

Can Wikis be useful for learning?

A Wiki is the “simplest online database that could possibly work”. It is a piece of server software that allows users to freely create and edit webpage content using any web browser. Given this worldwide reach and ease of use, could Wikis add value to the world of e-learning?

Wikis trace their ancestry all the way back to 1995. The inventor, Ward Cunningham, named them *Wiki-Wiki* (Hawaiian for ‘quick’) to avoid calling the concept ‘quick-web’.

Like many simple concepts, "open editing" has some profound and subtle effects on Wiki usage. Allowing all users to create and edit any page in a website is exciting; it encourages democratic use of the web and helps less IT-competent users to contribute content, which is something we want to happen in e-learning.

Wikis and sacred cows

The most famous Wiki of all is Wikipedia, the free online encyclopaedia with 4 million entries. Anyone who has used it will know it is a fabulous resource. And yet all of the pages have been created by the online community. Now most folk would think this a recipe for misinformation and distortion, and yet Nature did a serious peer review comparing the accuracy of Wikipedia (established 2001) with that of the venerable Encyclopaedia Britannica (established 1768). The results showed Wikipedia as almost as accurate. For example, one of the findings was that of the 42 entries tested, Wikipedia had 4 errors per entry and EB had 3 errors per entry. However both sides have since hotly contested both the method and the results since the report was first published last December.

Wiki works because:

- Everybody feels that they have a sense of responsibility because anybody can contribute.
- Any information can be changed or deleted by anyone. Wiki pages represent consensus because it's much easier to delete insults and remove spam than let them stand. What remains is naturally meaningful and has been collated from multiple points of view.
- Anyone can play. This sounds ominous, but to make an impact on Wiki, you need to generate real content. Anything else will be removed. So anyone can play, but only the good players remain.
- It's fun to participate, and people play nicely when the game is fun.

And if you feel intrigued but don't feel brave enough to edit a Wiki page, there is the wonderfully named *Wiki Wiki Sandbox*. There you can have a go at editing a live webpage without any risk of comeback.

Making money out of Wikis

Commercial companies have been quick to spot a good idea and make it chargeable. And there are over 20 Wiki tools listed at the UK's <http://www.e-learningcentre.co.uk> with great names such as Duck Computing and TWiki. However it does seem a shame to pay for a fully-featured version when the basic software is free.

But how can Wikis be used in learning?

Well the first use is as an information resource. A good internet user would use Google to find out the meaning of a new concept or term, whereas an expert internet user would be more likely to use Wikipedia. Unfortunately, Google has the power to find all the misinformation on the web, as well as all the good information.

Secondly, a Wiki is a powerful collaboration tool. A geographically distributed team could use a Wiki as a way of keeping in touch, sharing ideas and developing a project. Anyone who is on an email distribution list of over 3 people will appreciate that email is a poor collaboration tool. Once a group size goes over 3 people, one can be swamped with 'reply all' emails and find it hard to keep track of the different contributions, the consensus and what the proposed actions should be. If it were all on one webpage, which everyone could edit (and put their name against the edits) it would create a clearer picture of team direction.

Essentially this is workflow learning in action. The team members would be learning from each other as part of the natural flow of the project. All the important project management issues would be on the Wiki and everyone can access them and contribute. There could be:

- To do lists
- A forum for asking and answering questions
- Meeting agendas & notes
- Project Plan and related documents
- Task assignments
- Group announcements
- Document preparation
- Interacting with clients
- Status Reports
- Contact Information
- Links to: other Wiki contents, documents, network folders, internet and intranet sites, etc.

Wikis building e-learning content

What about building e-learning content using a Wiki? Subject matter experts (SME) have all the learning content in their heads, or have easy access to it, but they currently need an instructional designer/programmer team to create engaging, interactive e-learning content. E-learning design is currently a jolly merry-go-round involving SMEs, programmers, designers and the client, and hopefully a project manager to make sure it all gets done. A better way of all these parties collaborating may be to use a Wiki to construct the content. Some organisations already use collaborative software to keep an e-learning project on track, however the difference would be that the Wiki *is* the final e-learning content. SMEs and learning designers can both access it and amend it and users can be user-testing it as it develops. Clearly it would not necessarily be the most complex bit of learning but it could certainly avoid being linear by using hyperlinks to allow students to move around and explore the content.

Icebreaking Wiki

It has also been used as an icebreaker tool for online groupwork. At Deakin University, Australia, they adapted a group icebreaker that usually worked very well face-to-face by turning it into a Wiki.

They took a standard icebreaker exercise of a list of questions for which you have to go ask all the other participants to get all the answers. For example, 'Find someone who has the same colour car as you?' People have to get up and circulate in the classroom, asking each other questions, to try to locate people who match the criteria outlined in the questions. Because everyone is participating, the exercise creates a non-threatening way for everyone to introduce themselves to everyone else.

The Wiki version of this icebreaker hosted 451 users who actively participated in the icebreaker exercise. A popular question asked users to tell the group if they had pets. Some students chose to upload a picture of their pet instead of a picture of themselves. Many linked the images of their pet to their posts responding to this question. Overall the Wiki proved to be a good technology for online collaboration. All participating students managed to complete the exercise, proving they could use the Wiki in the process. Throughout the exercise there was no misuse or intentional deletions from the Wiki.

Good e-learning is certainly about informing, collaborating and meeting online, which are things that Wikis do well.

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