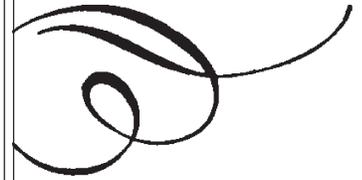# USING A WIKI TO ENHANCE
LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

by Brad Matthies, Jonathan Helmke, & Paul Slater

INTRODUCTION

A wiki is a type of social software that allows users to write, share, and edit content real-time, with only rudimentary skills in Web page creation. Moreover it is safe to say that most of what is being written regarding wikis in librarianship tends to focus on wiki-based reference sources, their questionable credibility (Gorman, 2005; Cohen, 2005), and how this question of credibility may impact information literacy (Clyde, 2005). Outside of this contentious topic are a wide range of multidisciplinary articles that focus on the collaborative uses of wikis. However, so far, the library literature appears to lack articles that discuss the application of wikis in library instruction. This article hopes to address this deficiency by chronicling Butler University Libraries' use of a wiki in librarian instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The authors conducted a review of library literature to determine if wikis are being used in library instruction. Our review revealed that so far no reports have been published in this area. This may mean that wikis have not yet been utilized by instruction librarians, or it may mean that articles are forthcoming. What follows is a review of select articles that were found during our search for literature. While not exhaustive, it should give readers an idea of what literature is being published on the topic. Articles fell into two categories: 1) General overviews of what wikis are and how they are used in various collaborative environments and 2) Descriptive articles covering specific examples of how wikis are being used in higher education.

COLLABORATIVE USES

There are numerous articles hailing mainly from information technology that tout the collaborative benefits of wikis within organizations. What follows is a brief overview of those articles that have library related applications.

According to Fichter (2005a) wikis are becoming very popular for team-based organizational collaboration in areas such as policy creation, customer service,

and research. An example that reflects library use of a wiki in this manner is Miami University Libraries information desk wiki. In this example, library staff use their wiki collaboratively to share answers to repeated research questions, post unanswered reference and IT questions, and post information pertaining to reference interview techniques (Withers, 2005). Finally, adding to these are other Intranet uses like "project teams, departmental initiatives, or special programs" (Fichter, 2005b, p. 50).

Another potential use for wikis in libraries is project brainstorming (Davies, 2004). Using wikis in this manner is quite commonplace in business and information technology. In this context, wikis can be created for specific projects like course design (Lamb, 2004a), virtual study areas for students (Bristow, 2005), or any project that requires the ability to gather input from multiple participants (Delio, 2005).

WIKIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

By now it should come as no surprise that educators are also tapping into the collaborative potential of wikis. For example, Skiba (2005) asserts that wikis can help students transmit knowledge, co-create new knowledge, and become experts themselves. Central to this process of knowledge transmission and creation is the notion of collaborative discovery learning. Simply put, discovery learning takes place most notably in problem solving situations where the student draws on his/her own experience and prior knowledge to discover the truths that are to be learned. Moreover, this type of learning often helps students to create new knowledge. Traditionally, discovery learning is personal, internal, and relies on a constructivist learning environment. However, wikis have the ability to make this process very interpersonal, collaborative, and dynamic.

In one such example, O'Neill (2005) used a wiki in her computer-science class to disseminate a framework of lecture notes. Then, to foster discovery learning, she had students return to the wiki site after the class lecture and fill in the notes with material that was presented in class. Not only did this endeavor provide

immediate feedback for the instructor but it also fostered discovery learning and collaboration among the students.

In a similar example, Lamb (2004b) reports of a professor who uses a wiki to enhance teaching and graduate research. Graduate students are required to use the class wiki space for collaborative writing, research, and reflection. Here again, a wiki is used to foster discovery-based active learning and collaboration among student peers.

OUR EXPERIENCE

Based on three years of collaboration with Butler University's business faculty, the Butler Libraries business liaisons have developed a three-part series of instruction sessions for the MG 101 Freshmen Business Experience. In the first session, students are introduced to the various types of business information, how to formulate research questions based on which part of the business environment they are assessing (i.e., economic, industry/competitive, market/customer, or global) and are afforded the opportunity to conduct some preliminary research. In the second session, students are informed of Butler's writing and citing resources, and are also given the opportunity to continue their research while two librarians are available to help them. In the final session, students are taught how to critically evaluate the content of their sources via a source evaluation workshop. In this workshop, students are divided into groups, are given a fictitious topic and one business source, and are then required to use the CRITIC Methodology to evaluate the content of their source for credibility (Matthies & Helmke, 2005).

Based on the learning objectives for MG 101 and the librarians' information literacy objectives, there is an emphasis on teaching students the importance of collaborative teamwork throughout all of these sessions. Thus, after reviewing literature pertaining to the collaborative uses of wikis, the librarians decided that a wiki could only enhance what had already been developed over the previous three years. So, during the fall of 2005, the librarians developed a modest wiki-based assignment. Each team of students was required to locate their teams' wiki page, appoint a webmaster, and collaboratively follow the posted instructions (http://www.seedwiki.com/wiki/butler_wikiref/). During the allotted lab time, students were required to use the libraries' business databases to find one preliminary business source for each of the four business environment areas. These sources should relate to the particular team's proposed business plan and answer the following questions: 1) What is your source's name? 2) How does this particular source help with your preliminary research? While the rest of the team members used

the libraries' databases to find their sources and answer their questions, the team's webmaster used the wiki's real-time editing capabilities to post their findings to the team's assigned wiki page.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall the use of a wiki to enhance library instruction exceeded our expectations for success. Rather than struggling to keep students engaged during a typical lecture-based instruction session, this enterprise allowed students, faculty, and librarians to collaboratively be involved in the teaching and learning. In a real-time situation, students literally had to formulate their research questions and select the appropriate business database that had the needed information. Thus, the librarians and instructors became mediators and used their expertise to guide discovery learning in the areas of database selection and use, question formulation, and overall assessment of each team's tentative business plan.

Better still, the wiki also served as a virtual repository of student work which allowed the librarians to diagnose each team's initial business plan and research, prior to the second instruction session which included an intensive research component. In this way, librarians were better prepared to help students continue their research, and, in a few cases, were able to identify problem business plans early in the semester before they became a problem for the respective team. Moreover, faculty were able to retroactively view what had occurred with each team during class and teams in general were able to see how other teams approached similar problems. Based on this success, the librarians are developing a wiki-based component for the aforementioned source evaluation workshop which takes place in the third instruction session.

The only caveat to our success is the wiki platform itself. The Butler Libraries settled on Seed Wiki (http://www.seedwiki.com/) which is one of many free public wikis available on the Internet. Due to what we suspect was high server load at the Seed Wiki end, some groups could not access their wiki page for up to five minutes. This problem happened in three class sections, but when one considers that seven class sections spanning 30 individual team pages used Seed Wiki and all teams were eventually able to access their site, it was not a major problem. Still, it may behoove librarians who are planning to experiment with wikis to compare free platforms with the many commercial products that are available. Chawner and Lewis (2004), Schwartz, Clark, Cossarin, and Rudolph (2004), and Tonkin (2005) have authored articles that provide excellent advice in this regard. So librarians and other educators may want to consult their work before selecting a product.

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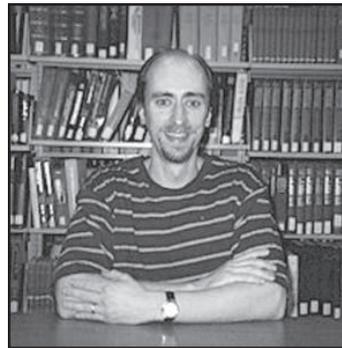
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