

Faculty Ideas about Technology: Wikis

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Introduction

Wikis are an increasingly popular trend sweeping through educational institutions around the world. Although they were originally viewed as another technological trend serving as a stop-gap, wikis have firmly planted themselves among the most asked about emerging technologies. As Web 2.0 becomes more prevalent in today's tech savvy culture, instructors in higher education are increasingly turning to wikis to provide collaborative environments for their students.

History of the Technology

Wikis are collaborative websites that allow users to edit and format content pages. Contributing to the wiki's recent boom in popularity is the fact that anyone can access, edit, and contribute to a communal body of knowledge needing nothing more than a keyboard and an Internet connection. Wikis can be universally accessed using any Web browser, operating system, or platform. For these reasons, the wiki has gained a reputation as a fast and efficient technological tool that most people can navigate with little to no training.

Wikis have been around since 1995, when Ward Cunningham launched WikiWikiWeb. However, it wasn't until the Wikimedia Foundation launched Wikipedia in 2001 that wikis became a driving force in mainstream culture. Wikipedia has been criticized by politicians, faculty, and even its founder, Jimmy Wales, as being inconsistent and, like most encyclopedias, inappropriate as a primary source. Despite the debate over the validity of content on Wikipedia, the Wikimedia Foundation continues to develop its open source tool, MediaWiki. Not to be outdone, a number of other corporations have begun developing wiki technologies that allow site administrators to leverage the power of the population to develop collaborative content.

In general, wikis are convenient content repositories that require minimal special markup language. To add content to a site, users can simply add text to a page. Additionally, users can edit, delete and modify the layout of the page with virtually no effort. Wiki users can take on different roles—content creator, formatting designer, or content evaluator. Wikis are a powerful technology that can accommodate an entire range of skill sets.

How do Wikis Support the Seven Principles?

It is not the inherent traits of a technology that impact the teaching and learning environment, but the practice associated with the use of said technology. For this reason, using Chickering and Gamson's seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education, we focus on the pedagogical issues associated with wikis. Like new uses of old technology, emerging technology



has the capacity to support the core mission of an institution of higher education by facilitating, ideally, several of these principles. With this in mind, let us consider which of the seven principles could potentially be supported by implementing wikis into an educational setting.

Encourages Cooperation among Students

By definition, a wiki is a collaborative environment. Thus, the most obvious principle that wikis could support is encouraging student-student cooperation by providing a collaborative work space. Whether this space is used formally or informally or to manage assignments, daily journal entries, or collaborative research, there is little doubt that a virtual collaborative space can be utilized as an extension of the classroom.

Encourages Active Learning

If classroom practice and pedagogy are implemented along with the wiki, they can serve as a technology that supports active learning. By empowering the students to be in charge of their own learning and requiring them to contribute their knowledge (whether currently held or newly gained) to a collective project, a wiki can facilitate discussions that place individual students in the role of teacher. If discussions are moderated correctly, students will be forced to present ideas and topics in new and meaningful ways in order to ensure comprehension by their peers and, in doing so, will gain a new understanding of the topic at hand.

Respects Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning

Some characteristics of the wiki show promise in supporting a third principle: respecting diverse talents and ways of learning. Different students adhere to different learning styles. Wikis offer a technological flexibility that can facilitate multiple learning styles while contributors are working on the same project/assignment. An assignment could be drafted with a central learning objective in mind, but good practice may dictate that the means by which the individual learner achieves the objective is flexible enough to accommodate the learner's preferred style. Since the wiki can support many different technologies, the individual learner is able to adapt the approach they are most comfortable with while feasibly encouraging other students to familiarize themselves with alternative ways of learning. The good practice principle is supported when each individual's talents are respected and recognized.

Communicates High Expectations

Finally, the use of wikis in a course could easily communicate high expectations. After all, a standard is being set when an instructor chooses to use a collaborative environment. There is an underlying assumption that a student's contributions will be judged against their peers and are expected to be of a certain educational caliber. If an element of peer review, editing, and feedback is incorporated, the idea of high expectations is reinforced.