

Infrastructure and Wiki Pedagogy: A Multi-Case Study

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Abstract

Current theories of wiki pedagogy, which hold that wikis can be valuable tools for collaboration and socially constructing knowledge in the classroom, have not thoroughly considered how wikis are experienced by introductory writing teachers who are not already wiki scholars. With infrastructure as a theoretical lens, this study uses data collected from two immersion narratives to examine how introductory writing instructors use and talk about wikis in their courses. Overall, the study found that the level of a wiki's embeddedness in a course can have a significant effect on its perceived usefulness and that immersion into using new technologies can have significant outcomes for both teachers and students. These findings suggest that wikis influence and are influenced by the infrastructures they belong to, that there are both physical and ideological barriers to successfully incorporating a wiki into a course infrastructure, and that immersion narratives can be a useful method for studying wikis. Because of these implications, the essay concludes with a call for more classroom-based inquiry as a means of reflective practice.

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When I first began researching wikis as a graduate student, I scheduled a meeting with an educational technologist at my institution. I explained that I was interested in using wikis as digital archives in my writing courses. He disagreed. I'm paraphrasing, of course, but he said something like "Wikis aren't archives. They are collaborative writing tools." This is a crucial, albeit small, conflict at the heart of the role of wikis in writing courses. Wikis are collaborative writing tools, but as Robert E. Cummings and Matt Barton (Cummings et al., 2008) demonstrated, writing instructors have added layers of complexity to that simple definition by utilizing wikis for a great many purposes beyond drafting a document with others. These utilizations have generated a great deal of excitement in composition studies, as well as other fields, about the potential for wikis, and Web 2.0 technologies in general, to reshape research, writing, and knowledge-making processes (Nelson, 2008; Purdy, 2010). The problem is getting there. In other words, what does wiki pedagogy look like when it reshapes research, writing, and knowledge-making processes? And more importantly, how do the instructors using wikis use and view these tools, particularly when the instructors are not wiki scholars?

1. Background

To address these questions, writing scholars and instructors have explored several spheres of inquiry. The first sphere of inquiry articulates *wiki pedagogy*. One of the most salient contributions to this scholarship was Mark's

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Phillipson's (2008) taxonomy of wikis in the classroom because this work helped to map other contributions. For example, there were studies examining what Phillipson identified as resource wikis, which traditionally served as collections of information (Anson & Miller-Cochran, 2009; McCorkle, 2008). In addition, there were studies examining what Phillipson identified as presentation wikis, which primarily supported the work of a course (Carr, Morrison, Cox, & Deacon, 2007; Fernheimer et al., 2009; Martin & Dusenberry, 2008; Walsh, 2010). Beyond these case studies of wikis, other scholars have employed Wikipedia as a situated writing context to teach students about audience and contributing original information to existing discourse communities (Caeton, 2008; Cummings, 2009; Vetter, 2013). And finally, there is scholarship that does not look at specific cases but instead makes rhetorical arguments for practicing wiki pedagogy, both its affordances and challenges (Barton, 2008; Lundin, 2008; Nelson, 2008). All of these contributions have made wiki pedagogy a rich and active sphere of scholarship within rhetoric and composition.

Another important sphere, particularly within computers and composition, has been how instructors, in general, develop their use of computers in writing courses. Barb Blakely Duffelmeyer (2003), for example, argued that new graduate teaching assistants often feel uncomfortable teaching with technology at first. Yet, she also challenged the assumption that more training prior to teaching was the most appropriate solution. Instead, Duffelmeyer argued for an

alternative way to think about how we may gain facility and comfort with technology: through an on-going process of participatory activity, a purposeful and active route of exploring and figuring things out as circumstances demanded. This idea of active participation, in contrast to the idea of advance training/transmission, permits TAs to be willing and able to perform before they are, or feel, entirely competent. (2003, p. 303)

My goal with this research is to focus on the times and places where these spheres overlap because one sphere that remains to be explored is how (typical) writing instructors—those not already invested in scholarship on wikis—experience wikis and the wikis' influence on the classroom. I argue that this perspective is crucial to wiki pedagogy for several reasons. First, throughout existing scholarship there seems to be an assumption that instructors deploying wikis in their courses possess an already formed or easily attained awareness of what wikis can do and should be. In other words, researchers—largely examining their own courses—have reached a level of awareness about collaboration, socially constructed knowledge, or even writing as a process that they then want to see their students achieve.

While inarguably valuable, this approach does not account for the perspectives—and ideologies—of the countless instructors who regularly teach writing but are not wiki scholars. Second, this group of instructors is crucial to the continued development and innovation of wiki pedagogy because there seems to be a certain irony in a potentially democratizing tool like wikis reshaping writing instruction while only being deployed by a narrow group of writing instructors and scholars. Third, understanding these perspectives is crucial for writing program administrators often charged with helping to prepare both new and experienced writing teachers to deploy new media in the classroom. If they are to work effectively toward this goal, writing program administrators must increase their knowledge of how new media are encountered, how they are used, and how challenges might be addressed. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to describe the processes and outcomes of two writing teachers' immersions into using wikis in their courses. I use what I am calling *immersion narratives* to make visible both the processes and the ideologies that instructors sometimes bring to bear on the technology they use, the ways in which the technology itself both shapes and is reflective of those ideologies, and even the ways in which students, participating in the construction of wikis, shape and are shaped by their participation.

My use of the term *immersion narrative* is an attempt to name something that I argue happens more than we like to admit. One of the premises of scholarly work is that any new research or teaching project begins with considerable exploration of existing scholarship. As John Creswell (2003) so aptly wrote, "A first step in any project is to spend considerable time in the library examining the research on a topic.. This point cannot be overemphasized" (p. 29). As appropriate, and even crucial, as this first step is, the development of projects does not always conform to neat, linear processes. To illustrate this, consider Cheryl Hofstetter Duffy's (2003) article for *Reflections* about redesigning composition courses to harness the potential benefits of service learning. Duffy referenced the growing wealth of scholarship on service learning and explained that "Ideally, composition faculty would avail themselves of this wealth of thinking and theorizing before ever attempting to teach a service-learning class, to ensure a coherent, thoughtfully critical program" (2003, p. 2). Then she confessed "I.. was too eager to begin and too overwhelmed as a newly appointed director of composition to do much delving beforehand" (2003, p. 2). Duffy's narrative of her experience

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