

CASE STUDY:
WriteToLearn
Provides the “Set-Point”
for Success at Innovative
California Program That
Combines Tutoring and Tennis



Just beyond the Spanish-colonial architecture, 8,200 acres of rolling landscape and opportunity that abounds at Stanford University is East Palo Alto, Calif., a city with a large minority and immigrant population struggling with inner-city challenges. However, a hundred children from East Palo Alto and neighboring areas are spending several days a week on the Stanford campus participating in a program that is helping them gain skills that will open doors in the future.

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The nonprofit afterschool program, called East Palo Alto Tennis and Tutoring (EPATT), serves students from kindergarten through twelfth grade who have been selected based on parent commitment, academic need and potential for impact. Students receive one-on-one tutoring from volunteers, primarily Stanford undergraduate students, and learn tennis and life skills every Monday through Thursday after their regular school day. Dinner is served, often with help from parents, and students stay until 8 p.m. Attendance and behavior must be exemplary. Tuition is free, and the wait list is long.

Kesha Weekes, EPATT academic director, said one of the most difficult subjects for her students is writing, as many are not native English speakers but rather Spanish or Tongan, a language from the South Pacific. Seeking a way to engage them in learning to write and to build their reading comprehension skills, she recently introduced them to WriteToLearn™, an innovative Web-based teaching tool from Pearson’s Knowledge Technologies group that combines summary and essay writing activities.

Through the state-of-art Knowledge Analysis Technologies™ (KAT) engine, WriteToLearn provides immediate feedback on style, mechanics and grammar, as well as accurate assessment and guidance on the content and meaning of student writing. For essay writing, WriteToLearn gives students an overall evaluation and scores for each of six traits of writing: ideas, organization, conventions, sentence fluency, word choice and voice. WriteToLearn also offers students expanded feedback on how to improve their essays and their scores on each of the traits.

“These kids want to write now, and that is amazing,” said Weekes, who first introduced WriteToLearn to EPATT’s middle school students. After seeing its success, she quickly ordered more subscriptions for the fourth through sixth graders.

Finding Their Voice With WriteToLearn

EPATT students immediately started using WriteToLearn for summary writing, and the first activity Weekes assigned was on American citizenship. The students read the assigned text and then wrote a summary of it, receiving instant feedback on how well they covered each section of the content, whether they included redundant or irrelevant information and whether they directly copied too much text without putting the material in their own words.

Using WriteToLearn's flexible scoring options, Weekes made the grading relatively easy so students wouldn't be discouraged. "They did really well with it, right from the start," she said.

In the past, students would log on to EPATT's laptops and play any educational games they could find, instead of getting to work on their assignments. "That's changed," she said. "I haven't seen anybody play the games since we started using WriteToLearn. I don't have to tell them it's time to get on WriteToLearn."

The students who have Internet access at home are logging on to WriteToLearn from there as well, successfully completing their assignments and asking for more. "They just love WriteToLearn," said Weekes. "They're kids, and they don't want to do anything that's not fun, and it's fun."

One of the best things about WriteToLearn is the immediate feedback students receive, she said. "They love to look at the results in the scoreboard and see how they're doing." Previously, she said students would focus on the mechanics of writing – looking for mistakes in spelling, punctuation and subject-verb agreement – but they didn't know how to evaluate content. "WriteToLearn shows them where they've omitted an area of content, so they're taking a more critical look at their writing," she said. "They never would have done that before."

Weekes noted that writing is personal, and it's not fun to have it criticized, and that's what's nice about WriteToLearn. "There's no evil professor, and the students kind of feel like they're playing a game," she said.

Pinpointing Problems, Relishing Success

One of the roles of EPATT tutors, who don't receive college credit or money for their time, is helping the students learn to write and build their reading skills. Many tutors have been frustrated by the way the students struggle and have grappled with how to help them, said Weekes. "It was like pulling teeth for them – I would tell them our students aren't starting from where they started and that it's a process."

Now WriteToLearn is helping to change that, she said. "It has taken the pressure off of the tutors to create assignments for them. Having tutors to support them as they use WriteToLearn, especially for the students who are learning English, has been amazing."

Theresa Zhen, a Stanford sophomore with a double major in economics and sociology, is a tutor coordinator in EPATT's middle school group. "There's very little that will keep me away from EPATT," said Zhen, who plans a career in policy work for underserved communities. The several hours a week she spends at EPATT is "a bit of a time commitment but a rewarding one, and I'm enjoying it tremendously."

When using WriteToLearn, students are forced to internalize what they read and turn it into their own words, said Zhen. "They can't just go into the program and look for the answers." And that serves them well, she said. "WriteToLearn helps them gauge where they are – pinpointing any problem areas – and then move forward from there."

For the stronger students, WriteToLearn helps them take their writing to a higher level, and for the weaker students, it helps them learn skills they didn't have, she said. "It's so rewarding when they are successful."

Learning Success is Possible

One of Zhen's students is Tevita Talakai, a seventh grader who has been part of EPATT since kindergarten. He is the youngest in his family, following two sets of twins, and his mother is from Tonga. He is a strong athlete who plays football, baseball and basketball and enjoys the tennis offered at EPATT.

Talakai appreciates the tutoring help he receives as well, and is pleased that his writing skills are improving since he's been using WriteToLearn. A recent essay writing assignment was to write about an object that's meaningful to him, and he chose to write about a photo of his grandmother, who died recently. "My grandma was very special, and she was like another mother because she took care of us when my mom went away to work," he said. "I wrote all about her – that she was a twin and she raised 10 children and her last request was to be buried in New Zealand."

With WriteToLearn, Talakai is learning to review and revise what he writes, he said. "My English teacher sees a difference, and she compliments me on it. On an assignment in class, she didn't find much to change because of the skills I learned from WriteToLearn."

On a WriteToLearn summary writing activity, he read and summarized an article about astronauts – describing many of the items that accompany them on their missions and noting that the dehydrated food they eat is similar to Dippin' Dots, a freeze-dried ice cream snack.

Because he is practicing summary writing, Talakai's reading comprehension is improving. He said, "I'm learning more words that I can use, and I'm getting pretty good."

As for the future, Talakai said he's always wanted to be a police officer, and he's recently discovered that he'll need an education to pursue that line of work. "I'm working hard to do my best," he said. "I want to be a cop because there's a lot of violence in the world, and I think doing a little can mean a lot."

Weekes is encouraged by her students' early progress with WriteToLearn and foresees higher achievement in writing on class tests and state assessments yet to come.

"Writing is complex, and they have to learn so many things at the same time – from decoding skills to organizing their thoughts," she said. "Our students are building literacy skills and learning a lot – they're seeing that they *can* be successful."

For more information, visit www.WriteToLearn.net