Overview

Wikis are online collaborative writing spaces that have multiple authors and contributors. The most well known wiki is Wikipedia.

You can use wikis to develop a community of practice and establish a shared learning space within a face-to-face or blended course. Using wikis for assessment gives students a collective online space where they can share their knowledge, and helps them develop graduate attributes and enduring skills in multi-modal literacy.

A wiki can be an authentic task in which students develop a tangible product that can be used after the assessment. Wikis also engage learners within a digital learning environment and "allow students to perform asynchronous online collaboration, with the added capacity to structure, re-structure and interlink content" (Bower & Richards, 2006) in a safe, shared space.

Wikis can also pose some issues and challenges for assessors in their efforts to keep track of each student's contributions (Gehringer, 2008).

When to use

Wikis provide a forum where you and your students can establish collaborative dynamics. Unlike on most blogs and discussion boards, students can interact and edit their posts and contributions within a single working document. As an assessment tool, wikis provide a space for collaboration and group work.

Students can work in small groups to research a specific topic, to prepare literature reviews and to discuss and prepare oral presentations as a group. In a wiki, this is easier than in a discussion board, where the multiple threads of posts and comments can become confusing. Students can edit and insert work into each other's contributions, and learn from and with each other. You can track students' unique contributions and assess them individually.

To help you decide whether to use a blog, a wiki or a discussion forum, visit the page Blog, wiki or forum—which should you use?

Benefits

- Wikis make it easy for you to assess your students' ability to combine critical thinking with editing, reviewing,
They can be highly engaging, enabling students to participate actively and productively in learning, sharing ideas and practising a wide range of skills, which in turn underpin the development of discipline-specific and generic graduate attributes.

The social processes of collaborating in a wiki environment can help you establish and maintain a learning community within the class. This can be particularly valuable in large classes.

Collaborative writing for a wiki allows students to see their peers’ writing, and this can contribute to a shared understanding of writing processes, of the characteristics of effective reasoning and writing, and of how assessment criteria are applied to discriminate between different levels of quality in writing.

Wikis also promote multi-modal literacy through active communication and expression on a particular topic, offering an authentic practice environment where students can develop digital design skills.

For course coordinators, wikis can be easily established for assessment.

Challenges

- Learning how to write, how to establish students in a social writing space and how to establish trust in a collaborative writing environment takes time. Refinement of all these skills is also time-consuming.
- Students may resist the idea of collaboration at first, believing in a teacher-centred model and instructor-led assessment.
- Students can be suspicious of being assessed in a collaborative writing space. Reassure them that this method does allow for individual assessment, and that it can enhance their face-to-face learning.
- Collaborative learning is often difficult to assess. It requires clear guidelines and standards.
- Often students do not want to share their research, for fear that it will be plagiarised, over-edited or deleted, resulting in unfair assessment. As Davies (2009) indicates, "some group members may be reluctant participants in assessment tasks and be uncommitted to the aims of the group - and the subject, for that matter."
- Timing of a wiki assessment should take into account the time it takes to become familiar with the writing style of a wiki and the collaborative process in which students are continually editing individual contributions. If you time a wiki assessment later in the course, issues around grading may arise.
- Wikis can look bland. Set design standards in the learning outcomes and assessment criteria.
- Wikis can pose technical challenges, especially for students who may not have Internet access in their study time. Some students may require training in navigating the wiki space, and outages and system failures can affect student and staff access at certain times.

Strategies
Design a wiki assessment

- Use an open ended task in which multiple perspectives and problems can be solved, researched and discussed in a number of ways.
- Structure the task and align it with the unit and course learning outcomes.
- Explicitly model and support good netiquette, and develop class wiki etiquette.
- Establish the learning space as a neutral territory. Wikis are point-of-view-neutral, being collaborative spaces containing many points of view.
- Arrange wiki groups around themes or topics, nominating, or allowing the group to nominate, individual students for different roles.
- Model and support the learning in the wiki. Don't assume students know either the technology or your expectations of their collaborative writing.
- Give clear guidelines for collaboration, posting and rewriting.
- Provide time and structured early tasks involving feedback as students develop skills.
- Develop clear rubrics and standards for student peer assessment.
- Monitor the students' efforts and contributions to ensure quality and understanding.
- Limit group numbers to around five students. Larger groups hamper problem solving processes, and can result in students experiencing cognitive overload or feeling that they lose their voice.

Grade and assess a wiki

Wikis are common writing and publishing spaces. Related assessment issues include students "free-riding" (sitting back and letting others do all the work), and problems with group dynamics.

When you set up the group wiki:

- provide a clear rubric and make sure students have a clear idea of your expectations. This can help discourage free-riding.
- explain, in the assessment method, the role each group member will play
- if appropriate, give one student in each group responsibility for leading the team; either they or you can distribute other responsibilities equally among the rest of the group
- document this distribution: not only will this avoid disagreements later on, it will also discourage free-riding.

When assessment time comes, ensure that you check whether all students have contributed equally to the work. You may be able to do this by observation, or you may want to employ peer feedback and review for this part of the assessment.
Wiki assessment design

Savery and Duffy’s (2001) instructional principles of constructivist learning can be applied to assessment by wiki. They suggest that it is best to:

- create a scenario and establish the parameters within which the problem is to be solved
- establish ownership of the problem in the scenario
- design an authentic assessment task
- situate the student within the problem and enable them to reflect on the learning within the task
- give the student opportunities to devise a solution to the problem
- use a variety of taxonomies and learning scenarios to encourage critical thinking.
- establish a trusting environment where students feel free to think creatively and make mistakes
- provide opportunities for reflective practice.

Group-based assessment

Have students actively participate in collaborative problem solving processes, with wiki-writing as a quantifiable assessment item. Here is a sample wiki.

Instructor assessment

Set weekly wiki updates, triggered by questions set by tutors, as an assessment task. See Cubric (2007).

Self and peer assessment

As collaborators in the wiki, students are often the best positioned to assess, through peer review, the content of a page or an overall wiki. They can learn significant critical review skills by analysing their peers’ writing, using the teacher’s clear expectations and rubrics to guide them. This helps them become more autonomous in their learning and academic writing (Xiao & Lucking, 2008; Rourke et al., 2008).

Authentic assessment

A wiki is an authentic assessment tool for teaching discipline-specific writing in a social space. It can help establish student identity in the community of practice by setting them a loosely-defined and open ended task, and encouraging them to develop a strategy and solution for producing a tangible item: a web page.

Feedback
Even in a non-assessable wiki, students can learn a great deal through feedback from both staff and peers as editors and contributors. Immediate reactions to their posts, edits and comments can help them both absorb the wiki content and improve their writing skills. With a wiki, it is relatively easy for instructors to lead students in the right direction as needed during the learning process, as feedback is not restricted to a single instance at the completion of a task (Al-Kilidar & Johnson, 2009).

Ways to use wikis for assessment

As a collaborative research writing assessment

1. Students develop an annotated bibliography to begin research on a topic.
2. In the course of posting and reading others’ posts, students identify others with similar research interests.
3. At a certain point they are encouraged to form wiki groups according to these similarities.
4. They share resources and research on their area of interest.
5. Within their groups students collaborate on a major wiki entry on a common chosen topic.
6. Individual student contributions are posted as sub-topical entries. These are then interconnected among themselves as well as to the major topic entry, which is drafted collaboratively.

In group oral/video/project presentation for tutorial assessment

Tutors can set up group wikis (with accompanying assessment criteria) where students discuss the assessment task, nominate topics of interest to them, find like-minded collaborators, develop student teams and project ideas, and coordinate their emerging group projects. Often the workload and cooperative experiences of research are distributed unevenly throughout a project group, but this unevenness will be clearly visible to the tutor in inspection of the discussion wiki, even if the actual presentation appears to be a seamless whole. Students can also be invited to peer assess individuals’ contributions.

Weekly assessment activities for individuals and groups

You might want to include, as an assessment component, weekly wiki entries by individual students to summarise lecture, reading or topic material or to solve related problems. Or you could call for students to collaborate on posting weekly wiki contributions to share dialogue in a community of practice, and assess these collaborative pieces.

Involving experts

Students develop collaborative wiki spaces and experts from the field/industry outside the course assess them. Experts can also be given the requisite access to contribute to the wikis during the course. See Boulos, Maramba and Wheeler, "Wikis, blogs and podcasts".

Ensure fairness
While wikis' use of technology may be inclusive in some ways, they can also be inherently unfair. Consider the diversity of student backgrounds and skills when you introduce wikis in your course. For example, students who have little or no access to private study arrangements can find it difficult to actively read and write in the wiki.

Providing computer-lab time can help ensure that all students have a specified time and place in which to contribute to the wiki space.

Additional information

External resources

- ARTS1091: Media, Society, Politics Wikispace, UNSW—Students collaborate in this wiki to produce and publish writing for assessments.
- UNSW TELT Gateway: How to create a wiki in Moodle (see also the relevant MoodleDocs page)
- UNSW Wikispaces—This project pilot was established to explore the provision of flexible spaces for teaching and learning at UNSW.
- Wikis in University Teaching and Learning—Richard Buckland, UNSW
- Wikis, blogs and podcasts: a new generation of Web-based tools for virtual collaborative clinical practice and education
- Wikimatrix—allows instructors to find and compare the wikis that match their teaching and learning needs

Further readings


Acknowledgments
The contributions of staff who engaged with the preparation of this topic are gratefully acknowledged.