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Technologies such as Wikis in the Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this report is to encourage the reader to explore wikis for use in classroom instruction and assignments. The information in this report was gleaned from interviews with various members of higher education as well as recent research by educators. The main problems found in the research with new technologies like wikis in classrooms was teacher training and access to computers with internet for under-privileged students. Some solutions to these issues are free conferences online for training of teachers and programs like TRIO SSS which provides free laptop checkouts for qualifying students. The answers are not clean and simple, but they can begin the process of adapting instruction to meet the needs of a changing educational environment as well as a changing student population.

As an observer in college classrooms on a community college campus, I often see students skip class, sleep through class, or occupy themselves in various ways during class. I also hear discussions in administrative circles about the crisis of retention, not only at Volunteer State Community College (VSCC) but across the state and country. I see on the news the large number of students who lose lottery scholarship money because they cannot keep up their grades. I hear instructors complain that the students are not prepared for college and college writing.

The issues seem overwhelming, and, to many, the solutions seem overwhelming. Some of those solutions have come from many high school English teachers across the country who are turning to blogs, wikis, or electronic portfolios instead of the typical paper form of essays because students apply more honest effort to a product that their peers and the general public might read. Blogs have been around for a few years, so many are becoming more familiar with them. However, they are not the only Webtool; wikis are also being added to curriculums in higher education classrooms. One blogger (one who posts a blog) sums it up by explaining what is powerful about these technologies, “They allow us to take risks with our ideas, to test them in authentic ways with real audiences, and learn from the process....Why shouldn’t we be asking

students to do the same?” (“Discovering content,” 2006). These new tools to be used with the Web seem too promising to ignore. So, in this research report, I will show wikis as a tool and viable solution to some of the issues facing community college students and instructors.

Definition

A wiki, which is a Hawaiian term meaning “quick,” is a Webtool that allows a group of people to collaborate on web writing and/or projects. It can be either public or private and has various forms and capabilities depending on the host site. They function best as a common site for people separated by distance or time constraints to collaborate on a project. PBWiki is one such site which has some excellent examples of ways groups have collaborated such as a site called “7th Ward” for a group of architects and architect students who are collaborating on rebuilding a section of New Orleans. The contributors are stretched across the United States, but they easily collaborate through a wiki environment.

The difference between a wiki and eLearn products is the difference between public and private. Almost every function can be found in each with the exception of the wikis ability to reach a public audience. Products like eLearn only allow a certain group to contribute – ever. Wikis allow anyone to collaborate who has a password. That is often the draw for wikis in composition classrooms.

The difference between wikis and blogs rests in the difference between personal journals and collaborative writing. Blogs are literally Web logs – daily or weekly journals of one person. Comments can be added to blog entries, but blogs represent the individual writer. Wikis allow a group of people to write, edit, and change the content. One person may manage the wiki, but many contribute.

Wikis in a composition classroom are based on the idea that collaborative writing is an important element in a composition classroom. Joe Moxley and R.T. Meehan (2007) address this issue and even profess that “groups of people can be wiser than individuals” (para.35). They acknowledge the work of the individual as important, but they stress the growing need of collaborative writing in a composition classroom. S. L. Garza and T. Hern (2005) also support wikis in composition classrooms by saying:

...this required negotiation of space (within a wiki) can lead to a better understanding of the social processes that underlie any collaborative activity. In these ways, wikis not only build constructive communities of writers, but also accommodate differences among members of these communities, which in turn can allow all voices to contribute to the conversation (para. 17).

Concerns Raised by Faculty

Obviously, this new technology raises concerns for instructors from elementary classrooms to university classrooms. Questions of

training for instructors and access to technology tops that list of concerns. One blogger posted an entry titled “Teaching What We Don’t Know” (2006) and said,

While these technologies certainly empower us, they also muddle much of what we thought we knew about teaching and learning. They challenge us, certainly, to answer many of the questions in our own individual contexts, and that’s a lot of work....This is a huge task that I sense most teachers who learn the potential of these technologies grapple with. They sense the immediacy of all of this, how we can’t simply wait for generational change. Yet they are overwhelmed with what’s being asked of them, with the idea that they need to teach what they don’t know (para. 2).

Teachers have always been the individual in the classroom who had all of the answers to all of the questions. After all, the teacher is the lecture preparer and test maker. But these wikis that teachers are being asked to incorporate requires teachers to not only learn new skills, but also open those four classroom walls to areas of exploration where the teacher may not have all of the answers. The move to wikis in a classroom thrusts teachers out of their comfort zones.

But the teacher is not the only one in the classroom who is unsettled by technologies like wikis in the classrooms. L. Stine (2004) addresses the issue of students who have not been adequately prepared for technology in college and find themselves overwhelmingly

disadvantaged. In her article about hybrid classes, Stine says that students in a basic writing course are often the most disadvantaged students in terms of study skills, income, disabilities, and technological experience (51). Many students enrolled in basic writing courses lack the discipline and study skills for an online independent study. Writing classrooms that require computer skills make these students that much more disadvantaged. In addition, Swenson et al. (2006) argue that students cannot afford the technology, so instructors should not require that they should use it. For those students who may not have the equipment or access to the equipment, learning would not be equal (para. 39).

Stine also addresses the plight of the instructor who does not have the time or the resources to be trained in technology (54). Requiring the instructors to teach these students both writing and computer skills doubles the instructor's workload. Likewise, Swenson et al. propose lack of teacher training as a problem to technologies such as wikis. They acknowledge the inevitable change of technologies, but want time to test their appropriateness for the classroom. To compound the problem, many schools have dwindling budgets that do not allow for extra pay, training, or equipment for teachers.

These problems, though, when seen from another perspective have a different set of problems than the ones presented by Stine and Swenson et al. The problems lie more within our view of education itself

than in the new technologies, for the students who do not write in the classroom will text friends and family all day long. They will write in Facebook, email friends, or post in a blog. Derek Pennycuff (personal communication, September 5, 2007), Webmaster at VSCC, says, "...the most exciting change with these web based tools is the new means of discourse... [Web tools] support a student integrating an academic topic into their lives." Pennycuff verbalizes what many students feel – that the time and effort spent in college classrooms appeases administrators and instructors long enough to receive a piece of paper testifying to one's readiness for the job market, but that time spent in classes does not actually apply to that job market. To Pennycuff and many educators around the world, changing those teaching practices to mirror the world outside of academia is more beneficial for students and our communities as well.

Teachers must learn to teach to students who do not learn as the students once did. Students now have grown up with high intensity stimulus: video games containing bold graphics, downloadable iPods, blogs/websites, text messaging, movies and television with state-of-the-art special effects. They often must "power down" for class. Teachers must grow right along with the students. The problem then is less of "Is this something that I should learn to do or require my students to do?" and more "Many of my students are already using wikis and other

technologies, so how can I and my less advantaged students catch up with the technology and the techno-savvy students?”

The consequences of not addressing these issues with increased urgency may lie in recent reports from VSCC; the retention rate from Fall to Spring semesters at VSCC is very low, and becoming worse every year. The retention rate from Fall 2007 to Spring 2008 alone is down 10% from last year. That means around 300 students which means a loss of about \$600,000 in revenue for the school (1). Many students at a community college like VSCC have families and full-time jobs. They face many challenges and are not motivated to persevere for that degree. The students with whom I work are at-risk students: low income, disabled, first-generation college students. They have a need to be able to relate what they learn to real life.

Possible Solutions

These new Webtools like wikis allow students to more easily budget their time and make the learning more meaningful and applicable at the same time. One objection that Stine and Swenson et al. propose is the lack of available technology, but I propose that access to the needed technology is readily available, and by not requiring the students to learn to use it, and use it well, we are doing our students a great disservice. They certainly will need to use the technology in the workplace.

Available at VSCC is a federally-funded program called TRIO Student Support Services, which provides a free laptop check-out for

students who show a need for a computer at home. All laptops at Vol State are in use for most of the year, with a waiting list. TRIO also has a computer lab with four computers and personnel available to assist with computer issues. As on most college campuses, Vol State also has free computer/internet access in its library. Public libraries also offer free internet access. These options may not be convenient, but they are available. And as time and technology progress, more will become available. Programs like TRIO can easily accommodate for many of the disadvantages that are offered by Stine and Swenson et al. Many schools have federally funded TRIO programs whose sole purpose is to support disadvantaged students through services like free tutoring, computer workshops, and laptop check-out. These services (as Stine requested) “mak[e] even disadvantaged students welcomed guests online” (57).

Another objection some have made against inclusion of technology like wikis into the classroom has been teacher training. I am aware of tight budgets and growing demands, so I give a possible solution to teacher training for free. A program called “Becoming a Webhead” (baW) is designed to train ESOL teachers on Web 2.0 tools (such as blogs, wikis, Skype, Yahoo groups), but they allow others to join as well. The group consists of educators from Germany, Japan, Russia, Venezuela, England, France, Canada, Portugal, USA, and many others. The course is six-weeks long beginning in January. BaW provides a syllabus for each week and support through the group discussions. The courses are

obviously aimed toward teaching other languages, but the tools can be applied to any discipline. The disadvantage of the course is the overwhelming work load. A group of readings is provided for the topic of the week and part of the week's homework is to read the assignment and post comments in the group forums. That is in addition to the blogs, wikis, synchronous telecast, asynchronous telecasts, Tapped-In tours, Frappr postings, picture uploads, and more. Even a little information gleaned, though, can be a step closer to assisting students in the classroom.

I began the course with some co-workers in January of 2007; unfortunately, none of us graduated. The amount of work was overwhelming in addition to our normal workload. We did, however, learn quite a bit to use with our students, and we always have the opportunity to take the free course again the following year. The syllabus is easily accessible at <http://baw07.pbwiki.com/week1> and the wiki at <http://baw07participants.pbwiki.com/FrontPage>

Another option for teacher training is on a wiki of a composition teacher at the University of Southern Florida who uses wikis in his classroom. Moxley (2007) provides an easy step-by-step guide to using a wiki. His wiki also includes video tutorials and links to a place to experiment with wikis before implementing them. He also provides links to examples of wikis in various classrooms:

<http://writingwiki.org/default.aspx/WritingWiki/UnderstandingWikis.html>

D. Lackey (2007) and P. Zemliansky (2007) also provide advice for wikis in classrooms. Zemliansky tells of many instructors who are including visual and multimedia assignments into composition classrooms because the need is rising for students to understand and manipulate writing with different mediums. Lackey describes wikis as “the course-tool most beneficial to my teaching”(1). He explains the differences between WebCT programs and wikis, saying he prefers wikis because they are public, which is an important concept in a writing class. A minimum of nine benefits of wikis are listed for not only students but also the instructors, especially those in learning communities. Some of the benefits for both student and instructor include discussing writing as a process, writing for “real-world” audiences, and publishing daily lesson plans. Lackey even provides a brief list of skills required to begin a wiki, which is easy and quick. This wiki is priceless for instructors who are considering a wiki for the classroom. It provides the inspiration, benefits, and a brief “how-to” piece.

The solution to the writing issues will never be quick and easy. There is no one right answer. But as education classes teach, a mixture of teaching styles will reach the greatest number of students. Engaging students in ways that are meaningful and real for them will motivate

students to stay in class and become involved in class. Stine lists ten interestingly named advantages of online basic writing courses:

1. a voice for the shy
2. real writing in the virtual world
3. only option for some adult learners
4. easy access to resources
5. building academic research skills
6. creating a place for students to meet
7. motivation
8. hours of operation disappear
9. creates active learners
10. continuous online communication (55-58)

This list of advantages makes an excellent argument for wikis in the classroom. It includes the best of both worlds: interaction of students in the classroom and access to the world of information and communication to the global audience.

These advantages that are presented by Stine should motivate and encourage instructors who are leery of such methods of teaching.

H. Singh (2003) provides more support for classrooms that use multiple methods of instruction like wikis. Research at the University of Tennessee shows that these classrooms had 10% better learning outcomes than traditional learning classrooms (53). These classrooms

will enable teachers to both motivate students with technology as well as build skills that transfer to the job market.

Another advocate of multiple teaching methods is Marcia Tate (2003), an education expert focusing on the best ways that our brains work. She has written a book called *Worksheets Don't Grow Dendrites* where she provides practical methods for teachers to actively engage students in learning – including technology. She quotes Glatthorn & Jailall (2000) saying, “ A technologically-based curriculum tends to be more specific, complex, visual, interactive, and global” (98). She quotes Uchida et al. (1996) saying, “Students will need to be skilled not only in accessing the vast array of information available through advanced technology, but in processing it as well...to prepare students, schools must incorporate marketplace technologies” (98).

All of these voices sing the praises of technologies such as wikis incorporated into classroom curriculums. It benefits the students by not only motivating them, but also supporting long-term retention of information learned in the classroom.

Education specialists are saying it. Students who text message during lectures and write poor essays are saying it. Teachers like Joe Moxley are saying it. Administrators like Derek Pennycuff are saying it. Technology is here. It works. Jump on board and enjoy the ride.

Personal Study of Wikis

As a tutor of two children who are chronically ill, I thought that trying a wiki for our classroom while the students travel would be fun and educational for all of us. We set-up a wiki on the Zoho site for many reasons. Zoho offers many options for word processing, group projects, chat, and many more. It seemed easy to set-up and easy to use. The students and I meet two times a week for two hours each day. But, we would communicate on the wiki almost daily. I could upload tests and quizzes online, and they could print them off in another state if they were away for medical reasons, which happened often.

We found a few obstacles. The discussion portion would jumble my messages, so when I checked the messages I did not always see the most recent posted chronologically. Only if I read back through past messages would I sometimes find a more recent posting to which I had not responded. Also, I had created a few special quizzes using software that the word-processing function would not accept. Most frustrating, though, was when one of the students could not make the wiki open while she was out of state. We could not tell if the problem was a wiki problem or a computer problem. When I tried to find help from the Zoho site, I found the forum where I saw many questions asked, but no questions answered. I became discouraged and gave up.

Then, recently, I posted comments to a blog sponsored by VSCC where a colleague was discussing the Zoho site. I added my experiences, accepting the fault as my own. The next day, an official from Zoho

posted a comment as well, asking me to contact him with my concerns. Zoho proved to be efficient at customer service.

A second experiment I tried was with my graduate writing class. I made a presentation to the class on wikis using a wiki. This time I chose PBWiki as the host site because the Group Project option offers many options and is easy to use. It is also known as an education-friendly host site. I created four pages within the wiki: FrontPage, Why Wiki, Possibilities, and Meta-. The Possibilities page included many links to wikis in use in classrooms as well as video of statistics and justification for wikis. The Meta- page was specifically designed as an area for the class to experiment with the wiki on their own. They could add or change anything on the page as long as they had the password that I had established for the wiki.

The problems that I found on the class experiment were that only one person could change the wiki at a time. They had five minutes to change the wiki when someone else was allowed to change it. If a person who had the permission from the wiki to change something did not show activity within two minutes, someone else could “steal” the permission from them. Another problem that I found was that two pages links disappeared from the sidebar. They could be accessed from various other methods, but someone new to the site would not know to look for them. The next day, I sent the question of the disappearing links to the PBWiki help staff. The response was neither helpful nor polite.

Other wiki host sites that I visited were Wet Paint which seemed to host many commercial sites like blogs for day time soap operas or fan wiki sites. It also contained many more ads. Wikispaces seems to be a popular choice for wiki sites, but I did not find that it had as many choices as PBWiki on the group project page.

Conclusion

In “Virtues of Wiki”, M.C. Morgan (2005) states:

Once we consider writing as more than generating words to suit, once we consider it forming meaning, relating pieces, connecting, establishing relations... Once we consider composing more dynamic than the page, it becomes clear that a wiki can encourage this fuller sense of what writing entails (para. 7).

Technology and the students’ and society’s acceptance of technology are changing the way we live which inevitably will change the way we learn and teach. It already has. Technology changed classrooms with the advent of paper, books, radio, television, computers, internet, and now the medium of the next generation: blogs and wikis. Who knows, another one may be around the corner. We must change, adapt, and educate...maybe ourselves first. And quickly. One blog even predicts the future of education as changing back to a one room school house (Jarche, 2006).

Much study is still needed in the long term effect of wikis and the best uses for them. More work is also needed in potential ways to solve

the problems of teacher training and student access. And more than that, schools need the gumption of instructors to jump in and test out the technologies like wikis. Pioneers make mistakes and find the road blocks, but they blaze the trail for the next generation of instructors and students. And, after all, isn't that what a teacher is?

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