# Within the Wiki:
# Best Practices for Educators



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Resources for this presentation: http://wikipanel.pbwiki.com

As you've heard from Occidental College, wikis offer many ways to collaborate and create content. However, the effective use of this technology often requires a paradigm shift in the teaching and learning process as well as the integration of best practices specifically for wikis. For my part of this panel discussion, I'll tell you how three faculty members at Boise State are using wikis, what they discovered, the challenges they encountered, and best practices that should make working with a wiki easier and more productive,

(By the way, Gayle, David, and I put this presentation together using a wiki, which shows you that we practice what we preach! To access pdf files of our PowerPoints and a link to this actual PowerPoint, just go to our wiki: http://wikipanel.pbwiki.com)

First, I'll provide an overview of Boise State and then move into a discussion of how wikis were used. I'll wrap it up with a discussion of best practices for effective wiki use.

# Boise State University

Boise State is a mid-sized metropolitan university, located in Idaho's state capital. Enrollment continues to grow, with over 19,000 students, the highest enrollment of any institution of higher learning in the state. Technology support for faculty and staff is provided by Academic Technologies, a department of Boise State, along with hardware support and equipment services. Blackboard, the university course management system, has been in use for several years and adopted by a majority of the faculty population. Blackboard offers an easy way for faculty to create an online course site, using tools that enable collaboration, such as instructor announcements, communications for students (email, discussion forums, file sharing), gradebooks, and online quizzes.

While Blackboard offers many rich tools and features, there is some dissatisfaction among faculty members about its perceived limitations. For instance, the synchronous component in Blackboard is difficult to use and does not offer a complete array of web communication tools.

# Why use wikis?

- Needed platform that would enable collaboration

- Dissatisfied with current limitations of course management system

- Wanted to engage students in learning

- Quick & easy to set up

- Advanced features: RSS feeds, page history

The three faculty members I will discuss used wikis for various purposes, but all of them needed a platform that would enable students to easily collaborate, since all of their course goals included a collaborative element. Also, faculty members were dissatisfied with the Blackboard CMS and wanted a system that would allow collaboration with outside resources and did not require much housekeeping and management, such as archiving of the course site.

Faculty wanted a platform that would be more interactive than Blackboard and engage their students, that was quick and easy to set up, and quick to learn--all features of a wiki. They also liked the feed feature of a wiki and page history.

Next, you'll hear how these three faculty members used wikis in their courses.

# You can use a wiki as a course site and ongoing resource for students and teachers.



http://bsuenglish101.pbwiki.com

An English professor uses a wiki for a graduate level course called "Teaching First-Year Writing at Boise State." This course prepares students to become instructors for the entry-level English courses, English 101 and 102. The wiki was put together by the professor within a very short period of time, since she already had the materials created in her Blackboard course site. She put up a few introductory and necessary materials and then had the students post their assignments to the wiki, for other students to view and to also build content. The wiki continues to serve as a resource and repository for developing materials for English 101 and 102 instructors. It is a collaborative, enabling interface that is, according to the English professor, "always a work in progress."

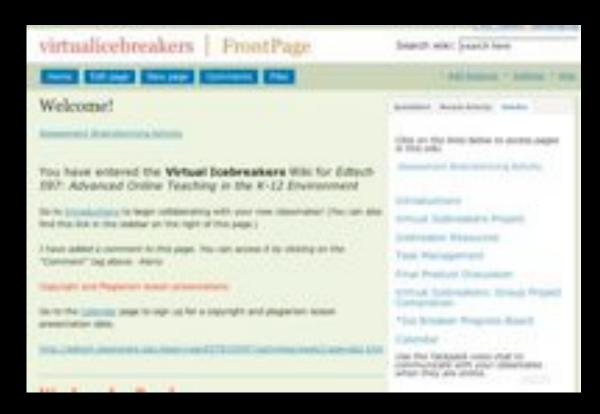# You can use a wiki to develop student writing skills and bring in outside resources.



http://whitecollarcrime.wikispaces.com

A Criminal Justice professor uses a wiki for his course called "White Collar Crime." As you may imagine, this course is very lively, with engaged discussions about the pros and cons of the justice system. The wiki served as a discussion platform for students as well as a repository and showcase for their developing project: a paper about an aspect of white collar crime. Students were encouraged to read, review, comment on, and even edit other students' writing, with the intent being to improve student writing. Outside resources were also brought in from the BSU Writing Center and the Albertsons Library to further help students in their writing and research.

# You can use a wiki as a workspace for students to plan and develop a final product.



http://virtualicebreakers.pbwiki.com

An EdTech professor uses a wiki for a course called "Advanced Online Teaching in the K–12 Environment." This course used the wiki to meet the goal of creating an online resource of synchronous teaching strategies for K–12 online teachers. Students collaborated and shared materials, eventually developing a working website for other teachers to use. The wiki served as the online workspace for the students to create their final product.

These are just a few of many ways wikis can be used to enhance and support learning. To use a wiki successfully, you should also know about specific challenges and opportunities these faculty members experienced.

# Common challenges

student discomfort with wiki environment/culture:

software
collaboration
self-directed work
critiquing others' work
technology

Faculty members reported similar challenges from using wikis in their courses.

They felt that students' limited experience with the wiki software, collaborative activities, directing their own work, critiquing other's work, and working with technology all contributed to this discomfort. But we need to find out more . . .

# Measurements of Success?

- No research data at this point

- Need to set up evaluation studies comparing wikis to courses set up in Blackboard

- Evaluation of collaboration process as well as product(s) produced

At this point, there are no research data to make any conclusions. However, faculty might consider setting up some studies to validate the use of wikis in collaborative learning environments.

One type of study might be to compare courses taught using a wiki with those using Blackboard. Another might be an evaluation of how students used the wiki features. There is not a lot of research on wiki use in education, which would be a good reason to conduct more research in this area!

However, something was learned from the experiences of these faculty members using wikis in their classes. They came up with helpful best practices, which I organized in a list of 10 Best Practices. Here they are!

# 1. Create a culture of trust among wiki participants.

You will need to help your students feel comfortable within the wiki, by creating a culture of trust among all participants. You may want to include some ice-breaker activities, to get students to know each other better before they start their "real" activities. You may want to more closely monitor activity at first to encourage shy students to interact and to intervene when needed if a potentially explosive or harmful interaction is about to occur. In other words, you need to set up and continue to maintain a culture of trust so that students feel safe in the environment while also encouraging them to experiment and take risks. This is not entirely easy to do, but your attitude and leadership can play a huge role in how students perceive their roles and responsibilities toward each other.

# 2. Set up conventions and require students to abide by these.



[http://wikipatterns.com](http://wikipatterns.com)

Conventions are a huge part of a wiki's success. If all students abide by the rules, the wiki community is strong and vibrant. If some are not abiding by the rules, it can become a disruptive and less attractive learning environment. Tell students up front what the expectations are for the wiki and put it on the home page. You may want them to acknowledge and sign a web form, for instance.

You might look at some of the People Anti-Patterns on the wikipatterns.com site to see if any of your contributors fit these patterns and ways you might revolve these anti-patterns.

# 3. Have a common goal for all participants.

Usually wikis work best in a problem-solving environment or something that requires common goals and collaboration. You should have some sort of learning outcome or goal that requires the participation of all students. This is the power of the wiki.

# 4. Assign meaningful, authentic activities.

Wikis demand authentic, relevant learning and offer an easy way to accomplish this through a public arena for reading, writing, and learning. This ties in well with problem-based learning and should really be a part of any learning experience.

# 5. Include explicit instructions and provide time for practice.

Most students have never used a wiki before and will need instructions and practice on how to actually use the software. By providing time and instructions for how to use the wiki, students will feel more comfortable in this environment. You might provide a sand-box or a practice wiki before your students actually use the real wiki.

# 6. Remind students of course deadlines and schedules.

The very nature of a wiki allows and encourages a lot of freedom and self-direction. However, sometimes students need to be directed back on task and reminded of course requirements and deadlines. Staying on top of student activities within the wiki is important.

# 7. Define and identify roles for collaborative activities.

Defining roles and clearly defining the activity, along with assessments are crucial to the success of collaborative learning.

# 8. Provide clear and explicit course expectations.

Again, this is an essential part of good pedagogy, but is an important part of working within a wiki. Students should have a clear understanding of course expectations and how they are to use the wiki to achieve the course goals.

# 9. Model examples of collaborative activities.

Since many students have never worked in a collaborative environment before, you will need to model these behaviors and show them what they look like.

# 10. Be patient with students and realize they may need help.

Remember, not all students are technologically-savvy and may need some initial help with the wiki. However, once they get going and see how easy and quick a wiki is, they should start feeling more comfortable and eager to use the wiki for its powerful collaborative features.

We will now open the discussion for comments and questions from the audience. We have also included a slide that lists some questions you might want answers to as well. Start talking!

# Questions you might have

- What do I need to know to get started using a wiki?

- Why would I use a wiki . . . what advantages might it have over my course management system?

- What wiki software would you recommend?

Here are some questions you might have. Or ask us anything you want about wikis!

# Web-based wiki software

- http://wik.is

- http://pbwiki.com

- http://wikispaces.com

- http://wetpaint.com

- Google Apps through domain:

  - http://sites.google.com

# Thanks for coming!

- Barbara Schroeder, Boise State University

- Gayle Burns, Occidental College

- David Reed, Occidental College

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