



CASE STUDY:

Wisconsin Middle School Gives Students the Right Tool for Building Writing Skills, Developing Reading Comprehension

When administrators at Brookwood Middle School in Genoa City, Wis., went looking for a tool to help their students boost writing skills, it was not from a position of deficit but one of strength.

“Our test scores in writing were fine,” said Principal Kellie Bohn. “We wanted something that would reinforce good writing and strengthen our students’ skills so they could perform at an even higher level.”

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Serving 291 students in grades five through eight, Brookwood Middle School is located in a town known as the “gateway of Wisconsin,” just over the Illinois border and 10 miles south of Lake Geneva. Known to locals as “the village,” Genoa City is home to 2,500 residents and known for its strong community support for family recreation, with an abundance of ball fields and parks. Poverty is relatively low in this tight-knit community, with 20 percent of Brookwood Middle School’s students qualifying for free or reduced lunch.

Brookwood recently implemented WriteToLearn™, an innovative Web-based teaching tool that combines summary and essay writing activities. Used for both instruction and assessment, WriteToLearn is the only writing development product that gives students the immediate, targeted feedback necessary to develop reading comprehension and writing that are critical for academic success. Through the state-of-art Knowledge Analysis Technologies™ (KAT) engine, WriteToLearn provides both immediate feedback on style, mechanics and grammar, as well as accurate assessment and guidance on the content and meaning of student writing.

Using Immediate Feedback to Build Writing Skills

English teacher Sarah Erickson began using WriteToLearn this school year with her seventh-grade students. Beginning with an exercise in autobiography writing, she has used WriteToLearn for seven graded exercises so far. In this computer-savvy school, students use WriteToLearn in the computer lab as well as on classroom computers with wireless Internet connections.

Erickson’s students write a lot of essays, and she emphasizes the importance of staying on topic. “WriteToLearn helps my students be concise,” she said. “It’s very helpful for those who think quantity is better than quality. They’ll say they thought their essay would be okay if they wrote a lot, but they’re learning there’s a better way to go about it.”

Erickson said when students are given several attempts at creating an essay, receiving feedback along the way, they have the opportunity to learn and succeed.

"They have a chance to receive a passing grade, even if it takes five or six tries to get it right," she said. Erickson has access to the complete portfolio of the students' drafts to review so she can see the progress of their work.

Grading her 80 students' papers by hand would take a week or even longer, so Erickson considers the immediate feedback one of WriteToLearn's greatest qualities. "WriteToLearn is so quick – now my students receive feedback in a matter of seconds," she said.

Students appreciate it as well, she said. "They love being able to see how they did immediately – what was right and what was wrong. Now there's not this lapse in time while they wait to receive feedback from me, when they forget why they wrote what they did."

Developing Comprehension Skills by Writing Summaries

The "big selling point," said Bohn, was WriteToLearn's summarizing component. It allows students to write online summaries of reading assignments and receive an immediate assessment of how well students have captured the main idea of the reading passage in their summaries. They receive section-by-section evaluation of content as well as immediate feedback on copying from the text, spelling, redundancy and irrelevant sentences.

Erickson explained, "I see students reading but not comprehending what they've read. Learning to summarize leads to comprehension. It's a skill that will help them in many ways."

Recent research at the University of Colorado at Boulder supports Bohn's and Erickson's views on the value of practicing summary writing, revealing that it helps students build reading-comprehension and writing skills. Researchers concluded that repeated, guided practice led to improvement in writing ability across a broad range of measures. Further, increase in performance endured, even when students wrote without the support of an online tool. Students included 50 percent more relevant content in their test summaries after having used the tool in their school work.

Customizing WriteToLearn to Meet Class Learning Goals

With WriteToLearn, teachers have access to a variety of reports and scoring options. They, along with students, can see reporting through tutorial feedback and status reports. Using flexible scoring options, teachers adjust scoring to meet the learning goals of their class. From a single-screen visual scoreboard, teachers can view classes, assignments and progress. In addition, WriteToLearn provides easy drill-down to student score detail and writing portfolios.

Erickson said her students appreciate the accessibility of WriteToLearn from their home computers. "I've had several students go online at home to use it just because they can," she said. She also allows WriteToLearn exercises from home as extra credit for those who are struggling, but she permits fewer attempts than she does in class.

Bohn and Erickson see the benefit of using WriteToLearn on cross-curricular projects as well. Erickson has already joined forces with a science teacher to have students write about cells. "The science teacher is very happy with it," she said. "WriteToLearn is easy to use for a variety of subjects."

Implementation of WriteToLearn has been painless, added Bohn. "It's been an easy startup, low-maintenance program." Erickson noted that support has been excellent. "We've only had a couple of little things come up, and Pearson has resolved them right away," she said.

Only in the first year of using WriteToLearn, it is early to see drastic growth at Brookwood Middle School. But Bohn and Erickson said progress is clear. "We're definitely seeing improvement – students are learning to be more organized in their writing and improving their summarizing skills," said Erickson. "We're getting through to them, and it's very encouraging."

For more information, visit www.WriteToLearn.net