Digital Literacies

Wikis, Digital Literacies, and Professional Growth

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The emergence of the "read–write Web" (Gillmor, 2004; Lessig, 2008) enables interactive online participation and collaboration on a scale not remotely possible during the 1990s. Popular forms of social software are the best-known examples here. These include blogs and microblogs for keeping track of things that interest you or for letting others know what you're up to (www.blogger.com, www.live-journal.com, www.twitter.com) and sites like Facebook for bringing together online networks, announcement spaces, group members, and interest affinities in one online location (www.facebook.com). The proliferation of such services is the basis of "Web 2.0" (Davies & Merchant, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). In this column we focus on digital literacies from the standpoint of one distinctive Web 2.0 resource: the wiki (see also Richardson, 2008).

Wikis

A *wiki* is a collection of webpages whose content is typically organized around a specific purpose or topic. Content can be collaboratively written, added to, deleted, and modified by users. Wikis are not like static webpages whose content is controlled by the website owner or webmaster. They are more like a shared, online writing space supporting embedded links to other pages internal or external to the wiki. Along with text and hyperlinks, wiki pages may include embedded images, audio, and video. Many wikis also have a built-in discussion space for each page. Because wikis are fully searchable they are ideal go-to spaces for accessing useful and current resources. The best-known example of a wiki is, of course, the massively collaborative online encyclopedia Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org).

Wikis in Education

Wikis have great potential for promoting online and offline collaboration and for disseminating research and practical resources among educators in accessible ways. For example, free wiki engines such as www.mediawiki.org, moinmo.in/, and www.twiki.org are resources to use to create your own wiki. Yet to date they have not been adopted within education circles to the extent that, say, weblogs have (that being said, the companion blog to these Digital Literacies columns [blog.reading.org/jaal] is an ideal place to begin discussing wikis in education). One reason for wikis being overlooked in education may be because contributing to a wiki isn't (yet) as "automatic" as is setting up and posting to a blog. Whereas users can blog without knowing any hypertext mark-up language

(HTML), the code underlying webpage production, it is usually necessary for wiki users to know at least a few basics of the simplified HTML code used in wikis (e.g., en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Cheatsheet).

We believe it is worth the effort to learn some basics because wikis can work well in education as professional development tools, resource hosts, and shared-interest spaces. For example, the Literacy Tent is a large-scale professional development wiki for adult literacy educators (wiki.literacytent.org). Adult educators working across the United States and elsewhere actively contribute resources and content to this wiki, which is organized around 32 key areas relevant to the field of adult literacy education (e.g., community development, corrections education, public policy). Another example of a wiki dedicated to professional development for middle school teachers is NewLits.org (www.newlits.org), which we will discuss in detail below.

The New Literacies Wiki

Overview

NewLits.org—funded by an Improving Teacher Quality Partnership Grant (NJ, 2008)—is organized around at least six key sections, entered from the navigation bar in the left-hand column (see Figure 1). These sections are always under revision as the wiki develops and grows, but at the time of writing include the following:

- A set of 10 commissioned papers written by leaders in the field

- A space for participants to post contributions and edit other people's contributions—such as remixes of the commissioned papers, accounts of using new literacies in classrooms (which can include lesson plans, video clips, showcases of student artifacts, teaching ideas, etc.)

- A "getting started" section containing tutorials and basic tips

- Links to additional reading located outside the wiki

- Links to free resources available online (e.g., graphic novels, content-hosting spaces, digital image-editing software)

- A "special interest groups" space (e.g., digital image-editing, making movies in Second Life virtual world, using graphic novels in classrooms)

NewLits.org Wiki Basics

If you are unfamiliar with wikis, the "getting started" section provides an introduction to wikis in general and includes links to a series of video tutorials created specifically for NewLits.org. The video tutorials walk new users through basic steps for participating in the wiki (e.g., how to create a hyperlink to internal and external content, how to add boldface or italics to text). They are augmented by text-based microtutorials, which include tips for writing inside wiki pages (e.g., placing an asterisk before a line of text makes an unnumbered list, placing a number sign or pound sign before a line of text makes a numbered list). Spending an hour in the getting started section provides the necessary basics to get underway as an active (writing as well as reading) participant.

Although anyone can browse the wiki and use posted material, users must register by setting up a user account if they wish to post contributions and edit material on the wiki's editable pages. Registration is free and users can be anonymous if they choose. Once registered, users see an "edit" tab appear on any page that they can edit or post items to (see Figure 1).
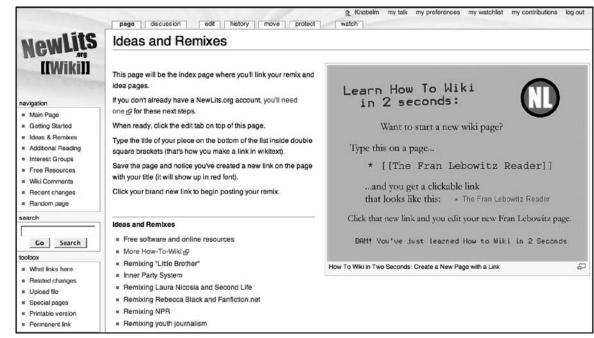
Clicking on the edit tab opens a writing space that mimics the look of word-processing software. This space is where users key in or copy and paste preselected text, insert links to images or videos, upload and link to document files, and tinker with layout commands (e.g., inserting subheadings, adding boldface to text, indenting text). In this way, collaborative writing across time, space, and distance unfolds within the wiki.

Simple guidelines for all key functions and processes are provided on site, and readers are encouraged to use the getting started link for a quick entrée to wiki basics that will serve them on any wiki and even support establishing one's own wiki.

NewLits.org and Digital Literacies

As a collection of webpages supporting multimedia formats and dedicated to the professional development

Figure 1   Section of the "Ideas and Remixes" Page on NewLits.org

of educators with respect to new literacies, NewLits. org provides a context for showcasing, demonstrating, and supporting the acquisition and understanding of digital literacies relevant to its scope and purpose. For example, participants might showcase digital video stories they or their students have produced and open them up to discussion, extension, and even remixing. Alternatively, participants might contribute podcasts, music videos, response videos to wiki content, student-made documentaries, or lessons created—and filmed—in Second Life, links to collaborative class blogs, student fanfic writing open to review and comments by wiki users, samples of student-created animation, and digital image–editing experiments, to name just a few.

For example, one wiki participant has posted a link to a showcase of her students' "extreme reading." Students are in grades 6, 7, and 8, and have produced a series of written poems and book reviews accompanied by an illustrated podcast. This podcast captures each author reading his or her poem or talking about a recently-read book and includes background music and an array of images linked and synched directly to the content of each poem (web.me.com/tracyt1/tracyt/Welcome.html).

In a forthcoming project, teachers will develop a cross-curriculum unit of work titled "Witness to History." Students will be interviewing long-term residents of their community. Students will use Audacity software (audacity.sourceforge.net) to edit their digital recordings and add sound effects and music to create dynamic accounts of historical events with local importance. Primary documents and photographs will be used to create interactive historical accounts, too, using VoiceThread (www.voicethread.com). Students' work will be showcased on or via the wiki, accompanied by unit or lesson plans and assessment rubrics.

Invitation and Conclusion

Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy readers can participate in NewLits.org in many ways and are warmly invited to do so. Being a middle school teacher is not a prerequisite, even though the focus of this wiki is the middle school level. The wiki's ethos emphasizes participation rather than eligibility.

Besides the kinds of contributions already mentioned, participants might consider posting the following:

- Rubrics to assess student projects that make use of multimedia showcase services (e.g., creating a multivoiced text on VoiceThread.com)

- Links to and brief descriptions of alternatives to online services often blocked by school filters (e.g., instead of using Flickr, try Picasa; instead of using YouTube, try OurMedia.org)

- Software or service walk-throughs that support "newbies" in becoming proficient users (e.g., a video and audio walk-through made with JingProject.com for using Zamzar.com to convert video files)

The logic of NewLits.org is that participants learn (about) digital literacies by *engaging* in digital literacies, within the supportive environment of what Gee (2004) calls an "affinity space" (pp. 85–87). In such spaces, participants interact with kindred spirits who have different levels of knowledge and expertise across different areas of competence. Through collaborative interaction and participation, the contributions of all progressively enhance the quality, richness, and usefulness of the affinity space, and enrich participants' personal and collective competence and knowledge—in this case, professional knowledge and expertise pertaining to new literacies within formal learning settings.

References

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