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Collaborating like Never Before: Reading and Writing through a Wiki

Students' comfort with online social networking makes the wiki a perfect forum for students to coauthor works and to respond to each other's writing.

Head down on a pile of mediocre papers, I overheard a student in my study hall say, "I wish Facebook wasn't blocked by the Internet filter; it would be nice to talk with some people who aren't in this study hall." Like a drowsy student called on during class, my head shot up from the desk, and I leapt to the computer. I thought to myself: *Social networking is exactly what Vygotsky was talking about; it just needed to be updated.* I knew that the school was not going to unblock Facebook or MySpace or any other popular social networking site, but there was a site that acted in a similar manner where people can chat and share ideas: a wiki.

That day I signed up for a wiki. The wiki was free and gave me all the tools I needed to create a virtual classroom where my students might feel more at home discussing ideas and helping each other write papers. Suzanne M. Miller discusses the importance of student-led discussion in the classroom when she writes, "Evidence from discussion-based literature classes suggests that students' discussion experiences shaped their dialogic thinking, characterized by both self-reflexive strategies and the intellectual disposition to use them" (309). Using a wiki to promote discussion and aid with writing was a long shot, but it was ludicrous enough to work with my hesitant writers. I tested my theory of using a wiki for social networking by having one class of students do their entire paper on the wiki while another class, of the same academic level, used more traditional methods of working through the writing process.

David A. Joliffe and Allison Harl found that college students are more likely to read a text if it is online. Joliffe and Harl go on to say, "Students are motivated by and engaged with reading, but the texts that they interact with most enthusiastically are technologically based" (612). I employed this idea with my high school students, thinking that their attitudes toward writing and technology are not that different from the college students Joliffe and Harl sampled in their study.

An Updated Writing Process: Wiki Brainstorming

Having already tried traditional methods of brainstorming with both classes, I took the "test class" (the class using the wiki) to the computer lab and asked the students to open their Web browser to the wiki. Most of the students had never heard of a wiki before, even though most of them use Wikipedia on a daily basis to find information on a variety of subjects. I set up the main page of the wiki to resemble a chat room: something that made the majority of students feel like they were sitting in their room at home talking to friends. I asked the students to type their paper ideas on the wiki page that I titled "The Brainstorm." The wiki took on a life of its own and conversations broke out all over the webpage. I sat at my computer and mediated some of the discussions. Next, I told students to list their ideas in one column and to write one question or concern that they have about that idea in a column next to it. Lastly, I directed the students to

comment on something that two of their classmates wrote. As simple as this may sound, it worked, and every student left the computer lab with a renewed vitality for their research paper.

When I thought about the progress that the students made in one class period using a wiki, online collaboration made complete sense. It made the students feel more comfortable with their writing. Think about how rare it is for people to hand a paper to a friend and ask them to read it and give them feedback. Now, think about how often students exchange ideas, music, pictures, and gossip online. On the wiki, students fell into their comfort zone and were more willing to share and contribute than the students who did not use the wiki (the "control class") were.

Revision

With the control class, I demonstrated a good revision session by modeling the process with a former student. I asked the control students to move into groups and read their papers aloud to each other. Students then had to comment on the reader's paper and offer the reader advice. Afterward, students exchanged papers with students in another group and completed a more detailed revision. The class exchanged papers a few times over two class periods. When students brought their drafts back on the third day, I noticed that many did not make any changes and some threw away the form that editors completed while revising the paper.

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I asked the class if they thought the methods of revision helped. Most students emitted a resounding "no." I then asked students why they did not find it useful to help their classmates improve their papers, and I received an array of answers:

- I did not have enough time to read the entire paper.
- I did not want to make negative comments and hurt the person's feelings.
- I did not want my friend to know that there were a ton of mistakes in her paper.

- Everyone else was finished and talking while I was still reading.
- I couldn't read the handwritten comments on my paper.
- The comments my peer editor left were not helpful.

The list went on, and there was no question that traditional revision did not help the majority of students, especially those who were struggling writers. Something needed to be changed to get more students to be satisfied with revising a peer's paper and with the revisions made to their own papers.

On the wiki, each student received a webpage for his or her paper. Other students could then go to that page to read, edit, and comment on that paper. I required students to revise two of their peers' papers and to use their confidential student ID when commenting, so they could offer suggestions anonymously. I tried to choose the groups based on writing ability, as I did with the control class. My theory was that in the high school environment, anonymity is the key to a solid revision. I encouraged students to revise more than the assigned papers, and I offered them a reward for every additional paper that they revised. Students altered the font color of the sections that they edited so that the author of the paper knew which sections to pay attention to. I pushed students to comment on the papers that they edited, which in turn encouraged the author of the paper to respond to the editors and begin a conversation. Students frequently asked their editors questions such as, "I really don't understand what you are asking me to do with my intro; can you elaborate?" Anonymously, students had whole conversations on the wiki that eliminated the fear of upsetting a friend by suggesting that that friend rewrite large portions of his or her paper.

I gave the students in the control and test classes two days to complete the revisions. I monitored the wiki conversations and the revisions that students made, making sure that everything that appeared on the wiki was school appropriate. On a wiki, all edits are documented in the history of the webpage, which teachers can have emailed to their account after every edit. I noticed that students were making changes in the evenings as well as

during class. This observation was significant because before I employed the "wiki writing process," very few students were working on their papers outside class. In addition, the authors of the papers were taking the advice given to them by their peer-editors and making the changes throughout the course of the day. The peer-editor would then visit the page later in the day and comment on the changes the author made either by suggesting another change or commending the author on an adjustment well done.

Students were receiving quality feedback on their writing and they were actually putting more effort into what appeared on the webpage. The difference in quality of the drafts coming from the test class compared to the control class was astounding, and their grades reflected it.

Audience

Although the control class's papers passed through the eyes of a few classmates and the teacher, that audience was not significant enough to make the assignment seem worthwhile to the students. During creative writing units I posted their stories on the wall of the classroom, but when it came to posting assignments such as a research paper, the students knew that nobody was going to stop and read a research paper in between classes; therefore, motivation in regards to audience was limited. I needed to find a more constructive way for the students' writing to be seen, critiqued, and enjoyed by their peers. It was not realistic to assign students a peer's paper to take home and revise for homework because sometimes they would forget to bring it back and the author would have nothing to work on in class the next day. Other times peer-editors would not have time to talk about the comments that were made on their papers because their partners were too busy making the suggested changes; this process left many questions unanswered and disrupted the opportunity for real conversation between group members.

Students in the test class were able to revise on their own time, and every student's paper was always available online. Every paper received attention from several students in class and even from students in other classes! I noticed comments appearing on students' papers from their peers in other classes and from other grades. Inspired by this spontaneous participation from students not in the class, I asked the other teachers in my department to invite their students to read and comment on the papers on my class's wiki. I then took that a step further and contacted some colleagues from around the state asking them the same thing. Soon my students' wiki pages were flooded with comments and revisions from students and teachers throughout the commonwealth! Immediately my test class became excited about their writing and could not stop talking

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about all the people who were reading their papers and helping them. This motivated the students to post their best work because it would be read by so many people across the World Wide Web and not just a few people in their classroom.

Ownership

In a presentation that Jeff Wilhelm gave to the Pennsylvania Council of Teachers of English and Language Arts, he highlighted the importance of ownership in writing. Wilhelm said that students are more likely to put effort into an assignment if the assignment elicits meaning and if the student can make a connection with past experiences. Students in the test class made a connection to the work that was being done on the wiki because it mirrored the social networking sites they use all the time in their lives outside school. Feeling comfortable in this new writing environment, the students also received instant feedback, which Wilhelm pointed out is another necessary component to getting students motivated to perform a task in the classroom. When students take pride in their work, they work harder to make that assignment as good as it can possibly be.

Traditional methods of teaching writing work with some students, but I noticed in my study of the wiki writing process that the majority of the students in the wiki class, whether they had Internet access at home or not, put more effort into their

writing as a whole. Students in the test class spent one week working on and finalizing their research papers; the control class took nearly three weeks to finish their papers and did not have the positive results that the test class had. To ensure that the students in the test class were not simply better writers and more enthusiastic students, I switched the classes for the next writing assignment and the results were the same. The students using the wiki finished their papers before the students not using the wiki, and the quality of writing from the students who worked with the wiki was much higher than the students not using the wiki writing process.

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The Outcome

I took the idea of the wiki one step further and used it in a similar fashion with a creative writing unit. Students did the same types of revisions, but I encouraged them to incorporate background colors and images into their papers. This form of wiki writing made the students put even more effort into their papers because their creativity was not limited to the content of their story; they branched out and incorporated visual stimulants into their writing. It seemed that the combination of creative writing and freedom of expression through art opened facets to the students' individuality that were never available to them before. The creative writing wiki took on a form of its own, almost like a picture book, but with moving animations and sounds. I had to extend the creative writing unit by one week because the students became so entranced with their writing. Each student's wiki page resembled a work of art.

Using the wiki for writing made the task less daunting and more reachable. The students now have a renewed vitality when it comes to writing and some have even started their own wiki writing groups. I have since incorporated this idea in my class as well, and I ask students to choose what sort of story they want to write, which helps them decide which wiki to join: comedy, suspense, drama, horror, etc.
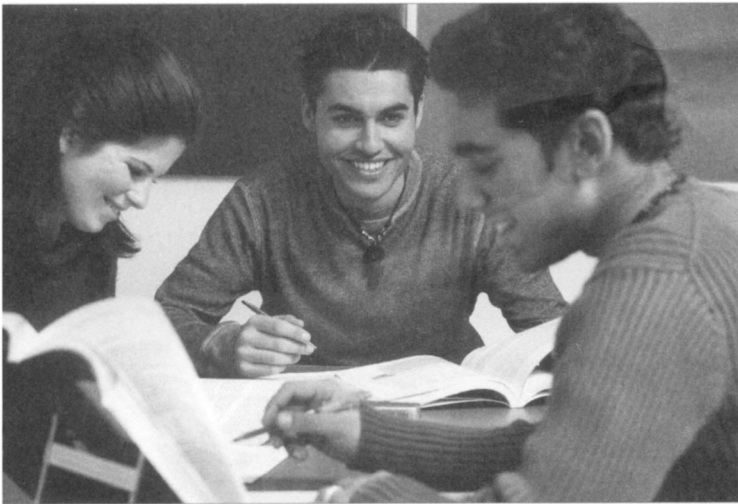
Other Uses for the Wiki: Webquests

Webquests are not new to the field, but coupling webquests with wikis opens many doors to student collaboration in the 21st-century classroom. Since the wiki worked so well for students during a writing unit, I wondered how well it would work for various reading units. I designed a WebQuest, which led my students into literary discussions and helped them to conduct research on important topics in the novels that they were reading. I assigned students to different teams and gave each team a list of tasks to complete. I used this tool to teach the theme of anti-utopia while working with the novels *The Giver* by Lois Lowry and *Anthem* by Ayn Rand. I instructed the students to create their own society based on the discrepancies of the societies discussed in the two novels. Each team's task was related to creating the ideal society: team one had to create the education system; team two had to develop manufacturing and trade; and so on. There were five teams in all, and I provided links to various websites that would help each team complete its task.

Normally a WebQuest is designed to promote group collaboration while doing research, but I also had each team report back to a page on the wiki. On the wiki, students had to collaborate not only with their four-person team but with classmates on other teams as well. This strategy tested students' understanding of both the book and the research that each group did. Each team had its own wiki page, where team members discussed research tactics and findings. Students made suggestions to other teams and asked other teams questions about designing the society. The main page of the wiki was the only page that was assessed, unless students created a separate wiki page and linked it to the main page. The main page was a class effort to create a homepage for a country designed and developed by the combined efforts of all five teams. Each team brought to the main page what it learned from the students' research and discussions on their team page.

Final Verdict

I found the students put more effort into their writing than they typically did before using the wiki. Students received more constructive criticism from

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Online collaboration is a quick and simple method to motivate learning, and it allows students who are typically hesitant when chiming in on class discussions to have a voice and have their opinions heard. Social networking increases motivation and inspires learning for all levels of academia. Updating the idea of social networking through use of a wiki improves understanding of strategies and concepts in both reading and writing. When I think back to my college class that motivated me to become an English teacher, I remember the extensive collaboration and how much fun it was to work with my peers in a safe and comfortable environment, and that is exactly what a wiki can do for today's learners. **EJ**

Works Cited

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their classmates and from students across the state. The reading wiki, for which students created a homepage for their own society, integrated concepts from the novel with student-conducted research and application. While using the wiki, students' understanding of the text was more complete, and a higher percentage of students passed exams related to the book than in previous classes.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION   Lisa Storm Fink and Christy Simon, RWT

WebQuests lead students into literary discussions and help them conduct research. "Gaining Background for the Graphic Novel *Persepolis*: A WebQuest on Iran" includes a WebQuest in which groups of students research information about the revolution in Iran and create a technology-enhanced presentation to share with classmates. The research helps students more fully appreciate the experiences of Marjane, the main character of *Persepolis*.
http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=1063