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GlossaTechnologia: Anatomy of a Wiki-Based Annotated Bibliography

We academics love our books. As the centuries-old vessels for containing and disseminating knowledge in various disciplines, books truly are the coin of the realm. We love our books so much, in fact, that we even create special types of books that do little more than catalog and comment upon other, more “real” books—metabooks, if you will, or what we more commonly call reference books. Among the various types of reference books, perhaps the most useful is the annotated bibliography, that peculiar metabook that not only lists citations to scholarly monographs, articles, and documents on a particular topic of inquiry but also includes a brief descriptive or evaluative paragraph for each entry that gives readers some inkling of its relevance or quality. Indeed, annotated bibliographies can be valuable tools for the wide-eyed academic venturing forth into a new project because they neatly encapsulate and comment upon a broad range of texts germane to a particular field or subfield. Library science guru James L. Harner describes the best models of this genre as “intelligent, accurate, thorough, efficiently organized works that foster scholarship by guiding readers through accumulated studies as well as implicitly or explicitly isolating scholarly concerns, identifying topics that have been overworked, and suggesting needed research.” Annotated bibliographies do have their drawbacks, however. For instance, because of the technological constraints of print, they are static documents (until a publisher deems a new edition necessary), usually offer the qualitative assessment of only one reviewer, and (if your topic deals with new technologies, let’s say) can suffer a rather short shelf life.

But what if we weren’t bound by those constraints of medium or form or generic habit? What would become of that venerated metabook if we were to
take the sine qua non of the annotated bibliography and place it into a new medium in order that it might take on a new look and feel and, in the process, a new functionality? Wikis can potentially allow us to overcome the constraints of the printed page by creating an open-access, real-time environment where scholars with a common interest can participate in the shared task of building a useful academic resource. This chapter chronicles the travails involved in using wiki software to establish GlossaTechnologia, an open, expanding annotated bibliography of texts on the topic of digital technology in rhetoric and composition studies. Specifically, I will address two main issues behind the implementation of GlossaTechnologia. In addition to positing a theoretical rationale for using wiki-based technology to construct a dynamic annotated bibliography based upon social networking and infrastructural theories, I will also discuss the pragmatic and technical dimensions of establishing and maintaining the wiki, including issues related to site vandalism and content vetting. Such problems aside, GlossaTechnologia demonstrates how wikis can be used to effectively harness the collective intelligence of a group of scholars to extend the knowledge base of a specific topic of interest and, by extension, their shared discipline. Further, it also functions as a site that increases the degree of interactivity between its collaborators, strengthening the sense of community in the field.

WikiWhy? A Theoretical Rationale for GlossaTechnologia

I’d first like to retrace the thinking that initially led to the creation of this particular wiki-based project, the type of project that Mark Phillipson in this volume would categorize as a resource wiki, because its primary function involves “the assemblage of a collaborative knowledge base.” As stated earlier, GlossaTechnologia is a hybrid wiki/annotated bibliography of scholarly works relevant to the intersection of digital technology and rhetoric and composition studies. A collection of such works is, in its own right, a valuable resource, but it also seems especially fitting that the medium should in some way reflect the content of the message—otherwise, the irony of a print publication dealing with digital technology would be lost on no one. In this context, a Web-based bibliography made sense, although at first the ques-
tion of what form—static Web site, blog, discussion board—was still very much up in the air. The name of the project, not incidentally, is derived from the Glossa Ordinaria, a famous book from the late Middle Ages that the classicist-cum-technologist James O’Donnell describes as “the common and widely disseminated medieval Bible commentary whose origins are still shrouded in mystery and which continued to grow and be relevant for centuries.”

Although admittedly less ambitious than the centuries-old Ordinaria, the more modest GlossaTechnologia bears at least a conceptual resemblance to its forebear as a multiauthored, collaborative scholarly compendium.

Of course, annotated bibliographies can already be found online. The Bedford Bibliography for Teachers of Writing and The Bedford Bibliography for Teachers of Basic Writing are two examples from my academic field, both of them Web-based versions of print editions. The fact that the online bibliographies are relatively faithful translations of their print-bound counterparts is precisely what makes them problematic in my mind. Aside from the benefit of increased access to the texts, there’s no real payoff to bringing them online in this static form because the constraints posed by the medium of print—the inability to manipulate content, the lack of growth, the impermeable wall separating the readers from the writers—are still very much in play. By contrast, I wanted to adapt the annotated bibliography to this new medium in such a way that it extended its overall reach and utility by being updatable, dynamic, and dialogical. In short, I wanted the text to benefit from the multiple perspectives of its reader-contributors, and the wiki format struck me as a perfect way to meet that particular goal.

Although the wiki has been around since the mid-1990s, when Ward Cunningham’s WikiWikiWeb first appeared, it has only recently become popular. In fact, searching the LexisNexus database for wiki and related terms shows a dramatic uptick in popular media coverage in the last few years (2004–present), with a comparable dearth of coverage prior to 2000. Contemporary Web culture increasingly supports the social networking paradigm, and this bodes well for the wiki platform in general. This shift to social networking epitomizes the comparatively democratic read-write Web originally envisioned by the World Wide Web’s creator, Tim Berners-Lee. Popular sites such as del.icio.us, Flickr, and Digg, where participants share, rate, construct folksonomies for, comment on, or tag content, have created a
more hospitable climate that has enabled the wiki to flourish. The benefit of such a paradigm is the potential to transcend individual intelligences via the phenomenon Steven Johnson calls “emergence.” In his book of the same name, Johnson describes the effect that often occurs in networked systems, a “whole is smarter than its constituent parts” argument. According to Johnson, networked systems solve problems by drawing on masses of relatively stupid elements rather than a single, intelligent “executive branch.” They are bottom-up systems, not top-down. They get their smarts from below. In a more technical language, they are complex adaptive systems that display emergent behavior. In these systems, agents residing on one scale start producing behavior that lies one scale above them: ants create colonies; urbanites create neighborhoods; simple pattern-recognition software learns how to recommend new books. Add to Johnson’s list the wiki-based annotated bibliography. When multiple contributors append annotation to annotation, patterns eventually develop that scale beyond the individual contributions, and an emergent type of consensus begins to form. In cases such as this, the more cooks in the kitchen, the better the broth.

WikiHow? A Pragmatics for GlossaTechnologia

Although pondering the theoretical contours of this project can be somewhat gratifying, it does not do much in the way of getting the site actually built. As a result, I’m going to shift my focus to the pragmatics of GlossaTechnologia and the logistical and technical details my development team and I worked out as we moved toward implementation.

Perhaps the most important initial decision we had to make was the choice of wiki platform. While there are a number of Web-based wiki products to choose from (among them PBwiki, TiddlyWiki, and Seed Wiki), in the end we chose to install MediaWiki on our own server account, the software engine behind the Wikipedia behemoth. In our case, installing MediaWiki was somewhat involved because it was not an application supported by Fantastico, an automatic installer program we use on our server space. Thus, we needed to install it manually, but in the end the process was hardly complicated, especially since the MediaWiki site has fairly thorough documentation outlining the various steps involved as well as troubleshooting advice. There
were a couple of reasons we selected MediaWiki over its Web-based counterparts. Although the setup is inherently more difficult, it is by far the most flexible and full-featured engine, allowing easier access to manipulate template files, style sheets, and the like. We also felt it was more capable of handling issues of scale—we wanted to be able to redesign or recategorize content easily if the organizational structure were to grow out of control. Additionally, MediaWiki’s own flavor of wiki formatting tags is more familiar because of Wikipedia, WikiQuote, and other popular, high-profile wikis. Because wiki tags can be a bit arcane to new users, we wanted to use a platform that is positioned to become the lingua franca for wiki coding.

Aside from the technical issues, there are other factors to consider with respect to handling the creation and organization of content. Perhaps the most important issue deals with content vetting. How are we to ensure that the additions to GlossaTechnologia are in keeping with the site’s scope and level of quality? To a large degree, this is the strength of a wiki: contributors determine community standards dynamically. And certainly at this early moment in the site’s existence, our community is small and of a single mind-set as to what GlossaTechnologia should be. As a result, contributions and emendations have mostly been expected and appropriate to the site’s mission. As the enterprise grows, however, so grows the risk of feature creep, and the need for as-yet-unaccounted-for functions, categories, and organizational structures will become apparent. Thus, developing strategies to maintain site cohesion will likely become more pressing in the near future. As one measure of curtailing such creep, we are currently in the midst of drafting a help document for the wiki that defines style, annotation length, and other best practices, with the acknowledgment that these attributes may well evolve as the site grows.

Of course, more than unintentional errors or irrelevant content, the problem of intentional site vandalism by spammers, trolls, and other malfeasants is one that inherently plagues wikis, or so the mainstream media would have us believe. Site vandalism can certainly be a real problem for wikis with higher traffic flows than ours, with Wikipedia perhaps the biggest target, but so far it has not been a big dilemma for GlossaTechnologia. For the immediate future, the development team is comfortable handling any needed fixes on the fly; anticipating a potential increase in vandalism in the future, we agree, will require revisiting this ad hoc policy, and we will perhaps consider
locking certain portions of the site such as the pages peripheral to the bibliography itself (i.e., help documentation, contributors lists, the site’s mission statement, etc.). At any rate, whether intentional or not, inappropriate content is to some extent a necessary part of building a sense of solidarity among a wiki community, a principle shared by the technorati. In fact, in a recent column for Wired magazine, noted technologist Joi Ito addressed just this issue when he was asked if Wikipedia was too vulnerable to the marks of vandals. Ito was particularly vociferous in his defense of Wikipedia:

I have never seen a mainstream media article about Wikipedia that didn’t itself contain errors. What’s the retraction time for those errors? Wikipedia works because it’s dynamic and alive and doesn’t require the same structures as old-fashioned, slow media. Every time I make a change online, I notice it being checked and elaborated on in minutes. I wish people would stop comparing a living organism to deadwood.\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{WikiWhen? Thoughts about the Project’s Growth and Future}

Chaos often breeds life, when order breeds habit.\textsuperscript{11}

Any project developer worth his or her salt will tell you that, while it is important to mind the store of the present, it is perhaps even more important to anticipate the vicissitudes of the future. GlossaTechnologia is no exception in that regard. Already at this preliminary stage—what we might call our “alpha build”—we are seeing evidence of the aforementioned spammers on the wiki. In fact, an overzealous pharmaceutical representative recently hijacked our front page, enticing visitors to try certain body-altering drugs rather than contribute to our modest enterprise. Fixing the intrusion was easy enough, as we simply reverted the page to a previous iteration and locked the page to unauthorized edits, but the incident illustrates the attention needed to maintain a cohesive and clutter-free site.

Additionally, we quickly realized the need to devote some of our attention to developing a cleaner interface for contributors. For instance, rather than have contributors manually create them, we would rather have a front-page, one-click solution for easily adding new bibliographic entries. We are also
looking into automated categorization for the entries as well, where users supplying new entries can check various boxes designating certain categories (media theory, digital literacy, etc.) rather than input them manually. Such streamlining measures will hopefully ensure that the site remains sticky for new and returning contributors alike.

Creating a sticky site, one that users want to continue to visit and build onto, is about more than just technical refinements—it also requires cultivating a network of human resources. Unlike the other wiki-based projects detailed in the “Wikis and the Higher Education Classroom” section of this volume, this one assumes a markedly different audience of readers and contributors. The motives and motivations for participating on the wiki are different when the audience is a group of loosely affiliated scholars from a range of institutions, ranks, and cultural contexts rather than a comparatively tightly knit group of students persuaded to participate in an instructor’s assignment. Therefore, building and sustaining a community around this project, especially at this preliminary stage, will require some behind-the-scenes politicking, entreaties to colleagues for contributions, done in pyramid-scheme fashion, where each of the core team of developers reaches out to a handful of colleagues in the field and so on—in other words, some type of social fire stoking that will eventually result in a more or less self-sustaining community. We hope that after an initial period of somewhat artificial social networking the wiki will begin to take on a community dynamic of its own, precisely the kind of community evolution described by Gilbert, Chen, and Sabol in their chapter “Building Learning Communities with Wikis,” included in this volume:

In the best-case scenario, a wiki becomes part of a thriving and sustainable learning community. In such a community, learners must move from just adopting the practices to adapting the tools. In this stage, the community moves from a centralized top-down structure to an organic structure where all contributors feel ownership over the intellectual framework, the site navigation, and wiki content. As a community, learners and the instructor collaboratively decide what information or media to include and how it should be organized. As the needs of the students evolve, they feel empowered to modify the tool to meet those needs. The community is also in a position to speculate what it might
need for future work and can change the tools and work practices to support expected needs.¹²

Even in its most idealized form, GlossaTechnologia can’t help but be a little rough around the edges; such is the simultaneous curse and blessing of the wiki structure. Still, a certain segment of potential readership may appreciate or even prefer a vetted, edited version of the site, not unlike Wikipedia’s recently released Version 1.0, which is an offline version of the wiki available on DVD or in printed form issued by the editorial staff of Wikipedia. While on its face, such a static incarnation doesn’t seem to embody the spirit of the wiki ethos, the option may actually be beneficial to the long-term viability of the project in a couple of respects. The self-serving rationale suggests that such products might lure otherwise unlikely readers to the site to see additional content not contained in the static version (in other words, the wiki is a value-added alternative). Moreover, a print edition may entice some readers to become contributors themselves, perhaps leading to subsequent editions. As for a more altruistic argument, a wider dissemination of the resource in multiple formats/media would help propagate a valuable resource so that it might aid those scholars just beginning to inquire into the topic. Once it begins to realize its full potential, GlossaTechnologia stands to embody Harner’s definition of what an annotated bibliography should be: a work containing the “determination, meticulousness, energy, time, critical acumen, and literary detective skills that one associates with the best scholarship of any kind.”¹³ Harner’s claims, written well before the advent of the World Wide Web, outline a metric that the wiki format is well positioned to meet or even surpass, given its evolving, dynamic, self-correcting nature. Because this project is still in its gestational stages—fresh out of planning and into implementation—I hope to return to the ideas put forth in this chapter to assess whether my theoretical rationale is borne out by a more battle-hardened, mature GlossaTechnologia. To those ends, I not only invite feedback on the project but also encourage readers of this present volume to submit to the GlossaTechnologia project themselves by visiting http://www.rhetoricalcommons.org/gt/ and adding their own voices to the fray.¹⁴
NOTES

14. I would like to thank my development team, which includes Jason Palmeri (Ohio State University), J. Chambley (Ohio State University), and Scott Banville (Georgia Tech), for their help thus far in generating content for the wiki. I would also like to acknowledge our Web master, Ashley Miller, for her tireless contributions to the design and overall technical maintenance of the site.