

# Delta College Students Know Interactive English Builds Confidence—and Essential Computer Skills



## Overview—Delta College, University Center, Michigan

After completing an Interactive English course, student surveys showed that:

- Seventy-eight percent of students rated their writing skills as either “good” or “excellent;”
- Fewer than five percent of students rated their writing skills as “weak” at the end of the course—down from 40.4 percent at the beginning; and
- Nearly 50 percent more students felt competent using computers.

Michigan’s Delta College has a diverse student population that is, in many cases, significantly underprepared in reading and writing. In 2000, the college started a three-year pilot program to implement PLATO Learning’s Interactive English (formerly an Academic Systems product), now used in Composition I and Composition II courses, at two of its four campuses. The college is specifically seeking to help underprepared students become more successful, as well as to integrate technology in the teaching of writing. So far both goals are being met.

Delta has seen extremely strong retention rates in Interactive English courses, though this has yet to be formally studied. More compelling to the faculty are the results of extensive student attitudinal studies, which provide dramatic evidence of the program’s success. “We have deliberately tied our research to the things we value, and we’re seeing that this program is having a positive effect on things such as increasing student self-confidence and competency with technology,” said Elaine Karls, professor of English at Delta.

## Survey Results Strong

On a scale of “weak, average, good, or excellent,” 40.4 percent of students rated themselves “weak” in writing when they came into the course; after the course, just 4.8 percent rated themselves as “weak.”

Conversely, the percentage of students rating themselves as “good” in writing was 63.4 percent, up from 14.2 percent at the beginning of the course. Additionally, 14.6 percent rated themselves as “excellent” when they finished the course.

“One of our outcomes and objectives for the course is to have students gain self-confidence in their writing, and that is clearly happening,” Karls said.

**INSTITUTION:** Delta College is a learning-centered institution that focuses on the diverse post-secondary learning needs of the community. Since 1961, the college has been a trusted leader in education in Michigan. The college offers low tuition, small class sizes, and a faculty dedicated to teaching. In addition, Delta’s emphasis on technology continues to make it easier for students to access their classes through the Internet and other distance learning options.

**SIZE:** In the fall of 2000, approximately 10,000 academic and skilled-trades students plus nearly 1,000 community education students enrolled in courses and programs on the Delta College campus and throughout 30 neighborhood centers.

**CONTACT:** Elaine Karls, Professor of English, [eakarls@alpha.delta.edu](mailto:eakarls@alpha.delta.edu)

“...this program is having a positive effect...”

ELAINE KARLS,  
PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

Examples of student comments, as taken from classroom assessment instruments, included:

“This course helped me with my first semester of school.”

“The online teacher provided me with useful ideas when I was stuck.”

“It offered me a chance to question more thoughts and get feedback.”

“I don’t think I would have learned the same amount as I did here [in Interactive English].”

“The setting gave variety and kept my interest.”

“I learned to read, write, listen, and learn about computers more.”

“You can’t get much better.”

Karls and other faculty report that students love having less lecture time. The active learning approach Interactive English takes is making a huge difference for them.

“They’re used to going into lecture-oriented classes and having to sit through material they don’t need. They love the fact that they can come in and be hands-on, and they love that they can get a lot of individual time with the instructor,” Karls said. “If you’re at a point where you’re struggling with something in your draft, for example, you’re going to get time with me. Before, in traditional classes, I didn’t get to do that as much. Interactive English makes instruction very real-time and focused.”

As more and more students begin to learn through this approach, the courses are in greater demand, showing another measure of the program’s success. Every Interactive English section of Composition II, a course option recently added due to demand from students who completed Composition I in the Interactive English format, is wait-listed. As Karls said, “Our students really want to learn this way. Enrollment has greatly exceeded our projections.”

### Students Become Technology-Savvy

Students—some of whom had little or no experience with computers prior to the course—also say that using Interactive

English has made them more fluent with technology. This was a goal the department sought in implementing the program, as well as helping to make the department as a whole more technology-friendly.

“Delta is considered throughout Michigan as an innovative campus where technology is concerned. Still, I’ve found it’s sometimes hard to convince people that English deserves part of the technology pie. I’ve had colleagues outside the English discipline say, ‘can’t you write with a pen?’ They think technology is more appropriate for other disciplines,” Karls said. “In using Interactive English, we’re working to dispel such myths and make technology an integral part of our department and our students’ experiences.”

In the winter of 2001, 23.4 percent of the students said that when they entered the course they had seldom or never used a computer. At the end of the course, 73.0 percent evaluated themselves as competent on computers. “For developmental students who must know computers to enter the job force, that’s so significant,” Karls said.

### Faculty Embracing Approach

Delta credits its faculty in large part for helping make the program successful so far. More and more faculty are considering teaching Interactive English, and those who do so already are committed to a team approach that emphasizes idea sharing, mutual support, professional development through mentoring, and a focus on qualitative research. They feel this has been an essential component to the successful implementation of Interactive English on this campus.

“We are starting to see some really compelling evidence that hybrid classes [courses that combine online instruction with face-to-face instruction] are one way to go with developmental students. This is how many students want to learn, and campuses need to face that reality,” Karls said. “I began teaching nearly 30 years ago and can do it in the traditional way, but I think students are going to be demanding it be done in this hybrid approach. You can maximize the best teaching and learning components and offer the best of everything. In a lot of ways, what you have then is an Interactive English classroom.”