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This commentary reports on the results of a pedagogical experiment in which second year feature writing students at RMIT University were asked to create Wikis of their favourite Australian feature writers. The implementation of the Wikis moved the teaching away from being centred on the lecturer to the students, thus allowing them greater flexibility in their collaborative work regardless of their physical location or their ability to be available at a particular time. This commentary recognises some of the challenges in setting such an activity and suggests ways the Wikis could be used in other universities.

Introduction

Feature writing is one of the most popular courses among journalism students at the RMIT University. Students continually express their desire to attend the feature writing class, but complain of clashes with other subjects that require off-campus "live" interviews. The challenge in teaching feature writing is two-fold: to ensure that students who are unable to attend classes at set times can still learn the generic skills required in feature writing; that they are still able to simultaneously interact, build knowledge and share ideas with their classmates and lecturers despite the constraints of time-tabling and location.

This commentary reports on a pedagogical experiment with using Wikis to address these challenges in teaching feature writing to second year journalism students at RMIT University. This experiment, conducted in 2008, was aimed at shifting the focus from teacher-centred learning to self-directed, exploratory and collaborative student-centred learning. This approach may prompt journalism educators to capitalise on Web 2.0 technologies in teaching students who are becoming increasingly tech-savvy.

For the purpose of this commentary, I defer to O'Reilly's (2005) classification of web technologies, which lists Wikis as Web 2.0.

Web 1.0		Web 2.0
DoubleClick	⟶	Google AdSense
Ofoto	⟶	Flickr
Akamai	⟶	BitTorrent
mp3.com	⟶	Napster
Britannica Online	⟶	Wikipedia
personal websites	⟶	blogging
evite	⟶	upcoming.org and EVDB
domain name speculation	⟶	search engine optimization
page views	⟶	cost per click
screen scraping	⟶	web services
publishing	⟶	participation
content management systems	⟶	wikis
directories (taxonomy)	⟶	tagging ("folksonomy")
stickiness	⟶	syndication

Non-journalism educators have for some time embraced Wikis to augment their teaching subjects such as mathematics and English. At the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, IT staff had identified different ways that academics were using Wikis: for course planning, class communications, collaborative content management, project development, and as a site for collaborative writing (Bruns and

Humphreys 2005: 28). Wikis appear to be most popular as a learning tool for courses where the output is written text.

At the State University of New York, for example, Wikis were used for a Collaborative Writing Project for "students to work together to interpret texts, author articles and essays, share ideas, and improve their research and communication skills collectively" (Anderson 2007). While there was concern that Wikis could lower the standard of English language expression in classrooms, US academic McPherson said "far from being the demise of the written word … Wikis may very well be the literacy technology that helps many of our current students learn to be effective writers" (McPherson 2006).

Figure 1: Example of the students' Wiki page

Pedagogical reasoning

This pedagogical experiment draws on the work of social constructivists who argue that deep conceptual understanding can come from giving students challenging problems that help them acquire new skills and knowledge through collaborative work in small groups where they would take responsibility for their own learning (Schneider 2003: 4). In other words, students learn more effectively by doing. However, Schneider et al. note that students do not learn simply because they are "put together" in class, but because they have to work together on an activity that triggers specific learning mechanism. They argue that the "teacher has to respect a harmonic equilibrium between the freedom, which is necessary for intellectual development and motivation on one hand and certain guiding principles on the other" (Schneider et.al. 2003: 5).

A key part of structured socio–constructivist teaching involves breaking the problem into parts that students are able to manage. I adopted this approach in the Wiki experiment by scaffolding the project into sections: research and writing, verbal presentation (for student and staff feedback), comments (further staff feedback), and self–reflection of what were learned in the process. This is where, as Schneider et. al. note, the teacher acts as a facilitator, manager and orchestrator of the students' learning.

RMIT's digital natives

In 2008 all journalism students at RMIT (around 140) were surveyed about their reading habits, learning preferences and use of technology. The survey was conducted at the same time the second year students were studying feature writing. The responses showed that while the students reported that they were mostly confident users of the internet and mobile technologies, they were not spending vast amounts of time online. For these reasons it was considered pedagogically appropriate to set an online assessment where they would be compelled to access the internet.

The RMIT cohort of journalism students reported a high frequency of news consumption, particularly from newspapers delivered to campus but also increasingly online news. The students also showed a strong interest in reading news magazines and magazines in general.

The students reported a high rate of magazine readership. Half the students (49%) said they read the *Good Weekend Magazine* and another 46% the *Sunday Life Magazine* in *The Sunday Age*; 28% the *Sunday* magazine in the *Sunday Herald Sun*; and 15% *The Australian Magazine* in *The Weekend Australian*.

Creating writer Wikis

In the first tutorial, students were asked to review feature articles from news magazines (provided in hard copy during the tutorials). Most of the quality news feature articles in Australia's magazines were not available online. I collected the magazines from *The Australian, The Age, The Sunday Age, The Monthly* and *The Financial Review* over six months to create an appropriately large number of current magazines for study by the cohort of 70 students. The students were asked to take the magazines home to read and report back the following week.

In the second week, students were asked to find a partner who wanted to work on studying the same writer. At this time the students were taken through class discussions dealing with online etiquette and language, collaborative learning processes and teamwork skills. No time was devoted to teaching technical skills as it was considered the students could use the online help provided by RMIT.

There were three parts to the writer Wiki assessment: creation of the Wiki; in–class presentation of the Wiki; and individual comments on other Wikis. The assessments were worth 40 per cent of the course marks.

Students were first asked to work with a partner to analyse at least two pieces of a writer's work and over a period of several weeks to create the Wiki, which they would present with their partner in their tutorial class.

Class presentation of the Wiki was created as an assessable item to ensure each student was exposed to different writers. The students used a projector to display their Wikis as they spoke about their chosen writers and their work. They also took questions from their classmates about the authors. The tutor's role at this stage was seen more as a facilitator asking the presenting students questions to help them draw links from the work.

Each student was further required to write a commentary about six of the writer Wikis constructed by other feature writing students. This was assessable to ensure the students interacted with the work of different writers, and that they had looked closely at the structure of different styles of feature writing.

I created the Wikis by using RMIT's e-learning system, the Learning Hub. Each Wiki was called by the name of the writer concerned. Each pair of students was allocated an empty shell. They were not given a template to follow and were encouraged to be as creative as they liked. Only students enrolled in feature writing could read and comment on the Wikis. Editing of the Wikis was restricted to the two students assigned to the writer. However, all feature writing students could contribute comments, regardless of which tutorial group they attended.

I decided to use RMIT's Learning Hub rather than an external blog provider, such as Word Press, to ensure the data was stored within the university's control, and that the students did not have difficulties with copyright issues (as the work of the writers which was posted on this site fell under the domain of 'educational use').

As the Wikis could only be viewed by students enrolled in the subject, it also allowed the students a certain freedom of expression so that they could critique the writers' work without fear of causing offence to a writer in a relatively small industry. Thirdly, the students had information technology support, if they required it, to create their Wikis.

No students reported any difficulty in writing the analytical text for the Wikis. However, the use of multi-media and links in the Wikis varied extensively, mostly dependent on the students' skills or interests in multi-media platforms. The students were not assessed on the visual presentation of the Wikis because time had not been devoted in class to the teaching of visual presentation or multi-media skills. Thus, students essentially focused on the text and contents rather than the design aspects. However, the students quickly became aware that the more popular Wikis were those that had employed some visual design and multi-media elements.

Why Wikis?

Wikis are an easy-to-use collaborative tool readily available for editing at anywhere and anytime as long as students have access to a computer connected to the web. I considered Wikis to provide the easiest avenue for students to work collaboratively without any time or location restrictions.

For busy second year students working on other hands-on projects it meant that one student could be working at home at 1am while the other could be working at university at 2pm and their work could still be collaborative. Each student could reorganize paragraphs or change data, without being stuck to the date-entry structure used in blogs.

There was also an electronic record of who had done what in the project. So, unlike some paper-based projects it could clearly be seen by the assessors and students who had input the data.

Students' feedback on the Wikis

Feedback from students to learning via the on-line Wiki environment was overwhelmingly positive.

> "It forces us to take the time to consider a range of different writing styles and look at why these writers are so successful in what they do, making it impossible not to take some of their techniques on board as inspiration and hopefully use them in our own writing."

Understandably, the standard of the Wikis varied greatly. A small number appeared to be perfunctory reports, which could just as well be done on paper. However, most were considered pieces of analytical work presented in fun and creative ways using all the advantages of the online-environment including hyperlinks, video and audio.

> "I found myself getting more engaged with the task as the weeks went by, and where possible, I did the comments as people presented, so it was all fresh in my mind. I enjoyed commenting and put thought and effort into all my comments."

The biggest issue for students was the choice of a writer for study. Even with the magazines I provided, there were some initial problems with students being able to identify the writers. With the exception of opinion writers, such as Andrew Bolt and Catherine Deveney, the students knew surprisingly few journalists by name. One student said:

> "I do read the paper frequently, but almost never look to see who has written the articles."

Time poor students

One of the anticipated benefits of the Wiki project was giving students access to on-line articles that were worthy of taking time to read. A student commented:

> "This Wiki database allowed me access to some of the best feature writers in Australia all in one place, and compare their different styles."

Many students found that they were introduced to new writers.

> "My first inclination was to be drawn to authors with whom I was familiar … but then I had exhausted the writers I knew, and was forced to – as was

obviously the aim of this exercise – read articles and authors I hadn't previously heard of."

Problems raised by students

Not all the students liked writing in an area that could be accessed by their classmates. Three, out of a group of 61, said they were intimidated by the process.

"I only posted a couple because I thought they were inadequate – I read the standard of others and felt a little intimidated."

"I was a little apprehensive with some of the writing to be publicly displayed."

"I am still improving and trying to establish my writing style so I want to practise some more before other people read it."

Although these concerns should not be ignored, it could be argued that journalism students need to be exposed to writing for a wider audience. The Wikis provided this experience in the safe learning environment of a closed university computer system.

Two students also reported finding difficulty with the third piece of the assessment – writing comments on the Wikis.

"The main problem with my comments was that I often meandered from analysis to praise when discussing an author's style."

"I didn't find this exercise particularly stimulating. I know it is to encourage involvement in writing, but I already read plenty and found referencing peers challenging."

General discussion

Using the Wikis to assist the teaching of feature writing skills was clearly a success, if measured only by the crudest possible of measures, the student satisfaction survey (100%). The 70 students enrolled in feature writing actively participated, and only three expressed some concern about their writing being publicly displayed.

However the students' participation was actively enforced by the allocation of assessment marks to both the production of the Wikis and the commentaries provided on each of them. Some of the students' comments highlighted that they would not have read the Wikis created by other students if marks had not been allocated to this task.

I believe the usability of the Wikis was a factor in the students' satisfaction with the feature writing subject. They did not need to attend all classes, could still learn the skills required, and were able to collaborate with their colleagues online. The assessments did not replace face-to-face teaching but made it easier for the students. Further, less technical students were able to access assistance from the university help desk and were not simply told to "Google the answer" when they had a technical problem.

Both the lecturer and some of the students expressed concern at the end of the semester that the work was not destined to be published on a wider scale. Some of the work was of such a high quality, such as the interview with Walkley award winner Hedley Thomas, that it could easily have been published for the edification of journalism students more broadly.

Interestingly there appeared to be a high regard for the content of the Wikis, with no students expressing any concern about the quality of their peers' work in relation to what appeared in the Wikis. However, a quick glance by a professional editor would easily uncover simple errors of grammar and spelling that should have been picked up by the students. However, a limited number of "eyeballs" on each page meant that factual or stylistic errors could go uncorrected.

One of the advantages of the Wikis being published "in house" was that concerns about copyright infringement were not onerous. However, it does seem important that the student cohort have a better understanding of what is, and isn't permissible to publish.

Other research has uncovered problems with the use of Wikis, which include: students being too polite to interfere with other students' work, students not wanting their own work to be interfered with by others, and reluctance to have their work in the public domain unless it was perfect (Bruns and Humphreys 2005: 29).

Conclusion

Journalism academics, even with minimal technical skills, can use Wikis effectively if they follow a few key processes. Students must have the technical skills to participate and/or assistance to do so. This does not need to be extensive and is most often available via internal university information technology systems.

Participation needs to be linked to assessment because few students will create knowledge for the pure pleasure of it. Importantly, time must be devoted to setting ground rules for the operation of the Wikis (who can change what, when and how) so that potential teamwork problems do not arise. Students should ideally be treated as an equal partner in the learning process and told the reason for the assessment so they can draw the appropriate links to their work. Changing assessments can be a time consuming process for academic staff, but this has to be weighed against the advantages.

The writer Wikis had three tangible results: the Wikis better engaged the majority of students in reading the work of good Australian journalists; the assessment resulted in a written record of the work of some of Australia's best and current feature writers that could be recycled for the next year; and the students reported an improvement in their own writing skills as a result of the project.

One of the unexpected outcomes was the creation of knowledge by the students and their exposure of local writers whom I had not previously considered. It was instructive to read what the students had produced from their reading of the work by well-known Australian feature writers.

There were a number of downsides to the project. The students created copious narratives – all of which had to be read and assessed by teaching staff. Some created Wikis of more than 3,000 words. Some also attracted up to 30 comments, which ran up to 150 words each.

It is very easy in this kind of project, and if dealing with a larger number of students, to create an excessive workload for those involved in teaching and assessing of the project. Guidelines need to be set early about who is doing what and exactly what is being assessed. It should be made clear that there should not be a requirement for the lecturer to read all of the work presented on the Wikis.

Significantly, this project cannot be replicated in every university without some requisite changes. There is a relatively small pool of quality feature writers in Australia who are working in an ever-decreasing newspaper feature market. It became clear early in the process, when one newsroom complained of being 'inundated' by student requests, that it is important to rein in the students from badgering some of the better known writers with requests for interviews. One way of stopping this would be to encourage students, who have received original material from a journalist, to put the material into the public domain by either updating Wikipedia on the web or create their own webpage on that writer.

The pool of quality feature writers in Australia should also be extended to include writers from the Pacific and South East Asia, in recognition of Australia's place in the region and the very high standard of some hard working journalists in neighbouring nations. This may well appeal to international students and to students who are hoping for careers as foreign correspondents.

While the basic skills required in journalism have not changed much over the years, educators should be encouraged to embrace the technology, which helps make it easier for students to learn. Harnessing new technologies can empower lecturers give students greater flexibility, creativity, and ultimately improve the teaching and learning experience for both lecturer and students.

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