

**CASE STUDY:
Struggling Denver Middle School
Students Take Writing
to a Higher Level,
Improve Test Scores
With WriteToLearn**



At Place Middle School in Denver, achievement is often hard-won, with the vast majority of students coming from households struggling to make ends meet, many dealing with language barriers and other issues. Despite these obstacles, language arts teacher Stewart Amos led his 105 sixth-grade students to a 60 percent increase in reading and writing scores on district-level benchmark tests in just one school year.

This jump occurred after Amos introduced his students to WriteToLearn™, an innovative Web-based teaching tool from Pearson Knowledge Technologies that combines summary and essay writing activities. “I’m not attributing all of our success to WriteToLearn, but it’s definitely a huge component. It picks up where my teaching leaves off,” he said.

“We’re an inner-city school, our scores are low, there’s no one at home and our students are constantly moving from one place to another,” said Amos. “To have these kids excited about this program and doing so well really says a lot.”

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With WriteToLearn, students practice essay writing and summarization skills, and their efforts are measured by the 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 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.

From Struggling to “Extraordinary” Writers

Amos predicted that WriteToLearn would be difficult to learn “because these programs always are,” he said. “But this one was different. There wasn’t one kid who went into that computer lab and didn’t know what to do. I’m not computer-savvy, and I always left feeling good, too.”

Using WriteToLearn to focus on essay writing, Amos assigned essays his students could relate to, “because that’s what successful writing is all about,” he said. He appreciates the fact that many of the writing topics in WriteToLearn allow students to reflect on their own experiences. In one essay, his students wrote about a Denver blizzard they had all endured. “I was surprised at how thoughtful they were – their pieces were extraordinary.”

Preparation, he said, is key to setting up his students for success. "I tell the kids that they need to do their outlines before they go into the computer lab, by taking the writing prompts and developing them first. When they go in with their 'webs,' they can focus and get right to it."

For essay writing, WriteToLearn gives students an overall evaluation, as well as scores for six traits of writing. WriteToLearn also offers students expanded feedback on how to improve their essays and their scores on each of the traits.

Amos finds this newly added feedback very beneficial in helping the students to improve their writing. He used WriteToLearn both before and after the traits were added, "and it was good before, but even better after, tighter, with more definition to it," he said.

"The advice is great, students can see where they're not writing enough, and there are all kinds of areas they can focus on," said Amos. "For example, a student might see he's having a hard time with voice and then come to me to discuss how to improve. He can really hone in on it."

With WriteToLearn, students are able to have much more time practicing their writing than if Amos had to grade essays manually, he said. "It's reinforcement that helps them improve," he said.

He said his students love to be in the computer lab working on writing, often working quietly for 90 minutes at a stretch. "The excitement is amazing. I never had a student who didn't want to do it, and I never saw anyone sitting there with nothing to do," he said.

WriteToLearn is a "really well-planned, organized tool, and lot of other teachers have been asking me about it," Amos said. "The feedback is immediate and so concrete, really pointing students in the right direction."

Amos' success with his students is clear. At the beginning of the school year, 51 percent of his students scored in the "unsatisfactory" category, and nine months later, only 10 percent fell in this category. In August, only 4 percent were considered "proficient" or above, and by May, 65 percent were scoring at this level. "Their achievement has really boosted their confidence," he said.

WriteToLearn as an Intervention Tool

Mid-year, graduate student and teacher Mae Guerra launched an intervention project with the 22 students in her seventh- and eighth-grade study skills class. The project would fulfill a requirement toward her master's degree and, she hoped, help her students in the process.

At a school staff meeting, Guerra heard Amos talking about his students' gains in writing and reading since he had introduced them to WriteToLearn. "He was the spotlight of that meeting because his scores had increased so dramatically," she said. "After hearing him, I knew I wanted to try WriteToLearn with my students, too."

Going into this, Guerra’s students “didn’t know capitalization, grammar or how to write a complete sentence,” she said. In addition to the academic challenge she was undertaking with her students – with only 25 percent of them rated as “proficient” in writing on the Colorado Student Assessment Program – there were discipline issues. “My time in the classroom had been spent on behavior control. They were throwing airplanes,” she said.

Taking Writing to a Higher Level

Like Amos, Guerra opted to use WriteToLearn for essay writing; her students practiced it during every class period for six weeks. “They were immediately engaged in writing,” she said. “They loved being in front of the computer, and they would actually work.”

Two of the many subjects they wrote about were “a remarkable place” and the weather. “The kids were motivated and wanted to take their essays to a higher level,” explained Guerra. “They could see a purpose to writing with WriteToLearn.”

Early on, Guerra had some apprehension about teaching writing. “I’m a science teacher, not an English teacher,” she said. “But WriteToLearn made it easy. Everything was there.” With the help of WriteToLearn’s feedback on six traits of writing, Guerra’s students could clearly see which areas of their essays needed improvement. “They always knew what they needed to do,” she said.

To reach the green “passing zone,” her students needed to score at least 4 out of 6 on each of the traits, because that’s where Guerra set the adjustable passing threshold. She said seeing the bars move forward on the screen toward the green line was like a game for students. “They loved it. They’d say, ‘I have four congratulations’ or ‘I have another one – that’s six.’ These were the kids I previously couldn’t get to work, and they were competing,” she said.

As an example, the graph below demonstrates the average improvement in feedback scores for the first essay that Guerra’s students attempted using WriteToLearn. This essay prompted students to identify a school issue they would like to change and convey reasons and possible consequences of this change. When students entered their first drafts, they barely received even 2 points, on average, of any of WriteToLearn’s six traits of writing. After only about six revision cycles, they managed to bring up their scores for each trait to the threshold (score point 4). For their final essay, at the end of Guerra’s intervention, her students had improved enough to approach this threshold after only four revision cycles.



While students worked at their computers, Guerra had full knowledge of how they were progressing. With a variety of reports available on her screen, she was able to see how her students were performing at the individual and class level. "You have the data there; it's always there. If my principal asks me for it, it is readily available."

Like Amos, Guerra saw a "huge difference" in her students' writing abilities by the end of the school year. "WriteToLearn is new technology, and it really captures students' attention so they can improve their skills," she said. "It was really, really successful."

Not only was WriteToLearn beneficial for the students, but it was beneficial for her as well, said Guerra. "It really freed up my time and lowered my stress level so I could focus on the students instead of a big pile of work on my desk. It allowed me the time to work with my students, one on one."

For more information, visit www.WriteToLearn.net