



LEARNING TO TEACH ONLINE



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CASE STUDY

Using wikis for student collaboration

Featuring: Debbi Weaver & Dr Craig McIntosh, Swinburne University of Technology

- Context** - An online class taught through [Open University Australia](#), including around 600 online distance students and 100 on-campus students
- Description** - A Social Sciences online academic study skills class for students returning to study
- 10 to 12 tutors were involved in teaching smaller cohorts of students
- Technology** - Wikis within the [Blackboard](#) learning management system (LMS)

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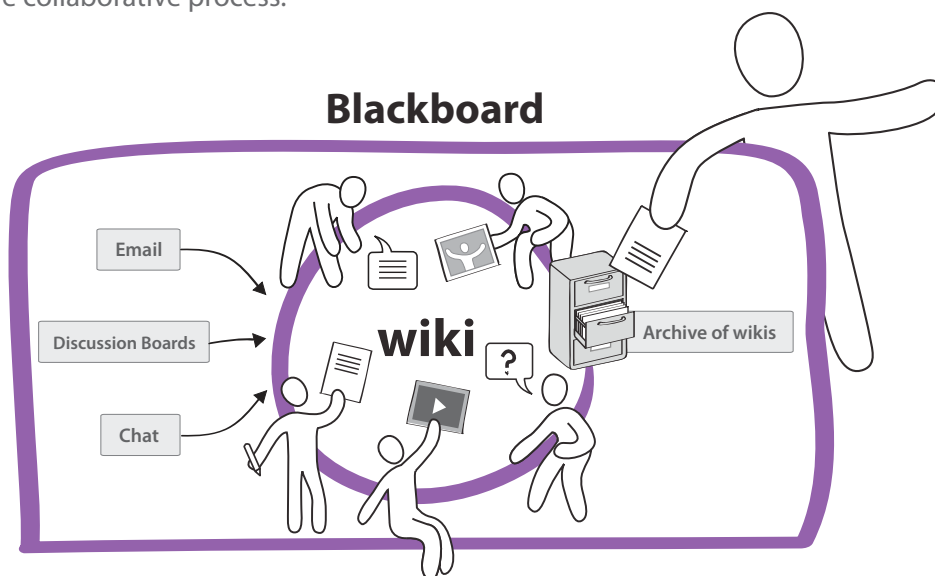


Aims and overview

This case study examines how the use of a wiki can help a teacher effectively facilitate student collaboration with on-campus or distance students. It discusses the importance of providing technical support for both staff and students, planning clearly defined collaborative learning activities, and designing relevant assessment strategies to help support students develop effective teamwork skills.

What is a wiki?

A wiki is a collaborative tool that allows many people to create and edit online documents or web pages without specialist programming knowledge. Many different media types can be embedded into a wiki page, such as text, images, video and [RSS feeds](#). The person who sets up a wiki can offer other users password protected access, restricting the number of people able to edit or create content. As each edit is documented, it is possible to see a chronological list of changes to content, and even to revert pages back to previous versions. Many wikis also contain a range of other collaborative tools such as message boards to help facilitate the collaborative process.



Craig McIntosh uses wikis within the Blackboard LMS to help distance and on-campus students develop fundamental academic and team building skills. Students around the country work together in team based assessment tasks within their own wiki space. This process is supported by online chat rooms, discussion forums and a range of technical support resources.

Examples of wikis

There are a range of open web wikis available that are free to use, or those where access is limited to a certain groups of users, and are part of a larger Learning Management System (LMS):

- [Wikipedia](http://www.wikipedia.org) www.wikipedia.org (an open source public encyclopaedia)
- [Wetpaint](http://www.wetpaintcentral.com) www.wetpaintcentral.com (open source wikis)
- [Moodle](http://www.moodle.com) www.moodle.com (open source LMS containing a wiki feature)
- [Blackboard](http://www.blackboard.com) www.blackboard.com (proprietary LMS containing a wiki feature)

Case study outcomes quick summary

Key benefits

- *Students don't have to spend a long time learning how to use the technology, as the main functions mirrored those of the more familiar word processor. Only very basic formatting skills are required to use a wiki*
- *Students can work asynchronously, meaning that not all students need to be present at one time or place to effectively contribute to group work*
- *Teachers can easily see which students are doing the work in a group assignment because every addition or change is documented, making assessment more fair and easier for the teacher*
- *Similarly, the quality of the students' contributions can easily be monitored*
- *Students develop critical analysis skill and the ability to constructively criticise the work of their peers*
- *Many students reported that the results of the group assignments surpassed what they could have achieved on an individual basis*
- *Students were positive about the levels of support and collegiality they received from other students as part of the process. They also felt like they got to know their peers well in most cases*
- *In the beginning, many students expressed doubt about their ability to work in a team online, however by the end of the process many were surprised and impressed with what they had achieved collectively*

Key issues to consider

- *Students may not know how to work effectively in groups. Therefore support and guidance is required*
- *There must be provision of sufficient technical support to enable students to build confidence in using the wikis effectively*
- *The first iteration of the class took a significant investment of time to develop the structure, assessment and to create the technical support resources for students, however this meant that subsequent iterations of the class required minimal set up time*

Motivation for adopting an online teaching strategy

The class coordinator, Dr Craig McIntosh, was aware of the increase in demand from employers for effective collaboration and teamwork skills in graduates. While on-campus students were receiving a good level of support and training in developing these skills, the large number of online students at the university did not have the same opportunities to work with their peers to develop this skill set. Craig approached academic developer Debbi Weaver to help him create an online version of an existing face-to-face class designed to teach students effective collaboration skills. Debbi and Craig found that the functionality of wikis offered the opportunity to develop new online learning and teaching strategies that could provide equitable levels of support, feedback and learning opportunities for both on and off-campus students. The class is designed to help students develop their academic skills and collaboration capabilities, and has now run for four years.

Planning

Wikis were identified as a potentially effective way to facilitate such a class for distance students, despite the fact that none of the teaching team had any prior experience of using this technology. Therefore, the team found it vitally important to find and read current literature about how wikis were being used successfully by other teachers. This initial research formed the basis of their own approach:

- *Teachers and tutors were all involved in determining the assessment structure for the class. Regular meetings took place so that all tutors had the chance to be a part of the formative process, and could develop a thorough understanding how the assessment could work*
- *This also provided an important feedback loop during the semester, as all tutors offered feedback and observations about how their own students were progressing*
- *As wikis are relatively simple to use, the lack of previous experience of using wikis did not prove to be a barrier for the teachers. All were able to easily improve their technical skills by using the wikis while teaching*
- *Since developing effective teamwork skills was a primary objective of the class, 15% of the total mark for the class was allocated to contribution to teamwork, and tutors helped develop the following rubric to help them assess equitably across different tutorial groups.*

Assessment rubric for individual teamwork component*

Marks (15)	Assessment Criteria
15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evidence of collaboration with fellow group members - Integrates individual contributions into a cohesive whole - Attempts to include group members at all stages - Acknowledges and welcomes contributions from fellow group members
12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evidence of collaboration with fellow group members - Attempts at integrating individual contributions
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evidence of a solid individual contribution, but little attempt at integrating work of others into a cohesive whole - Minimal attempt at collaboration or involvement with fellow group members
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Late ('last minute') individual contribution - No evidence of collaboration with fellow group members
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Late joining into Wiki, contribution too late to allow fellow group members to attempt integration or editing - No evidence of collaboration
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Minimal individual contribution, and contribution of poor standard
0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No attempt to participate in group project
<p><i>Note: These marks and criteria are a guide only - markers may award additional marks in some circumstances (for example where an individual has had no opportunity to collaborate with others) or subtract marks (for example, where an individual has had a disruptive or negative impact on the functioning of a group).</i></p>	

*Assessment rubric provided courtesy of Debbi Weaver and Dr Craig McIntosh, Swburne University of Technology.

Teaching

Since the class contains a large number of students, there is usually a team of 10 to 12 tutors involved in teaching all of the class groups. The following points were found to be key to the success of the class:

- *It was made clear to students that academic content and skills were of primary importance in their wiki projects (research, referencing and writing quality). Those students with less advanced technical skills would not be disadvantaged if they could not use the advanced features of the wiki as well as other teams*
- *Managing student expectations in this regard became an important component of teaching using wikis*
- *It was important to provide additional methods of communication for the students working together in the wiki, so features of Blackboard such as groups lists, [asynchronous](#) discussion forums and [synchronous](#) chat rooms were utilised*
- *If students meet online to discuss the project in a different technology such as [Skype](#) or [Messenger](#), they were asked to keep notes and post a summary of the discussion in the wiki's discussion board to help the teacher track the development process, and to keep a record of the collaborative process for the team*
- *Technical support and guidance was provided for students in the form of video demonstrations, how to style documents and links to other example wikis. The latter proved to be valuable in helping students gain an understanding of what was expected of them when developing their own wiki*
- *A discussion thread within Blackboard was maintained to elicit student feedback throughout the semester about the wiki, the assessment structure and teaching strategies surrounding collaborative work.*

Issues to consider and suggestions for dealing with them

Debbi and Craig encountered the following issues within the class, and offered the following strategies to help overcome them:

- **Issue**
Choosing student groups for collaboration initially proved to be challenging. Some students were highly motivated and others were not, which could cause delays, resentment and dysfunction

Suggested strategy

The group work component of the class did not begin until after some initial student discussion and participation in online chat sessions, and the submission of the first individual assessment. Active and motivated students who participated in the early discussions were offered the chance to form groups amongst themselves, having already gotten to know one another to some degree. Next, those students who had not participated in the initial discussions, but had submitted their individual assessment task on time were sorted into groups by their teachers if they had not already joined a group in the first stage of the class. All remaining students were then sorted into groups. This strategy allowed motivated and engaged students to be placed together, and seemed to reduce the amount of conflict and dysfunction during the semester.

- **Issue**

Misunderstandings can occur in text-based team discussions when visual cues such as facial expressions and body language are not present

Suggested strategy

Students receive guidance about how to effectively communicate online in a text based environment early in the class, and throughout the period of collaborative work. Adding more detail to comments, explaining their intentions in more depth, and recapping the context in which the comment is relevant etc, can help minimise any confusion. Teachers must also be ready to quickly moderate any misunderstandings to help minimise disruption to the collaborative process.

- **Issue**

Inevitably, some groups would experience problems with non-participating students, or breakdowns of communication

Suggested strategy

Positive encouragement and involvement from the teacher is important. For many students, communicating online (especially in an academic context) is a relatively new experience, and they need to be nurtured through the group building process. This can be facilitated by the teacher having a regular, visible presence in the wiki, offering strategies and advice about how to work effectively as a team, and also being there as a disciplinary presence when required. However the teacher must also be careful not to dominate the group, but rather play a supportive role, enabling the students to contribute freely and manage their own collaborative process as much as possible.

Conclusion

The collaborative tools within a wiki can offer great opportunities for collaborative learning. We hope that the fundamental pedagogical considerations highlighted in this case study are of use when planning your own use of wikis in online group work situations.

Additional reading*

Deters, F., Cuthrell, K., & Stapleton, J. (2010). [Why Wikis? Student Perceptions of Using Wikis in Online Coursework](#). *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching (JOLT)*, 6(1).

Judd, T., Kennedy, G., & Cropper, S. (2010). [Using wikis for collaborative learning: Assessing collaboration through contribution](#). *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*. 26(3), 341-354.

McIntosh, C., & Weaver, D. (2008). [Fostering collaboration amongst off-campus students](#). Paper presented at the Hello! Where are you in the landscape of educational technology?, Melbourne.

Parker, K. R., & Chao, J. T. (2007). [Wiki as a Teaching Tool](#). Interdisciplinary Journal of Knowledge and Learning Objects, 3, 57-72.

Weaver D. & McIntosh, C (2009). [Providing Feedback on Collaboration and Teamwork Amongst Off-Campus Students](#). In C. Fulford & G. Siemens (Eds.) EdMedia 2009 - World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia and Telecommunications, Hawaii, USA June 2009, 2070-2079.

Weaver, D., Viper, S., Latter, J., & McIntosh, P. C. (2010). [Off campus students' experiences collaborating online, using wikis](#). Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 26(6), 847-860.

**Note: Some readings are held in subscription only databases. In most cases accessing the link from your institution's network will enable access*

Acknowledgements

Interview and Production: *Simon McIntyre and Karin Watson*

Camera and Post: *Creative Development – L&T@UNSW*

Edit: *Sarah Spackman*

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Assessment rubric provided courtesy of Debbi Weaver and Dr Craig McIntosh, Swinburne University of Technology.

COFA Online would like to extend a special thank you to the institution and academics who graciously donated their time and expertise to this case study.



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To find out more about the Learning to Teach Online project, or to view the video component of this episode, please visit the COFA Online Gateway.

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About the project

The [Learning to Teach Online](#) project is a free professional development resource designed to help teachers from any discipline, whether experienced in online teaching or not, to gain a working understanding of successful online teaching pedagogies that they can apply in their own unique teaching situations. It hopes to encourage dialogue, discussion and the sharing of ideas about online learning and teaching across disciplines and between institutions around the world.

About COFA Online

COFA Online is an academic unit at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), The University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, Australia. It has been innovating online pedagogy, academic professional development and effective online learning strategies since 2003.

About The University of New South Wales

UNSW has an enrolment of approximately 40,000 students, and is the leading international university in Australia with over 10,000 international enrolments from over 130 nations. UNSW was also ranked as the top university in 2009 in the Australian Government Learning and Teaching Performance Fund for the quality of its teaching.

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Support for this activity has been provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The views expressed in this activity do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.



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