

Learning Experience of Student Journalists: Utilizing Collaborative Writing Medium Wikis

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Abstract: In this paper, we explore the processes and effects of Wikis as a learning medium to journalistic writing. In a field study, undergraduate journalistic students are exposed to a Student-written Wiki to jointly compose news reporting online. A group of student journalists were then asked to complete a post survey to comment and reflect their learning experience of news reporting within the Wiki environment. Analysis of student journalists' responses to open-ended questions revealed revision as the core processing capability of Wiki. The motivational factors to revision include accuracy (fact checking), story enrichment, and personal interest toward the news topic. On the other hand, learners are also affected by the social interactions among the community users within Wiki. The results are important to provide practical guidance to the implementation of Wikis.

Keywords: Wikis, News Writing Processes, Revision, Social Interaction

Introduction

Since its introduction in 2004, Wikipedia.org has grown rapidly into one of the largest reference Web sites on the Internet. Basically, Wikipedia, utilizing the Wiki technology, provides only a platform out of scratch. Wiki is defined and described as "*a type of website that allows users to add, remove, or otherwise edit and change all content very quickly and easily*" ([1]). In turn, could we apply the Wiki technology to support teaching and learning of writing in general and news writing in particular?

Journalists practice writing as their single or most important professional activity. Ward ([2]) and Blundell ([3]) suggest generic steps in news writing. On the other hand, referring to the core capability of Wiki in facilitating revising in the writing process, revising has been a key concern in many prior studies in writing (e.g., [4], [5]).

Apart from a structured environment to help the process of writing, Wiki also helps create a community of Wiki users to interact with each other within its environment. Empirical studies found that providing feedback constitutes an integral part of the learning process in writing (e.g., [6]).

Therefore, this paper aims at an exploration of how student journalists value the benefits and face challenges using Wiki in the processes of learning news writing. The study utilizes students' self-reflection on their experience in using Wiki in a collaborating news writing setting.

1. Method

Background & Subjects: A student-written Wiki (named, HKNews at <http://hknews.syc.edu.hk>) has been setup for the Department of Journalism & Communication at a private local university in Hong Kong. HKNews Wiki is open to the public; however, its primary aim is to support teaching and learning by allowing 548 student reporters in the department to contribute original news reporting. Up till April 15, 2007,

there were 10,622 Wiki pages (including discussion and user pages), and among them, there are 4203 news reporting articles, and a total of 54,049 edits (5.09 edits per article), with a total of 2,474,818 view counts in the whole site. At the beginning of the second semester in 2007, 23 students enrolled in the Application of Information Technology for Communication at the Department of Journalism & Communication. They were the subjects in this study.

Data collection & Analysis: There was a seminar on February 6, 2007. Before that, a Wiki page was setup about introducing the speaker and the talk. Throughout the week, all the students in the department were encouraged to edit the Wiki page and to add content to it. They might also create links and additional Wiki pages to provide extra information for any content in the article. The 23 students joined this collaborative news writing task for one week. In order to understanding the processes of collaborative news writing and the individual learners' perceptions on using Wikis, they were asked to complete an open-ended survey expressed in details in the writing processes and their reflection on their experiences in the Wiki environment. For the analysis of qualitative data from the open-ended questions, we copied the responses into a word processor, sorted and grouped them, and labeled the major themes and categories that emerged.

2. Results

2.1 Key Motivators to Revising Wiki page: Accuracy, Enrichment and Interesting

Revision is the key processing capability of Wikis. What determine them to revise their own written Wiki page? *Accuracy:* Half of the respondents point out that accuracy is the key motive. It seems quite a clear consensus that student journalists cannot bear any inaccurate information on the Wiki. *Enrichment:* Moreover, more than one-fourth would consider enrichment by adding new information or further details to the writing as the key motive to revise a Wiki page. *Interesting:* It is also interesting to find that two of them will work on the article if they find it interesting. This is important. In a Wiki project, everyone writes. However, it is not necessary everyone writes on the same article. Rather, everyone finds the topic that he or she is most interested in and they would contribute to their best. At last, every article is to their best as each article is contributed or edited by the most interested and capable ones (see Table 1).

Table 1: Motivators to Revising Wiki Page Overview

Motivators	Typical Comments
Accuracy	"When there is a mistake or out-dated information, I will revise it." "If I find the mistakes from the Wiki page, I will do my revision for it."
Enrichment	"When I find new details about the topic, I will revise my page." "Discover new ideas or receive comments."
Interesting	"mainly from curiosity"

2.2 Social Interaction in the Writing Process

Social interaction appears in several key steps in the writing process. (1) *Planning Stage:* The key activities in this stage include ideas generation from reading Wiki articles. (2) *Drafting Stage:* S/he needs to read a lot to take care of others' idea to avoid writing too similarly. Secondly, if s/he needs to build on a previous work, s/he needs to think hard to understand the idea flow before s/he can write further. (3) *Revising Stage:* (i) *Different Styles over Revising:* The respondents also indicate they have different style in dealing with others in completing the written work. (ii) *Reasons to Revising due to the Presence of Other*

Wiki Users: They are expecting comments, revision from other Wiki users, and reviewing the changes. They also care about whether their Wiki page is popular by checking the click rate. Typical comments are summarized as bellows (see Table 2).

Table 2: Social Interactions among Wiki Users at Different News Writing Stages

Writing Stages	Typical Comments
Planning	<p>"reading sources is the most significant process of preparing,"</p> <p>"First read all text other students have written before writing my own text to avoid repetition which spends me most of the time."</p>
Drafting	
-Discussed with users before/when drafting	<p>"I have discussed with my classmate before I write. After that, if my writing is modified by someone, I will also discuss with them. Through the discussion, we may understand more about the talk (the issue)."</p> <p>"Yes (I would discuss with others), when I cannot sure of the information I find or I cannot find the information."</p>
-Anxiety aroused from the presence of other Wiki users	<p>"The content of articles is too many and too scattered."</p> <p>"The greatest problem is that there is already too much information in wiki. I cannot repeat the thing that have already considered. So I must find more information or give up writing."</p> <p>"The greatest problem in using Wiki to write is sometimes I would have problem in understanding other people's writing and don't know how to continue the passage."</p> <p>"The article is easily changed by other users and their work will take the place of mine. The feeling of being replaced is not good."</p>
Revising	
-Different styles viewing revising among users	<p>"I think I am very critical to others' work and this style forces me to seek for a better outcome of the task."</p> <p>"If I am very critical to others' work, other groupmates cannot express their style (views freely) on the project."</p> <p>"My style is based on fact. If they write something wrong, I will ask them to revise. But if they express their own views, I will respect them and let them go."</p>
-Different reasons for revising written work	<p>"Every time when I go back to review my work, I always think that it is inadequate, no matter contents, information or even page editing, it is not enough. If I am a reader, I want more than that."</p> <p>"Yes, I would like to know (if there is) any amendment of my revision, if there is amendment, I would see how different with my writing and learn from it."</p> <p>"I look for the click rate of the pages to determine their popularity."</p>

2.3 Wiki as a Learning Medium to Writing: How Learners Really Use the Wiki and Does the Unique Processing Capability of Wikis Really help?

It is found that half of the respondents do not write directly on Wiki. They write on a Word Processor and then copy and paste their draft to Wiki. Less than half write directly on Wiki. Two other respondents do not indicate clearly the way they do. However, after they post their draft on Wiki, all further revision will be done through Wiki. Wiki records all editing log, with time, date and login ID of the editor. Therefore, although we may miss the preliminary planning and drafting process in the history log, we do record all the revision behavior in Wiki and the learners are interacting with Wiki during the revision process.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

3.1 Revision as the key to News Writing

While revision is a key to writing as found in prior research, the results of this study

consistently reveal that individual learners improve their writing in accuracy, enrichment, new ideas, and presentation through a continuous revision process.

3.2 Effects of Social Interaction on Learners

What motivates learners to revise their work? The results find that individual learners do care about the presence of other users. They care about whether their work has been viewed and/or has been revised. No matter it really takes place or not, this expectation becomes a motive for individual learners to regular review their written work, and in a higher chance to revise their own work for accuracy and enrichment of content or idea.

3.3 Wikis as a Learning Medium

The unique processing capability of Wiki, on the one hand, facilitates writing processes of individual learners; on the other hand, this also improves the interactions between community users of Wiki, to read others' work, to edit others' work, to read any changes made from other users, and to learn from a different perspective to the same issue. However, we cannot disregard the concerns and anxiety of individual learners which may finally affect the learning processes.

3.4 Conclusion

This preliminary study confirms the importance of revision in learning news writing while acknowledges the effects of social interactions towards the different stages in news writing. Reflecting from student learners' experience, the study finds that student learners both value benefits and face challenges from their learning experience in using Wiki.

3.5 Limitations & Future Research

This is a preliminary study on a specific context, utilizing Wikis for student journalists to collaborate to complete a writing task. The results may only apply with limitations. Future research should expand the study to other disciplines in order to understand better on the impact of Wikis. The results and analysis are based on the self-reflection of respondents who participate in completing the writing task, although this is the appropriate way to capture all the details in understanding the writing process, future research should consider data from various sources, for example, the usage behavior captured by the Wiki.

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