

AVOIDING THE BLEEDING EDGE OF WIKIS

by Joseph Tomei and Richard S. Lavin

WIKI

If you are using technology to improve teaching and learning, it is hard not to get excited about the possibilities of wiki software. Wikipedia as well as smaller, more focused wiki projects, such as Wikitravel, Wikibooks, or one of the many examples on the Meatball Wiki TourBus, may have you thinking that if you can just tap into some of the energy surrounding wikis, your classes will be swept up in a wave of excitement (see Wiki Resources on page 27 for the wikis and tools mentioned in this article).

Wiki enthusiasts think of wikis as an important tool to ensure that “students will not simply pass through a course like water through a sieve but instead leave their own imprint in the development of the course, their school or university, and ideally the discipline” (Holmes et al. 2001). We count ourselves as wiki enthusiasts but suggest a measure of caution. Though many successes have been reported (see, e.g., “The Wonderful World of Wiki,” *Essential Teacher*, December

2006), we have also observed and, indeed, experienced projects that have not gone as expected.

If you are new to wikis, we suggest that you not plunge straight into projects with students but first become a wiki user yourself. Wikis are both gloriously simple and strangely subtle; by taking your time to make them work for you, you can become attuned to the numerous possibilities they offer while avoiding disappointment through uses that ask too much of students.

Does Size Matter?

Fundamentally, a wiki is a Web site that can be edited from anywhere on the Internet, that keeps track of changes so you can revert to a previous version, and that allows for easy link making. The best-known wiki is Wikipedia. Anyone who has edited or authored an article will appreciate the power of an encyclopedia that, by harnessing the expertise of many thousands of people worldwide, has grown to nearly three times the size of the

Encyclopedia Britannica (cf. Zandberg 2006). However, not all wikis are large, not all are open to contributions by the public, and some are not even viewable by anyone other than the author.

For many educational uses, smaller-scale wikis may be the way to go. Above all, realize that you do not have to use all the features of wikis. We offer a few projects here that can help you familiarize yourself with the different aspects of wikidom.

Play in a Sandbox

First, it is worthwhile to test-drive wiki software. Most public wikis offer a *sandbox*, where you can play without consequences. You can either try some of the major wiki software, such as PmWiki or Wikka Wiki, or some of the wikis listed at the beginning of this article. Practice making links, as this skill is at the heart of creating wikis with a flexible structure. And get accustomed to some of the markup conventions, such as creating headings or lists.

A Comparison Shopping Spree

After you've gotten your feet wet, visit the Wiki Matrix, where you can select several wikis and compare features. Both wiki engines (the software that drives wikis) and sites offering free wiki space are listed, and a Wiki Choice Wizard guides you through a series of questions to make an appropriate choice. We've been impressed by the free wikis offered by PBwiki, Wetpaint, and Wikia. One exciting possibility is offered by Wikispaces, which excels on the usability front and is free for K-12 use.

Wiki Projects

All of the following projects assume a single author (you) because we strongly feel that the first step to being a wiki teacher is being a wiki user. You may want to unleash wikis on your students before unleashing your students on wikis.

Project 1: Make a Wiki Notebook

After finding free wiki space on the Web or, more ambitiously, setting one up on a server, your next step would be to store some information in a wiki for personal use. Many wikis today are personal information repositories, or *outboard brains* (Doctorow 2002). Wikis are ideal for this, as they do not restrict you to a conventional hierarchical structure of section and subsection. You can add links between any pages that have some relation to each other, thus shortening the distance between useful chunks of information.

Don't get too hung up on the format; concentrate on getting information into the wiki. Try to add information whenever you are connected to the Internet, even if you simply make a

Wiki Resources

Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>): A massive encyclopedia. This is what people usually think of when they hear the word *wiki*, but it is too big and complex for most class projects.

Wikitravel (<http://wikitravel.org/>): A wiki that uses the same software as Wikipedia but provides open-source tourist information on locations around the world.

Wikibooks (<http://en.wikibooks.org/>): Collaboratively produced textbooks for a wide range of educational courses.

Meatball Wiki TourBus (<http://www.usemod.com/cgi-bin/mb.pl?TourBus>): Tours of wiki sites. Originally set up to show the variety of wikis, the wikis on the tour have a long history and therefore a more developed structure.

PmWiki (<http://www.pmwiki.org/>): A system for creating and maintaining wikis that doesn't require knowledge of a computer instruction language.

Wikka Wiki (<http://wikkawiki.org/>): A slightly more complex wiki engine that uses a MySQL database but emphasizes speed and has support for mind maps.

The Wiki Matrix (<http://www.wikimatrix.org/>): A list of more than 200 wiki engines and sites that allows you to compare features. The Wiki Choice Wizard helps you narrow down your choices.

PBwiki (<http://pbwiki.com/>): PB stands for *peanut butter*, to underline that making a wiki is as easy as making a peanut butter sandwich. Free to educators and for personal use if the site unabashedly advertises itself as a wiki.

Wetpaint (<http://www.wetpaint.com/>): A free wiki site that avoids mentioning wikis and provides lots of support.

Wikia and Wikia: Places (<http://www.wikia.com/>): Free wiki hosting. The site uses the software used by Wikipedia, Wikitravel, and Wikibooks, so this is a logical choice if your aim is to eventually use these wikis in your class. The Places area has lots of gaps ready for students to fill.

Wikispaces (<http://www.wikispaces.com/>) and **Edublogs** (<http://edublogs.org/>): Edublogs, which provides educators with free blogs, has arranged with Wikispaces to offer ad-free wikis if you sign up. Wikispaces emphasizes usability.

tiny correction. If you realize that your wiki structure is not appropriate, then change it little by little. It isn't necessary to replace one structure with another; by adding links, you end up with multiple paths to your information. Remember that you can work on your wiki anywhere you have a connection to the Internet.

Project 2: Create a Course Material Center

Once you've created a notebook, you'll probably begin to see the flexibility inherent in wikis. The next step is to make limited use of a wiki for a single course.

Put your handouts and class notes within the wiki. Students can either read these online or print them out, just as they could with a conventional Web site, but wikis offer huge advantages over static Web pages. As you teach the class and find something that needs to be added or changed, make a note of it and update it immediately after class. Using wikis in this way gives you a better understanding of why wikis are such powerful tools for education. If your class is held in a computer lab, make the changes in front of the students; a particularly powerful example is to move back a homework deadline.

A variation on this theme is to make pages with large type and a small number of bullet points and to include a *Next* link at the bottom of each page, which functions as a kind of computer slide presentation. You can add questions or extra information that arises from class discussion to the slide live.

Going a step further, consider converting your whole teaching Web site to a wiki, giving you one central, instantly editable place to manage all files and materials. Any changes you make for this year's class will automatically be available for next year's.

Project 3: Collaborative Wikis

So far, we have focused on the instant editability of wikis and their

organizational flexibility but not their collaborative aspects. You can also introduce individual students or whole classes to a collaborative course wiki. We have found that it is best to introduce students to wikis by giving them a personal page. Using a page like this to get to know students better can add an important dimension to your class and provide regular feedback.

Wikis usually have a Recent Changes list of all changes made within a specified time, so you can quickly and easily identify student pages with feedback or new information. If you teach in a room equipped with computers, you can easily gather feedback about lessons by asking students to write one thing they liked and one thing they didn't like about the class. Easing students out of their own wiki spaces, you can create a course questions (FAQ) page, being sure to add new questions promptly as they are raised. You can also encourage students to create a Class Notes section that, alongside the FAQ page, serves as a resource for current and future classes.

A Wider Wiki

Expanding your horizons, you may be tempted to experiment with open sites like Wikipedia, but a more manageable option may be to create a wiki to encourage students to contribute information and advice. This becomes a resource for the community beyond the class. If you are at a loss what to do, consider using the Places area of Wikia, as it is focused on communities based on place, a great topic for almost any group.

A Middle Way

Many teachers have seized on wikis as the ultimate collaborative tool, and enthusiasts imagine environments where students with very little training or coaxing participate enthusiastically, editing each other's work in a constant, lively back-and-forth flow of ideas. Pessimists worry that students will change important

documents, that things that should remain private will not, and that it will be impossible to ascertain the correct attribution for work on the wiki, leading to concerns about assessment.

Returning to our title, we caution that if you are not careful, the *cutting edge* can all too easily become the *bleeding edge*, as the newest tools leave early adopters injured while the problems they wish to tackle remain unsolved. The possibilities of collaboration through wikis are multifaceted, but in order to collaborate, you must have enough confidence in your own grasp of seemingly mundane technical details. If your aim is to have students collaborate with you, you owe it to them to have a broad base of experience for your efforts. Previous work (Lavin and Tomei 2006) has suggested to us that even trivial user interface issues can stop users in their tracks. When these issues are coupled with the newness of a fully collaborative environment, the wiki may survive thanks to the efforts of a few brave souls, with less confident students overwhelmed by the shock of the new. Thus, we recommend using wikis for storing and presenting information before deploying them as full-blown collaborative tools.

Cole (1993) suggests that tools contain within them the history of their use. Unbundling the instant editability and general convenience of wikis from their collaborative aspects unlocks a new range of possibilities. While the traditional Web site update routine of edit, upload, and test was often just enough trouble to stop people from doing it more than a few times a year, with wikis, instant, even daily changes are perfectly feasible. Using a wiki does not necessarily entail total transformation. There are plenty of modest but useful ways to put them to use in your teaching life.

Consider converting your teaching Web site to a wiki, giving you an instantly editable place to manage files and materials. Any changes you make for this year's class will automatically be available for next year's.

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