

TechMatters:

Welcome to the WildWorldOfWikis

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Wiki (n.) A collaborative Web site comprised of the perpetual collective work of many authors. A wiki allows anyone to edit, delete or modify content that has been placed on the Web ... including the work of previous authors.

From the Webopedia, <http://www.webopedia.com>

MoreAboutWikis

At its simplest, a wiki is a collaborative communication and authoring tool. Much like a weblog, a wiki allows individual authors to post and revise online entries related to a specific topic. The main distinction is that a wiki allows **anyone** to change **anything**. Typically, authorizations and passwords are not required, and content can be changed simply by clicking on an “edit link” located at the bottom of each page. Wiki content is often described as “ego-less and time-less”¹; when and by whom something was written is not considered particularly important.

The term wiki is derived from the Hawaiian word for “quick”. Accordingly, authoring and editing wiki content is facilitated by a simplified markup syntax² and automatic linking to PagesThatUseWikiNames which are indicated by joined, capitalized words. Because linking to related WikiNamedPages is so easy, cross-linking throughout a site is very common.

SomeWellKnownWikis

Portland Pattern Repository

<http://c2.com/ppr/>

Created in 1995 by Ward Cunningham, the Portland Pattern Repository (PPR) is the original wiki. The PPR itself contains information regarding pattern languages as solutions to computer programming problems. More importantly from my perspective, however, the PPR is also often referred to as the WikiWikiWeb and contains massive amounts of information related to authoring, setting up, and managing a wiki³.

Wikipedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page

The *Wikipedia* describes itself as a “Web-based, free-content encyclopaedia”. As a wiki, it is written collaboratively and any entry can be edited by any individual at any point in time. The English language version of *Wikipedia* contains over 500,000 articles of varying length and depth on a wide variety of topics. It even contains an entry for “Library Instruction” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library_instruction].

The *Wikipedia* has been controversial amongst librarians, who often cite the lack of authority and editorial control as a deficiency. That being said, *Wikipedia* is a well-known source amongst students, and is accessed millions of times each day.

Wikibooks

http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Main_Page

Wikibooks is a companion site to *Wikipedia*. It is a collection of free, online textbooks that are being written collaboratively in the wiki tradition. Currently, the English language version of the site, includes over 8,000 “wikibooks” in subject areas ranging from the humanities to science to computing. There’s even a “How to Find a Book” module [http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/How_to_find_a_book] that includes information about searching for books in library catalogs and using WorldCat to locate materials.

PlayingAroundWithWikis

If you’re anything like me, your curiosity regarding how to edit wiki pages was peaked within a few minutes of your first visit to a wiki site. That “edit text” link at the bottom of each page can be hard to resist! However, before starting to contribute to a wiki, it is important to become familiar with the text formatting conventions to ensure that you don’t inadvertently create editorial havoc. Fortunately,

most wikis provide a “Sandbox” area where you are free to experiment in a safe area where you can’t do any permanent harm to the rest of the site. One such experimental “play area” is the WikiWikiSandbox [<http://c2.com/cgi/wiki?WikiWikiSandbox>] on the *WikiWikiWeb* site.

After playing in the sandbox, you may become interested in establishing your own wiki. Although choosing the best software for your purposes and setting up your wiki are beyond the scope of this article, there are many excellent online resources that will help you with this process.

“Wiki Science”, from *Wikibooks*

http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Wiki_Science

What could be a better resource than a “how-to” guide to all things wiki created by active members of the wiki community? This “wikibook” covers starting, publicizing, maintaining, and troubleshooting a wiki, and includes numerous links to outside sources of information. And if after setting up your wiki you become an expert, you can then add to the wikibook and share your knowledge!

“Top Ten Wiki Engines”, from *WikiWikiWeb*

<http://c2.com/cgi/wiki?TopTenWikiEngines>

Another resource produced via the collaborative efforts of wiki contributors, this list of the top ten wiki engines provides comments and critical reviews of the “best” wiki software. For a more comprehensive list of software options, see *WikiWikiWeb*’s complete list of “Wiki Engines” [<http://c2.com/cgi/wiki?WikiEngines>].

WikisAndLibraryInstruction

Now that we’ve taken a look at what wikis are and how they work, let’s explore how they can be used to enhance a library instruction program. First, wikis could be used as a tool to help instruction librarians collaborate on the development of lesson plans and instructional guides. Wikis are ideal for editing text, and thus for creating documentation. By working together in a wiki environment, instruction librarians could combine their collective knowledge to produce the best possible instructional ma-

terials for their students.

In a classroom setting, wikis could be used to encourage collaboratively learning between students, faculty, and librarians. For example, instruction librarians often create “research guide” web pages for students to refer to and use following a one-shot bibliographic instruction session. What if those guides could be accessed, edited, and changed by students and their professors as they proceeded with their research and identified other useful tools for their purposes? By sharing their research experience and knowledge in such a way, students might become more engaged in the research process.

Similarly, wikis could be used in a for-credit information literacy course to facilitate group research projects. Students could use the tool to collaboratively conduct in-depth research tasks and track their learning experience over the course of the semester. Instructors would also be able to monitor each group’s progress and provide guidance as required.

AdditionalSourcesOfInformation

James, Heather. (2004, May 21). My brilliant failure: wikis in classrooms. *Kairosnews*. Retrieved May 13, 2005, from <http://kairosnews.org/node/3794>

Lamb, Brian. (2004). Wide open spaces: wikis, ready or not. *Educause Review*, 39(5), 36-48. Retrieved May 13, 2005, from <http://www.educause.edu/pub/er/>

Notes:

Various authors. “Elements of Wiki Essence”. *WikiWikiWeb*. <<http://c2.com/cgi/wiki?ElementsOfWikiEssence>>.

Various authors. “Text Formatting Rules”. *WikiWikiWeb*. <<http://c2.com/cgi/wiki?TextFormattingRules>>.

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