

Web 2.0 Handouts

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Abstract: In this chapter, I will describe how I use wikis to support my workshops and conferences presentations as dynamic online handouts. Related topics will include blogging, RSS, podcasting, social bookmarks, and PHP.

Introduction

During the 25 years that I have delivered professional development activities for educators, I have always tried to model the technologies and techniques that I was teaching. In recent years, the efforts have had less to do with specific technologies, software products, services, and much more to do with philosophies where learning happens as part of continuing and multi-dimensional conversations among learners and teachers, and others on the Net. This is what the emerging new web, web 2.0 has done to my vision of education.

I have long abandoned the print handout, using it only under those conditions where they are expressly requested by the people who pay me for my services. Otherwise, I point to my web site at the beginning of the presentation demonstrating links to web pages that provide a variety of digital resources for the topic at hand. Until recently, these have been static html documents or pages that were derived from content management systems.

The first time that I installed a wiki engine on my web server and produced a web page that could be edited by any visitor to that page, I saw this as the perfect vehicle for providing access to digital content for my workshop participants within the context of education as conversation philosophy mentioned above.

The Wiki

Fairly early in the evolution of my wiki handouts, I selected MediaWiki (<http://mediawiki.org/>) as the engine for my online handouts. Its robustness, richness, availability of various extensions that have been developed by an open-source community of programmers, and security features were among the reasons why I chose this product. An additional features that the familiarity that many people already have with its editing process, since MediaWiki is the engine used by the Wikipedia (<http://wikipedia.org/>).

Initial, I left editing wide open for my online handouts, so that teacher participants would be able to easily add and edit content on the handouts. This did not last long, as spambots quickly found the site, adding online gambling and fairly disturbing pornography to my growing list of handouts. I switched the login feature on, and set up a generic account, with an easy to remember login, *teacher*, and equally easy to remember password, *teacher*. I added a note to the top of each of the pages reminding users of the login and password, wanting to keep participant in the handouts conversation as simple as possible.

As teachers have become much more sophisticated in their use of web tools, a removed the teacher account, and now require them to establish their own account, and login as themselves as the edit the handout pages. The ability to easily set up a personal account is a native feature of WikiMedia.

Lists of Links

One important feature of any technology handout, print or digital, is lists of web sites related to the topic of the workshop. My wiki handouts were no different. But I didn't want to have to manually code links into the appropriate wiki pages, everytime I found something new for educators.

Social bookmarks provide an efficient way maintain a catalog of web of web sites. Tagging the sites makes it easy to cross reference web pages that apply to different topics in my presentations. Since del.icio.us, my social bookmark service of choice, syndicates my bookmarks by tag, using RSS, the challenge was to find a way to attract aggregated lists of web pages into my wiki handouts.

The solution came from a programmer in Cogne, Germany. Mutante, had created an RSS extension for MediaWiki, which enabled me to edit a wiki page with a reference to an RSS feed (tagged del.icio.us feed) and the extension accesses del.icio.us and displays all of the web links with the specified tag. Adding the extension was easy, requiring that I download a PHP file, upload it to the /extensions director of my MediaWiki installation, and then add one line of code to the MediaWiki's configuration file. Take my word for it. It was easy. However, you may want to refer to your schools web server administrator to affect this change.

Once the RSS extension was installed, all I had to do was go to del.icio.us and list all of my web sites with a specific tag, say, blogsineducation. Scrolling to the bottom of the del.icio.us listing, I would find an orange RSS chicklet button, that links to the RSS feed for that listing. I would then right-click on the chicklet, copying the RSS feed link to the clipboard of my computer, and then go the the wiki handouts page where I want my list of Blogs in Education web resources to be listed. Finally, I would enter a beginning `<rss>` tag paste the feed url, and then type the ending `</rss>` tag. The tag looks like this:

```
<rss>http://del.icio.us/rss/dwarlick/web20</rss>
```

As an example, entering text into the edit box (figure 1) for my wiki page would result in the web following page (figure 2).

The image shows a MediaWiki editor toolbar with icons for bold, italic, undo, redo, link, unlink, help, source, and others. Below the toolbar is a text area containing the following code:

```
This is a test of the RSS extension
for MediaWiki:

<rss>http://del.icio.us/rss/dwarlick/digitalcamera|
title=Digital Camera Web Sites|long</rss>
```

figure 1

You notice a couple of extra parameter, separated by the pipe symbol (|). The title attribute identifies a preferred title for the listing, replacing the title that is labeled in the RSS file. *Long* indicates that a larger amount of the description of each item should be listed. If the word *short* was entered, then only each item title would appear.

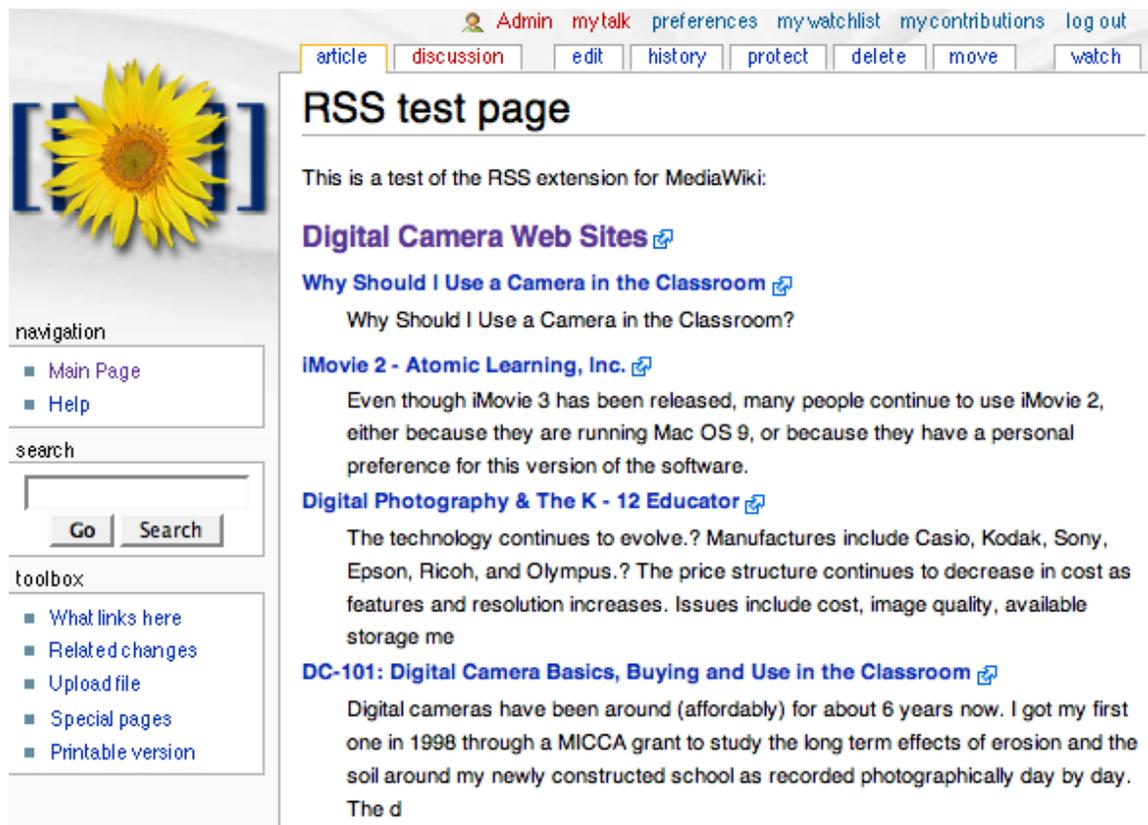


figure 2

Media Feeds

Once I can subscribe to RSS feeds from my wiki handouts pages, much more becomes possible in terms of making a variety of resources available. More for fun and color than for modeling deep concepts of learning through conversation, I will frequently take photographs at the venues I am speaking at, uploaded the pictures to flickr (<http://flickr.com/>), tagging the pictures for the event.

One of the unique features of this popular photo archive and sharing service is the ability to generate RSS feeds based on the tags of the photos. So all I have to do is generate a listing, on flickr, of all photos that have been tagged for the event, paste the feed address within the rss tags (<rss>feed address</rss>), and a listing of photos appear on the online handouts page (see figure 3).

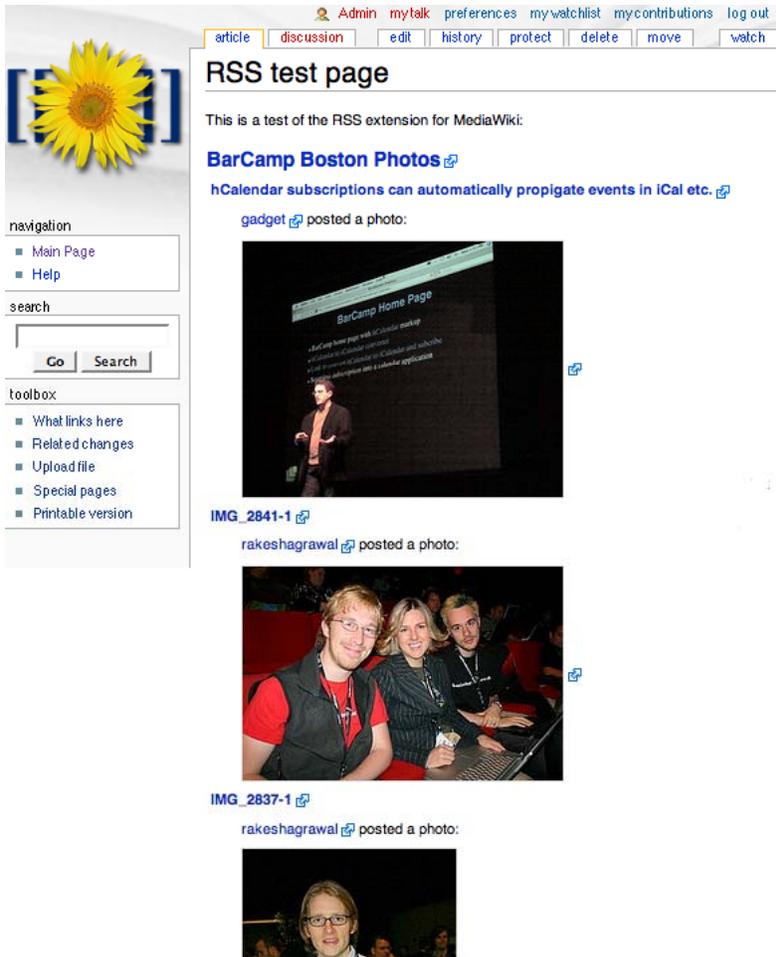


figure 3

Participant Contributions

One of the signature features of Web 2.0 is that content comes increasingly out of a conversation within a community of interest, rather than exclusively relying on a single authoritative figure.

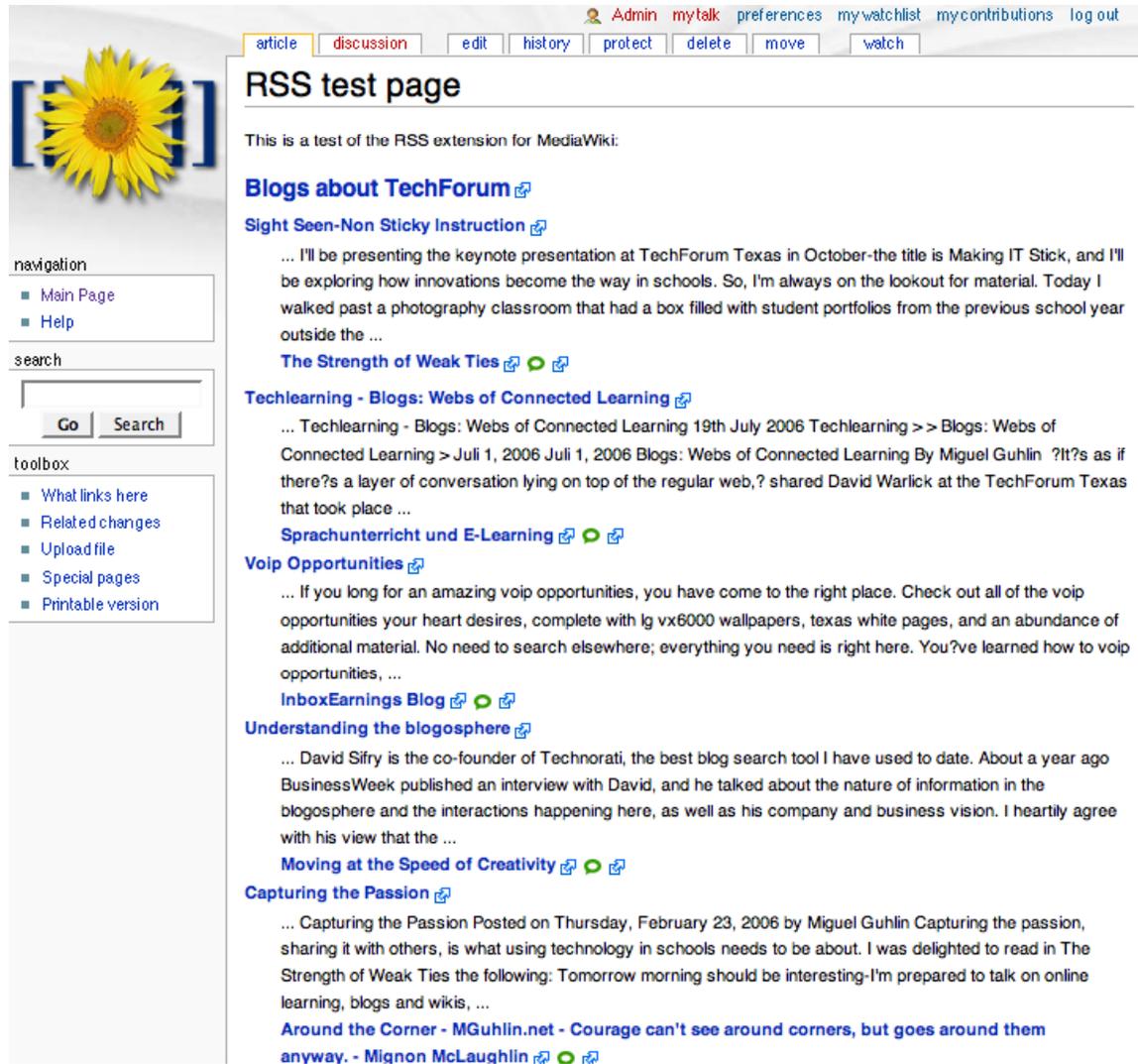
Today, it is possible and even likely that people in my audiences will have perspectives on the topics of my presentations that may be of critical value to other members of the audience and to me. So one of the chief benefits of using wikis for the online handouts is the ability to allow session participants to edit the contents of the wiki pages. In addition to that, the ability to display the content of RSS feeds affords me the unique opportunity to display blog postings written by participants, related to the presentation.

I will usually announce this feature early in the presentation, asking bloggers in the audience to include specified tags in any blogging that they do about the presentation. For instance, if I am speaking about the new web, I will ask bloggers to include *web2* and *warlick* in the body of their entry, or among its tags.

To generate the feed, I use Technorati (<http://technorati.com>), a blogging search engine. Through my free membership with Technorati, I conduct a search of blogs that mention *techforum* and *texas*, and then save that search to my **watchlists**. Once the search is added to my watchlist, an RSS feed is established. Finally, I find the link to the RSS

feed, copy it into the clipboard, and then go to the blog listing page in my wiki handouts, and include the following on that page.

```
<rss>http://www.technorati.com/watchlists/rss.html?wid=327233</rss>
```



The screenshot shows a MediaWiki page titled "RSS test page". At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for "Admin", "my talk", "preferences", "my watchlist", and "my contributions", along with a "log out" button. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with links for "article", "discussion", "edit", "history", "protect", "delete", "move", and "watch". The main content area displays a list of RSS feeds from Technorati, including titles like "Blogs about TechForum", "Sight Seen-Non Sticky Instruction", "The Strength of Weak Ties", "Techlearning - Blogs: Webs of Connected Learning", "Sprachunterricht und E-Learning", "Voip Opportunities", "InboxEarnings Blog", "Understanding the blogosphere", "Moving at the Speed of Creativity", "Capturing the Passion", and "Around the Corner - MGuhlin.net - Courage can't see around corners, but goes around them anyway." Each entry includes a brief excerpt and a link to the full article. On the left side, there is a sidebar with a navigation menu (Main Page, Help), a search box, and a toolbox with links for "What links here", "Related changes", "Upload file", "Special pages", and "Printable version".

figure 4

As with the flickr images discussed previously, a listing of blogs, indexed by Technorati and tagged with *techforum* and *texas*, appears in the position of the RSS tags.

The dirty secret about Wikis and My Solution

Upon initial introduction, wikis seem like a magically simple way to facilitate collaboration in the classroom, allowing students to work together (quietly) on collaborative activities. There is a problem, however, that is often not explained during the wiki's initial introduction. I must admit that I tend to gloss over this issue during my customary one hour presentations, not wanting to squelch any enthusiasm that I may be

inspiring. The problem is that only one person can edit a single wiki page at a time. For this reason, wikis work best, when the work is extended over a longer period of time – or when individuals are working on different wiki pages, to be compiled later.

The solution is obvious, if you already know the names of the participants in your workshop or presentation or can label the tables they will be working at. If you can create links to individual wiki pages, labeled with the participants' names or table designations (Table 1, Table 2, Table 3), then you can give them unique places to go to contribute their work. Consequently, you can have individuals or groups working on their own wiki pages, contributing content, that they can revisit later, and even visit each others contributions by backing up to the original listing and then clicking into their pages, editing as per the assignment.

My problem is that I rarely know the names of the people I will be working with. So I have cheated. I have written a web page with PHP script, that I can send participants to from a link in the wiki handouts. The page feature a form where they type their names and then press the submit button. The script automatically adds their to the handouts wiki page, building a list of participants, each linked to a unique and editable page. This solution worked very well with MediaWiki until their last update, which altered the programming, that I couldn't figure out how to hack it. So I have now adopted PMWiki, developed by Dallas area programmer and computer scientist, Dr. Patrick Michaud. The programming was simpler and easier to hack and he features a skin or template that is almost identical to Media Wiki's – a seamless transition.

PHP is a high level scripting language for creating dynamic web pages.