A Wiki for Classroom Writing

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"So what can we do with a wiki, because I think I have a good idea for writing instruction?" This e-mail from Rich Smith, a classroom teacher, to Brian Morgan, a college professor, initiated a school–college partnership exploring the use of classroom wikis. The project involved students researching topics of their choice and creating online multimedia reports using the wiki technology to enhance collaboration between student peers, the classroom teacher, and the college students.

What Is a Wiki?

Wikis are collaboratively authored, searchable documents linked internally and externally. For classroom purposes, wikis are designed to be created by more than one student. Readers of the wiki can find needed information by using search-and-find procedures. Authors can easily create links to take their readers from points within the wiki to other points that have related information. These links can connect either within the wiki itself or outside the wiki to the Internet. Wikis and blogs share much in common, but blog visitors simply add comments to the original content, whereas wikis allow visitors to change the content.

Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia (www.wikipedia.org), is the most famous example of a wiki. But today, teachers and students are beginning to engage with this technology more and more, creating a variety of wiki types (see Table 1).

Wiki authors can easily add and change text, images, and tables. Most wikis are as easy to use as any word processing software. Students work together to compose a single, collaboratively authored document, or they help each other with their own individual documents. The teacher can participate at any level he or she wishes at any time in the process: as collaborator, guide, editor, or site administrator.

Access to all parts of a wiki can be controlled by the teacher. Changes in the wiki can be closely tracked and compared with earlier changes in terms of frequency and type of engagement. For example, we can see the student draft that is currently on the page, but we can also click an icon to see and compare every change that student has made between each saved writing session. With this feature, students can return to any previous draft and repair errors (e.g., an accidental deletion).

PBWiki (pbwiki.com) and the Edublogs affiliate Wikispaces (www.wikispaces.com) are often used by teachers to set up classroom wikis. Wikis created at these sites are very easy to set up and allow teachers a great degree of control over who is able to read or edit the documents. They are also associated with well-recognized organizations, so your district's IT department will likely unblock the wiki sites.

Table 1
Types of Wikis Useful for the Elementary Grades

Classroom wikis—mrlindsay.pbwiki.com, which includes assignments, student work, and parent communications

Report wikis—arrpirates.wikispaces.com, which displays a collaborative research project on the history of pirates by students in grades 4–6

School wiki sites—sfxschool.pbwiki.com

Large-scale, interschool projects—Engstrom, M.E., & Jewett, D. (2005). Collaborative learning the wiki way. *TechTrends: Linking Research & Practice to Improve Learning*, *49*(6), 12–16.

Setting Up the Project

We found it important to start the projects by following some simple guidelines. Mr. Smith helped the students create their own composition pages for the reports within his wiki site. He also taught them basic wiki text editing and discussed the schedule of due dates. After conducting research at the library, students composed first drafts on their individual wiki pages.

The front page of Mr. Smith's classroom wiki included a general description of how wikis work and what this one could do (see Figure 1). It also had links to references on wiki procedures and editing.

To access the wiki, each student needed an individual username and password so that the author of each comment was identified. As comments appeared and drafts were revised, writers would add a section to their page that asked questions of their collaborators about revision and grammar. The collaborative wiki format makes revision an integral part of the process, as one of our students, Jim, noted: "I went back and forth to my essay every day. I must have revised it seven times." The college students collaborated by offering comments and suggestions as members of the writing community that centered around this wiki.

Some of the drafts were very rough and consisted of merely an organized list of ideas; others were more developed. In either case, the students then read and commented on their classmates' work. Comments and suggestions were placed in context using the wiki's system for inserting footnotes or by using virtual sticky notes. "You're intro really drew me in!" Bethany commented to Kenny. "You made a lot of statements that help people to become interested in your paper."

Comments are created by inserting simple code into the text of the writing. For example, in PBWiki students can insert comments by creating a box using a vertical line (|) before and after the text. In the wiki software we used, footnotes were inserted by placing the text of the footnote between parentheses. Hovering the cursor over the footnote number in the text revealed the content of the footnote.

Our experience using the wiki has been entirely positive. The track changes feature of the wiki made the writing process more visible to the students and teacher, and in that way the writing process became emphasized and revision consisted of a continual process of slight collaborative modification. The ease of collaboration strengthened students' abilities to engage with text as writers and readers. The environment provided immediate, contextualized feedback, thus strengthening the relations among audience, purpose, and structure of the writing.

Easy access to the wiki allowed students to participate more frequently and freely. For example, students posted brainstormed ideas or preplanning instead of nearly completed, highly structured drafts. Students began commenting on the planning and

Figure 1
Screen Capture of First Page of Mr. Smith's Classroom Wiki
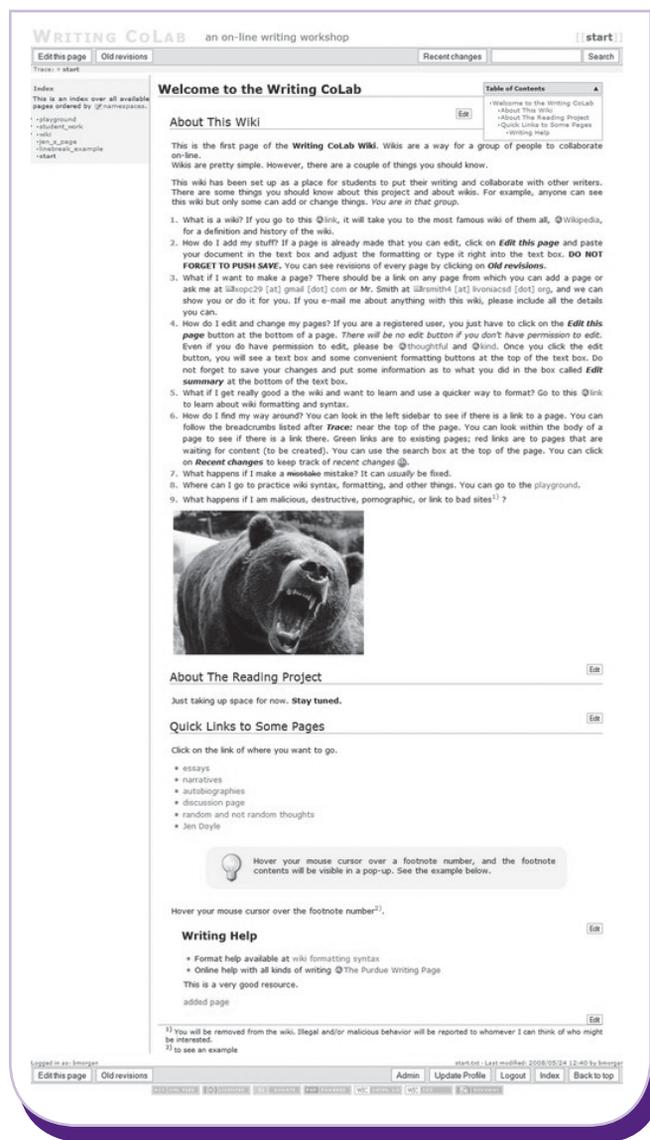
ideas as soon as those ideas were posted to the wiki. They made many revisions to their compositions as the project progressed. Ultimately, when using the wiki as a collaborative writing community the students are more engaged with the writing process. The students noted the ease of composition, the de-emphasis of error, the helpfulness of the collaboration, and the efficiency with which they were able to complete the assignments.

Some Helpful Hints

First, teachers should remember that wikis are nearly bulletproof. Any mistake can be fixed and any previous version of the content can be recovered with a click, so do not be afraid of your wiki. Emphasize this fact when introducing the wiki to your students.

Second, wikis are structured as a group of linked pages, so create a playground page where you and your students can experiment with the wiki. Both PBWiki and Wikispaces lets you do this with one click. Although your students are probably more comfortable with the idea of playing with software, you should still encourage your students (and yourself) to go to the playground page to play and try things out.

Third, explore other wikis that you like and look at the source code of pages you find with interesting formatting (there is usually a button on the wiki where one click reveals page source code), and borrow it by copying and pasting it into the appropriate pages of your own wiki.

Fourth, do a little planning of the structure of your wiki. For example, create a page for each major category of information you are putting in the wiki: one page for each student, one page for each book you discuss, one page for each topic in a unit you are working on, one page for each group working on group projects, and so on.

Finally, remember that the core principle of wikis is collaboration. Wikispaces and PBWiki have extensive help sections, and your fellow wiki users are always ready to help.

We recommend wikis as a useful addition to any classroom. They are engaging to students, easy to use, and the multitude of uses is limited only by your and your students' imaginations. Once you start, you will wonder how you ever lived without one.

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