Wiki Writing

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Preface

Wiki Writing: Collaborative Learning in the College Classroom is, as the title suggests, an exploration by teachers in higher education of the online writing spaces called wikis. How do wikis change student writing and collaboration? The answer lies in the way they structurally invite collaboration and yet tolerate dissension. Wikis are not blogs or Web spaces where one user writes and all others read. Similarly, wikis are not forums or messaging boards where users post multiple statements in a hierarchical chain. Because wikis allow all readers to write (typically—there are important exceptions), but write the same document, they provide a unique Web space where differing opinions are expressed, explored, and, yes, sometimes eviscerated, but gradually moved toward consensus. If wikis do not foster complete consensus, they facilitate a defined disagreement. But as these spaces create communities of inquiry around topics, they facilitate a gradual move toward a more singular comprehension of the state of knowledge for that community topic. The content on wikis will differ greatly from one community to the next. But it is the underlying commonality of that shared site space, the wiki itself, that moves users from complete divergence of opinion toward often greater understanding through dialogue.

Wikis—and specifically the clashes surrounding that most famous wiki, Wikipedia—have evoked what some might term “intellectual lawlessness.” As wikis emphasize diversity of expression on a massive scale, creativity and originality erupt in spaces beyond official endorsement or review. Similarly, fraud, character assassination, hoax, and simple hyperbole thrive in this uneven landscape. For a Web that seemed to promise so much in terms of diversity of points of view in the late 1990s, too much territory has been worn bare with familiar paths. Wikis represent a proximal negotiation between community and individual on the Web: a way for the individual (one) to work in dialogue with a community of inquiry (one) dedicated to a particular topic or mode of inquiry.
Wikis are often simplistically described as Web sites that anyone can edit and seem to many people to represent nothing but textual chaos. As Robert E. Cummings explores more fully in his introductory essay to this volume, there is a difference to appreciate between wikis generally and Wikipedia singularly. But a glance through that most famous wiki, Wikipedia, would reveal tens of thousands of entries that are well written, lavishly researched, and probably more up-to-date than any printed encyclopedia. Whenever Wikipedia is mentioned in the popular press, however, it is almost always in conjunction with some abuse of the system or scandal, such as when a politician or CEO is discovered to be creating or “spinning” his or her own pages.

Meanwhile, flocks of zealots settle down on controversial pages and exercise brute force in an effort to keep “their” pages biased in their favor. Concerned scholars, scientists, and educators make “corrections” to pages that are later overturned, while other contributions are rejected for being “original research.” Shouldn’t there be some kind of system in place to privilege contributions from “experts”?

Many of the most successful wiki communities emulate an encyclopedia format. One of the better-known examples of these is Wikitravel, an “open source travel guide.” As of this writing, users have contributed 16,313 “destination guides” and articles of interest to world travelers. Another well-populated wiki community is Memory Alpha, a wiki dedicated to all things Star Trek. That project currently boasts 25,953 articles. We also find businesses turning to wikis to collaborate with customers in building help sites and guides for their products or services. Companies that have jumped on the wiki bandwagon include Amazon, eBay, Intel, and Symantec.

Amazon’s project is called Amapedia, which encourages users to write about their favorite products. The articles typically describe the product in question, list similar items, and place the item in a network of related content (such as larger categories or genres). The Amapedia is integrated with Amazon’s product database, so an article titled “Real-Time Strategy Games” may include dozens (if not hundreds) of links to other such games sold at Amazon. The idea seems to be that customers will buy more products if they are better informed.

eBay uses wikis to help its customers understand online auctions. A good example is a page called For Buyers: Protecting Yourself Against Fraud. The page appears to be authored by individuals who have firsthand experience
with criminal activity on the popular online auction site. The Intel Software
Network wiki is intended for users who want to share their hands-on knowl-
edge about Intel’s products with other professionals. Symantec uses wikis
internally to help its employees “track ideas and collaborate.” A company
named QAD, which provides enterprise software to large manufacturing
companies, uses wikis to facilitate the sales proposal process. QAD’s cus-
tomers work with the company to collaborate on proposals, speeding up the
process “from up to a month to just days” and providing much more satisfy-
ning service.

Wikis have also attracted the interest of many professional educators all
over the world. These educators not only are motivated to analyze wikis from
a theoretical perspective but also want to understand how and why their stu-
dents should invest in them. What can writing in a wiki teach students about
the composition process? What kind of rhetoric is needed to successfully en-
ter and actively participate in a wiki community? What are the different
stages of collaboration, and how do they foster course outcomes? And, on a
more pragmatic level, what kind of wiki-related writing assignments will
truly benefit students? If wikis are good for anything in a writing classroom,
it is their ability to open up issues that may have seemed hopelessly abstract
before. Postmodern theory has, for example, been waxing on for decades
about how we should question our Romantic notions of authors and author-
ity. Wikis demonstrate the problem quite concretely by conflating the roles of
author and audience. Likewise, what were once puzzling and baffling dis-
cussions about the role of expertise in knowledge production, such as how
much we should privilege expert or “official” knowledge over “the wisdom
of crowds,” are now vivid and concrete, immediately accessible. Some dream
of daily newspapers published as citizen wikis; there is even an effort to build
virtual universities in wikis, and plenty of professors have worked together to
create free college “wikitexts.” Even if these projects ultimately fail, the so-
cial, cultural, and technological milieu that led to their existence is a rich and
fertile ground for scholars. Far more than some new “hip” technology, the
wiki phenomenon promises to provide fundamental and important insights
into the nature of knowledge production itself.

Thus while the essays in this collection explore the wiki phenomenon
from a variety of perspectives, this collection is mainly concerned with help-
ing students, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders in higher ed-
ucation understand the potential for wikis in the college classroom. The essays are grouped into three main sections, based on how their authors have envisioned their audiences: Wikis and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning; Wikis in Composition and Communication Classrooms; and, most generally, Wikis and the Higher Education Classroom. In all cases, the writers explore approaches to using wikis in the classroom that reveal their strengths and weaknesses, not only conveying to readers how wikis might apply to their college classroom but also gesturing toward the potential of these platforms.

In the introductory essay, coeditor Robert E. Cummings provides a brief historical introduction for readers who might want more background on wikis. Much of the essay traces the cultural history of Wikipedia, but the main theme is epistemology and concerns the extent to which wikis have permanently shifted how we create and evaluate knowledge. Cummings develops this epistemological narrative by tracing the evolution of popular awareness of wikis, as it is reflected primarily in a series of controversies about Wikipedia, including the various charges of inaccuracy by editors of print encyclopedias, the Nature study comparing Wikipedia’s accuracy to other online journals, and Stephen Colbert’s satire of Wikipedia’s impact on popular culture. Cummings concludes by noting that, while the impact of wikis seems to be widely appreciated, their long-term effects on productivity, knowledge creation, and authority are in need of serious and sustained study. Cummings’s introduction is followed by a cluster of four collaboratively authored essays focused on wikis and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Mark Phillipson of the Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CCNMTL) gives readers a very useful taxonomy of the different wikis in “Wikis in the Classroom: A Taxonomy.” Phillipson surveys a broad number of wiki projects and provides an intellectual template to help readers assess what these varied sites can accomplish. He reminds us that, although Wikipedia is likely the first wiki that springs to mind when thinking about their potential classroom use, it is not necessarily the most apt. The truly collaborative nature of this software tool becomes most apparent when a wiki is designed specifically for the course in question. Surveying many different college-level classroom wikis, Phillipson identifies a series of wiki genres—the resource wiki, the presentation wiki, the gateway wiki, the simulation
wiki, and the illuminated wiki—and, by describing the key qualities and processes of each, provides readers with a useful entry point for understanding the wide variety of wikis available today.

One exemplary project featured in Phillipson’s wiki tour is the Social Justice Movements wiki at Columbia University, which was developed in the course of Robin D. G. Kelley. In “Wiki Justice, Social Ergonomics, and Ethical Collaborations,” Jonah Bossewitch, John Frankfurt, and Alexander Sherman, also of CCNMTL, explain how they developed this wiki to transform a traditional teaching space into a unique and active community. Kelley’s undergraduate course Black Movements in the U.S. provides a rich collaborative platform for students who desire to collaborate on social justice projects but heretofore lacked the tools for doing so. Going one step further, the team also entertains the question, What is the point of a wiki?—looking to other landmark collaborative efforts in intellectual history, such as Diderot’s Encyclopédie and the Oxford English Dictionary, as analytic tools. This essay completes the circle between a technology design team and teacher with a statement by Kelley on teaching with the wiki.

Meanwhile, across the country, another team of academic researchers at the Stanford Center for Innovations in Learning (SCIL) and Stanford’s Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) was also exploring the questions of how best to apply wikis in the classroom. In “Building Learning Communities with Wikis,” Dan Gilbert, Helen L. Chen, and Jeremy Sabol collaborate to explore and document the different stages in which learning communities evolve as a result of their deployment of wiki technology in the classroom. The highest form of engagement they identify, learning communities, proves to be an elusive but rewarding level of interaction, and the essay lays out strategies for moving students from one stage of engagement to the next by using a novel yet insightful diagram inspired by the children’s board game “Chutes and Ladders.” The SCIL team’s essay brings a wealth of teaching knowledge to bear on wikis, detailing the strengths and weaknesses of differing software platforms in multiple undergraduate classes.

In “Success through Simplicity: On Developmental Writing and Communities of Inquiry,” two communications professors, John W. Maxwell and Michael Felczak, both of Simon Fraser University, recount their experience of teaching large undergraduate courses using wikis. They too focus on the
concept of establishing communities of inquiry among students. For their part, they find wikis to live up to Ward Cunningham’s call for “the simplest thing that would work.”

“Disrupting Intellectual Property: Collaboration and Resistance in Wikis” shifts our focus toward the practices of composition and rhetoric. Authors Stephanie Vie and Jennifer deWinter are teachers of writing, and their examination of wiki writing is well grounded in theories of collaborative authoring (including the work of Kenneth Bruffee) and explores materialist questions of textual property and ownership. Wikis certainly do challenge the traditional notion of the author in question, and Vie and deWinter clarify this challenge by exploring the currency of intellectual property in the university setting. They write that as teachers “we advocate research and teaching practices that highlight multivocality such as citing sources, building upon prior knowledge in the field, and echoing the familiar terms of a discourse community.” At the same time, Vie and deWinter point out that, while collaboration is a familiar concept, sites of practice are rare and the value of wikis consists in their ability to provide such a site.

Continuing in the composition classroom, in “Agency and Accountability: The Paradoxes of Wiki Discourse,” D. A. Caeton writes of his experience teaching writing with Wikipedia. Caeton is certainly not the only teacher in this collection to focus on this topic. What makes Caeton’s experience unique, however, is the lens of his student Emina, who migrated to California from Bosnia. Caeton’s essay details how the impassioned exchanges of this student on Wikipedia over the definition of “Bosniak” led her to both a fuller and more personal understanding of theories of rhetoric than he could have ever planned for as an instructor.

The next essay also focuses on the student experience with wikis but in the communication classroom. David Elfving and Ericka Menchen-Trevino explore the learner perspective in “One Wiki, Two Classrooms.” The authors recount the experience of communication graduate students at the University of Illinois-Chicago who decided to collaborate to attack the mountain of reading that they had been assigned in two graduate seminars. The wiki proved a great tool for one class but was not well used in another. The authors tell us why and in so doing discover some of the barometers of a healthy wiki community.

Will Lakeman’s “Content and Commentary: Parallel Structures of Organi-
“zation and Interaction on Wikis” investigates the question of how wikis allow authors to shape and access content effectively. In many ways, Lake
man’s essay picks up where the work of the wiki creator, Ward Cunningham, leaves off. Cunningham created the wiki to enable electronic mailing list writers to store and access older content. Lakeman’s theoretically grounded essay explores how wikis can facilitate this access, as well as what happens to our theoretical understanding of authorship in the process. Lakeman encourages us to view content on wiki discussion pages and wiki pages themselves not as diametrically opposed to each other but rather as parallel forms of interaction.

The last essay in the section dedicated to the use of wikis in the composition and communication classroom imports the computer programming concept of refactoring to better map and explain the necessary work flow of wiki documents to uninitiated students. In “Above and Below the Double Line: Refactoring and That Old-Time Revision,” Michael C. Morgan blends coding practice with composition theory to reinforce the importance of revision for student writing and, naturally, to explain how wikis can facilitate such a process. Exploring the inevitable overlap of the coding community and the writing community that wikis portend, Morgan writes, “Refactoring is a kind of revision, but where composition and rhetoric types tend to see revision changing and developing meaning, refactoring attempts to preserve meaning. . . . Refactoring is synthesis.”

The next essay begins the third section of the collection, which focuses on the effect of wikis on the higher education classroom. In “Is There a Wiki in This Class? Wikibooks and the Future of Higher Education,” coeditor Matt Barton is concerned with two main tasks. First, he describes what kind of class assignments work well for wikis (and which ones do not), and, second, he discusses the value that good wiki assignments bring to the university and beyond. His main contention is that wikis have a strong civic or service-learning potential that tends to get overlooked (and compromised) by well-meaning instructors improperly integrating wikis into their classroom. Barton is not apologetic about advancing his agenda: he believes in the civic values and virtues of wikis and encourages teachers to allow those concerns to trump any misgivings about “security” and “ownership” when introducing wikis to students.

In examining the challenges of incorporating wikis in the classroom,
Thomas J. Nelson pays special attention to how their collaborative nature reveals to students a truer, more complex understanding of the nature of knowledge production. In “Writing in the Wikishop: Constructing Knowledge in the Electronic Classroom,” Nelson posits that some of the typical problems teachers face in incorporating collaborative work into the classroom—particularly the difficult issue of assessing collaborative work—can serve as learning opportunities about how we make meaning collectively.

“Wiki Lore and Politics in the Classroom” is contributed by Cathlena Martin and Lisa Dusenberry, both of the University of Florida. These teachers frame their essay by examining questions salient to all teachers who might consider the adoption of a wiki in the classroom: “Does a wiki truly provide a common, collaborative space where students can be creative and address the theoretical concerns of a college classroom? How do students accept and use their public, online writing space? Do wikis provide the same type of online voice as blogs? Is using a wiki for compositional writing seen by students as a subversive or marginal writing space? Does the writing medium of a wiki place an informal, creative bent on academic writing for a college class? Is a wiki only appropriate in a class dealing with popular media?” To find an answer, these teachers begin by exploring the analogy comparing a University of Florida community graffiti wall to the electronic space of a wiki. They record and examine students’ perceptions of a wiki, enumerate specific wiki writing assignments, and examine how students handled potentially divisive collaborative editing issues. And since they worked with wikis in different courses, the authors also examine where, in a curricular sense, wikis make the most pedagogical sense.

In “GlossaTechnologia: Anatomy of a Wiki-Based Annotated Bibliography,” author Ben McCorkle recounts his aims, goals, and experiences in conceiving a new wiki project. McCorkle envisions the wiki as the ultimate electronic tool for the bibliography, combining the ability to correlate the opinions of multiple readers in an ever-present, ever-updated metabook. McCorkle gives an honest account of his attempts to establish GlossaTechnologia, detailing both its successes and failures.

Our last offering is, in many ways, our most refreshing voice and the vision of our greatest pragmatist. Bob Whipple’s “An (Old) First-Timer’s Learning Curve: Curiosity, Trial, Resistance, and Accommodation” is very much a teacher’s missive to fellow teachers. Whipple’s voice is lighthearted
but provides a very practical guide for teachers who might want to employ wikis in their classrooms for the first time.

While this collection seeks to provide readers with a comprehensive overview of the emerging phenomenon of wikis and how to engage with them, it also represents a very self-conscious effort. All authors who write about technology—especially those who write books about technology—remain acutely aware that their subject is evolving even as they write. Nevertheless, the essays in this collection remain convinced of several principles. First, though we recognize that the wiki platform has been accused of destroying authorial integrity and textual authority, we believe that the advent of this technology in fact provides a valuable service by inviting us to understand how these concepts are fundamentally connected. Too often, authorial reputation has been misappropriated by the medium—book, periodical, or paper—rather than by the reputation of the author or even the worth of the text itself. By collapsing the distinction between author and audience in new and concrete ways, wikis provide the opportunity to reassess the value not of author and authority but of our application thereof.

As the conflicts surrounding Wikipedia have shown, the arrival of wikis has revealed perhaps another lazy habit of mind. Whenever a new concept arrives, we must metaphorically map an existing concept onto a new phenomenon; in the case of Wikipedia, we continue to look for The World Book but are surprised when it violates that template. Until we have enough practice of seeing the wiki for what it is and applying the tool based on its known strengths and weaknesses, false controversies will continue to flare up. This volume hopes to usher along that process of seeing the wiki for what it is—and for what it is not.