Using Wikis to Enhance Learning

TA Day
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Outline

- What is a wiki?
- When could I use a wiki?
- Why use a wiki?
- The LTRC’s wiki-hosting service
- Getting started with a wiki
- Potential pitfalls
- Top five tips
- When could I use a wiki?, redux
- Final thoughts
What is a wiki?

- The word “wiki” is Hawaiian meaning “quick” or “fast”
- A group of web pages designed to permit authorized users to add and edit content
- Simplified markup is used so that mastery of HTML is not required to contribute
- Pages are linked together non-linearly
- Meant for collaborative document creation and the storage/management of information
What is a wiki?

The most famous wiki in the world:

**WIKIPEDIA**

**English**
The Free Encyclopedia
2,534,000+ articles

**Español**
La enciclopedia libre
392,000+ artículos

**Français**
L’encyclopédia libre
698,000+ articles

**Deutsch**
Die freie Enzyklopädie
795,000+ Artikel

**Português**
A enciclopédia livre
424,000+ artigos

**Polski**
Wolna encyklopedia
531,000+ haseł

**Русский**
Свободная энциклопедия
311,000+ статей

**Italiano**
L’enciclopedia libera
426,000+ voce

**中文**
自由的百科全书
203,000+ 条目

**日本語**
フリー百科事典
515,000+ 記事
What is a wiki?

- Not quite as famous (but still popular):
When could I use a wiki?

- With your current level of knowledge and experience with wikis (e.g. having used Wikipedia), when do you think a wiki could be used effectively in teaching?
Why use a wiki?

- Easily facilitates collaboration in document creation
  - Versus e-mail exchanges, shuffling Word documents around
- Web-accessible, immediate publication
- Changes easily tracked/reverted
- Quick-and-dirty edits possible
  - Save thoughts and ideas for future refinement
  - Documentation
- Ability to integrate multimedia
The LTRC’s wiki-hosting service

- Began in 2006 as a pilot program
  - WikiNatomy (Anatomy Program), and others
- Expanded to include over a dozen courses
  - Biochemistry and Biomedical Sciences
  - Kinesiology
  - Health Sciences
  - Nursing
  - Midwifery
  - Economics
  - Engineering
The LTRC’s wiki-hosting service

- Over 500 students from undergraduate- and graduate-level programs involved
- Supports common authentication via the MAC ID account
- Extensible via dozens of plugins
- Indexed full-text search
- Flexible access control mechanism
- Similar “look-and-feel” to Wikipedia
- Multi-language support
The LTRC’s wiki-hosting service

- A list of some wikis hosted by the LTRC:
  - Astronomy 1F03
  - Biochemistry 3C03
  - Biochemistry 3N03
  - Biology 1AA3
  - Biophotonics Research Group
  - Economics 3HH3
  - Kinesiology 701
  - Physics Research Group
  - And many more...
Getting started with a wiki

- Requesting a new wiki
- Administrative Information
  - Account and Service Policies
  - Backups, Disk Usage, Copyright
- Frequently Asked Questions
Getting started with a wiki

- Logging in:
  - E.g. [http://wiki.mcmaster.ca/demowiki/](http://wiki.mcmaster.ca/demowiki/)
  - Your MAC ID username and password

- Navigating, viewing and editing pages
  - Use of editing toolbar

- Help section
  - Syntax help and plugin help
  - Top tips for newbies
  - RSS subscriptions and more
Getting started with a wiki

- Creating a new wiki page
  - Create an internal link
  - Create the page and save it

- User account management
  - Add/remove users (by their MAC ID)
  - “Internal” users can also be set up
    - E.g. guest accounts for users with no MAC ID

- Access control management
  - Deny edit privileges to students/groups to “freeze” wiki pages for grading
Potential pitfalls

- Low student engagement and buy-in
  - Assign a large portion of the grade to the wiki
    - E.g. 20-40% of the final grade for the wiki output
  - Use phased deliverables
    - Set weekly or bi-weekly milestones as part of the grade
    - Periodic (graded) progress reports
  - Be enthusiastic and an active promoter
    - Your level of interest will be infectious
    - Support the students and help them find answers when they are having problems with wiki syntax, etc.
Potential pitfalls

- Non-contributing group members
  - Check each student’s contributions by reviewing their edits in the revision history
    - Verify edit dates/times, quantity/quality of edits
  - Require individual progress reports on a regular basis
    - Force students to report on what they have accomplished since the last report
  - Include a group member evaluation process, and make clear how the process works
    - State penalties for laxity/substandard work upfront
Potential pitfalls

- **Factual accuracy**
  - Require proper citations
    - Style (e.g. MLA), types of sources (e.g. journals)
  - Encourage use of discussion page for debate
    - Disputes can be debated/discussed instead of engaging in “edit wars”
  - Select topics with sufficient authoritative primary sources
    - Otherwise, students go digging on the Internet or other frequently inaccurate sources for the topic at hand
Potential pitfalls

- Poor organization and layout
  - Plan and set up the table of contents and structure first
    - Use of certain headers (H1, H2, H3) will auto-generate a ToC
  - Avoid renaming pages to avoid orphans
    - Just change the label displayed for internal links
  - Create separate pages for different administrative tasks
    - “To do” list
    - Milestones
    - Communication message board for group members
Top five tips

1) Start with a document structure
   • Wiki pages are not independent
   • Wiki pages are not monolithic Word files
   • Consider headers and categories
     • Abstract or introduction
     • Multiple content sections
     • Conclusions and references
     • Table of contents
   • Create internal links from the main page
     • Improves readability
     • Permits simultaneous collaboration
Top five tips

2) Create separate pages for rough work
   • Use as “holding areas” for ideas, notes, etc.
   • Each person should have their own page(s)
     for rough work
     ▪ Once the content is reformatted and presentable,
       it can be incorporated into the main article
   • Try not to rename pages
     ▪ This can break internal links and create orphans
Top five tips

3) Review the syntax and plugin help pages
   • LTRC-hosted wikis have syntax and plugin help pages
     ▪ Syntax help describes the wiki syntax for basic text formatting
     ▪ Plugin help demonstrates several plugins that provide additional features
     ▪ Some elements can help give wiki pages a “polished” look
     ▪ Help pages will provide ideas on how to format text
     ▪ Refer back if you have difficulty with syntax
Top five tips

4) Use the Playground for testing
   • Practice formatting content here
   • Try out plugins or inserting your own code
   • Constantly editing/saving your main wiki pages increases the number of revisions being tracked
     ▪ This will make it very difficult to find a particular old revision later on
     ▪ When making revisions, try to include comments about the edit to describe the changes and additions so it will be easier to find a particular revision later
Top five tips

5) Say “hello” to tabs

- Many tabs appear at the top of the wiki page
  - **Article**: main article for the topic
  - **Discussion**: a “talk” page linked to the article
  - **Create this page**: topic does not exist
  - **Edit this page**: must have edit privilege
  - **Show pagesource**: read privilege only
  - **Old revisions**: history of edits, comparison, revert

- Remember, you can’t permanently mangle things in the wiki, so experiment!
With what you’ve seen and heard about today...what new ideas do you have as to when you could use a wiki?

• It doesn’t have to be part of just one course...
• It doesn’t have to be strictly about teaching...
• It doesn’t have to be strictly academic, either...
Final thoughts

- Be prepared...faculty may ask for your involvement in their course use of wikis
- Or, you may wish to promote the use of wikis in your department
- Keep in mind that a wiki is not a hammer, and your problems are not all nails
- Need help?
  - Learning Technologies Resource Centre (LTRC)
  - Web site: http://www.ltrc.mcmaster.ca/wiki/
  - E-mail: support.wiki@ltrc.mcmaster.ca
Final thoughts

- The what, when, why, who, how, and where of wikis
  - What a wiki is
  - When a wiki could be used
  - Why a wiki should be used
  - Who to request a wiki from
  - How to use a wiki
  - Where to get help with a wiki
Thank you!
Questions?