

CASE STUDY:

Troutman Middle School



North Carolina Students of All Academic Abilities Make Great Strides Across the Curriculum With Pearson's WriteToLearn™

Learning to string together ideas in a cohesive way to construct an essay – and finding the confidence to try – is a tremendous challenge for many students, especially for those with learning disabilities. At Troutman Middle School, which serves 400 students in North Carolina's Piedmont region, students of all academic abilities are taking their writing skills to new heights with the help of WriteToLearn™, an innovative Web-based teaching tool from Pearson that combines summary- and essay-writing activities.

Debbie Craven is a special education teacher at Troutman Middle School, and Perry Justice co-teaches an inclusion class with her; he also teaches regular and academically advanced classes. "Some of our students couldn't focus to put together simple sentences, and writing was very difficult and frustrating for them," said Craven. "Since we introduced them to WriteToLearn, we have seen a dramatic change. They think nothing of sitting down to write for an hour. Kids who used to struggle with one or two paragraphs are composing entire essays."

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. The KAT Engine is a unique automated assessment technology that evaluates the meaning of text, not just grammatical correctness or spelling. WriteToLearn provides feedback on 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.

In the past, Craven and Justice would introduce a writing prompt, spend time explaining and encouraging their students and allow for two weeks of writing with paper and pencil. This year, they took their students to the computer lab once a week to use WriteToLearn, and they were off and running at log-in. "The papers they wrote were just fabulous – it blew my mind," said Justice. "They finished them in a day and a half instead of two weeks, and they were working on them at home, too."

Craven and Justice assigned two kinds of essays to meet state curriculum requirements and to prepare for state writing assessments: "on demand" essays, which are open-ended persuasive pieces; and "content specific" essays, which demonstrate knowledge in subjects such as social studies and science. For both, they used WriteToLearn, in collaboration with the content-area teachers. "The essays were fantastic, and the science and social studies teachers were excited to see how much the students had learned," said Craven. "It was very gratifying to see the benefits of teaching writing across the curriculum."

Summarizing is another focus for seventh graders in the district, to help them build reading comprehension as well as writing skills. In another collaborative effort with the science teacher, Craven and Justice's students used WriteToLearn's summary component to write a summary about the heart and lungs. "When the students started writing, it kind of hit me in the face that they had retained what they had learned in the previous summary about the human body and that knowledge had carried over to the next writing task," said Craven.

With WriteToLearn's immediate feedback, students learn, in detail, what steps they can take to improve their writing in all of the different trait areas, as well as on spelling, grammar and redundancy. A "scoreboard" shows students their progress, and they work to move into the "excellent" zone. With the range of academic abilities in their inclusion class, Craven and Justice have unique expectations for each student, and WriteToLearn allows them to adjust scoring criteria for their students.

The teachers are able to monitor students' progress from their own computers and add comments on students' writing. "We can see what everyone's doing," said Craven. "It's a great management tool in the classroom."

Justice appreciates the ability to use the Web-based tool from any computer, which proves useful when students want to work on their writing from home. When one of his students was suspended from school, Justice assigned him an essay using WriteToLearn, and the student satisfactorily completed the assignment, earning high marks. "Without WriteToLearn, I wouldn't have gotten anything from him," said Justice.

Using Texthelp accessibility software embedded in WriteToLearn, students with learning disabilities have ready access to text-to-speech output and phonetically mapped writing support tools. "Some of my students will stumble over larger vocabulary words," said Craven. They put on their headsets and click on the words to hear them read aloud, and find embedded pictures and articles that give them additional information. "They appreciate having the resource at their fingertips, rather than having to ask for help in pronouncing and defining words," she explained.

In addition, English language learners find text-to-speech output beneficial, she said. "I have a Spanish-speaking student who listened to the text in a summarizing exercise in English so he could better understand what he was reading. It's a great tool."

Grading, the teachers said, is substantially easier for them now, as WriteToLearn supports North Carolina state writing standards. "The kids know what level they have to reach on WriteToLearn to receive a certain grade from us," said Justice.

The school's other language arts teacher, whose students wrote without the benefit of WriteToLearn, was "amazed and jealous," said Craven, when she saw the quality of writing and the state writing assessment results from Craven and Justice's classes. "We had great success – almost all of our students passed." And in every one of Justice's classes, which span three ability levels, students showed growth.

"What we've seen from WriteToLearn is quality and quantity. Kids just couldn't produce anything with paper and pencil – it was like pulling hens' teeth," said Justice. "Now they're proud of what they're producing, and it just flows from their fingers."