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# EXPLORING WIKIS IN A LIBRARY CREDIT COURSE

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## ABSTRACT

Wiki is a type of software (also known as social software) that enables its users to create a website with only a minor knowledge of html. Many universities, schools, businesses, and libraries are currently using wiki software to great effect. Even so, there is very little literature addressing the use of wiki software in the university library instruction classroom. This report will focus on the use of wiki software in a university library instruction classroom and consider its feasibility as a tool for teaching critical thinking through team-based learning.

## INTRODUCTION

The State University of New York's University at Albany is a liberal arts and sciences institution of approximately 18,000 students and 1,000 faculty; it awards degrees in sixty-one undergraduate programs, eighty-nine graduate programs, and thirty-nine doctoral programs. The University has a strong institutional commitment to information literacy. General Education requirements (2008) stipulate that students must complete either a General Education course with information literacy

components or a dedicated library credit course. The Libraries' User Education Department is responsible for teaching the credit course and strongly encourages its instruction librarians to explore different methods of instruction. The author uses wiki technology in the sections of the library credit course she teaches, allowing students to publish and exhibit their coursework as web pages.

This paper will discuss the author's experience introducing wiki technology into the classroom. She has taught an eight-week, half-semester

library course, worth one credit, at the University for six years. Sections of the course described in this paper were taught consecutively during one academic semester. The author encourages librarians to explore the versatility of wikis for their own teaching purposes.

## WIKIS

Though several definitions of “wiki” exist, the author prefers one coined by Thomas Chesney (2006): “a ‘wiki’ refers to a Web page which can be changed by its visitors.” Many universities, schools, businesses, and libraries use wikis effectively, though there is sparse literature addressing the use of wikis for library instruction. This paper describes the use of wiki technology in a library course and demonstrates its feasibility as a tool for team-based learning.

The term “wiki” is the Hawaiian-language word for quick or fast. It refers to the speed with which wikis allow their users to create and edit web pages with virtually no knowledge of HTML tagging. The most famous example of a wiki is *Wikipedia*—the popular online encyclopedia published in over two hundred languages. It is the author’s experience that *Wikipedia* is often a first source of information consulted by students for their coursework, though this might not be true if they understood that *Wikipedia* can be edited by anyone.

## INTRODUCING STUDENTS TO WIKIS

At the outset of each library class described in this paper, the author administered a survey to gauge students’ familiarity with wikis and the web (see Tables 1 and 2, and Appendix). Survey results showed, among other things, that few students understood the nature of *Wikipedia* as an actual wiki. In general, students thought that “wiki” was simply a random qualifier added to the suffix “pedia.” Furthermore, none of the students knew that wikis, including *Wikipedia*, could be edited by any user. As a result, many students had been using a form of social software without even knowing it.

During the first week of class, students were divided into four teams, each responsible for creating its own web page on the class wiki. To prepare for work on the wiki, students were assigned to read a chapter from the book, *Wiki Collaboration* (Ebersbach, Glaser, & Heigl, 2006). During the second week of class, each student was required to write a three to five page opinion paper about the book chapter. In particular, they were asked to share their thoughts about using a wiki to create their final projects for the course. Several students expressed discomfort with allowing other students to edit their coursework, but they were also interested in having the opportunity to publish online.

TABLE 1 — CLASS #1 SURVEY RESULTS

Survey Questions	Yes	No
Have you ever used a wiki?	0	23
Have you ever heard of a wiki?	2	21
Have you ever used Wikipedia?	22	1
Do you realize that you can edit the information found in Wikipedia?	0	23
Do you know what HTML is?	0	23
Have you ever created a web page?	1	22

*n*=23

TABLE 2 — CLASS #2 SURVEY RESULTS

Survey Questions	Yes	No
Have you ever used a wiki?	1	20
Have you ever heard of a wiki?	5	16
Have you ever used Wikipedia?	21	0
Do you realize that you can edit the information found in Wikipedia?	0	21
Do you know what HTML is?	3	18
Have you ever created a web page?	1	20

*n*=21

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Matthies, Helmke and Slater conducted a review of library literature on the instructional use of wikis, and they state that, “so far no reports have been published in this area” (2006, p. 32). Still, librarians have discovered wikis for other purposes. *Library Technology Reports* states that librarians are leveraging wiki technology for “subject guides, project planning, policy manuals, resource listings, and training resources” (2006, p. 53). Several examples are provided, such as Meredith Farkas’ *LibSuccess Wiki*, Butler University Libraries’ *WikiRef*, and Ohio University’s *Biz Wiki*. The report concludes by suggesting that wikis can also be used for library instruction.

Schwartz, Clark, Cossarin, and Rudolph (2004) wrote about the educational uses of wikis. They observe that “more dealt with activities, events or clubs, than with curricular issues,” because “the open access to wikis for editing deters regular university use for content that must not risk change” (2004, p. 2). Nonetheless, the pedagogical literature of many academic disciplines provides evidence of successfully using wikis in the classroom, if not in the library instruction classroom (Bold, 2006; Harding, 2007; McPherson, 2006; Richardson, 2006; Siegle, 2008). The paucity of library literature should not be a deterrent to librarians who wish to use wikis in credit courses. Ward Cunningham, creator of the wiki, described it as

“the simplest online database that could possibly work” (Tonkin, 2005). Implementing wiki technology into course curricula is free, and in the author’s experience, simple.

## WHY A WIKI?

Much has been written in the literature related to web 2.0 that compares and contrasts wikis and blogs. They are unique social software tools, though one cannot be considered better than the other. Each fulfills a different purpose. Blogs are communication tools and wikis are interactive, allowing groups to work together and edit documents simultaneously. Blogs have authors and readers; wikis have collaborators. Blog users are not able to change titles, postings, or formatting as easily as they could with a wiki. Blog authors typically post ideas, and readers will sometimes react. Wikis also facilitate author postings and reader reactions, though users may also edit the content. This is a new concept to those accustomed to more static information sources. Wikis compel users to regard the web as an unstable, unregulated environment. There, too, is a different temporal dynamic when comparing and contrasting these tools; blogs are chronological, whereas wikis provide no particular beginning or end. As a result, their internal structures are also different—internal links are essential to wikis, but external links are more commonly found on blogs.

In a traditional lecture-style course, students are generally expected to accomplish the same things in the same manner: take notes, study, synthesize, and demonstrate an understanding of course material on exams. Blogs can be used effectively here, though they do not inspire the same sense of collaboration that wikis do, nor do they cater as effectively to different learning styles. With wikis, students can work together in teams, learn from one another, and form their own conclusions regarding course subject matter. Teaching with wikis allows instructors to observe their students' processes with project construction and design in real time. This real-time function allows instructors to quickly recognize problems and remedy them. Additionally, a unique "versioning" function allows instructors to view previous versions of students' projects.

#### CHOOSING A WIKI

Librarians can access and select wikis in any of three ways: they can use a free hosted wiki provider, purchase the software for configuration on their own server, or use software that comes bundled with a course management system such as Blackboard. A hosted wiki provider is a collection of servers that hosts wikis and offers remote service for its subscribers. Such providers may be free and/or fee-based. *PBWiki*, the provider used by the author, is malleable and well-regarded by students. Using a hosted wiki provider is advised for instructors working alone or for those with limited time or technical support. Most hosted wiki providers require users to complete a brief web form that typically consists of wiki title, user email address, and chosen password. Access to the hosted wiki is usually immediate.

Instructors may choose to install wiki software on their own institutional servers; this is a choice well-suited to large institutions. Set-up will require more time, but users will have additional options for customization and configuration. Finally, course management systems now offer wiki tools which allow instructors to communicate either one-on-one

with students or with entire classes on collaborative wiki pages.

Wikis can be fully public, allowing all users to read and edit; they can be partially public, allowing selected users to read and edit; or they can be private, allowing only creators or administrators to read and edit. Hosted wiki providers typically provide free basic services, and then charge monthly or annual fees for additional features and administrative controls. Useful features for collaborative projects include page versioning, page locking, edit suspension options, tiered levels of password access, and internal search functions.

The quality of customer support varies among wiki providers. Instructors are advised to monitor relevant listservs and Internet reviews for recommendations before choosing a provider. Tonkin (2005) and *Educause Learning Initiative* (2005) provide useful advice for wiki beginners. Additionally, *Comparison of Wiki Farms* (2007) assists in choosing the proper wiki based on users' needs.

#### LEARNING TO WIKI

Editing a wiki is a creative and collaborative endeavor. Still, it is important to understand that creativity and collaboration are not inherent to the activity; instead, wikis facilitate these processes. Whereas a static website may suffice by virtue of being complete and available for all to see, a wiki has the added dimension of potentially being edited.

For both classes described in this case study, the author's students were introduced to an empty course wiki early in the semester, and were instructed that they would be working in teams to populate it with their final project assignments—annotated webliographies. Because few of the students had ever created a webpage, they found it daunting to start from scratch. *PBWiki* has a designated "sandbox" where users may go to experiment without fear of making mistakes or compromising an already-established part of the wiki. The author used the sandbox to demonstrate a number of

fundamental skills—creating hyperlinks, modifying text fonts—and then encouraged students to further experiment in order to hone their editing skills. Students reported having difficulty with some processes, such as aligning bullet points and creating hanging indents. A working knowledge of HTML tagging was needed here to modify the wiki's source code. The *PBWiki* editor resembles the Microsoft Word application, making it easy to use; very little class time was required to accustom students to using the wiki.

At the conclusion of one of the classes described in this paper, a student suggested redesigning the wiki to resemble a template, with designated boxes in which to type the different kinds of information required for the final project. Some students agreed, though not the majority. *Ways to Wiki* recommends creating a template for students (2008); the author chose not to do so, for fear that a template might limit the creative process. Lamb concurs: "The structure of wikis is shaped from within--not imposed from above" (2004, p. 40).

#### WIKI COLLABORATION

As experienced teachers know, complications can arise from collaborative, team-based projects in the classroom. Instructors must consider how to grade teams and how to penalize individual students who do not contribute sufficiently to their team's workload. Instructors might also assume that collaborative work will result in students learning from each other, but this process may not lead to desired learning outcomes. In both classes described in this case study, the author observed instances of team members following the lead of dynamic individuals instead of knowledgeable ones, which hurt the team's performance. There were also several instances of mistakes in the formatting of students' webliographies; had students worked together more effectively, these simple mistakes should have been found and fixed. Instead, students seemed to ignore obvious errors of their teammates and became territorial regarding who did what on the wiki. For this reason, the author added the element of

peer-review, forcing students to collaborate and also to provide constructive criticism.

#### PEER REVIEW AND TEAM-BASED LEARNING

The author used two methods of peer review for classes. On the team level, students were required to evaluate the quality of one another's contributions to the wiki. On the class level, students were required to evaluate other team projects at various stages of completion. While these methods of review can cause classroom tensions, it is the author's experience that they also force students to hone their critical thinking skills. Individuals and teams are more attentive to detail when peers are evaluating their work. The process of peer review can make different learning styles more apparent. Comparing and critiquing one another's work caters to visual learners; discussing solutions to problems benefits auditory learners, and creating solutions and organizing them on a team's wiki page appeals to kinesthetic learners.

Many students in the classes had previous experience working in groups in other courses, though few of those experiences were positive. The primary reason for integrating wiki technology in this case study is the author's belief in the importance of group work in school and beyond. Psychologist and expert on "team genius," Keith Sawyer, writes: "It's not news to anyone in the corporate world that collaboration is powerful. Businesses everywhere are moving to team organizations, distributed leadership, and collaboration. The trend is so strong that even office furniture companies have been rethinking the cubicle-and-desk paradigm. James P. Hackett, chief executive office of Steelcase, is leading the company in designing a new kind of furniture that will support team collaboration" (2007, p. 13). Librarians can help students by exposing them to this current workforce philosophy of collaboration, and wiki technology is an easy and effective way of doing so.

#### CONCLUSION

The social nature of wiki software is considered

by some instructors to be too informal and therefore inappropriate for the classroom. In particular, instructors voice concern about the distinguishing feature of wikis--that any user can edit them. It is important to emphasize that wikis can be password protected and that instructors have complete control over how such protections are assigned to individuals, teams, or classes.

Integrating wiki technology into a library credit course is not simply another way for instruction librarians to teach course material as they always have. For this case study, it was necessary to overhaul the structure of the course, the pedagogy, and the learning assessments. Still, the author asserts that the most vital factor for successfully using wiki technology as an integral part of students' coursework is convincing them of the benefits. Students expressed concern regarding how their individual efforts would be graded in a team-based, electronic environment. In particular, they were concerned about how the participation of their teammates might affect their grades. It is key to have students appreciate the benefits of teamwork and to employ emerging technologies, like wikis, to facilitate collaboration. It is likewise important to capitalize on the sense of ownership and pride that students demonstrate when they create publicly accessible coursework.

#### WIKI BEST PRACTICES

The author suggests that instruction librarians consider the following points relative to using wikis in a credit course:

1. Use listservs and Internet reviews to identify an appropriate wiki provider.
2. Remember that different hosted wiki providers provide different levels of help to their users.
3. Make sure that students understand the function and purpose of a wiki before they begin using one.
4. Divide classes into small teams; provide each team with exclusive access to their own wiki to promote pride in ownership and to diminish fears of vandalism.
5. Give passwords with "view only" privileges to those outside individual teams so that the whole class will have access to other wikis without being able to edit them.
6. Carefully consider whether or not to prepare a wiki template for students. The author advises against it.
7. Exploit the ability to reach students with different learning styles (auditory, visual, and tactile/kinesthetic) by leveraging the collaborative aspects of wiki projects.

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## APPENDIX

### Survey

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. Have you ever used a wiki?  
Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_
2. Have you ever heard of a wiki?  
Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_
3. Have you ever used Wikipedia?  
Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_
4. Do you realize that you can edit the information in Wikipedia?  
Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_
5. Do you know what html is?  
Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_
6. Have you ever created a web page?  
Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_