

## **Wikis, Laurel A. Clyde**

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Wiki is yet another new infotech term that has come to prominence in the last couple of it is said, from the Hawaiian word for "fast," "WikiWikiWeb" (or just "wiki") describe a particular type of interactive web site--a site to which users can contribute. Though the first wikis appeared about nine years ago, it has been only in the last two years that they have captured the imagination of relatively large numbers of Internet users. Wikis are being used in different contexts, including education, business, and library science and information management.

Like blogging software (see "Educational Blogging," *Teacher Librarian*, 32(3), 43-45), wiki "engines" (the software used as the basis for a wiki) are a form of "social software," that is, "a type of software that makes it easy for groups of people to work together in a virtual environment" (Chawner & Lewis, 2004). Wikis support collaborative activity by providing a format for the submission of contributions, a way of organizing and updating the site, and automatic maintenance of the links among pages and to external sites. Users do not need to possess sophisticated web skills to take part in developing a wiki, though setting up a wiki does require more skills.

In its simplest form, a wiki allows any authorized user to add new content and new pages to a wiki, and to edit, change, or delete existing content. Some allow any users to make changes, and those changes might not require moderator approval before appearing on the web site, depending on how the wiki has been set up. The process for contributors is normally quite simple with all activity taking place in an environment of ordinary web browser software (such as Internet Explorer or Mozilla). Web-based forms provide most of the necessary tools, and users need no knowledge of HTML (the markup language behind web pages), nor do they need to use web page creation software like FrontPage or Dreamweaver. Most wiki engines also provide facilities for members of the wiki group or community to monitor changes, to restore previous versions of pages, and to delete unwanted pages or material. Some wiki engines can also track the contributions of individuals, show the development of different areas of the wiki, or compare the current version of a page with earlier versions.

While many wikis are available on the public Internet, wiki engines are also available for use on private intranets or local area networks within organizations (such as schools or businesses). The private wikis are known as GatedCommunities. Counting wikis is difficult, and the few specialist tools for finding wikis are not particularly comprehensive--a problem shared with the world of weblogs or blogs. A directory called SwitchWiki lists more than one thousand public wikis (it also has a list of wikis by wiki engine); the University of Illinois Computer Science web site lists wikis by subject. At the moment there is no comprehensive list of private wikis, and it is unlikely that one will ever exist.

Like many other Internet environments (for example, email with its @ in all addresses, and the World Wide Web with its URLs containing www and .html), wikis have their own conventions and specialist terms. One feature of wiki "language" is OddCapitalization, a convention first used to name wiki pages and now used in terms for features associated

with wikis. So we have GatedCommunities (see above), WikiFarms (see below), and WikiEngines, among others.

Probably the best-known wiki at present is Wikipedia. Begun by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger in 2001, this is a project that aims to build a free encyclopedia on the Web to which anyone can contribute; anyone, anywhere, can add new articles or edit existing ones. By late 2004, Wikipedia contained nearly 350,000 articles (Boxer, 2004). Despite the open nature of the project and the idea that "anyone can become a contributor," the credibility of Wikipedia has increased over the last four years, as the open-source concept, "many eyes make all bugs shallow," comes into operation. Nevertheless, Wikipedia remains an interesting complement to established and authoritative commercial encyclopedias rather than an alternative to them. Other sites inspired by the success of the Wikipedia project include WikiTravel, an international travel guide that commenced operations in 2003.

## CREATING A WIKI

A wide range of software is now available for creating and managing a wiki; these wiki engines have different features, but at a basic level will normally provide the features indicated above. Typically the wiki engine is installed on a server (a lone computer connected to the Internet that is used to house a web site or sites); the wiki engine may be the basis of just one wiki or of several. Perhaps not surprisingly, a good source of information about wiki engines is the "Wiki Software" entry in the online Wikipedia.

Selecting a wiki engine requires some knowledge of computer operating systems, because these engines are written in different programming languages or using different software development tools, and some will work only with particular operating systems (although many are cross-platform applications). Running a server with a wiki engine also requires some computer skills well beyond the basics. On the other hand, one of the advantages of using a wiki engine on one's own server is that the wiki software can be reconfigured or even recoded to meet local needs. Wiki engines include the following:

\* PmWiki <http://www.pmwiki.org/>

\* QwikiWiki <http://quinthar.com/qwikiwiki/index.php>

\* Senseis <http://senseis.xmp.net/>

\* TikiWiki <http://www.tikiwiki.org/>

There is another option for people who do not have the skills to or do not wish to set up their own server. WikiFarms are servers that run a wiki engine as a service; these WikiFarms may be free or they may charge a fee. Some WikiFarms provide a free service for personal use but charge a fee for wikis created by commercial organizations. Generally speaking, these WikiFarms provide the software for creating and maintaining a wiki, and they also host the wikis, They do make it possible for people who have

limited "server-side" skills to create and manage a wiki. The following are examples of WikiFarms or wiki hosting:

\* JotSpot <http://www.jotspot.com/>

\* Ritters.com <http://www.riters.com/>

\* SeedWiki <http://www.seedwiki.com/>

\* Swiki.net <http://www.swiki.net/>

The following are some of the free online resources available to people who want to create wikis:

#### HOW TO START A WIKI

[http://wikibooks.org/wiki/Wiki\\_science\\_HowToStartAWiki](http://wikibooks.org/wiki/Wiki_science_HowToStartAWiki)

#### HOW TO CHOOSE A WIKI

<http://c2.com/cgi/wiki?ChoosingaWiki>

#### TOP TEN WIKI ENGINES

<http://c2.com/cgi/wiki?TopTenWikiEngines>

#### WIKI ENGINES

<http://c2.com/cgi/wiki?WikiEngines>

#### WIKI SCIENCE: HOW TO START A WIKI

[http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Wiki\\_science\\_HowToStartAWiki](http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Wiki_science_HowToStartAWiki)

#### WORLDWIDEWIKI: POPULARWIKIS

<http://www.worldwidewiki.net/wiki/PopularWikis>

#### WORLDWIDEWIKI: SWITCHWIKIWIKI DIRECTORIES

<http://www.worldwidewiki.net/wiki/SwitchWikiWikiDirectories>

#### EDUCATIONAL APPLICATIONS OF WIKIS

Wikis can be used as the basis of class or group projects, as sources of information (Wikipedia and the travel guides come to mind), and as a basis for online publishing. In business, they have also been used for knowledge management applications. In

educational environments, however, wikis as sources of information raise information literacy issues--how does one evaluate information made available through a wiki? What place does the information from an open source such as a wiki have in the information world of Internet users? Internet guru Karen Schneider (2004) says, "I check wikis ... Then I go find information I can trust." But is it really as bad as this? This is still an open question. Wikis used as a basis for group work require some communication skills on the part of participants because not everyone is good at communicating ideas or working with other people.

In an educational setting, there are two main modes used within wiki groups or communities, and the resulting wikis do look different. In collaboration mode, the focus of the group is usually on creating a document together to which anyone in the group can contribute and in which anyone in the group can edit content. The result is a seamless document that incorporates ideas from a number of people without identifying the individual contributions. In discussion mode, however, individual contributions remain separate and appear in the form of a conversation rather than as a text document. Instead of adding to or editing the original document with which the discussion began, participants post their comments at the end of the document, and their contributions are often signed. The result looks like a blog or an electronic bulletin board.

Both collaboration and discussion modes have applications in classrooms and other educational settings. Jonathan Davies (2004) has produced a report called "Wiki Brainstorming and Problems with Wiki-Based Collaboration" that will help teachers and teacher-librarians who are interested in using wikis. However, as is the case with blogs, new educational applications are emerging all the time as people become more familiar with this new medium.