<u>**Using Wikis to Create Online Communities**</u>

Meredith Farkas

August 23, 2005

"Web design" used to be thought of as something only attempted by people who had specific technological knowledge. These people were in control of our websites and, in many cases, the content of those websites. Over the past decade, different tools have been developed to level the playing field and to give almost anyone the ability to develop a web page. Even now, there is still often a single person who is in charge of adding content to the website. Thus, many websites only reflect the vision of one person or a small handful of people. Other people in an organization may have great ideas about how to improve the website, but they are not included in the decision-making process.

Wikis level the playing field even further, completely democratizing the process of designing a website. A wiki allows anyone the ability to take part in the creation and editing of web content. With its simplified text-formatting rules that anyone can easily learn, it truly puts experienced web designers and web novices on equal footing. In public libraries, where the technological skills of employees can range from high to non-existent, wikis can allow everyone the ability to develop the website. The resulting website would reflect the imagination and good ideas of the entire organization, not just a select few with the requisite "tech-savvy."

The possibilities for what libraries can do with wikis are endless. At their least, they are spaces for quick and easy collaborative work. At their best, they can become

true community resources that can position the library as a an online hub of their local community.

What in the world is a wiki?

Wikis have been around since the mid-1990s, but only recently has the general public become aware of their existence. This is due, in large part, to the growing popularity of the Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/), an encyclopedia created by the online community. In the Wikipedia, any individual is allowed to create, add to, or edit any entry. Some of the more popular Wikipedia entries have been edited hundreds of times by dozens of different people. A wiki allows a group of people to collaboratively develop website with no knowledge of HTML or other markup languages. These people may know each other or they may be complete strangers who are all working together to create and edit a website. Wiki, meaning quick in Hawaiian, was developed to allow for easy and fast collaborative development and editing of a website. Wikis usually start as a blank slate and are developed by the community of users who choose to participate. Anyone in the community can add to or edit anyone else's writing. In theory, the final content should represent some sort of consensus within the community.

Some wikis are open to everyone. This can become problematic when spammers or malicious people vandalize entries, but they are usually quickly fixed by concerned members of the wiki community. The community enforces behavioral norms, so that it doesn't become a free-for-all. It is self-organizing group behavior in action. Other wikis are open only to specific groups like librarians, software developers, or participants in a

class. These are wikis that are used to fill a specific need, and that need is how to find a way to easily collaborate and share information. Wikis are often used for intranets, research spaces, collaborative projects, creating documentation, and editing texts. Stanford Law professor Lawrence Lessig actually put the contents of his book *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* into a wiki (http://codebook.jot.com/WikiHome) to allow others to update the information for the next edition.

It can be difficult for people to get used to the idea of a website that anyone is allowed to add to or edit. The notion of private property is so deeply embedded in our society that it's difficult to imagine going onto someone else's website and changing things, even when they want us to. We're accustomed to websites where someone is the final arbiter on what can or cannot go into it. With a wiki, everyone is the final arbiter. If I don't like what someone put into the wiki, I can change it. And if someone don't like what I wrote, they can make their own changes. The wiki will develop organically to reflect the interests and needs of the group who worked on it.

What can my library do with a wiki?

Wikis are a great way of collaboratively developing a website, but they are not suitable for every web-based project. While some websites might benefit from the insights of the community, others function better under tighter control. If you are looking to develop content that requires input from people outside of the library, a wiki is a the ideal tool to solicit that content. The following are just a few ideas for how wikis could be used in public libraries.

Subject guides

Librarians have been creating subject guides on the Internet since before there was a World Wide Web. With the many "hats" that most librarians have to wear in any given day, updating the subject guides may not be a priority. Subject guides can languish online with dead links to long-gone websites and without links to newer, more useful sites. This may be because the librarian doesn't have the time to update them or because the librarian must give the updates to someone else who actually puts them on the Web.

A wiki is a great format for a subject guide. Because it can be edited by anyone, patrons can add to the collection of useful resources and can prune away the dead links. The librarian can moderate the wiki and decide what websites can stay in the guide, or he or she can let everyone contribute freely. It's a great way to develop a subject guide that really represents the interests of its users and doesn't put the entire burden of finding websites on the librarian. Even without asking for user input, a wiki allows librarians with little web-savvy to quickly and easily update the subject guide. Chad Boeninger, Business Librarian at Ohio University has created a Biz Wiki (http://www.library.ohiou.edu/subjects/bizwiki/) so that he can more easily update his subject guides and so that students and faculty can add to his lists of useful links.

Annotating the catalog

Most library catalogs only contain the most basic information on books. They have the elements that go into a MARC record: title, subject(s), author, year published, etc. When patrons go into an online catalog, they probably won't know if what they've

found is the sort of book they're looking for until they pull it off the shelf. When users go onto Amazon.com, they will find a book synopsis, cover art, and reviews from people who have already read the book. This extra content helps people to get a better sense of whether the book will meet their needs. Why can't we do that same at libraries? Adding wiki functionality to the catalog would allow users to post synopses and reviews for books they've already read. We can capitalize on the reading experiences of our patrons in order to help them make informed reading decisions from the library catalog. Right now, OCLC is working on putting wiki functionality into Open WorldCat (http://www.oclc.org/productworks/wcwiki.htm), so that people can add reviews to book entries. The results of this test case will give us some idea about the power of allowing users to annotate the catalog.

Community wiki

Many libraries have been working to make themselves a physical hub of the community. With community programming and useful workshops, libraries have attracted people to library who may otherwise have never visited. What about making the library's website the *online* hub of the community? Libraries could create a community wiki that would be a one-stop-shop for community information. With the input of the entire community, it could become whatever the community needs it to be. Want to know who the best mechanic is for fixing old Toyotas? Check the automotive reviews on the wiki. Want to know when your child's next Little League game is? Check the team information page the coach set up on the wiki. Want to find the spiciest Thai food in town? Read the member reviews in the restaurant section. Anyone could

add new informative content. The library could team up with other local organizations to develop, maintain and add content to the wiki, but the bulk of the content will come from average member of the community. Opening up a community guide to the public allows a wealth of information to flow in that can make the library's website a true community resource.

Wikis for Librarians

Wikis can also be used internally in libraries. In an average week, the number of emails that travel between colleagues in a library is astounding! When we're working on a specific project with our colleagues, it can be difficult keep up with the flow of conversation in emails. We have to remember who to cc: on things and which ideas we have not yet responded to. Wikis are an excellent space for collaborative group work. All of the planning and communications can be documented in the wiki rather than in emails that can easily be deleted. Everyone can make changes to the wiki. If the group is working on a document, it can be edited in the wiki rather than having different versions of a word processing file going back and forth through email. It's simply a better way of organizing the group's efforts and keeping track of where everyone is in the process.

Libraries have increasingly been developing intranets for their staff where the administrators can more easily disseminate information. Making the intranet into a wiki allows both administrators and staff to easily add relevant news and other content. Are you sick of updating and printing out your large policy and reference manuals? Putting them into a wiki makes them accessible to all staff members and makes them easy to update on the fly. You don't have to make every wiki document open to editing by all

users of the wiki. Sometimes the purpose of a wiki's page is just to make it easier for *you* to edit things.

Each year, there are dozens of library conferences taking place in various cities around the world. Oftentimes, the librarians attending these conferences have never been to the cities they are visiting. They may have a difficult time finding the best places to eat, stay, and visit on a limited budget. With a large conference like the ALA Annual Conference, new attendees may be overwhelmed by its size and not know how to make the most of their time. On the other hand, there are librarians who are experienced conference go-ers and there are librarians who live in the city where the conference is taking place. They have unique and useful knowledge that others would find tremendously useful. The question is: how do we hook these two groups up? The answer is: a wiki.

For the 2005 ALA Annual Conference in Chicago, I created a wiki to supplement the American Library Association's conference information. After feeling completely lost at my first Annual Conference in Orlando, I knew there were people who would benefit from tips and advice on navigating Chicago and the Conference. Since I'm no expert myself, I called on the library community to help out. The result was the ALA Chicago 2005 Wiki (http://meredith.wolfwater.com/wiki/). This wiki included restaurant reviews, a guide to wifi in Chicago, tips on getting around in Chicago, tips for conference go-ers, a list of unofficial and official conference events, people's conference schedules, and much more. When I initially created the wiki, I had my own limited vision of what it could be, but other members of the community expanded it beyond my wildest dreams. Some people simply added a conference tip or the name of a restaurant they like, while

other people added entire sections to the wiki. All of their contributions, no matter what their size, added up to a truly useful resource for people attending the conference.

All over the world, librarians are doing truly innovative things in their communities. Unfortunately, most librarians don't document the things they do for the larger library community. This may be because they don't think they're doing anything revolutionary, but it may also be because they don't feel like they have a place to easily share their ideas. A wiki can become a repository for the collective knowledge of the library community; a place where anyone can share their success stories, advice, and useful materials. I created the Library Success Wiki (http://www.libsuccess.org) to be a one-stop-shop for great ideas for librarians. If a librarian has done something at their library that they consider a success, they can write about it in the wiki. If they have materials or know of websites that would be helpful to other librarians, they can add that information to the wiki as well. The goal of the wiki is to help librarians replicate the successes of other libraries so that no one ever has to reinvent the wheel.

These suggestions only represent a small portion of the possibilities for the use of wikis in libraries. Wikis can essentially be used for anything where collaboratively developed content or easy Web editing is desirable. Internally they can make it easier to share information among librarians. Externally, they can make the library's website a true online community.

So you want to build a wiki? Practical considerations for wiki novices.

So you've decided that you want to implement a wiki at your library. Fantastic! Now you've got some decisions to make. While a wiki is free and democratic, that does not mean you can just throw it up online without some sort of planning and structure. You need to think about your audience, your wiki's focus, the level of control you wish to exert over the wiki, and the software you wish to use. Here are some practical things to think about before you get started:

1. A wiki *must* have a specific purpose. You can't just offer a wiki up to your patrons as a blank slate and expect them to know what they should add to it. Even when the wiki has a specific purpose, it's good to create some sort of structure so that people will feel comfortable posting. Users can always post whatever they want and can change the structure of the wiki later on, but it can be difficult to get people to start posting without any structure.

2. It's also good to add some content to the wiki before making it public. Most people get nervous if they're the first person posting to a wiki and they may be unsure if they're posting the "right" sort of content. Even if there really is no "right" or "wrong", people may need some concrete examples before they feel confident enough to add content.

3. Be very explicit in your instructions and disclaimers. You need to make the guidelines for adding content to the wiki very clear or you may get a flood of emails where patrons ask you to add things instead of doing it themselves. If it is a public wiki, you should develop a disclaimer making it clear that the library has not created all of the content on

the wiki. This way the library will not be held responsible for the opinions of wiki users and the librarians will not be considered experts on every bit of content in the wiki. Copyright is an issue that should be addressed both in terms of the license governing content on the wiki and content added to the wiki that may be restricted under copyright.

4. Spam can become problematic on a wiki, but with enough loyal users, it will become a manageable problem. When I first started the ALA Chicago 2005 Wiki, I had to fix all of the spam myself, but once I had a community of users, other people usually fixed the vandalized pages before I ever saw them. The community really can enforce behavioral norms. Some wiki software also allows you to install spam filters that can help delete the spam before it ever gets onto the wiki.

5. It is nearly impossible to "break" a wiki. Spam and vandalism are not fun to find on your wiki, but they are very easy to fix. Most wiki programs save all of the earlier versions of each page, so even if the entire page is vandalized, it is easy to revert back to an older version of the page. This is also good news for nervous users who may be afraid of ruining a page. No matter what anyone does, it can always be changed back.

6. One important decision wiki administrators must make is whether or not to limit access to the wiki. Many wikis are open to anyone who wishes to read or edit the pages. Of course this gives free reign to spammers or malicious individuals whose only intent is to vandalize pages. Some wikis require users to register, which usually helps with any spam problems. Registering is a simple process that requires users to create a username and

password, but it prevents spambots from simply putting content up on the wiki. While this will help to control the spam problem, it will not prevent malicious users. Other wikis are password-protected so only selected people can even read it. Obviously this measure would prevent malicious users or spammers from adding content. Password protection is only practical for wikis where the list of users is limited and known – like in group projects. For a community wiki, it would be difficult to give user names and passwords to every member of the community. The level of access restriction should depend on the type of wiki the library is creating and the level of protection they feel they need. It's hard to find a balance between being as inclusive as possible and still protecting the wiki from malicious individuals.

7. There seem to be as many wiki applications as there are wikis. The decision of which wiki software to use depends on the features the library wants and the tech-savvy of the person or people setting up the wiki. Some wiki software is easier to set up than others. Most wiki software is written in PHP, but others are written in Perl, Ruby, Python, and other programming languages. Some wikis are freely hosted on the Web and have limited features. Others, all free to install, must be installed on the library's server and usually have greater ability to be customized. Here are a few options for your library:

- Seed Wiki (http://www.seedwiki.com/) is a free hosted wiki for those who either do not have their own server space or do not have the technical skills to install and customize wiki software. It is very easy to use. Administrators can set restrictive

permissions on specific pages that the library may not want altered, but there are charges for password protection and advanced customization.

- Schtuff (http://www.schtuff.com/), like Seed Wiki, is a free web-based wiki, but it does not charge for any of its features. It does have a 200MB space limit and likely will come out with more flexible for-pay storage options in the future.

- Media Wiki (http://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/MediaWiki) is the software that runs the Wikipedia and is written in PHP. Because it's used in such a large wiki implementation, lots of documentation exists on how to install, customize and use the software. In other words, you won't have to create your own usage guide for your patrons and staff. This is what I used for the ALA Chicago 2005 Wiki and the Library Success Wiki.

- Instiki (http://instiki.org/show/HomePage) is very simple to install, but the server used needs to be running the programming language Ruby which does not come standard on most web hosts.

- PmWiki (http://www.pmwiki.org/), written in PHP, is designed to look like a normal website. The only difference is ability to easily add and edit pages. The University of Minnesota uses it for their staff pages (http://wiki.lib.umn.edu/Staff/HomePage) – on which editing is password protected – and it hardly looks like a wiki at all!

Just remember, most of the decisions you make now are not irrevocable. You can always make changes later on. If spam becomes a real problem, you can change the permissions and require people to register. If you find that people are not using the wiki, you can

change the focus, add content, or make your permissions less restrictive. The wiki can

become anything you and its users want it to be.