

infotech by annette lamb and larry johnson

an information skills workout: wikis and collaborative writing

Teacher-librarians are always on the lookout for ways to introduce and reinforce student information skills. Whether evaluating the accuracy of information found at Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, expanding an existing wiki project, or creating original content for a new wiki, collaborative writing projects allow young people the opportunity to exercise their minds and apply essential information skills to authentic activities. To become information fluent, students must be able to use their skills in a variety of situations across disciplines to solve problems and make decisions. Creating and using wikis are a great information skills workout.

WIKI BASICS

Wikis are collaboratively created web sites. They involve young authors in selecting, evaluating, revising, editing, and publishing information and ideas. A wiki uses web-based open-editing tools to provide an easy way for multiple participants to enter, submit, manage, and update web pages. Wiki-based systems are popular because they are simple to install and contributors do not need special software. The word *wiki* comes from the Hawaiian word for "quick" or "fast," meaning that a collaborative team can quickly construct a web site.

Emphasis is placed on authoring content rather than simply viewing existing information. Wiki environments may be text based or can incorporate graphics, audio, video, and animation. Users make changes by selecting from options and filling in forms on a web page. Authorized users can add and delete links, pages, and content. In some cases, a moderator approves changes before they are posted. Most wikis also provide a way to track changes and view earlier versions of pages.

WIKI CHARACTERISTICS

Wikis are a specific type of social technology involving cooperation, interdependence, and synergy. For instance, individuals, classes, and clubs at different points along an earthquake fault might analyze ground movement and share their findings on a wiki. Or a local historical society might collaborate with the teacher-librarian and high school students to create a city history wiki. They might also invite people who have lived in the area to share their insights and experiences. The resulting wiki contains multiple perspectives likely missed by a single author.

According to Brian Lamb (2004), wikis have five characteristics that separate them from other social or collaborative technologies:

Unique: Wikis provide an opportunity to share original content in niche areas that might not be found elsewhere. Rather than duplicate web content, wikis can link to existing information beyond the scope of the project.

Collaborative: Wikis are designed to be free, open spaces for sharing. Rather than focus on a single author's contribution, wikis concentrate on the synergy that comes from multiple contributors creating a project as a virtual team.

Open editing: Anyone can add anything to a wiki at anytime. Although many K-12 wiki projects require registration or guest access for outsiders, most allow anyone to join in the fun.

Simple coding: Even young children can learn to create and edit pages

using the web-based forms. In most cases, the tools are similar to a word processor.

Evolving: Wikis are in a constant state of change. Teacher-librarians can consider ways that young people can build on the work of other students or other classes.

UNDERSTANDING WIKIS

Before jumping into the creation of wikis, students need to understand how they work. Begin by having them explore existing wiki resources. Discuss how these resources are built and the purposes they serve.

Audience. Some wikis are designed for a particular audience, such as an age group, organization, or profession. The Library Success or Teacher Librarian wiki are designed for librarians to share their resources and experiences. The Social Justice Movement wiki was originally created by college students but is now open to the public. Internet Public Library's (IPL's) Teen Poetry Wiki is designed for teens wishing to read and share poetry. This is a wiki that your students may wish to expand.

General. Spend some time exploring Wikipedia. Do a search for your town. Ask students to look for accurate and inaccurate information. Notice that some of the information contains references. The population information may come from the census bureau. Rather than cite Wikipedia as a source, go directly to the primary source and fact-check the information. If you are looking for additional information, use the external links at the bottom of the wiki page. Find a sentence that can be enhanced or expanded. Or look for a piece of information that needs a reference. Demonstrate how the wiki can be edited. Also show the history of the page to see the changes that have been made over time. When citing a Wikipedia page, use the permanent link. For example, a project on Pluto done in the spring of 2006 would be different from one done in the fall of 2007.

Topical. Many individuals and groups have created wikis focusing on particular topics. More Perfect is a wiki focusing on

politics and policy. You will find wikis about authors, books, series, and genres that are sponsored by publishers, authors, or fans. For example, Redwall and A Wiki of Unfortunate Events are both based on book series. Check out Wikia for examples of these subject-specific wikis.

WIKIS AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Although most educators have used collaborative writing activities in their classroom, these assignments are often more cooperative than collaborative. In other words, teams may work on different aspects of a topic and bring them together to create the final project. Wikis provide an opportunity to synthesize ideas and create a collaborative project that is broader, deeper, and more interconnected than that created in a traditional writing environment.

Wiki setup. Services such as wikispaces are popular with educators because they allow users to set up and build a wiki instantly. Some schools prefer to store wikis on their own web server. Tools such as phpWiki, pmWiki, and TikiWiki are distributed under a general public license.

Wiki basics. Ask each child to create a pseudonym that he or she can use in the project. You may wish to use a generic log-in with younger children. As students gain experiences, allow each student to create a personal username and password. Keep a list of usernames and passwords in case students lose their information. Talk to students about creating and editing pages, linking to pages, and incorporating graphics. Begin with a small project. For instance, small groups can work together to start a page about a book, author, character, or genre. Then, classmates can add their ideas to expand the pages.

Content. Think about designing a project that requires students to generate original works, such as poetry, interviews, and science experiment results. There are many web sites that contain information about the solar system, biomes, and countries of the world. How will your project contribute in some unique way to the body of information already on the Internet? Consider some sample ideas about what wikis can revolve around:

- books, such as analysis and literature circles;

- local and state interests, such as historical buildings, locations, events, noteworthy persons, oral histories, art, and music;

- creative works, such as choose-your-own adventures, invented world, poetry, short stories, artwork, and step-by-step instructions;

- comparisons, such as then-and-now, what-if's, parallel timelines (local, national, and global), pros and cons, issues and perspectives, company profiles; and

- evaluations, such as critical reviews, analysis of a company.

Wikis allow students to incorporate text, graphics, audio, and video. Before posting content, check to be sure that you have permission to use material. Generally, people place their content in wikis under the Creative Commons rule known as "share and share alike." In other words, you can use and link to information found on other wikis as long as it is cited.

Links. Linking is an important aspect of wikis. Students may link within the page. For example, they may create a list of ideas at the top of the page and link to a detailed description further down the page. They may also create links to other pages within the wiki. For instance, if they are creating a wiki based on the book *Crossing the Wire*, by Will Hobbs (2006), they might develop pages on each chapter, character (e.g., Victor, Rico, Julio, Miguel), setting (e.g., Mexico, the border, Arizona), and topic (e.g., smuggling, border patrol, illegal immigration). These pages can then be linked together. Finally, create links to outside resources such as the author's web site and resources related to immigration.

Discussion and editing. One feature that makes wikis so wonderful for collaborative writing is their editing options. Talk to children about the difference between enhancing an article and damaging the work of a peer. Most wikis provide a discussion area where writers can share their ideas for enhancing the page and give an explanation of their reasoning behind additions and changes. This provides a wonderful forum for discussion, as well as a way to track student involvement.

Demonstrate ways that changing the content can make the article better. Discuss the roles and responsibilities of each author. For example, each page may have a main author, contributing authors, and editors.

Keep in mind that most wikis do not contain a spell checker, so editing skills are important.

History. One of the strengths of the wiki environment is the history aspect. Students and teachers are able to trace the progress of the project and determine the contribution of each participant. It is also easy to revert back to an earlier version if problems are discovered.

Citations. The power of a wiki is the ability to bring information and ideas together. However, it is important that learners understand how to cite the primary sources that they use in building their wiki. If a student provides a statistic on illegal immigration, he or she should cite the original source, such as the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and provide a link to the complete set of information.

Wikis provide students an authentic experience applying their information skills. For instance, fact checking is a critical component of wiki development and use. Wiki creators learn to cite their work and provide supporting evidence for their statements, whereas wiki users get practice checking the accuracy of information found in sources such as Wikipedia.

WIKI IN LEARNING

Wikis are useful across grade levels and subject areas. To be effective, young people need to understand the fluid nature of this collaborative format. Consider projects that get students involved in ongoing wiki experiences.

Some possibilities include the following.

Collaborative problem solving. Wikis provide an environment for groups to share their understandings and come to consensus. The wiki can be used to generate lists, narrow topics, outline options, debate issues, make suggestions, and even vote.

Collaborative research. Whether working simultaneously on a project or over multiple semesters, researchers can collate and share their data using a wiki.

Collaborative writing. Wikis are often used for collaborative authorship. In other words, a group of people get together with a final product in mind, such as writing an article or letter; editing a book, guide, manual, glossary; or creating a knowledge base.

Dynamic journal or notebook. Wiki

software can be used to organize notes, ideas, and brainstorming. It is a great tool for a book club or study group to organize information. Although generally thought of as a collaborative tool, single-user wikis are a way to collect, organize, and reflect on one person's ideas. The activity is focused on recording ideas and process rather than coming up with a final product.

Electronic portfolio. Some wikis are used for collecting and organizing resources for an electronic portfolio. A wiki is an effective tool for this activity because it allows a learner to constantly select and update materials.

Portal. A portal is designed to be the starting point for a particular topic or subject. Wikipedia refers to main pages on topics or areas. Originally, portals led people to other resources, but they are increasingly being designed as wikis to help people see the big picture of a topic and how it connects to related fields such as arts, biography, geography, history, mathematics, science, society, and technology.

Resource aggregator. Like a bibliography, mediator, or pathfinder, a wiki can be used to organize links to web sites, blogs, and other electronic materials.

Study guide. A wiki is a great tool for creating a collaborative study guide.

Virtual conference. Rather than meet face to face, users can utilize wikis to share resources as part of a virtual conference activity. Because most wikis allow uploading of files, these conference wikis can hold documents, visuals, and audio and video materials.

WIKI USE POLICIES

Examine your school and library collection development and technology use policies as they apply to the wiki environment. Does your acceptable use policy talk about using the discussion option during peer editing in a wiki environment? Does your policy define plagiarism? Are issues such as the use of names and personal photos discussed?

When building wikis, add a short statement and link to your school's policy on your wiki page. Or get students involved in interpreting the policy. They can create their own wiki warranty for their page.

PUT IT ALL TOGETHER

Nancy Bosch, the gifted facilitator at the Nieman Enhanced Learning Center (<http://connections.smsd.org/nieman/el/>), in Shawnee Mission, KS, recently completed her first wiki assignment with students. Her sixth graders were overjoyed to hear that instead of writing an essay, they would be creating a wiki based on the book *The Wright 3*, by Blue Balliett (2006). After setting up the space for her students at Wikispaces, her students jumped into the project, creating chapter summaries, character pages, and topical resources. They also created cross-references within their wiki and linked to outside resources. Their comments told the whole story:

"Boy, I'm glad we didn't have to write!"

"It is so cool to know that somebody might use what I wrote for their research!!"

"I write a lot more carefully knowing the 'world' can read it."

"I liked the fact that we could work together, help each other out, and link to stuff someone else wrote."

"It is so cool to put something ON the Internet, rather than always taking stuff OFF."

REFERENCES

Balliett, B. (2006). *The Wright 3*. New York: Scholastic.

Hobbs, W. (2006). *Crossing the wire*. New York: HarperCollins.

Lamb, B. (2004, September/October). Wide open spaces: Wikis, ready or not. *EDUCAUSE Review*, 39(5), 36-48.

RESOURCES IN THE COLUMN

IPL's Teen Poetry Wiki: www4.ipl.org:8080/index.php/Main_Page

Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki: www.libsuccess.org/

More Perfect: www.moreperfect.org/

Redwall: http://redwall.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Page

Social Justice: http://socialjustice.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/index.php/Main_Page

Teacher Librarian Wiki: <http://teacherlibrarianwiki.pbwiki.com/>

A Wiki of Unfortunate Events: http://snicket.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Page

Wikia: www.wikia.com/wiki/Wikicities

Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia: www.wikipedia.org/

The Wright 3: <http://thewright3.wikispaces.com>

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

Creative Commons: <http://creativecommons.org/>

WIKI POLICIES AND SAFETY

Twiki Issues: Keys to a Safe and Positive Wiki: www.teachersfirst.com/content/wiki/issues.cfm

WIKI SERVICES

JotSpot: www.jot.com/

pbWiki (ads): <http://pbwiki.com/>

Wikispaces (free, no ad spaces for teachers): www.wikispaces.com/site/for/teachers100K.com/

WIKI SOFTWARE

phpWiki: <http://phpwiki.sourceforge.net/>

pmWiki: www.pmwiki.org/

TikiWiki: <http://tikiwiki.org/>

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NEW YORK TIMES 100 NOTABLE BOOKS OF THE YEAR

www.nytimes.com/ref/books/review/20061203notable-books.html

This site includes reviews of 100 books selected by the *New York Times* as notable books of 2006.

THE POETRY FOUNDATION

www.poetryfoundation.org/features/children.html

This site provides resources on poetry for kids and adults and includes a searchable poem database, poetry tools, journals, poet biographies, reading guides, children's activities, and much more.

QUINTURA FOR KIDS

<http://kids.quintura.com/>

This is an interesting new search engine for younger students. The search terms appear in a word cloud, which is intended to help kids narrow or broaden their searches.

SCHOOLROOMS

www.schoolrooms.net

SchoolRooms by SirsiDynix is an online portal that encourages K-12 students to explore, discover, and learn—anywhere, any time. Using SchoolRooms, students can search libraries, interactive educational media, and the Web—all at once—to find resources selected by educators to meet student needs.

SECRETS OF EGYPT

www.nationalgeographic.com/pyramids/

Explore the pyramids of ancient Egypt through diagrams, photos, and facts; plus, get related links, kids content, news stories, and more. Read the journal of a writer who spent 4 days exploring ancient sites. Interactive features include "Treasures of Egypt" (photos, e-postcards), "At the Tomb of Tutankhamun," "Mysteries of Egypt Movie Preview," "How to Make a Mummy," and much more. There are also games and standards-based lessons for grades K-12.

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