

## [ DRAFT COPY – Teacher Librarian, June 2007 ]

### **An Information Skills Workout: Wikis and Collaborative Writing**

By Annette Lamb and Larry Johnson

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, expanding an existing wiki project, or creating original content for a new wiki, collaborative writing projects allow young people an 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 websites. 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 don't need special software. The word wiki (WikiWikiWeb) comes from the Hawaiian word for "quick" or "fast" meaning that a collaborative team can quickly construct a website.

Rather than simply viewing existing information, emphasis is placed on authoring content. These environments may be predominately 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, or 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 school 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 that would likely be 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 duplicating web content, links can be made to existing information beyond the scope of the project.

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

**Open Editing.** Anyone can add anything at any time to a wiki. Although many K12 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. 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, it's important that students understand how they work. Begin by exploring 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. *IPL's Teen Poetry Wiki* is designed specifically 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 citing wikipedia as a source, go directly to the primary source and fact-check the information. If you're looking for additional information, use the external links at the bottom of the wiki page. Find a sentence that could 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 than 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'll 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 often are more cooperative than collaborative. In other words, teams may work on different aspects of a topic and bring together to create the final project. Wikis provide an opportunity to synthesize ideas and create a collaborative project that's broader, deeper, and more interconnected than could be 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 they can use in the project. You may wish to use a generic login with younger children. As students gain experiences, allow each student to create their own username and password. Keep a list of usernames and passwords in case a student loses their information. Talk to students about creating and editing pages, linking to pages, and incorporating graphics. Begin with a small project. For example, small groups could 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 websites 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?

- Book (i.e., analysis, literature circles)
- Local or state interest (i.e., historical building, location, event, noteworthy person, oral history, art or music)
- Creative works (i.e., choose your own adventures, invented world, poetry, short stories, artwork, step-by-step instructions)
- Comparisons (i.e., then/now, what ifs, local/national/global parallel timelines, pros/cons, issues and perspectives, compare companies)
- Evaluations (i.e., critical reviews, analysis of a company)

Wikis allow students to incorporate text, graphics, audio, and video. Before posting content, check to be sure you have permission. Generally people place their content in wikis under the Creative Commons rules 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 more detailed description further down the page. They may also create links to other pages within the wiki. If they're creating a wiki based on the book *Crossing the Wire* by Will Hobbs, they might develop pages on each chapter, character (i.e., Victor, Rico, Julio, Miguel), setting (i.e., Mexico, border crossing, Arizona), and topic (i.e., smuggling, border patrol, illegal immigration). These pages can then be linked together. Finally, create links to outside resources such as the author's website and resources related to immigration.

**Discussion and Editing.** One reason that wikis are 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 don't 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's 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's 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 that 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, while wiki users get practice checking the accuracy of information found on in sources like 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:

**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 a 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 specific 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's a great tool for a book club, study group, or club 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. In Wikipedia, they refer to "main pages" on topics or area. 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, mediagraphy, or pathfinder, a wiki can be used to organize links to websites, blogs, and other electronic materials.

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

**Virtual Conference.** Rather than meeting face-to-face, wikis can be used to share resources as part of a virtual conference activity. Because most wikis allow uploading of files, these conference wikis can hold documents, visuals, 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 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 in Shawnee Mission, Kansas recently completed her first wiki assignment with students. Her sixth graders were overjoyed to hear that instead of a written essay, they would be creating a wiki based on the book *The Wright 3* by Blue Balliett. 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, as well as linking 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**

Lamb, Brian (September/October 2004). Wide Open Spaces: Wikis, Ready or Not. EDUCAUSE Review. Volume 39, Number 5, 36-48.

### **Learn More**

#### **Example Wikis**

IPL's Teen Poetry Wiki <[http://www4.ipl.org:8080/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://www4.ipl.org:8080/index.php/Main_Page)>

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

More Perfect <<http://www.moreperfect.org/>>

Redwall <[http://redwall.wikia.com/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://redwall.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Page)>

Social Justice <[http://socialjustice.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/index.php/Main\\_Page](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](http://snicket.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Page)>

Wikia <<http://www.wikia.com/wiki/Wikicities>>

Wikipedia <<http://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  
<<http://www.teachersfirst.com/content/wiki/issues.cfm>>

### **Wiki Services**

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

JotSpot <<http://www.jot.com/>>

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

### **Wiki Software**

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

pmWiki <<http://www.pmwiki.org/>>

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