

## Weathering wikis: Net-based learning meets political science in a South African university

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### Abstract

Wikis represent flexible tools functioning as open-ended environments for collaboration while also offering process and group writing support. Here we focus on a project to innovate the use of wikis for collaborative writing within student groups in a final-year undergraduate political science course. The primary questions guiding our research were in what ways could wikis assist collaborative learning in an undergraduate course in political science and how we could support educators' in the effective use of wikis? Curiously, wikis may serve as a mediating artifact for collaborative writing even among students who are reluctant to post online drafts. The paper raises questions concerning the nature and limits of lecturer and tutor power to deliver transformative educational innovations in relation to the capacity of students to embrace, comply with, or resist such innovation. In analysing the negotiation of the use of wikis in the course by and among the lecturer, tutors, and students, we draw on two principles in activity theory, which Yrjö Engeström argued are central to his model of expansive learning: multi-voicedness and contradictions [Engeström, Yrjö. (1987). *Learning by expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research*. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit; Engeström, Yrjö. (2001). Expansive learning at work: Toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of Education and Work* 14(1), 133–156.]. We add a third principle, transparency, to more fully capture what we observed.

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### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Collaboration and net-based learning

Collaboration is a central tenet of net-based and technology-enhanced learning (e.g., Lipponen, 2002; Lipponen, Hakkarainen, & Paavola, 2004). Collaborative project-based work

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is widely used across higher education (e.g., Goodsell, Maher, Tinto, Smith, & McGregor, 1992, p7; Stahl, 2001). Earlier approaches to collaborative writing on the Web have been extended recently through the ease of use and transparency of writing in wikis. These affordances support flat structures of participation, authoring, and annotation. Wikis are intended to promote texts that are unfolding in their collective processes of meaning making in and across time. What perhaps most distinguishes wikis compositionally are the ways their features can facilitate shared patterns of trust and adaptation in the shaping of collaborative resources. The shared yet emergent character of wikis is apparent in the widely discussed *Wikipedia* where encyclopedic knowledge is radically reshaped through the practice of multiple and adaptive authorship to build shared meaning (e.g., Bryant, Forte, & Bruckman, 2005; Giles, 2005).

There is comparatively little research on wikis beyond their more technical aspects (e.g., O'Neill, 2005) despite them being seen as worthwhile additions to the complex of computers and composition programmes and centres (Palmquist, 2003). Educationally, however, wikis may be seen as communicative tools that have the potential to support group interaction, but their uptake depends on the context of their use (Rick & Guzdial, 2006).

### *1.2. Wikis and negotiation*

Wikis pose interesting pedagogical possibilities in undergraduate courses because of the high value placed on critical reflection concerning discipline-specific content. As a product, they serve to share actual disciplinary knowledge. Procedurally, they may also assist in the gathering, appraisal, placement, and distribution of this knowledge. For lecturers, this potential opens up new pedagogical opportunities. It allows for increased meaning making by and between students. Partnership between lecturers and educational technologists with experience in related work and research leads to a collaborative pedagogical design with affordances for negotiation of meaning by students. Together these elements impact on the possible effective uses of a wiki and the resulting dynamic discourses. Yet what seems special about wikis is that they are under-scripted in that they are designed to support flexible (and possibly open ended) collaborative writing projects rather than publication of predetermined knowledge. This characteristic, however, raises questions about the role and place of teachers in the learning process (Lund & Smørdal, 2006). The most familiar use of wikis is in collaborative projects that need straightforward ways to make identifiable edits to a shared document. Consequently we need to understand how students select and negotiate content and collaborate in meaning making (Andriessen, Baker, & Suthers, 2003; Baker, Lund, & Séjourné, 2003; Veerman, 2000, p. 2).

### *1.3. Research context and question*

Our research forms part of a wider international collaborative project into how to apply new technologies in building communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) of university educators in the human sciences at a South African university. This research project drew together two centres of net-based learning in a workshop-based approach to building communities of practice for educators. This article presents a situated, course-based collaboration with a political science lecturer who motivates students to articulate their own

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