

Chapter 110

Story-Based Professional Development: Using a Conflict Management Wiki

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors describe an initiative to create a cross-organization, knowledge building communal network built from the personal workplace stories voluntarily contributed by conflict management practitioners. They identify various wiki adoption and usage issues and provide recommendations and strategies for addressing these issues based on survey data from the wiki target member population. Moreover, the authors compare and contrast their wiki design with recommended practices from the wiki literature and provide some suggestions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

For nearly ten years, adult learners in a master's level conflict management course offered by a small private university in the Midwest have been introduced to a unique method of instruction. This instructional method was designed by Dr. Richards, the second author of this article, and has been researched by Dr. Slabon, the first author of

this article. This instructional method is referred to in the literature as "learning by restorying" (Slabon, 2009).

Restorying uniquely engages learners in the rewriting and retelling of a personal, domain-relevant story based on the application of concepts, principles, strategies and techniques covered during each unit of instruction and again summarily at the end of the course. Through a five-week series of content application assignments, in-class story sharing and discussion, and a final integration pa-

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per, adult learners in the aforementioned conflict management course engaged in the restorying of a personally meaningful workplace story selected from their own, professionally relevant experience base (Slabon, 2009).

In March 2011, the authors of this chapter conceived of the idea to invite 250 former students who engaged in learning by restorying to co-construct a personal story-based wiki for professional development. The intent was to create a cross-organization, cross-industry knowledge-building communal network (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2003, 2006) built from the personally meaningful, professionally relevant stories voluntarily contributed by conflict management practitioners. By providing an informal elearning space which enabled practitioners to share their real world conflict management stories along with critical insights and any unresolved issues or challenges for fellow practitioners to reflect and comment on, we believed that this wiki would have strong potential to serve its members as an ongoing professional development resource with an ever-growing inventory of professionally useful stories, insightful commentaries, and context-rich dialogue to inform member practice (Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998, 2000).

We noted from the instructional design and professional development literature that Schank (1990, 1999), Lave and Wegner (1991), and Schön (1993) have strongly advocated for the use of real world stories to promote problem solving skills and contextual reflection on difficult cases for all professions. Jonassen and Hernandez-Serrano (2002) have similarly asserted that “stories elicited from skilled problem solvers, indexed for the lessons they have to teach, and made available to learners in the form of case libraries can support a broader range of problem solving than any other strategy or tactic” (p. 66).

With respect to the use of wikis to promote professional growth through practitioner knowledge sharing, we looked at how wikis have been utilized

in such domains as law, medicine, business, and education. Google searches produced a wealth of examples in each of these domains. For example, a list of 69 wikis devoted to the medical domain was provided on David Rothman’s blog site at <http://davidrothman.net/list-of-medical-wikis/>. Robert Ambrogi’s (2007) “Legal Wikis Are Bound to Wow You” offered useful descriptions of how wikis are being employed to promote lawyer-to-lawyer collaboration. A business case study of wiki usage involving Dresdner Kleinwort Wasserstein, an investment bank with 6,000 employees across the world, was accessed at <http://learningwith-wikis.wikispaces.com/Empirisk+grundlag>. In education, the Educause web site offered wikis on a variety of topics in addition to over 130 wiki-related resources at <http://www.educause.edu/Resources/Browse/Wiki/18426>.

While we thought that a real world story-based wiki might have strong potential to serve its members as an ongoing professional development resource, questions immediately arose as to the extent to which practitioners would in fact adopt and actively utilize this resource to inform their practice. Even with privacy settings and story contributor instructions to change the names of actual parties and departments and to not disclose specific information that would reveal a company’s identity, it was unclear whether these working adults would readily construe an online wiki as a *safe* environment for frank and open discussion about personal workplace conflicts.

Slabon’s (2009) research involved face-to-face classroom story sharing and even in that environment, a number of learners expressed some initial concerns about openly sharing and discussing a personal workplace conflict with others. These initial concerns were however promptly allayed by the instructor and other class members who effectively modeled candid disclosure, which fostered a collective perception of a safe learning environment in the classroom for story sharing and discussion. We wondered if similar, or perhaps

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