

techLEARNING

Wild about Wikis

By David Jakes

Aug 15, 2006

URL: <http://www.techlearning.com/story/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=191801354>

Tools for taking student and teacher collaboration to the next level.

Simply put, wikis enable anyone and everyone to create content online using easily understandable tools. The most famous wiki is Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia created by users from around the globe. Wikis are also increasingly being used by the corporate world; for example, eBay recently added wikis to its auction site so members can coauthor articles about buying and selling. Not surprisingly, K-12 schools are also taking advantage of the opportunities for "collaborative construction" that wikis provide.

1. How do wikis work?

Generally, a user begins a wiki on a particular topic and invites others to participate in creating content using an interface that's similar to basic word processing software. Because new content is continually being added by contributors, wikis are considered fluid works in progress (changes are tracked as "page history," so it's possible to see the development of the wiki over time). In addition, wikis typically include forums that let users discuss the content they're creating.

2. What are the educational benefits of wikis?

Wikis are extremely flexible tools that have many classroom, professional development, and administrative uses.

Classroom. Students can use wikis as platforms for collaborative problem solving; group laboratory reports; "WebEssays" (essays that combine images, text, and hyperlinks); classroom writing projects; and the creation of a class "textbook." Basically, wikis can be used to support any type of collaborative student project.

Professional Development. Wikis are handy tools for planning workshops or conferences. Trainers can post documents and other resources at the wiki prior to the workshop and have participants create and post their own notes during the event. Later, participants can return to the wiki to further reflect on what they've learned.

Administrative Uses. Administrators can leverage wikis to allow teachers, technology staff, and others help create and edit policy documents.

3. Are they free?

Most Web-based wiki tools are free or offer a free version of their product that includes basic features. However, "free" wikis typically contain advertising such as Google AdWords. Teachers wanting to use a free wiki solution should be aware of district policies concerning ads and school-related uses of the Web.

4. What wiki tools are available?

There are a variety of wiki tools. Some are hosted online; others are available as server-based open source software. For a comprehensive comparison of more than 50 types of wiki platforms, visit [WikiMatrix](#). Additionally, there are wiki solutions available for learning management systems like [Blackboard](#) and [Moodle](#). What follows is a sampling of tools schools might want to consider.

PBwiki: This site says creating a wiki is as easy as making a peanut butter sandwich, features an attractive design, an easy-to-use interface, RSS feeds, and the option to password-protect content. PBWiki supports itself through Google AdWords. More robust features such as advanced permissions are available for a monthly fee (\$5, \$10, or \$25 per-month options).

Wikispaces: Wikispaces is an outstanding tool that's free for K-12 educators, and more important, it's free of advertising. The education-specific pages are private so only space members can edit them. With its easy editing interface, Wikispaces is a good choice for teachers getting started with wikis.

EditMe: This is a full-feature wiki interface with multiple levels of authoring control and viewing (such as public view, public edit, administrative edit, and more) through password protection. The advertising-free wiki pages offer easy editing through a WYSIWYG interface. EditMe's cost-per-month starts at \$4.95.

WetPaint: A new player in the wiki hosting environment, WetPaint offers a simple editing interface, password protection for registered users, RSS feeds for content distribution, and a unique moderator option that lets individual contributors monitor wiki content and user behavior. WetPaint's free wiki pages contain Google AdWords.

MediaWiki: MediaWiki is a free server-based wiki tool. Because it's hosted on a school's internal server, no ads are present. Although its page-editing tools are somewhat challenging to learn, MediaWiki offers a complete solution for schools to create a wiki environment tailored to their needs.

5. How much support is required to maintain a wiki?

Web-hosted wikis like PBWiki and Wikispaces are easy to construct, use, and maintain. In fact, a teacher with basic technology skills can begin using wikis relatively quickly. Another benefit of going with the hosted option is that all interface support is handled by the wiki provider so there's minimal technical support required. In contrast, open-source solutions such as MediaWiki demand more robust support and programming knowledge. Installation is typically handled by a district's technology department.

6. What are potential concerns about using wikis?

Wiki pages have the potential to be very useful for educators. However, their strengths can also be limitations. Because they can be edited by anyone, wikis are subject to vandals—individuals posting inappropriate content that distracts from the purpose of the wiki page. To address this issue, most wikis offer a "notify" feature that automatically notifies wiki monitors/administrators of any changes. Monitors can then delete irrelevant or inappropriate content. In addition, publicly-accessible wikis are vulnerable to spam. One solution to this problem is to password-protect your wiki pages.

As for wikis in the classroom, there's still the age-old issue of one student doing all the work on a collaborative project. Teachers should closely watch changes to the wiki (through the wiki history feature) to get a clear understanding of student contributions.

David Jakes has spent 20 years in education as a teacher, staff developer, and technology coordinator. He contributes regularly to www.techlearning.com/blog.

Eleven Wikis to Watch

Presenting the cream of the wiki crop.

[Bud Hunt's Wiki](#): Created by Colorado teacher Bud Hunt and many educator-collaborators.

[Educational Blogging Wiki](#): Supports the educational uses of blogs and contains links to student and teacher blogs.

[High School Online Collaborative Writing](#): Features the collaborative writing of various high school students.

[Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki](#): Smart practices for libraries and the issues that impact them.

[Westwood Schools Wiki](#): An online space for Westwood Schools' students that includes a variety of student projects, including an insightful analysis of Web 2.0 tools.

[PodcasterCon Wiki](#): Supports collaborative preconference planning for PodcasterCon 2006 and hosts content about each session that participants can add to.

[SwarmSketch](#): Just for fun: This site allows you to contribute a single line to a drawing and then vote for the inclusion of other lines in the drawing.

[Warlick's Wiki](#): A wiki designed to support the presentations of education guru David Warlick, who speaks at Technology & Learning's Tech Forum events.

[Wikibooks](#): Collection of textbooks that can be edited by anyone.

[WikiVille](#): A wiki where students can build stories about where they live.

Learn More

Not ready to stop reading? Refer to the following articles.

[Seven Things You Should Know about Wikis](#) (PDF)

[Think Outside the Blog](#)

[Wide Open Spaces: Wikis Ready or Not](#) (PDF)

[Wiki Pedagogy](#)