

Wiki Wisdom: Lessons for Educators

By **Michelle R. Davis**

Instructional-technology coach Kristin Hokanson is hooked on wikis. Hokanson counts at least 40 wikis, or collaborative Web sites, that she either designed or participates in. She uses them to post PowerPoint presentations, provide how-to videos and tutorials for educators, and share other resources with colleagues.

"I use wikis for just about everything," says Hokanson, whose 3,500-student Upper Merion Area School District, in Upper Merion, Pa., is pushing teachers and schools to use technology more effectively.

To be sure, wikis have already caught on among some teachers, who have developed creative ways of using them in their classrooms. But recently, an increasing number of administrators have also been turning to wikis to help them do their jobs.

"There's been an enormous uptick of wiki use in the K-12 area in the last three years," says Adam Frey, a co-founder of San Francisco-based Wikispaces, a for-profit company that provides **free wikis to teachers**. "A lot of people have found the wiki and really understand it and apply it."

"Wiki" is an abbreviated version of the full name, wiki-wiki, which translates as "quick" in Hawaiian. Wikis have been around since the mid-1990s, Frey says, and were originally used by software engineers to collaborate on writing software and for other technical tasks. A wiki is a Web site that allows those with access the power to edit or add content, track who made changes, and allow revisions to previous versions if needed.

Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia that was launched in 2001, is one of the largest and best-known wikis.

Though wikis were created by software engineers, wiki technologies these days are easy to use even for non-techies, Frey says. "We realized that technology is less about cramming every single feature into a product, and more about making sure the features a product has are valuable to people," says Frey.

Michael Horton, a science coordinator for California's Riverside County Office of Education, which includes 23 school districts, says wikis have become valuable tools for sharing best practices and discussing strategies for teaching science.

One of the most popular pages on **the wiki Horton designed highlights free material**—such as DVDs, posters, and bookmarks—that science teachers can get for their classrooms. Horton says those who access his wiki can add more free items they discover on their own. Horton also embeds audio podcasts in his wiki that highlight science misconceptions and how to correct them when talking to students.

Potential Problems

Horton emphasizes that educators do not have to be technology experts to use wikis. The technology, he says, is fairly simple to use.

"It's about communicating with science teachers," he says. "I was training some teachers talking about professional learning communities, and a person said, 'I wish there was a blog where we could discuss that.' Thirty seconds later, I had created a place on my wiki to do that."

Still, there are problem areas that educators need to be aware of when using wikis, says Jennifer C. Dorman, a facilitator of instructional-staff development at the secondary level for the 20,000-student Central Bucks, Pa., school district.

Ed. Wiki Tips

Experts recommend several steps to follow when using wikis, including:

1. Make use of the feature that alerts a wiki manager that changes have been made to the wiki. Check regularly to see what changes have been made and by whom.
 2. Determine whether your wiki should be accessible to the public or be limited to a defined group.
 3. Be aware of copyright and licensing issues when posting other people's work.
 4. Emphasize "digital professionalism" to the community that can add content to, edit, or otherwise revise your wiki to remind users that it is a document many other people will see. Talk about and make clear what is, and is not, acceptable on the wiki.
 5. Especially when using wikis with students, take steps to prevent users from posting personal information that would reveal their identities.
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For instance, although the creators of wikis generally limit the number of people who view them, many educators prefer to have public wikis so teachers across the country can contribute or take advantage of the collaboration.

But when a number of people can make changes to a wiki, those who created the space need to be aware that inappropriate comments and material can be posted or unfair editing can take place. In fact, a new tracking device recently found that corporations and politicians, among others, were editing Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, to manipulate content to make themselves or their businesses look better.

Wiki technology can notify the manager of the wiki each time a change is made, and that change can be erased quickly if it's not appropriate. Dorman cites an incident in which a teacher once removed important parts of [a wiki that Dorman runs](#). She was alerted, and a few minutes later restored a previous version of her wiki.

Although her wikis are available for the public to read, to combat such problems she allows only teachers she knows to edit the content.

Educators should also be aware of copyright and licensing issues when posting other people's work on a wiki, Dorman warns. And emphasizing "digital professionalism" among those who contribute to a wiki is vital, she says, to prevent contributors from posting inappropriate comments.

Classroom Wikis

Teachers who use wikis with students deal with similar issues.

Students of Spanish teacher William Bishop at [Haleyville High School in Haleyville, Ala.](#), have used wikis to create and edit reports on Dia De Los Muertos, the Mexican holiday translated as the Day of the Dead, and the Galapagos Islands, as well as profiles of 21 Spanish-speaking countries.

"The main thing is to have a strong acceptable-use policy," Bishop says. "Make sure that's in effect and you talk to students about it."

Also, while wikis track every editing change made to them and keep a history of what those changes are, some students have tried to game the system by making small alterations (such as adding a period) to make it seem as if they've been working hard on a project. Wikis do have the ability, however, to allow a teacher to sift through the changes to see the quality of what a particular student contributed, Frey of Wikispaces says.

"Wikis ... allow you to get 100 percent participation," says Vicki Davis, a computer sciences teacher and information-technology director at Westwood Schools, a private school in Camilla, Ga. "Your team may have created the greatest wiki in the world, but if your user ID hasn't contributed, then you get a zero. It eliminates the bottom-feeders of projects—the student who kicks back and lets all the other kids do the work."

Security is an issue, too.

Teachers can build wikis that only a small group, such as a class, can see. But many teachers prefer to have wikis open for public viewing.

Davis, who uses public wikis, says [she often posts student-made videos and photographs on her wiki](#). But she does not allow her students to list personal information, and they must use pseudonyms. Also, she requires that younger students put an Avatar, or electronic picture or representation, over their faces in video or photos. Older students are allowed to use their own faces, however.

"We try to protect the privacy of the student," Davis says.

Davis has won awards for her wikis, including ["The Flat Classroom Project,"](#) which began when her class was studying Thomas L. Friedman's best-seller *The World Is Flat*, which addresses the impact of globalization. That wiki linked Davis' Georgia students with students in Bangladesh to collect and present information on globalization and outsourcing, virtual communication, and how the Internet has changed the world.

Davis' wiki was even mentioned in an update to Friedman's book.

Michelle R. Davis is a contributing writer for Education Week and Digital Directions.