The Wiki Way

A Lunch-and-Learn workshop
Gina Maranto/Fall 2006

Above, schematic of a wiki, with linked internal pages in green, and links out of the wiki to the web.

What’s a wiki?

A wiki is a collaborative online workspace powered by a “wiki engine,” that is software that allows multiple users to access and edit pages, sometimes with password protection. Another way of thinking about a wiki is as a hypertext database. Wikis maintain a cache of edits, pages can be “reverted” to earlier versions. All changes to pages can be tracked, and changes can be disputed or justified via “discussion” pages. The bulk of wiki software is open source, so no site-license costs are incurred when you install a wiki on a server.

Where can you find them?

The best known wiki is [Wikipedia](http://www.wikipedia.com), started by Larry Sanger and Jimmy Wales in 2001, as an online encyclopedia. Wikipedia now boasts over a million entries in English, and claims there are “active” versions in 159 languages at last count. But wiki farms, including commercial sites, are sprouting all over the web. Some of the more popular sites include:

- PbWiki: [http://pbwiki.com](http://pbwiki.com)

Is there a difference between wikis?

Some wikis are purely public, such as Wikipedia. Others can be made private via password protection or features that allow you to “publish” to the web or not. A number of new sites are clearly conceived as community sites or forums, meant for collaboration. These include, along with Wikipedia:

- Wikimedia commons: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)

Are there problems using wikis in the classroom?

Like any technology, wikis have weaknesses. For class use, you need to be aware of issues surrounding IT/security, intellectual property, FERPA, and authority.

All wiki engines have security measures; if you decide to install one on a university server, you need to be sure to go through your IT people instead of trying to sneak it inside the firewall. This ensures that the wiki will be set up to minimize risks to the server, directories, and files. Although non-password protected wikis are always subject to hackers and vandals, the revert capacity minimizes the chance that you will lose an entire site. However, you should use the same computer hygiene you normally do and be sure that copies of files reside in multiple places, not just the wiki.

Intellectual property issues pertain to all files (text, images, software, music, video) posted on a wiki, including student work. Most wiki mavens advise that you at least have a conversation with your students about issues of copyright and copyleft. [Creative Commons](http://creativecommons.org)
has a good overview of the subject, as well as licenses. In depth discussion of IP and fair use can be found at the Harvard Digital Media Project, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, among other places.

Due to potential FERPA violations, wikis should not be used for posting grades in any format or for carrying on substantive conversations about possible grades on individual pieces of work. If you are using rubrics to give feedback on preliminary work and those rubrics have grade scales, you will want to use Blackboard, with its password protection, for posting them.

**Additional Resources:**

For back end setup on a server: EducationalTechnology.ca has a good primer on how to choose and set up wikis.

Joe Moxley at USF has put together the excellent WritingWiki that has tips for both instructors and students, including a good introduction with links to several seminal academic articles on wikis and to pedagogical resources, and a page for teachers new to wikis.

Policies on the use of Wikipedia for research have been discussed in numerous forums, including Kairosnews.

Wiki textbooks: Wikibooks is described in this c|Net news article.

Gina Maranto’s UM wiki can be found at: http://www.as.miami.edu/english/wiki105/

The wiki for this talk is at: http://glmaranto.jot.com/WikiHome

The Composition program wiki is at: http://www.as.miami.edu/english/wiki/