're doing the right thing—that they're on task—and WriteToLearn helps them with that," she said. "It just really helps motivate them and gives them a lot of confidence in their writing."

Students see bar graphs on the computer screen that tell them how they are doing with

their writing assignments. Guerra is able to set the flexible scoring at a level she finds appropriate for her students. “When it says that they’re on ‘excellent,’ they get ecstatic, almost like they’re winning a game,” said Guerra. “To win ‘the game,’ they have to become a better writer.”

Competition is part of what motivates them, she said, as students compare their progress. “They ask, ‘how far did your bar move, did you get to excellent, are you on green yet, and what do I need to do to get to the next level?’” she said.

While WriteToLearn’s “scoreboards” show students a detailed analysis of their progress, Guerra is by their side while they are working on their writing. She integrates the summary writing into the overall curriculum, and is always on hand to offer guidance. In addition, she monitors each student’s progress from her computer and, with the most recent update to WriteToLearn, can now write comments directly into their summaries.

Opportunities for practice in writing are abundant with WriteToLearn, as students complete drafts, receive feedback and revise their work until they reach the desired level. Every week, Guerra’s students complete a summary-writing exercise using WriteToLearn. If it were a manual process—of completing a writing assignment, handing it in to the teacher, waiting for the teacher to grade 22 papers and return them—this amount of practice and fine-tuning would not be possible, Guerra said. In addition, she believes that manual grading doesn’t always result in a broad view of students’ writing. “You just get bogged down with grammar and usage, and kids want to go beyond that.”

The time she saves using WriteToLearn helps Guerra

to be a more effective teacher, she said. “The immediate feedback that the students get on their writing gives me more time to do really great lesson planning because I’m not editing papers at night.”

Further, she said WriteToLearn allows her to devote individual attention to students who require extra help. “It enables me to work individually with English language learners who sometimes have a hard time getting started with their writing.”

For English language learners, writing is a daunting task, as subject-verb agreement is confusing and spelling is difficult. “The spelling feature is excellent in WriteToLearn because when students misspell something, they just go back to the spell check to correct it, and that reinforces their learning.”

Guerra’s students have made great strides in summarizing the passages they’ve read. They are now able to understand what they’ve read, organize their thoughts, identify the main ideas and write clearly. “They understand that when they read, they need to look for important facts to include in their summaries,” she said. “The summary writing is very beneficial, especially on benchmark tests, when kids have to read a passage and understand what the main idea is.”

Milagros Martin-Atilano, one of Guerra’s students, appreciates all she has learned this year with the help of WriteToLearn. “I got better with my writing, and it helps me get better in my spelling and my reading,” she said.

Kimberley Alcantara, another student, said WriteToLearn “shows us how we’re doing in our summary. We learn how to write, and we read things we have never read and we learn about the things.”

Guerra has found that by building literacy skills, her students are gaining the foundation they need to learn in every content area. Whether they are solving a word problem in math or learning about Colorado history in social studies, students are able to extract the main points—a skill that will be necessary throughout their lives, she noted. “When you take a chemistry class, you have to understand what the author is trying to tell you—the steps that are needed to follow through with the formula. It’s going to be beneficial in all aspects of their education,” she said.

Guerra described her students’ progress this year as “amazing.” “At the beginning of the school year, a lot of the students couldn’t complete a sentence. The practice they get with WriteToLearn has given them the confidence they need to write well-organized, thought-out summaries that really do reflect what they’ve read. So not only are they building really strong writing skills, but they’re developing great reading comprehension skills.”

Assessment results support Guerra’s observations. By the end of the 2007-2008 school year, her students’ scored 91 percent proficient/advanced in reading and 95 percent in writing on the district-administered benchmark tests—an improvement of 90 percent over their results from the beginning of the school year.

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