

Learning With Wikis

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In the business and education world alike, the concept of *collaborative technology* continues to shape our thinking. The notion of techies huddled in isolation in front of monitors has given way to sharing of data and ideas across the office or across the ocean. Students, professionals, or like-minded hobbyists can now be linked on line by more than mere discussion boards or chat rooms. Wikis now give a venue for virtually anyone to collaborate on line.

What is a wiki? A wiki is a collaborative writing space that allows users to read, add, and edit text and files of any kind including sound, movies, and links to other websites. Very little tech. expertise is required to contribute to a wiki, and only a web browser and an internet connection is needed. All wikis contain two vital commands: “edit” and “save.” Users can also view the history of a wiki to compare any of the iterations of the project. The most popular wiki today is Wikipedia. A great introductory document is available from the Educause Learning Initiative entitled “The Seven Things You Should Know About Wikis” (<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7004.pdf>)

How do I make and use one? Starting a wiki is a relatively quick process. First, select one of the free, online wikis available. Some of the more popular ones are “PB Wiki” (<http://pbwiki.com>), Wet Paint (<http://www.wetpaint.com>), Wikispaces (<http://www.wikispaces.com>), and Jottit (<http://jottit.com>). To determine which wiki might be best for you, check out Wiki Matrix (<http://www.wikimatrix.org>) for a side-by-side analysis of many choices. The moderator can then initiate the space and in most cases can set the security parameters to determine who can edit and view the space. Contributors are then enrolled (usually via email address) and the wiki can begin.

How can I utilize them for students? The idea of a collaborative creation space for students has limitless possibilities. Students can create a biology on-line textbook, in Literature Circles (Harvey Daniels) students can culminate the process with a set of “Cliff Notes” on the book studied, students can collaborate with a school across town or across the country to create any kind of a project. Wikispaces has a page that has a variety of wikis used in education:

(<http://educationalwikis.wikispaces.com/Examples+of+educational+wikis>)

What are the advantages?

- Relatively simple technology
- Promotes “real-world” collaboration skills
- Fosters richer communication than synchronous communication (Mabrito, 2006)
- Pools strengths of many
- Assessable, easy to track
- Online collaborative writing produces higher quality writing than face-to-face collaboration (Passig and Schwartz, 2007)

What are the concerns?

- Security/safety issues
- Potential biases
- Labor for moderator
- Combating “Copy and paste” philosophy
- Potential inequitable work distribution by contributors

How do I ensure high-quality work?. The first step is to have an “Acceptable Use” policy that outlines expectations of “Digital Professionalism.” Next, whenever possible, the wiki should become a tool to be used by contributors later as a resource instead of merely an “assignment.” Assessment, however does need to be included. Students must take an active role in creating rubrics and assessing the wikis (Stiggins). During the process, teachers need to be continually monitoring and contributing formative suggestions directly on the wiki itself. Most importantly, to develop true collaboration, teachers must incorporate structured Cooperative Learning methodology into the project. Among the components, the most important to consider are Positive Interdependence and Individual Accountability (Johnson and Johnson, <http://www.co-operation.org/>). Designating roles and tasks, providing a unified goal, and creating a climate where the participants identify the need for each other will ensure a quality product.