The Way of the Wiki: Using a Wiki as a Management Tool for Online Programs

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Abstract

Many universities are struggling to meet student demand for quality online course offerings. As an online program grows, it can become more difficult to manage information, resources, and people. Adopting useful knowledge management tools, such as wikis, could help better position an online program in a competitive marketplace. Wikis promote collaborative knowledge convergence that helps accumulate, organize, and store essential programmatic assets in an easy-to-access format. This paper details the adoption and evolution of a wiki as an administrative tool in an online graduate program and explains how, after a slow start, the departmental wiki has morphed into a highly functional knowledge management space that is rapidly spreading throughout the college and beyond. The authors conclude by offering lessons learned and considerations for future wiki adoption.

Introduction

The brick and mortar university system has existed for centuries as a logical way to group learners with teachers and scholars in a common location. However, with recent advances in technology, location is becoming a more fluid concept, and students can opt to attend a growing variety of online programs. Higher education is struggling to meet student demand for quality online course offerings in this new learning landscape. In many cases, institutions that do the most effective job of managing their online programs will be more relevant, stable, and better positioned to enjoy sustainable growth.

As an online program develops, it can become progressively more difficult to manage information, resources, and people. Email and infrequent face-to-face contacts can become increasingly inefficient and do little to promote the kind of real-time, collaborative knowledge management and strategic planning needed to insure program health and vitality. This can result in communication gaps where the goals and objectives of the program are not properly understood by all interested parties. Wikis can begin to close some of these gaps.

However, for wikis to be effective in online programs, one has to reexamine how the program is led, managed, and organized. Wikis promote relationships and associations that organize people, activities, and ideas in ways that are "frequently unattainable in command-and-control management settings" (Staley, 2009, p. 37). Wikis place an emphasis on a more egalitarian and constructivist style of management rather than a top-down approach. When directors of online programs begin to relinquish

some control and make use of tools like wikis, they often find that leaders will emerge in given tasks, and that delegation and consensus become powerful tools for programmatic growth and stability.

This paper details the adoption of a wiki as an administrative tool in an online graduate program and explains how, after a slow start, the departmental wiki has morphed into a highly functional knowledge management space that has rapidly spread throughout the college and beyond. Though this paper outlines a wiki adoption for an online graduate program, the lessons learned from this successful implementation could be applied to a variety of contexts, programs, and administrative needs.

What are Wikis?

Chances are, even if you have never used a wiki, you have heard of them. Wikis (the name is Hawaiian for "quick") have been around since 1995 when their creator, Ward Cunningham, developed *WikiWikiWeb* out of a desire for a quick and easy way for people to discuss and exchange ideas about computer programming and software design (Bean & Hott, 2005; "History of Wikis," 2010). However, wikis have been garnering much more attention in the last few years—in part due to the growing popularity of *Wikipedia* (The Free Encyclopedia) and also because advances in technology have made wikis more ubiquitous and easy to use (White & Lutters, 2007). What began as an experiment for IT "geeks" has evolved into a powerful knowledge management tool with nearly endless applications in education and business.

In short, wikis allow for multiple users to collaborate, discuss, revise, and make otherwise meaningful associations—all in an intuitive and easy-to-use format that resembles an editable webpage. Wikis do more than simply create, store, and distribute information. They promote a level of communication, organization, and knowledge convergence that, just a few years ago, was not possible. This potentially makes wikis well-suited to management tasks in online programs (Raman, 2006).

Wikis as a Management Tool for Online Programs

As more programs begin to shift to an online format, they struggle to replicate the sense of community needed for faculty to engage with one another as efficiently as they would in a face-to-face setting. To combat this issue, online programs use a variety of communication tools to conduct administrative business—from face-to-face meetings and phone calls to the ubiquitous email and the occasional shared document service such as *Google Docs*.

What makes wikis different is that they combine technology with social engineering to yield a new type of convergence that produces high-quality content built on consensus (Cortese, 2003; McAfee, 2006). In a group setting where a priority is placed on agreement, as with faculty in an online program, wikis are an inherently more efficient way to go from the emergence of an idea to the convergence needed to take the initial idea into practical application.

Wikis also carry with them the added bonus of being a type of informal memory for the program. Meaning that they allow for a "central repository for information that formerly was shared only in an ad hoc way through email or face-to-face encounters" (Cortese, 2003, p.2). This virtual storehouse has practically limitless record keeping potential and can also maintain a comprehensive, up-to-date record of socially-constructed knowledge about the program without the need to invest in proprietary or extensive database creation.

The Wiki Adoption

Beginning in August of 2007, the Media and Instructional Technology Department at the University of West Georgia was looking for a way to collaborate on a project that called for the creation of a series of workshops related to online learning. The purpose of the workshops was to train faculty outside the department to teach online. Since everyone in the program had varying levels of experience and expertise teaching online, faculty wanted a way to collaborate asynchronously that was more efficient than email or the existing campus-based method of sharing information over the network. Collaborating

asynchronously had the potential added benefit of allowing faculty to better fit the workshop planning into their busy schedules.

Initially, one faculty member set up a document in *Google Docs*, thinking this would meet the department's needs. Over the course of several weeks, faculty began using the document tool to outline the workshop series and to sign up for various tasks. As the document expanded, faculty began color-coding their remarks and contributions in order to discuss one another's ideas. At the time, this seemed to be the most efficient way to follow each member's line of thinking. However, the result was a multi-colored mess that was difficult to track, and soon, rather than arriving at anything resembling consensus, the group had a document that was expanding to the point of being useless. The *Google* document had worked well at the outset, but the growth of ideas and the need to discuss individual contributions in an organized way necessitated a different tool. A more flexible space was needed for collaboration.

With this in mind, a faculty member set up a wiki using *Wikispaces* and transferred the information from the original *Google* document to the new wiki. *Wikispaces* was initially chosen because a faculty member was already comfortable and familiar with that particular program, and she believed the design and layout of *Wikispaces* was intuitive enough to facilitate easy adoption for newcomers. She invited all members to either join the wiki with their own logins (after demonstrating how logins were created) or use a generic username and password combination to access the wiki. The generic username and password was a way to simplify initial wiki access. It was thought that those faculty reluctant to take the time to create their own accounts might be more willing to participate if the account was already set up for them. It was hoped that once faculty saw the value of working collaboratively in this space, they would then take the time to create and use their own logins. Within a month of receiving the invitation, the majority of faculty had joined the wiki through their own user accounts, though many initially used the generic login. It was also decided at this point to pay the nominal monthly fee ($5/month at the time of this writing) to make the wiki "private," meaning no one without the proper authorization would have access.

To structure the distance education workshops, approximately twenty pages were created over the course of several months. During the course of designing the workshops, wiki use by the faculty increased and branched out other administrative areas. Members of the department began creating new pages including one for posting the agenda and minutes related to the biweekly department meetings. Another wiki page was used to solicit feedback from other faculty on what content needed to be placed on a departmental promotional poster. Faculty were emailed an invitation to look at the proposed poster content on the wiki and were then asked to use the discussion tab attached to the wiki page to give their feedback rather than correspond through email or wait for the next department meeting. The poster initiative was the first real wiki success. The promotional poster's content and design were fashioned with direct input from a majority of faculty. While the wiki's original purpose (distance education workshop planning) was sidelined, the applicability of the tool lent itself to further use as faculty continued to collaborate on projects, research, and presentations across the academic year.

By the end of the first year of the wiki adoption, it had begun to serve as an informal group memory-system. Meeting minutes, graduation sign-up, curriculum, and other such organizational matters were being added to the wiki, and leaders in wiki use were emerging. The wiki was no longer in a "trial phase" and was becoming an important part of how the department conducted its business. It was becoming apparent that the wiki was, potentially, a powerful administrative tool.

Academic Year 2008-2009

The following year, in August of 2008, the new department chair went beyond merely encouraging wiki use and, whenever new business arose, she would ask faculty to "post that on the wiki." In departmental emails, the chair would regularly remind faculty to consult the wiki to review information posted and to add to or clarify information on the wiki as necessary. During this phase of the adoption, she would often email a direct link to the wiki and encourage faculty to edit the wiki page directly or use the page's discussion tab, rather than email, to converse about issues or tasks. It was over the course of this year that the wiki saw a notable increase in use.

To further synchronize activities and enhance productivity, faculty embedded a *Google* calendar onto the front page of the wiki for posting all important dates. In department meetings, the need to create new wiki pages for additional purposes regularly arose. The wiki's left-hand navigation bar grew rapidly—with more than twenty links to various areas of the wiki. The original creator of the wiki continued to take responsibility for managing the wiki and keeping it in order and was designated the "wiki administrator."

Across the year, more than 70 new pages were created, and more than 100 files were uploaded. Faculty could access departmental meetings minutes, budget information, and common departmental resources and tasks. Links were created for each of the programs in the department, so that faculty in the specific programs could post their meeting minutes, curriculum work, and projects. Other broad areas were added, such as one for recruiting students and another for departmental policies and procedures. By the end of the second year of using the wiki, all members of the department were actively engaged in its use.

At the last department meeting of the 2008-2009 academic year, faculty created a wiki page of tasks in progress. With the summer break approaching, the creation of this page served as a reflective activity and a reminder of projects underway. Creating this list together was a way for the department to hold itself accountable for work that still needed to be completed. Additionally, it was hoped this would allow for a smoother transition into the next academic year.

Academic Year 2009-2010

During the 2009-2010 academic year, the faculty have continued to use the wiki to collaboratively build and house departmental knowledge and resources. In early October, the wiki administrator observed that, due to the addition of many new pages, wiki organization was becoming harder to follow. She unveiled a new navigational scheme where the most often accessed departmental pages were reorganized on the homepage, allowing for greater ease of use (see Figure 1). The left-hand navigation bar was relegated to frequently used external websites such as links to college, university, professional, and governmental resources. The department has moved beyond the provided template with *Wikispaces* to experimenting with reorganizing the site to better meet its needs. At the end of this academic year, faculty plan to discuss the effectiveness of the current design and make appropriate changes.

Figure 1. New Navigational Scheme for the Departmental Homepage
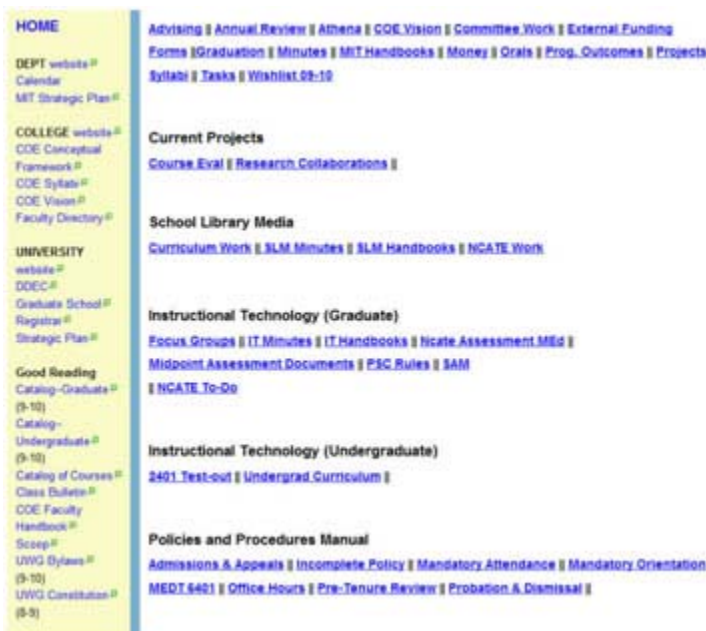

Figure 1. The left-hand navigation (shaded) is typically reserved for page linking within the wiki site. In

this instance, it houses important external links while the home page now organizes the internal wiki navigation for the most often accessed departmental pages. This demonstrates the inherent flexibility and customizability of the wiki.

The use of the wiki has not stopped at the departmental level. Word quickly spread throughout the college and university about the department's use of the wiki, and other departments have begun to ask for help designing their own. Additionally, faculty who are now comfortable working with wikis have begun to explore new and creative ways to use them in their teaching, service, and professional development areas.

Some examples of wiki uses that have sprung from the initial adoption include wikis that organize information for other departments in the college; coordinate projects with K-12 schools; manage faculty and administrative job searches; shape co-teaching endeavors; allow for publication collaboration and presentation planning; promote file management and organization for NCATE and SACS accreditation; and simplify and streamline university, state, and national-level committee and taskforce organization and planning. At last count, there were dozens of wikis that owe their genesis to this initial innovation. In summer 2010, the University of West Georgia instituted a campus-wide adoption of a standardized wiki-platform.

Lessons Learned and Considerations for Future Wiki Adoption

Wikis, as with any tool, only have value if their implementation is well-planned. While wikis are a powerful platform for knowledge management, one has to administer them properly to take advantage of their collaborative potential. If done correctly, wikis are a potent tool for generating knowledge consensus as well as storing, organizing, and supplying necessary information. The department transition to using the wiki as the primary knowledge management space was not without obstacles and lessons. While the department is still constantly evaluating and improving the wiki adoption, the following considerations for future wiki implementation can be offered.

Understand the Management Process

It was not until the new chair began to actively use the wiki, stress its importance, and encourage its use that the adoption truly took hold. She served as a model and leader for wiki use, and this promoted greater response and buy in from the faculty. She was also willing to relinquish some control of the management process and adopt a stance of leading rather than micromanaging. This more democratic approach to leadership may "flatten the organizational hierarchy, changing traditional communication channels" (Hasan & Pfaff, 2006, p. 379). In other words, the wiki allows for a greater delegation of responsibility, a more equitable sharing of workload, an increase in individual accountability, and, therefore, more ownership in the management process by faculty. This approach could make traditional top-down-style managers uncomfortable and pose a challenge in programs with more rigid or conventional power structures. A more participatory power structure is needed to help the wiki "write itself" and spread responsibility to everyone involved in the process.

Over time, the wiki may begin to serve as a collective knowledge base for the history of a program. This repository could be particularly beneficial when transitioning new faculty or management into the department.

Choose Your Wiki Wisely

Once a wiki platform is chosen, the group will probably stay with that particular platform until given a clear reason to change. Unless the organization has the ability to create or adapt its own wiki platform, it is probably better served going with one of the prebuilt off-site wiki services such as *Wikispaces*, *PBworks*, or *Wetpaint*. Most of these platforms offer private hosting for free, or at a discounted rate, to educators and campuses. If the program deals with sensitive information, it is a good idea to explore the options for private hosting to avoid potential legal concerns. All wiki platforms are not created equal, and it pays to examine several different ones before settling.

One concern about prebuilt off-site hosting of a wiki is control over access and content. What happens if the service goes away or no longer suits the program? This is a legitimate concern, and one should look for a wiki platform that can be backed up and archived at regular intervals. For instance, *Wikispaces* allows the wiki administrator to export the entire content of the site in three different formats: wikitext (a simplified version of HTML that should transfer to other wiki platforms), HTML pages, or as a compiled .pdf document. The .pdf format is probably the best option for record keeping purposes due to its universal reach, high readability, and small file size. When exporting as a .pdf, the file resembles an ebook and maintains all working navigation and links. If moving the wiki to a new host site, wikitext or HTML pages may be more appropriate.

Be Patient and Flexible

It will take a while before the program fully adopts the wiki and begins to see the benefits. It took more than two years for the wiki to take hold in the department. Potentially, one can speed the adoption process by assigning a willing worker as the "wiki-manager:" a person who is primarily responsible for the organization and upkeep of the site. It also helps to regularly solicit faculty feedback about the wiki to ensure its continued relevance.

Conclusion

Wikis are a powerful management tool, and one should not be afraid to experiment with and adapt the wiki as needed. They are inherently flexible, and there is no single correct way to use wikis. Many online programs, in addition to distant students, have faculty either working completely at a distance or in a more asynchronous fashion than typically found in traditional programs. This coming merger of long-established workplace expectations with the more flexible and collaborative employment landscape of the future is ideally illustrated through the administrative use of the wiki.

While wikis provide a standardized platform that allows for easy access and sharing of information, greater immediate and longitudinal collaboration, consensus building, and a shared sense of responsibility and purpose, the real power of the wiki may lie in its ability to facilitate the social construction of knowledge *asynchronously*—a concept that should be of particular value to online programs.

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