

Chapter 5

Wikis as Open Educational Resources in Higher Education: Overcoming Challenges, Realizing Potential

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ABSTRACT

Open wikis such as WikiEducator (WE) (http://www.wikieducator.org/Main_Page) lie at the intersection of two significant applications of learning technology: open educational resources (OERs), which are freely available materials that can be shared, modified, adapted, and reused in diverse learning contexts; and collaborative authoring environments. This chapter presents a case study of the use of open wikis in a single online postgraduate course in the College of Education at Massey University (New Zealand). The case discussion includes an illustration of the use of open wiki technology at WikiEducator within the course from two different points of view: the use of wikis as a presentation tool by the course teaching staff; and as a production tool by learners seeking to create OERs as part of an instructional design project. The chapter also links the challenges and opportunities associated with these points of view to wider possibilities and pressures attending the terrain in which contemporary higher education is situated.

INTRODUCTION

The merit of wikis in education is a point of debate. Proponents hail them as potentially glamorous and exciting learning tools (Pan & Bonk, 2007), as providing a flexible, cost effective, and user friendly

interface for student interaction and collaboration (Schwartz, Clark, Cossarin, & Rudolph, 2004), as allowing productive brainstorming among learners (Challborn & Reimann, 2005), as enhancing students' collective cognition while enabling (and requiring) new pedagogical approaches by teachers (Lund & Smørdal, 2006), as drawing on the best features of print and orality (Ferris & Wilder,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-869-2.ch005

2006), as exhibiting affordances that promote community-focused enquiry (Wheeler, Yeomans, & Wheeler, 2008), and for their versatile applicability across disciplines as varied as financial security (O'Neill, Schuchardt, Pankow, Porter, Seiling, Branch, & Miller, 2007) and teachers' professional development (Foley & Chang, 2006). Detractors cite technical difficulties associated with installing and using some wikis (Challborn & Reimann, 2005), course design not necessarily maximizing the possible utility of wikis (Choy & Ng, 2007), an ambivalence about the lack of attribution of individual authorship of wiki content potentially reducing its quality (Kamel Boulos, Maramba, & Wheeler, 2006), and a recognition that good wiki design cannot compensate for poor pedagogical approaches to group-based assignments (Robertson, 2008).

This debate positions open wikis as potentially powerful tools for a variety of educational applications. However, as with all innovative uses of technology, there are a number of challenges associated with their use in context. This chapter examines the opportunities offered by the use of open wikis in higher education and the possible challenges faced in their use. The chapter is structured around the following sections:

- The organization's background, including the basis for openness and the link between openness and OERs
- Setting the scene, including wikis as OERs and a focus on WE
- The case description, highlighting course delivery and use of technology, the use of WE, and the rationale for using the technology in that way
- Two crucial current challenges facing the organization in maximizing WE's potential utility
- Solutions and recommendations, linking those two challenges to broader issues confronting contemporary higher education.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The chapter is based on a case study of the use of open wikis in a single online postgraduate course in the College of Education at Massey University (New Zealand). The case discussion includes an illustration of the use of open wiki technology at WE within the course from two different points of view. The first point of view is the use of wikis as a presentation tool by the course teaching staff. The discussion highlights the perceived advantages of this approach and anticipated challenges faced by faculty in the use of open wikis. This discussion also articulates issues for faculty in terms of their role in both teaching (for example, subject matter experts, learning facilitators, and learner support) and administration (for example, responding to institutional imperatives around the production of teaching materials and the management and administration of formal educational programs). The second point of view is the use of wikis as a production tool by learners seeking to create OERs as part of an instructional design project. The analysis identifies opportunities for the enrichment of learning experience provided by the use of open wikis as well as the challenges faced by teaching staff in supporting learning in this environment. Particular issues canvassed include the addition of authenticity to learning and explicit support for collaborative activity provided by features of the technology, to some extent contradicted by current limitations of that technology.

A Basis for Openness

The concept of 'openness' denotes a flexible approach which emphasizes freedom from barriers to the creation and use of particular resources. The openness referred to in the context of OERs is informed by old and new academic traditions in the sharing and application of knowledge for the common good; the provision of open education; the development of free open source software; and the connected, collaborative culture of net-

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