

Wikis in College Teaching

The previous Bulletin started a new series on Web 2.0 tools that, despite their relative novelty, have already demonstrated great potential for the college classroom. As we said last time, the big pedagogical advantage of these tools is that they get students actively engaged in not only learning, but also producing knowledge. Today we will take a look at the most commonly known of these tools: Wikis. Again, we are supplementing our treatment of these tools in the CTL Bulletin with additional information on the CTL website at:

www.neiu.edu/~ctl/teaching/web2.html.

What is a Wiki?

You can obtain a quick overview of how a wiki works from a four-minute video on Youtube or from EDUCAUSE's two-pager "7 things you should know about Wikis" (see references at bottom). In short: A wiki is a collaborative research and writing tool or, as EDUCAUSE puts it: "A wiki is a Web page that can be viewed and modified by anybody with access to the Internet." It is "a composition system, a discussion medium, a repository, a mail system, and a tool for collaboration" that is "able to incorporate sounds, movies, and pictures." It "allows users to create Web pages 'on the fly'." "A wiki is essentially a database created by a group rather than an individual."

The important features of this tool include (following UIUC's classification):

Access: All team (or class) members can have access to it anytime anywhere

Easy sharing: Team members don't have to send files over e-mail and download them to their computer

One version: Everybody is working on the same document; no need to add version numbers to each document

History: Every previous version can be recovered in an instant and compared to the newest version

Notification of changes: A wiki can be set up so that team members will be automatically notified via e-mail if a change has been made to its files

Over time collaboration: Collaboration does not end with the semester but can build over multiple semesters and classes.

A Taxonomy of Classroom Uses

The following taxonomy of wiki uses in the classroom comes from Mark Phillipson (2008).

1. The Resource Wiki

The best-known example of a resource wiki is Wikipedia, an online encycloedia constructed by thousands of largely anonymous contributors that, by some accounts and despite occasional missteps, rivals the Encyclopedia Britannica in accuracy and quality and surpasses it in timeliness. The same format can be utilized in the classroom where students and instructors can build an expanding reference resource for any number of purposes, such as: book reports/reviews, customized glossaries and concept maps, (supplemental) course textbooks, course-specific case scenarios and real-world illustrations, student-generated poetry, course-related

histories of the surrounding community, a virtual museum of paintings and other art objects, collections of maps, rocks, bones, archeological artifacts, etc. The extra bonus of the wiki: These reference resources don't have to be limited to one class or one semester. They can grow across semesters and involve multiple classes.

2. The Presentation Wiki

As the name suggests, presentation wikis tend to generate material primarily for the convenience of the class, for peer evaluation, and for providing practical experience in the effective use of a communication forum. While the focus of the resource wiki is often turned outward to an audience beyond a classroom, the presentation wiki has more of an inward focus. Its material and writing style may resemble a reflective journal, but a journal written for a limited peer group calling for peer-feedback and evaluation. Presentation wikis are particularly suitable for education classes, where students may build "best practices clusters" of learning objectives, teaching strategies, and lesson plans.

3. The Gateway Wiki

Gateway wikis lend themselves to facilitating the study of science. Part of this wiki is the (unedited!) provision of data (i.e. scientific measurements, statistics, calculations, survey results, metrics, and any number of other datasets). These datasets may have been provided by the instructor, obtained from authoritative sources, or collected by students themselves. Students may then introduce, illustrate, and supplement these data sets, as well as conduct interpretive or ethical analysis. The gateway wiki can supplement student lab sections and provide a platform for students to log results, share experiences, air questions, and connect their observations to theory.

4. The Simulation Wiki

Simulation wikis can be useful choices for creative writing projects and for the study of historical events. They don't describe a subject, they are built to explore a world (such as San Diego State's *Holocaust Wiki Project*, or Skidmore College's *Greek Tragedy Project*). These wikis can be somewhat unpredictable. Their content may be browsed through negotiation of unique pathways, confrontation with decision points, exploration of one possibility over another, and comparison to real-life models. The simulation wiki is intended to mirror and to mimic its subject. Hence the term: simulation.

5. The Illuminated Wiki

The main purpose of this wiki is the communal mark-up of source documents. It does not act like an encyclopedic resource wiki, but focuses on the act of explication of its subject. Students mark up source text with the results of their interpretation and investigation. The wiki then represents a record of exegesis. For example, the Romantic Audience Project wikis developed by students at Bowdoin College focused on the explication of a limited group of 18th and 19th-century poems. Students chose a word or phrase from such texts and created links from this source text to their analysis. Such analyses may become even more interesting when compared across classes over several semesters. How did students react to a specific poem in 2003 versus students in a class five or ten years later?

References

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