

**„Go4job – e Skills Project Days & More –
Developing Competences for High-Performance Workplaces“**

Digital media for vocational education

Wiki

Introduction to Collaborative Work and Wikis

Introduction

This topic sets the scene with an introduction to collaborative learning and how social software tools, such as wikis can be implemented as educational tools to promote collaborative learning. Groups can use wikis to write documents together online - how things have moved on!

A new generation of learner is emerging and new web-based tools, including wikis, are encouraging and supporting the way that they engage with the learning process. Students have more direct control over their learning. They can work together and share ideas and content online.

1.1 Web 2.0 Technologies

A decade ago learning technology was significantly different – broadcast media, audio, video being the means by which many educational establishments engaged with technology. Now we have the new generation of learners – students who have grown up in a wired world, with podcasts, instant messaging, wikis, weblogs (blogs) being the social software tools that they can engage with – often referred to as Web 2.0 technology or social software. The Internet, rather than just a repository for information, now offers them wikis, blogs, managed and personal learning environments where they can interact with like-minded individuals in established networks.

What is different?

So why is this different? Students working together in groups and interacting with each other isn't new. The essence of this change is that these Web 2.0 technologies promote online groups to form which co-operate and share information. What makes it different is the more direct control that social software gives the learner in a space where they can share comments and content. *How* the learner engages with these social software tools makes them of use or otherwise, rather than the technologies themselves.

We'll take as an example a wiki. Creating a wiki (a collection of web pages that can be edited by anyone) isn't difficult to set up. It's what the contributors to the wiki do with it to develop its purpose and engage with its content that is the essence of making a wiki a learning tool and making it work.

Blogs are another example of social software and Web 2.0 technology. They too allow likeminded users, who often don't know each other or haven't worked together before, to share a group space on a common theme.

Facebook and MySpace, often seen as the curse of the classroom, engage

learners in a shared space with others with similar interests or in the same locations. Whether we love or hate them, many of our learners are experts in their use.

What you may also notice is the informal nature of this learning or engagement. Perhaps the classroom environment is no longer the focal point where learning takes place as learners set up more and more social networks and have the freedom of choice when, where and how to learn? The jury is, perhaps, still out on this one!

A challenge for us as educators

How does one marry this open, decentralised, democratised approach of Web 2.0 with the more traditional, hierarchical, expert-focused, structured world of education? It is a challenge which faces educators (that means us!) and we need to develop and implement learning strategies that are appropriate to this new generation of learners. Whilst wikis, for example, encourage student control, there is also an element which stresses that a degree of structure and direction is necessary. So at least as teachers and lecturers we have a role in this. In fact, our role has, perhaps, never been more important. A major issue could be that learner doesn't necessarily know what it is that they need to know without guidance and direction. What has changed is that in an open, decentralised world the idea that the teacher is the person who will give you the content doesn't hold water anymore. That's a difficult pill to swallow but with one foot still in the past we have to reflect if our educational system was designed to teach this first generation to grow up with the new technology.

1.2 What's in a Wiki?

The growing range of social software tools in education is serving to support collaboration and group work. Students are coming to education with a familiarisation of these technologies which, at first, can be overwhelming to educators. Rather than stick to old tried and tested ways, educators need to harness this knowledge and capabilities and put them to good use in the classroom, providing it can be justified that they are of value in the learning process. This resource will examine the value of wikis in education if used effectively.

It has been argued by some educators that YouTube should not be allowed in the classroom. Some can envisage the potential for its use but others cannot. Some judged its use as disruptive in the classroom which, of course, it could be if the students chose to abuse its use, but there are some really useful video clips which can get the point over more than a thousand pearls of wisdom!

Background of Wikis



You may be wondering where the name comes from. General agreement is that it comes from the Hawaiian phrase *Wiki-Wiki*, meaning 'to hurry'. Wiki-Wiki is also the name of the shuttle buses at

Honolulu airport! It was a technology first launched by Ward

Cunningham in 1995 with his WikiWiki Web. Possibly the most famous and public wiki is Wikipedia where users can freely engage with its content

to produce a wealth of knowledge. Through editing pages knowledge is built on to produce this online encyclopedia. There aren't many subjects that you can't find in Wikipedia and if you do find one that's not included, you're invited to start a page yourself. What a dynamic encyclopedia! It must surely beat those old dusty ones on the bookshelves, or in my case, the attic!

Key Features of a Wiki

The YouTube video illustrates why wikis support group work and knowledge creation, but a well-thought out wiki can do much more. There are several key features of a wiki that make it different:

- Unlike conventional web pages It allows several users to create and edit its content, (both their own and that of others), in an ethos of open editing.
- It is built collaboratively, unlike conventional web pages, bringing together likeminded users – learners with a common purpose or interest.
- Users can work on a document together, making multiple contributions, without having to email revised versions back and forth.
- Pages can be created within a wiki and these can have many purposes – carrying out research activities, providing web links and social bookmarks, adding resources and images, posting assignment briefs, creating pages to keep rough drafts, technical help pages, general and specialised even holding brainstorming sessions – in fact, almost anything!

Wikis have the capacity to compare previous versions of a page and track who has edited their content and when. In this way educators oversee the content and users can self-police themselves.

How do Wikis Support Learning?

Think about the examples of how a wiki can be utilised, in particular, during group work. Participating in a wiki involves the group taking responsibility for creating its content. This way they learn from each other and build on each other's contributions to the wiki by editing pages. The key to this is that group members take on the ownership of their own learning and content in a supportive role. Think of a wiki set up for the purpose of problem solving. Group members will come along to the wiki with different personal experiences which they can share, discuss and move the knowledge of the group forward. Groups feed on the energy of its members and learn, with the less experienced gaining knowledge from others.

1.3 Group Work and Learning

There was a time in education when pupils in schools were encouraged to work on their own. Looking at someone else's work was viewed as cheating - a heinous crime! How things have changed now! We actively encourage our learners to work together and to share knowledge.

Group Learning is Engaged Learning

Engaged learning, is based on the simple belief that students of all ages learn better when they are active participants in what they are studying and group work is one way in which we can engage our learners. Our role as educators is to devise ways in which this can happen. Using Web 2.0 technology tools can help us in this process if used effectively. Wikis, blogs, social bookmarking or social networking sites such as FaceBook support, create and develop groups and communities using both individual and shared spaces.

Group work can provide a learning environment of support which leads to highly motivated learners. However, we need to provide a learning environment which serves to balance nurturing our learners whilst giving them the autonomy to learn with and from their peers, feeling comfortable when engaging in activities with others. We need to create a supportive but challenging environment – short-term goals, choices and constructive feedback.

Group work using wikis can stimulate the learner's curiosity. By devising relevant and authentic learning tasks, students are allowed to create and display their work which can serve as a permanent record of their interactivity and collaborative work.

Is the idea of group learning based on any particular theory of learning? One approach to learning is to consider it as social process of co-operation. Whilst recognising that the individual constructs knowledge, this approach suggests that effective learning needs to be set in a social setting.

How does group work support learning?

Group work on a structured activity works on the principle that co-operative groups learn to work as teams, to solve problems and to think things through without having the direct control of the tutor. Group work increases motivation as the learners learn from each other

- Group work changes attitudes and approaches to learning
- Group work creates more ideas than an individual working on their own
- Group work encourages a sense of security and belonging
- Group work provides support for the individual

A theoretical approach to learning

It's important to ground group work in a theoretical perspective. As educators, understanding *how* we learn influences how we approach our teaching. Such an approach underpins any course design, the pedagogical approach we take and the technology engaged with to achieve our learning outcomes.

It's beyond the scope of this course to visit the wealth of views on the way that we learn and I'm not sure that you would be too enthusiastic to do so! Let's look at one that supports the idea of working together as a way to learn, *social constructivism*. This view supports the principle that learning is a social practice based on co-operation and interaction. You may be familiar with the work of *Vygotsky*, a Russian psychologist born in 1896 (interestingly, in the same year as the child psychologist, Piaget).

One of his early observations was that children worked beyond their mental age if they were helped by adults or older children. Sharing ideas provides the scaffolding needed for learning to take place - think of brainstorming sessions, where ideas are pooled together collectively. Vygotsky was particularly interested in human dialogue – through this our learners can interact, negotiate and collaborate; thus, language and discussion are fundamental to learning and, although we internalise words, it is through language that we communicate our ideas and thoughts to others.

So where does this theoretical perspective fit in with our emphasis on group work? We've moved from the teacher-centred delivery and reframed the learning process through conversational and reflective dialogue. Web 2.0 tools, in particular, support a social constructivist approach to learning – discussion of ideas, writing, interaction and collaboration are afforded through these tools in a learning community with a common purpose.

So who owns the learning?

When we talk about the group are we suggesting that the ownership of the learning is transferred from the teacher to the student? The group can generate an energy all of its own through meaningful and valid activities. Through collaboration with others, students can gain verification and clarification of their ideas through sharing resources and engaging in activities to meet shared objectives.

Where does this leave you as the teacher? Are we to be made redundant or are our roles evolving – guiding students and acting more as the facilitator of the learning process rather than the ‘fountain of all knowledge’. Teachers need to adopt a supportive role for individuals and groups.

So, for example, if our learners are seeking information, we can suggest a variety of approaches to seeking that information and putting forward, hopefully, stimulating ideas of how to search for it as well as keeping learners motivated through appropriate activities.

This is where a wiki can help us to create a structured activity and guide the students - encouraging them to discuss issues amongst themselves, problem solve, research and much more. You'll be trying this out for yourself in due course.

Hopefully this has got you thinking about how group work has supported your teaching. Have there been occasions where this hasn't been the case? Why do you think this was the case?

1.4 Netiquette

With Web 2.0 technology such as wikis, weblogs and established social spaces including FaceBook and Bebo, Flickr and MySpace, online communication and collaboration have become almost second nature to the younger generation. Network etiquette or ‘netiquette’ as it is referred to, involves a code of practice concerning what is proper to post or send. Without the face to face element of communication it's very important to set standards online. Body and tone of language must be inferred through how you write and what you say. It's important that we educate our learners on following certain codes of practice.

What's in a Word?

Wording is so important when working online and one inappropriate word can offend people, even if this may not be intended. You may misunderstand what others are saying too when again this was not meant.

Let's look now at some simple rules that you should encourage your learners to follow when online to prevent misunderstandings. Think about each one and ask yourself if you follow these rules religiously. You might be able to think of some situations where they are more appropriate than others. For example, you might be communicating in both formal and informal situations online – would you approach these situations differently?

- When you are dealing with people face to face, you have visual cues to put your meaning over. When you read attachments, emails or posts to forums and other shared spaces online, you only have the computer screen to look at and meanings can be misconstrued. So the rule is *'don't say online what you wouldn't say to someone's face. Remember that you're dealing with humans not a computer!'*
- Take time before posting or editing online *'Think before you write.'* Before you write to a wiki, for example, take one more look to make sure it is exactly what you want to say.
- We seem to be on the go all the time! *'Don't waste people's time and keep posts short.'* Before you write, make sure that you pay attention to the content of your writing. Be concise and accurate. Too much text doesn't equal quality – people read the beginning and then overlook the rest when they see a lot of text. Grammar and punctuation are an important part of language – they give meaning to what we write. *'Pay attention to your punctuation and grammar.'*
- Do acronyms annoy you? How many posts and documents have you read which contain them and you just don't know what they mean? For example, ‘SMT’ –

senior management team; 'DYK' – do you know. So, 'Use acronyms sparingly.' They don't impress and don't really save time, so use them only when necessary and if you're sure the recipients know what they mean!

Emoticons - are they appropriate?

What do you think of the use of emoticons and their place in online netiquette? Some users describe the Internet as faceless and emotionless and these serve to personalize your interaction with it.

They are the visual representations of facial expressions and have grown up to help overcome the problem of communicating electronically and to express the emotions experienced online – frustration or uncomfortable (sad face), enjoyment and comfortable with the online discussion (happy face), confusion or a more light-hearted posting in the form of a wink. Their use can set the tone for social networking. They should be used with care, however, so as not to set the wrong tone of a 'conversation'; conversely, they can set the correct or desired tone. This emoticon represents either yawning or shouting – so be careful you want to convey the impression that you are angry or frustrated or just downright bored!