Technology Forum

Wikis
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What it is
A wiki is a webpage or website that allows collaborative editing. A wiki invites participants to take part in the creation of the site content. Typically edits are tracked and a history of the contributions can be viewed.

The word wiki comes from the Hawaiian word for quick, which is descriptive of the ease of creating and editing content within a wiki site. Wiki sites foster open and collaborative group participation in a project. Wikipedia is a well known example of a wiki in which a community of editors revises and refines content for collectively accepted encyclopedia entries.

Who produced it
In 1994 Ward Cunningham, a computer programmer from Oregon, developed the first wiki, which he called WikiWikiWeb. Although there are many companies that offer free and licensed wiki site hosting with a range of features, a wiki site is more of a concept than a product.

Why it matters
As an active learning tool, wikis offer a means to help students develop writing, research, and critical and analytical thinking skills. Wikis can be a forum for class discussion and student collaboration. Groups of students can also use wikis to collect and document information for a research project that can aid their reporting or presentation of a topic.

How it can be used
JHU Classics faculty member Hérica Valladares decided to use a Wiki for students to create an online exhibition for her course The Authority of Ruins offered in the spring of 2010. She used Google Sites:

http://sites.google.com. The project can be viewed here: https://sites.google.com/site/theauthorityofruins.

The seminar was structured around the close study of antiquarian books in the Eisenhower Rare Book Collection. For their final project, instead of producing individual research papers, the students in this class were asked to create an online exhibition based on these early modern publications. After they were divided into teams, the students' first task was to select images and themes for this exhibition. They were also responsible for writing informational captions and short interpretive "wall texts" to accompany the selected images. Curating and mounting an exhibition is, by nature, a collaborative and interactive endeavor. Although each member of the seminar was required to complete discrete, individual assignments in preparation for the final project, they were also expected to communicate with one another to produce a coherent exhibition. A wiki was the perfect medium for bringing this project to fruition.

After considering different options, the students and Professor Valladares, in consultation with Macie Hall in the CER, decided that Google Sites was the best platform for this project. It is extremely user-friendly; it allows for easy communication both among the students and between the students and Professor Valladares; and, last but not least, it allows students to share their work with a larger public. This last aspect of Google Sites was extremely important to the students. They were keen to make their online exhibition publicly accessible, and this motivated them to behave professionally and produce "publishable" texts.

As a whole, Professor Valladares felt that the experience of creating an online exhibition was extremely productive pedagogically.

The students not only learned about the history and practice of antiquarianism in Italy, but also had a chance to work directly with primary source materials. Putting together an online exhibition also made them aware of the process involved in producing and disseminating accurate information on the Internet. Moreover, this experience gave them a clearer sense of the different stages of academic research, from analyzing primary sources to producing an informative, engaging scholarly text. The use of digital technology in this class also invested these "dusty, old" books with an aura of contemporaneity. Transforming these early modern volumes into the subject of an online project helped create a bridge between what might be perceived an arcane subject, and students were eager to make classical antiquity accessible to a present-day, non-academic audience.

How to get started

- Have a clear objective for use.
- Be specific about requirements. Have a grading strategy or rubric.
- Set up a clear timeline for the different stages of developing and completing a wiki (e.g., creation of content, selection of images, editing the text, etc.).
- Set rules for engagement: who can edit, what can be edited, what is acceptable and unacceptable. If groups are being created and a single wiki is used, students should be clear about the boundaries for each team – they should know which pages they can and cannot edit.
- Give specific assignments, topics.
- Students need to feel that they have "ownership" in the wiki; it is important to allow flexibility. However, it may be a good idea to set up a navigational structure in advance, depending on the nature of the assignment and whether or not there are several groups of students using the same wiki.

Other Thoughts

For the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences and the Whiting School of Engineering, course web sites in Blackboard (a course management system) are provided for all full time courses. The wiki application is one of many Blackboard features.

Advantages of Blackboard Wikis over commercially available online tools:
- Copyright concerns are reduced.
- Content is secured.
- Content is managed within JHU.
- Content is not public.
- Disadvantages of Blackboard Wikis over commercially available online tools:
- Content is not viewable by the public.
- Content is available only to students who are registered in the course. Guest accounts can be created to meet certain needs.
- Configuration of appearance is limited.
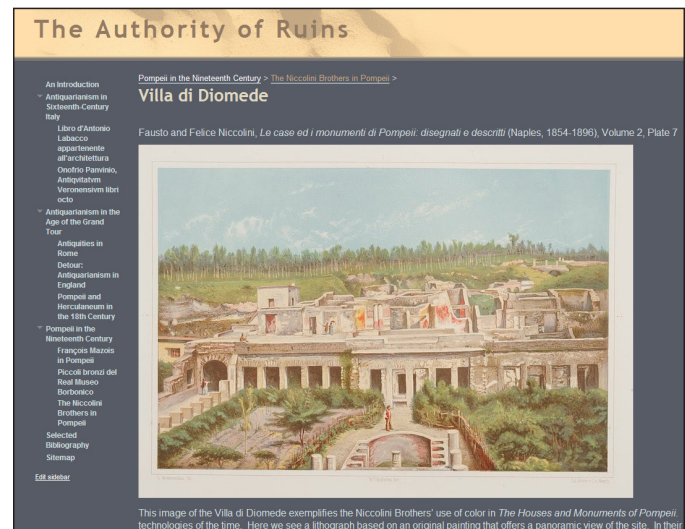
Screenshot of a Professor Valladares' class wiki

Additional Resources

Free Wikis (*Read the terms of use carefully. Some applications will have ads unless you pay for an account without them)*:
- Google Sites: http://sites.google.com (Google apps are ad free by default)
- Wikidot: http://www.wikidot.com
- Wikia: http://www.wikia.com
- Wiki Spaces: http://www.wikispaces.com (see Higher Education Plan)

Authors' Background

Hérica Valladares,
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Hérica Valladares (herica@jhu.edu) is assistant professor of Classics at Johns Hopkins University. Trained both as a classicist and an art historian, she teaches several interdisciplinary courses on Pompeii, early modern antiquarianism, Roman landscape art and the history of archaeology. She is especially interested in the role of digital technology in Classics pedagogy.

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Macie Hall (macie.hall@jhu.edu) has provided instructional technology support to faculty since 1987. She is interested in visual literacy, effective presentation techniques, and Web 2.0 technologies.