



Viewpoint

Why Wikis?

- By Ruth Reynard
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Most Web 2.0 tools are discussed at length in terms of their application to the learning process. While there is much that can be learned from using these tools in instruction, there are also principles upon which that use rests that have long been the goals of instruction at various levels. In other words, while the tools may change, the goals of teaching and learning remain much the same.

What is a great advance, however, is how quickly and effectively some of these instructional goals can be met while using newer technology tools. The Wiki is one such tool.

Again, while ideas of knowledge construction and collaboration in learning are not new, the effective ways in which a Wiki can support and facilitate these outcomes provide interesting concepts for further conversation.

Constructed Knowledge

There can be no doubt that most educators are focused on helping students learn and gain more knowledge about specific subject areas or skill areas. What is not always clear is how knowledge is developed in the sense that it becomes part of the specific and "useable" knowledge of the student rather than the general knowledge of multiple persons in a specific field of study or expertise. Students must not only understand what they hear, read, experience, or do in a class but must also incorporate that into their own structures of knowing so that it is recalled and applied in relevant situations. The Wiki tool can help facilitate this development process in several ways:

Knowledge is not a distinct or quantifiable body of content; knowledge is information that has become understood and applied in some sort of meaningful context so that it can be "known" by the student. We often test information recall in our courses but we do not always evaluate knowledge development. The Wiki can help in this process of moving information towards useable knowledge.

When using a Wiki in an instructional setting, the context is essentially dynamic and moving. That is, the actual purpose of a Wiki is not to simply communicate information, but to invite participation at the level of input that will contribute to the understanding and application of the information shared. This can happen in a document or media project via a Wiki or a series of contributed knowledge "items" that can be collectively producing new knowledge. The Wiki, then,

can "move" student work towards a collective goal.

Collaborative Writing

One such project type that is maximized in a Wiki is collaborative writing--writing that depends on the participation of several for its completion and success. Writing collaboratively is a complex challenge for participants and instructors as it brings together a variety of skill sets and goals. Michael Spring (1997) in his [Web page on collaborative writing](#) suggested:

With collaborative authoring, there is a meshing of the complexity of (technical) writing along with the challenges of collaboration. Given that writing is a complex, open-ended task, there are many ways of stating meaning. With multiple authors, this adds to the complexity. The acts of collaboration and writing as they relate to collaborative authoring include: establishing an agenda or goal of the collaboration effort, identifying writing tasks and dividing those tasks among group members, tracking individual idea generation, defining rules for document management, identifying roles for group members, communicating ideas, and managing conflict. Collaborative authoring, therefore, requires effective communication between members of the writing group.

Spring continued:

The communication requirements of the writing task are: task division, brainstorming, editing, general discussion, and goal setting. Task division relates to assigning tasks and communicating the associated requirements and deadlines. Brainstorming is generating and recording ideas to be used in production of the text. Editing involves members indicating their comments about and enhancements for the text. These comments and suggestions will be used to revise the existing text. General discussions can include formal team meetings as well as casual, impromptu conversations. Determining what the purpose or goal of the document is goal setting. Also, goal setting can include establishing the timeliness and activities that relate to task division.

Therefore, it is a highly managed project requiring multiple levels of skills with people and tasks. While there are multiple ways to manage this kind of project and various methods and tools that could be used, using a Wiki for this purpose presents an easier solution. A Wiki provides an integrated authoring, editing, annotating, and feedback environment where every thought, every idea, and every modification can be captured, re-assessed, and integrated into a developing whole. When setting up a writing project in a Wiki it is important to structure it efficiently with schedules and stage-by-stage goals. In other words, to simply suggest collaboration to students does not result in high motivation and participation. The Wiki provides the location and the tools; the instructor provides the general and specific goals, for each stage of writing and the synthesis takes place through the process.

Public Ideas

For collaborative writing to be successful, an additional notion of public versus "owned" ideas must be understood, although this is extremely difficult to achieve. In most discussions that take place in class and online when students discuss course concepts or reactions to readings, etc., ideas are

communicated by individuals, and the idea expressed is "owned" by the person who expressed it. What this does to a discussion is add in a layer of negotiation of the space that really should not be present in a collaborative context in its truest form. Even without a digital context, for students to be able to elevate a discussion to the level of dialogue and debate where ideas are publicly owned is a complex challenge for the instructor to facilitate. It is difficult for students to understand that, to truly debate ideas, there must be a level of objectivity that resists ownership of those ideas and makes them public. However, once ideas are public, they can be worked and modified and built upon so that they grow as a result and become something new. In a Wiki environment, this can happen well and be captured visually.

The main difference between working ideas in an instructional setting and simply providing a platform for the sharing of ideas is focus. There are numerous new and even newer Internet sites that promote the notion of sharing ideas, even small ideas, so that feedback can be given and ideas can "live" as long as they have life to do so. In an instructional setting, the working of ideas centers on a theme or focus around which information has already been shared, opinions read or discussed and a problem or project question posed. The ideas shared then have various levels of movement. For example, initial ideas usually are reinforcements of already shared information, but then become expanded to include possibilities of thought and application. Finally the ideas move through a process of modification and expansion at intervals until there is a consensus reached that the result is acceptable and has moved the thinking to a new point of discovery and understanding. If every instructor implemented this process of knowledge construction, there would be enlightenment for every student in every class and often for instructors as well as they share in the process with their students. This is discovery at its best.

Using a Wiki for this purpose does not minimize the need for a facilitation of the process itself by the participants, but it does provide an easily accessible and captured environment that is easily edited and "moved" but remains visible and, therefore, traceable for every participant. Often remembering the process of thought is useful for students so that they can then use the same process in different classes. Often it is precisely the learning process that is not valued and, therefore, soon forgotten by students.

The Wiki, then, is a great tool to help facilitate students collaboration and knowledge construction, however, teachers must be aware of what that process looks like so that is not shortened or diminished in any way for the students. Additionally, assignment must be designed in such a way that students can demonstrate the kinds of skills necessary for true collaboration and sharing of the learning space to occur. Once the learning process has room to take place and is truly valued and facilitated by the teacher, students will feel empowered and successful in their learning.