

Wikis – what and how

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The World Wide Web as we know it has become a vast body of knowledge accessible via read-only web browsers. The original vision of Sir Tim Berners-Lee (acknowledged inventor of the internet) was an interactive environment in which users would not only browse web pages but also edit and add to them as part of the process. This is the function of wikis.

The term 'wiki' is derived from the Hawaiian word for 'quick'. The basic idea of a wiki is to allow multiple people to work on and contribute to the same document.

Wiki topics range from general reference, like Wikipedia or Wiktionary, to very specific subjects, like the CookbookWiki or Fitness Wikia. So, whether you are in need of something like an encyclopedia or dictionary, or looking for specific information about a subject like cooking or sports or video games, you can find the information in a wiki.

Some fundamental principles of wikis include:

- Anyone can change anything – each wiki page has an 'Edit text on this page' link. Clicking the link allows access to the code of the page allowing users to edit or add to the text.
- Simple page coding – wikis use a simple form of page coding with only a few formatting tags to learn. Users can quickly learn these tags to edit pages.
- WikiPageTitlesAreSqueezedTogether – wiki page titles automatically eliminate word spacing to simplify linking between pages.
- Content is never complete – contributions to wiki pages can be made by any user at any time.
- Links everywhere – unlike blogs, which are usually organised chronologically, wikis are organised by context using links to connect to related information on other pages.
- Unformatted pages – being predominantly a text-only medium, wiki pages tend to look unformatted and 'wordy'

So a wiki is an online repository of shared knowledge and information from a wide variety of voluntary contributors. Wikis have been referred to as 'social constructions of knowledge' and 'constructions of popular culture'.

The structure of a wiki is shaped by its audience and not imposed by an external web developer or information holder. Users are not governed by the dictates of a system but can define the structure themselves as the wiki develops.

Knowledge transfer

There is a difference between information and knowledge. The generation of knowledge and understanding is a more complex process than the simple transfer of information. The main currency of present day education is explicit knowledge – that is, knowledge which is objective and formal and can be communicated easily. Another type is tacit knowledge, which is intangible know-how. One of education's challenges is sharing tacit knowledge in a way that effectively conveys it to others or converts it into explicit knowledge.

Tacit knowledge is usually shared face-to-face through conversation and stories of personal experience. These stories tend to arise when most appropriate in conversation with those close to the situation and trusted by the seeker of knowledge. Thus, the social interaction medium of sharing tacit knowledge cannot be overlooked.

Translating this concept into an educational context – the use of wikis online for sharing works best when paired with an existing face-to-face

community. In this environment, wiki technology can help to deepen existing relationships and foster collaboration. Studies have shown that this occurs because the type of information exchanged is most usually personal knowledge and stories. This supports the concept in knowledge management circles that 'knowledge cannot be separated from the knower'.

When paired with an existing social construct, e.g. a class or interest group, the wiki online environment can work more appropriately as a compliment to face-to-face knowledge exchange.

The informality of a wiki environment is conducive to spontaneous sharing. In fact, the value of an effective wiki lies in the variety and spontaneity of its contributions. Wikis allow multiple contributors and requires no particular person to be in charge. Individuals automatically assume leadership roles when particular contexts arise.

Wikis in education

A wiki in the hands of a healthy community works. A wiki in the hands of an indifferent community fails. Reliance on the technology without ensuring a viable social context is a recipe for failure. In an educational context, the social environments often already exist but may need specific nurturing before introducing wiki technology.

One example for introducing a wiki into a classroom environment might be for planning a special class event. Begin the planning at the face-to-face level by proposing the event and facilitating discussion and the generation of ideas. Introduce the class special event wiki and encourage students to list their ideas online. Subsequent lessons might examine the online list of ideas and promote further expansion or explanation of each item. Students could then add these explanations to the wiki.

For teacher use, one common way to use wikis is to support meeting planning. An initial agenda is proposed on the wiki and the URL distributed to participants who are then free to comment or add their own items. During the meeting the agenda serves as a note-taking template and at the conclusion of the meeting, notes are instantly available online to all attendees.

To give you a first hand experience of how a wiki works I have set up a training wiki at: <http://ettrainingwiki.wetpaint.com>. This wiki will gather a list of favourite holiday destinations and why it is your favourite. Go to the URL address and have a go at adding to this wiki.

Getting started

Wikis in Plain English is great place to start, view this three-minute presentation at:

http://www.teachertube.com/viewVideo.php?video_id=20514

Teaching with Wikis

<https://wiki.umn.edu/view/TeachingWithWikis/WebHome>

50 Ways to Use Wikis for a More Collaborative and Interactive Classroom <http://www.smartteaching.org/blog/2008/08/50-ways-to-use-wikis-for-a-more-collaborative-and-interactive-classroom/>

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