Case Study: Making a Difference for Students with Autism
Transforming Non-Writers into Writers with Word Prediction

Co:Writer®

Murphy McBride, SCORES Teacher, Joe Dan Mills Elementary School, Austin, Texas (SCORES—Social Communication Resources and Services)

Murphy McBride

Students with autism come into Murphy McBride's room for assistance in writing. Some students with autism do not speak or speak non-stop. Many are verbal, but cannot write a single word. Some cannot lift their arms due to a physical disability. Some thought that these students would never write, but not Mrs. McBride! She tackles each student's needs individually to help them take one step closer to better writing.

Mrs. McBride is a SCORES Teacher (Social Communication Resources and Services) at Joe Dan Mills Elementary School in Austin, Texas. SCORES is an instructional resource and service that supports students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and students with disabilities who demonstrate impairment in social, communicative, and behavioral functioning.

Murphy has used an assistive technology word prediction tool for the last nine years and credits the software for helping lots of students with learning disabilities write their first word, sentence, and paragraph. She has taught children with special needs from kindergarten to high school across the disability spectrum. She has worked with students who have mental retardation, autism, traumatic brain injuries and cerebral palsy. Some students have combinations of learning challenges such as a print disability while learning English as a second language (ESL).

Rarely does Mrs. McBride use worksheets to help her students write. Instead, she provides real-life writing experiences, which take her students into a world of social interaction. For that kind of learning, she turns to Co:Writer, a word prediction tool that helps to facilitate a student's communication attempts. "Co:Writer can transform poor or non-writers into writers for the first time, regardless of age," she said.

One bright young girl suffered from traumatic brain injuries. She had wonderful language skills, but had damaged her vocal chords and had limited mobility from being on a respirator, which restricted her ability to write. Mrs. McBride said, "Co:Writer gave her a chance to express herself again. If you cannot speak or barely use your hands, this valuable tool brings communication back into so many students' lives." For the first time, this student could put into words what she was feeling with the assistance of Co:Writer. It became her way to communicate with her teachers. "It gave her back her thoughts and vocabulary; it sped up her ability to type and she started to write more. Co:Writer released the language she had inside of her—like a magic wand."

Students with Autism Need Structure and Organization

Mrs. McBride has noticed that students with autism need increased structure and organization. She encourages them to open Co:Writer in a variety of word processing programs and use the Microsoft Outlook calendar to help organize their schedules. She said the assistive technology tool keeps students on track while helping them write fluidly and improve their spelling abilities. In high school, her students used Co:Writer to write to businesses within the community, such as writing notes to the UPS man and writing emails to teachers and parents. One student, whose father traveled frequently, began to see how Co:Writer could help him stay in touch with his father through email. "What a breakthrough for this student!" she said.

Flexible Spelling Support

"Lots of times, students have a difficult time spelling. Regardless of how poorly my student spells, Co:Writer always seems to help them find the words they want to use. Some students respond to hearing a word spoken through a synthetic computer voice; others do not. You can set a default for this feature that can make the writing process flow smoothly. I love the flexibility of Co:Writer. It's both teacher and student friendly and stimulates a student's thinking process. I also love the Topic Dictionaries which are easy to use and you can add your own custom terms."

Summarizing, Mrs. McBride said, "Using assistive technology to write in real-time is the key to keeping these students from shutting down in frustration. Even though they are reluctant to write, they respond to the computer and to keyboarding (typing). Co:Writer got them to believe in themselves and they loved it! My students have become writers. They express their thoughts in cohesive ways. If your students can't speak, spell or write or have trouble with organization or fine motor skills, Co:Writer will help them. If they need extra coaching or practice to express themselves in writing, Co:Writer can accommodate their needs. The sooner you expose students to word prediction, the faster they will catch on to using technology in real-life ways. Co:Writer has opened up learning to students that were deemed not teachable using only traditional writing approaches and methods."
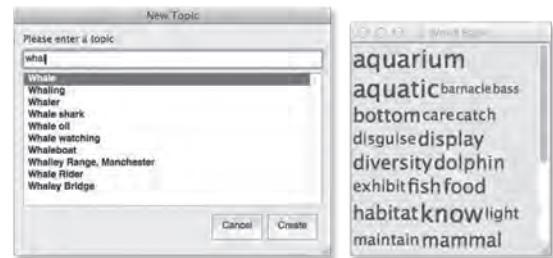
Single-window design
floats on top of any application

Track time spent writing and vocabulary usage of individual students and groups

Instant Topic Dictionaries–Access over 4 million Topic Dictionaries instantly just by typing the name

Word Bank triggers vocabulary by showing topic-specific words

WATCH Video Interview with Chauncy Rucker, Editor CONNSense Bulletin ATIA 2009 Conference, Orlando, Florida at:
donjohnston.com/autistic-students-write-first-words-sentences/

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