

The power of wikis



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1. The organisation

Taunton's College is a relatively small 16-19 college in Southampton, Hampshire (www.tauntons.ac.uk). We have a strong PE, Sports and Public Services Department and a healthy enrichment programme.

2. Overview

This report outlines how a wiki can be used in education, but also shares the experience of a novice digital teacher working with and alongside semi-digital learners. We engaged in the use of wikis as a collaborative teaching project and so far we (the BTEC National in Sport tutors and learners) have made slow but purposeful progress. This is not a cross-college programme but rather a course initiative that has gained some attention from staff in other departments.

3. The detail

3.1 Approach

The approach might be characterised as *trial and error*, *trial and more error*, *read and learn*, *share and learn*, *apologise and learn*. This is perhaps not a traditional pedagogy, but there is also shared planning, collaboration and support. As noted, this is not an organisational programme; however the use of wikis is slowly spreading through the College. It is a pebble in the pond approach, except that it is the learners throwing the stones rather than the management.

All members of a related course or project (both students and staff) are given permission to edit the wiki pages. This gives the learners a feeling of control over their learning and encourages a sense of responsibility for the course or project as a whole. This is perhaps best evidenced by the Panini Project, a charitable task set up and organised by the students (see <http://btecnationalsinsport.wikispaces.com/Panini+Project>).

The use of the course wiki is heavily focused on learning with only small attention given to the tool itself. The wiki has spread to encompass many different teaching and learning outcomes, as a communication tool and to publish and showcase student work. As a wiki is an easy-to-use webware technology, the students have created much of the content and ideas.

One of our most significant achievements has been the use of the wiki to challenge and inspire students, through online charitable projects (as above), student testimonies, and former student blogs (for example see:

<http://btecnationalsinsport.wikispaces.com/Dean+Faithful%27s+FIT+Blog>).

3.2 Scale

This is a very young project, barely nine months old. We work primarily with students, but also staff, parents and a cross-Atlantic partner (Kent State University). We have three year groups: two year 2 groups, introduced to the tool half way through their course and one year 1 course, introduced to the wiki as part of their induction. Both groups use the wiki actively. However, year 1 students are far more involved, engaged and accepting. There are approximately 60 students, plus a large number of lurkers.

3.3 Impact...

... on learners, teachers, partners, staff etc

The staff use the wiki to communicate and support student learning. As a teacher it has enabled me to post deadlines and reminders and to confirm the students' responsibilities for their work, outside of the usual classroom contact time. In many cases these are simple notifications, e.g. details of televised football matches or documentaries, through to class cover and college-wide dates.

We also use the wiki to inspire learners and challenge their notion of education and citizenship. The students use the wiki for a wide range of educational reasons, for example wiki mail, collaboration, discussions, publishing. The effect on learners who find it difficult to participate in classroom discussion has been positive.

Here are some examples of student comments about the wiki:

"I believe wikispace is a refreshing new way of learning. I have never learnt like this before, and have found that I am reading through a lot of people's comments. It also allows people to voice their own opinions, which they may not do in an ordinary class."

"Wikispace helps you learn as it gives everyone a voice without being interrupted, as in a classroom pupils choose to shy away from talking. This in turn helps you learn more as you learn from others."

"I believe it gives the less outgoing students a chance to voice their opinions and answers away from the pressures and peers of the classroom. I also like to use the wiki as you can have debates with others and learn from their comments."

... on the organisation

As an institution Taunton's College had little or no involvement in the introduction of the wiki, but is are supportive of what is being done. A wiki is a portable, personal teaching resource. The tutor can login to the wiki at any time or place (provided Internet access is available). Once a course is completed the space can be left for students or staff to use or it can be closed for further editing. A copy can be taken for storing offline.

Other staff are now beginning to use wikis in their teaching and are finding the wikis far easier to use than they expected and that the students like the educational focus. Comments about the students' pride in the work and in online publication are consistent across the groups.

3.4 Costs and benefits

Setting up a wiki is either free or low cost. The time commitment is variable depending on the scope of the project. I estimate that I spent five hours a week monitoring the wiki for three groups. The more online activities in progress, the more time spent.

There are numerous benefits; the more creative you are, the more opportunities you will find. Wikis primarily offer a scaffold on which to build and host online activities.

4. Lessons, caveats, and implications

4.1 for the organisation

The use of the wiki has accelerated learning for students and improved grades. Students have extended class discussions online and certainly some of the least likely students have been contributing. Publishing their work offers great motivation, especially when it is recognised by readers outside the college and the course.

Students can showcase their learning, and take pride in publication. The wiki enables reflection, and the creation of portfolios, blogs, projects and galleries. It is a very immediate assessment tool for teachers. Wikis also enable instant messaging, which is another quick method of communication that students have appreciated, and which can be embedded on a page or a meeting point arranged. The clarity of the students' thinking has surprised us.

To date there have been very few drawbacks. Sometimes the students have to be enthused to try something new, and this can be emotionally draining. The reward is that in nearly all cases the students have been proud of their achievements, as recorded in their comments submitted with each piece of coursework.

4.2 for others

Many writers offer tips for using wikis. There are some useful links in the wiki staff room we have set up at <http://btecnationalsinsport.wikispaces.com/The+Staff+Room>. The key thing for a teacher is to not be afraid to try. Wikis have a history function, which means you can always go back to a previous version of a page and you can never do any real lasting damage. There is an interesting and relevant discussion on the NING network about the use of wikis for learning (<http://classroom20.ning.com/forum/topic/show?id=649749%3ATopic%3A45481>)

Wikis are geared towards community activity and collaboration, so teachers need to work with other stakeholders, colleagues, students and parents to get the full benefit of the tool. Finally, as with any learning technology, it is not the tool but the pedagogy behind it that matters.

Teachers can join any one of a range of wiki providers and make use of free education space (which is also free of advertising). I work with Wikispaces; others prefer PBWiki, Wetpaint or Jotspot. Each wiki has a very helpful community of wiki users, educational wiki users and support staff. It really is a team effort. You can join our wiki; we have 40 or so helpful student advisors (<http://btecnationalsinsport.wikispaces.com>).

5. Contact details

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