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Wiki anyone? Reflections on an information literacy class wiki.

Ginny Franklin; Academic Librarian (Science), Library; Loughborough University. Email: v.franklin@lboro.ac.uk

Abstract

Purpose: Following an first-time opportunity to run a face-to-face workshop with Computer Science First Years the self-imposed brief was to use activities that captured their imagination, be innovative, yet within the author's technical capabilities. A course wiki, or mass collaborative authoring tool, was an obvious choice for this community.

Methodology/approach: The paper reports on observations of two groups; the first observation discusses students use of a course wiki in a face-to-face information literacy session, the second discusses use of a separate wiki by a group of information professionals at a CPD event.

Findings: The Computer Science students engaged with the wiki and associated activities and posted some very interesting comments. Encouraging reflection in class following an activity allows a teacher to gauge understanding and just as importantly, to elicit student views. The ability to post anonymously is welcomed by students and teacher alike and mitigates against a cohort going mute when a question has been posed. Whilst using a wiki with Computer Science First Years was extremely successful, mixed results were achieved with a much less homogenous group of information professionals at a CPD event.

Originality/value of paper: Wikis are increasingly being used in education and in libraries and in some cases in library education or information literacy. Whilst examples of these can be found easily there is an apparent dearth of writings on how wikis might be used in a face-to-face information literacy session. This article reports on the experience of using a wiki in two different IL scenarios.

What are wikis?

A wiki is a collection of webpages which can be edited by a community of authors. The most well-known wiki is Wikipedia, the encyclopaedia which anyone with a web browser can edit. The word "wiki" means 'quick' in Hawaiian (Wikipedia, 2007); wikis are so named as they are extremely quick to create since editors do not need to know HTML, CSS or any other code. The word wiki can also refer to the authoring software itself. For more detail

on wikis generally visit the Wikipedia page on wikis[1]. For a succinct summary aimed at the library community visit the TechEssence.Info blog entry[2] on wikis.

Wikis in action

Wikis are being used in a variety of ways within education. For example, as a course web site where students present their research findings or for collecting and storing data (Mader et al, 2006) or as a place to host a series of ice-breaking activities for a group of distance learners (Augar, Raitman and Zhou, 2004).

In library and information services wikis are not only being used as repositories of internal knowledge but librarians such as Chad Boeninger from Ohio University are using wikis "as an alternative form of delivery of library information" (Boeninger, 2005). Boeninger believes wikis are essential tools in the classroom as pathfinders for guiding students (Boeninger, 2006). Regrettably neither reference details how wikis may be used in face to face teaching. John Russell, a librarian at the University of Oregon, created a wiki for "collaborative research space" for a history 3000 class. A history lecturer wanted students to share resources they found useful for their assignments, so Russell created a wiki where students could note primary and secondary sources they had identified or pose questions (Russell, 2006).

The distinction between 'teachers' and 'learners' is blurring. As Richardson (2006) notes "knowledge is soft" meaning that it can be constantly and instantly changed. Perhaps using a wiki will go part way to personalising education?

Despite good intentions not all education-based wikis have been successful. For example, James (2004) reported of falling into the 'wikipoint' trap where wiki becomes glorified PowerPoint. She goes on to say:

> "I used an instructionist and fill-in-the-blanks approach, whereas, what I would have rather have done is for the student to identify the blanks themselves, and build from there. In other words, it's as if I had installed a blog, but only for myself to publish to the class, and allowed them to only make comments".

James appears to criticise the extent to which she scaffolded the concepts. This is not the fault of the wiki. It is important that educators are clear about what they want to the students to achieve and whether a wiki is appropriate. A simple wiki seeded with a little content can be an effective approach to gently guide first year students, whereas finalists can construct their own learning.

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki
[2] http://techessence.info/socialsoftware/wiki

Information Literacy and Computer Science students

At Loughborough University information literacy teaching for Computer Science students had been limited to face to face contact with the Finalists who needed a session on finding information for their projects. A common theme in the student feedback was the request for this kind of session much earlier in their degree courses. Following lengthy discussions with the department it was agreed that the Library would deliver a session to First Year students. The session was timetabled into the "Essential Skills for Computing" module. The 170 students on this module were split into 4 groups to accommodate numbers; thus the session was delivered four times. Each session was scheduled around week 8 of the Autumn term 2006 and was allocated a double period (i.e. 2x50 minute slots) though in practice the sessions were shorter. The content of the session linked directly to the assignment.

Students are increasingly concerned about how they use their time and will be very quick to point out if they feel their time has been wasted. They need to be engaged with the content and fast. Computer Science students in particular are quick to grasp how to navigate resources which means they can be set more challenging activities. A couple of hours experimenting with wiki software from pbwiki[3] indicated that combining interesting activities with the read/write facility was the way forward.

A wiki for Computer Science

The stage was set. The wiki would introduce students to a variety of information resources which they would explore in a reasonably structured way within the class session. The intended rationale for the wiki was to:

- involve students more fully in the discovery process
- elicit their views / opinions (and to some extent their prior knowledge) of various resources
- promote student reflection
- encourage student input into a read/write resource tool aimed at their community

It was very important to create a positive impression from the start. The wiki was given a snappy name, finditfast, not only to enhance the upbeat message but also because the name forms part of the wiki's URL. The home page contained minimal text explaining in a couple of sentences the purpose of the wiki, the author’s contact name and email and a 'lifestyle' message. This message used a photo of a cinema together with the following wording - "find it fast and have time for better things". The purpose was to encourage an association with efficiency in finding and locating good quality information thereby allowing more time to enjoy the nicer things in life. The wording was also deliberately chosen to reinforce the wiki name.

[3] http://pbwiki.com/

The wiki was created with a definite structure in mind; each wiki page was devoted to a resource type, for example a page on full text ejournals. The content was formed of links to the appropriate resource(s) as well as a couple of activities, for example a suggested search to perform and a specific reflective activity. Students would explore the resources, carry out the suggested activities then reflect on their experiences by posting using the "Comments" facility. The activities are outlined in Appendix A.

The screen shot below (fig. 1) shows the wiki page on Computer Science dictionaries. This page was created using one of the wiki's templates. This particular template automatically generates a table of contents (the grey box at the top of the page) which can speed navigation for the reader. In a short page such as this its navigation function is a little superfluous, however it has benefits for learners who like to see the 'big picture'. The SideBar displays and links to other pages in the wiki. The SideBar is not automatically generated, rather is edited manually.

Fig 1: Finditfast wiki page on Computer Science dictionaries

It was important early on in the face to face session to establish that there are alternatives to Google and Wikipedia and why it is important to search beyond one resource. The first activity in the session started simply by comparing definitions in the online dictionaries and thinking about issues of relying on one source. The students' comments revealed some interesting insights. For example, it was useful to discover that at least one student had used one of the resources before. There was also no consensus as to which resource they preferred. Of the 58 comments, 33 preferred Webopedia; 30 preferred

FOLDOC; 9 preferred TechDictionary; 10 named more than one resource as being useful and 6 students had no preference. This neatly reinforced the need to search in more than one place even for a simple definition.

Some of the students equated quality with quantity. This was a typical sentiment: "I think that ... was the most useful and the most accurate. The vast amount of information that was available was also an advantage". A few students took this idea a stage further and considered in what circumstances quality or brevity would be appropriate. The following comments in particular demonstrate deeper evaluation of the resources:

> "...and ... definitely provide the user with a more broad and in depth definition. Either of these would be suitable for coursework or computer-based research".
>
> "... offers a very simple definition which could be good for a quote in an exam as it is relevant and can easily be remembered. However the other two dictionaries offer a much deeper meaning to the term and is a much more informative way of explaining the word. This will be much more useful when broadening knowledge or trying to understand a term".
>
> "Depends on the purpose, to quickly find out what the meaning of something is the preference would be: 1st ... 2nd: ... 3rd: ... This is due to the quality of the summary and type of language used".
>
> "They all have different purposes and because of this, the ability to distinguish between them would be impossible!" This student moves on from deep reflection to humour - the next sentence is "However, my personal favourite is FOLDOC since it's in CAPITALS which makes it seem IMPORTANT".

A few students looked beyond the content and mentioned usability and appearance. Whilst all three sites are straightforward to use, some offer a range of browsing methods and this was welcomed by a few students; one student complained that one of the sites was "full of links and adverts", another complained about another of the sites stating that "the page doesn't attract me to read a single word".

The most insightful remarks recognised that sources can sometimes provide conflicting information:

> "I find that the definitions provided by the three sites didn't completely agree with each other".
>
> "... and ... appear to contradict each other whether adware and spyware are the same thing or not"

This made for a good starting activity and encouraged the students to consider a number of issues when using information. The comments in the wiki could be quickly and simultaneously posted which was ideal for a classroom situation. (A previous experiment with simultaneous posting to a blog post revealed that multiple synchronous access was not possible). In the pbwiki software not only could students post synchronously, but the latest comments could be viewed by all simply by refreshing the screen. This meant that students could read and respond to each other's comments. Similarly, the students' comments could be monitored by eye as they were posted and verbal responses made either to encourage more elaboration on a particular point or to praise a particularly interesting point. Since the students did not have to identify themselves to post the comments they had the comfort of anonymity. At the end of each workshop the author made a more thorough reading of the comments and posted a comment – either a reiteration of a point made in class or a mention of additional information. (see screenshot below, fig. 2).

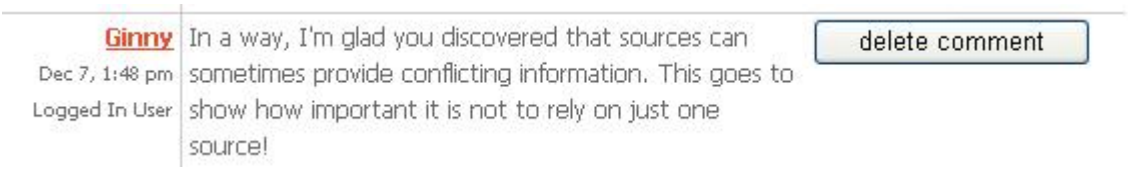


Fig 1: Finditfast wiki page on Computer Science dictionaries

The screenshot identifies this user as logged in. Posted comments or changes made to the wiki by this user are attributed to this user. (Note: access arrangements to pbwikis have since changed; now all users are required to identify themselves).

Subsequent activities within the workshop used the MetaLib, Full Text Sources and Finding blogs pages (see Appendix A for activities). One of the learning objectives for the workshop was the ability to leave the session being able to pinpoint a relevant full text article. Using MetaLib and browsing the full text ejournals were means to this end. The 'finding blogs' activity was designed to be a little more light hearted but with an subtle appreciation of understanding the Technorati site. Finally, links to specific areas of Loughborough's online Personal Development Planning tool were made so that students could record their newly acquired skills in the relevant sections.

Using the wiki in the classroom worked well. The session could be punctuated in the familiar way - demo resource 1 then practical, demo resource 2 then practical etc. However there was the added benefit that student reflection was quick, easy and anonymous; the pattern becoming demo - practical - reflection, demo - practical - reflection. The ease and anonymity of the posted reflections in turn meant that students were willing to engage and as a result have learned from each other's experiences.

It felt like a huge risk not only using a wiki for the very first time but also with the added aim of making a good impression on a particular group of students. However the risk paid off and the sessions were very successful. There was no technical failure and the novelty of the wiki appealed to this group of students.

Feedback from the students on the course as a whole will be familiar to many librarians; students are always surprised at how much they have discovered. The following comments are typical: "Showed me useful things I didn't know before today" " It was very well taught. Different things were used and gave a variety of resources"; "That I found all about this side of things which I didn't have a clue about".

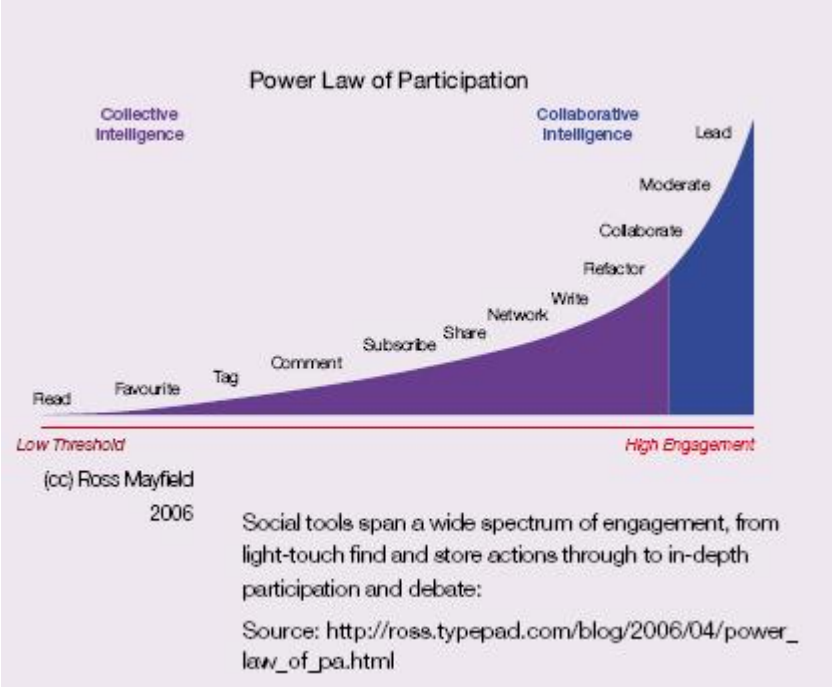
Far fewer students commented specifically on the wiki. Those that did were extremely positive. For example:

> "This wiki is very useful, has some good links and will help with the subject in the future. As long as it is updated with new websites or journals when they are available then the wiki is to a very good standard".
>
> "I thought that the Wiki was helpful, but don't know how to improve it".
>
> "I also think that wiki could be a very useful resource especially with the online dictionaries to help with computer jargon or other bits of coursework"
>
> "I found wiki very stimulating and comforting to know I can get this much help without even leaving my doorstep. I am thrilled that so much information is present ... I love wiki, wiki, wiki, wiki! WICKED"!
>
> "This wiki IS helpful, to remind me of all the stuff I'll have forgotten from this lab in several months time".
>
> "The wiki is a helpful tool and I hope to utilise it in the future"

These comments endorse the use of a wiki in the classroom. Regrettably the students have not added new content to the wiki since the classroom session despite the reminders that it is their resource! Tutors who have more contact with students could reinforce use of the wiki in subsequent sessions and/or could set assignments that require participation.

Although the face to face information literacy sessions went well there are two things in particular which could be done differently in future. The first is to reduce the number of all-class activities. Although nearly all students participated in the discovery activities, the number of students that posted reflective comments steadily declined after the first activity. It would be better to give them more time and space for independent discovery. This may or may not encourage more reflective posts and may even lead to student-created content in the form of new pages. This would in part demonstrate that

the students had moved further up the participation scale. See graph below (fig. 3)



Source: Mayfield (2006)

Fig. 3: Levels of participation versus engagement

Allowing students more discovery time would go someway to countering the complaint raised by James (2004) mentioned earlier.

The second thing would be to seek to upgrade the wiki to make it more secure. Currently the version in use is the freely available product which is completely open. Although access requires a password, edits and deletions are easy to make. In figure 2 the screenshot shows a "delete comment" button. Sadly, a student did delete a comment and it was never re-posted despite requests. The comment was interesting and it would have been fascinating if the student had elaborated on it. Unfortunately that did not happen and worse still, it was removed. The comment was "Google is god". It could almost have been an essay title - "Google is god: discuss!" A limited amount of protection is however afforded by the facility to create a backup of the entire wiki, and as in all wikis, it is possible to revert to earlier editions of pages (provided they have not been deleted).

A wiki for CPD

A couple of months after using the wiki in the classroom with Computer Science First Years an opportunity arose to get feedback on the concept from fellow information professionals at a CPD event. The event was aimed at LIS professionals in higher education and was attended by around 25 people, most of whom were subject librarians (or equivalent). The wiki for CPD component was one of a number of hour-long presentations.

Without prior knowledge of the participants' experience with using wikis there was a distinct risk of preaching to the converted. However the risk was worth taking as it provided an occasion to generate discussion. Using pbwiki software again, a completely new wiki was set up. This wiki had a decidedly different flavour – literally. This wiki was all about Cadbury's chocolate. The intention was that delegates would use the wiki to research, present and reflect.

Firstly delegates would select and research a subtopic of chocolate - either from the list of suggested subtopics or one of their own choosing relevant to the main topic. Reflecting on the experience of using the wiki with the Computer Science students, there was far less prescription about the research avenues the delegates would take. This was partly to test the notion of giving completely free rein for discovery and partly to follow the advice given by Hart (2004) and Menn (1993) regarding the power of autonomous learning.

Secondly delegates would present their findings visually either on flipchart paper or using electronic means for example by creating new pages in the wiki or using online tools such as Google Docs or Zoho Show. In practice, the time available was not sufficient for this element.

Finally, and most importantly, delegates would reflect on the literacies that could be developed through such activities and how this might help learning style preferences. Reflections would be posted using the comments facility in the wiki. A workshop facilitator with more experience than the author and expertise in leading and maintaining an in-class discussion could tease out more from the written comments and stimulate an interesting debate.

The delegates' reflections revealed some polarisation of opinion. For example a couple of delegates felt that there had been little or no opportunity for comparing and evaluating information. Whereas there were an equal number of delegates who remarked to the contrary. One delegate noted:

> "The comparison of the different websites that we visited exercised our evaluation skills and considering how we would present our research allowed our creativity to develop"

Similarly, there were some divergent views on the topic of IT skills. For some delegates, using a wiki involved IT skills whereas another comment refuted this: "little IT skills - using browsers". Comfort level with the technology was clearly significant with some delegates raising concerns that using the wiki would "help some (learners) but not all" and "what about more mature students who don't like computers or know what wikis are?". This kind of feedback although useful was somewhat unexpected. At the most fundamental level wikis are collections of web pages that can be read, annotated or commented upon. Creating a new page or editing an existing page in the pbwiki is like using Microsoft Word. Posting a comment is like

sending an email or an instant message. The least familiar thing about wikis is the exotic name.

Evidently using a wiki in a classroom is particularly suitable for some groups, especially undergraduates in scientific disciplines. Whether it would be as successful with mature groups or MSc students, many of whom are from overseas, would require further investigation.

Perhaps this experience to steal from James (2004), represents “my spectacular failure in the classroom". Other factors might be significant in the success (or otherwise) of using wikis. For example, a longer session might have given delegates more opportunities to familiarise themselves with the purpose of the wiki; similarly participants might have benefited from a computer-per-delegate scenario. Whatever the issues, the delegates appeared not to have identified the same potential in the wiki and the activities in it as intended. Whilst this is particularly disappointing on a personal level it is, on a more objective level, useful feedback. The wiki was called food4thought. Hopefully it has achieved just that.

The future

At the time of writing there are other 'new' technologies which will be impacting on information literacy developments at Loughborough. The University will be moving from a home-produced VLE to a Moodle-based VLE. Library staff will be taking a key role in assisting academic staff to exploit the functionality of the system. This functionality includes wikis and blogs, discussion forum and chat. Becoming familiar with this range of what Moodle terms "activity modules" will be an immediate priority. A comparison of the wiki feature in Moodle versus pbwiki will be the subject of future investigation.

Conclusion

This is an exciting time to be teaching information literacy. Tools such as wikis offer new ways to engage students. The experience of two very different workshop scenarios has highlighted how new technologies are not panaceas but need to be used appropriately. The results have been mixed but the experience has been worthwhile. The Finditfast wiki encouraged the Computer Science first years to engage and communicate and to some extent, reflect. Comfort level with ICT and the perceived need for IT skills appear, in this limited study, to impact on the success of using a wiki in the classroom.

The foray into new technologies has just begun and will soon move to a new level. Wikis and the like are here to stay. As Ward Cunningham discovered, if you want to go anywhere fast it's time to get on the Wiki Wiki shuttle! (Wikipedia, 2007)

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Appendix A – Activities in the finditfast wiki

1. Clarify meaning

1. Look up a technical term in http://foldoc.org e.g. **spyware** and compare the definition against http://techdictionary.com and http://webopedia.com
2. Which resource / definition did you prefer and why?
3. Post your findings to http://finditfast.pbwiki.com/discussion.php?page=CSdictionaries

2. Pinpoint quality information

1. Visit http://metalib.lboro.ac.uk select INSPEC and Computer & Information Systems Abstracts
2. Run a search on **Ajax** in the title
3. Note the details of at least 2 articles you can access in full text
4. Post your findings to http://finditfast.pbwiki.com/discussion.php?page=MetaLib

3. Full text sources

1. Visit and explore **any TWO** from http://ieeexplore.ieee.org , http://sciencedirect.com , http://portal.acm.org/dl.cfm , “Find ejournal” on http://metalib.lboro.ac.uk
2. Which was the most useful and why?
3. Post your findings to http://finditfast.pbwiki.com/discussion.php?page=FullTextSources

4. Finding blogs

1. Search http://technorati.com for the term **Ajax** in blog posts, in tags and in the blog directory
2. What effect does the selection have on the results?
3. Now try a search on **Web 2.0** in blog posts. How does this differ from a search on **"Web 2.0"** in blog posts?
4. Post your findings to http://finditfast.pbwiki.com/discussion.php?page=FindingBlogs