
To Wiki or Not to Wiki?

Facilitating Collaborative Learning in a Graduate Online Youth Development Course

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Abstract

Collaborative learning experiences are looked upon favorably by many educators because of their ability to yield desired educational outcomes such as critical thinking, solving problems, cooperating with others, and developing innovation skills. One strategy that is gaining more attention as a facilitator of collaborative learning is the use of instructional computing technology (ICT). A promising web-based platform that has the potential to leverage collaborative learning outcomes is the wiki. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the use of wikis as platforms for collaborative learning and to provide an example of a wiki-based project developed for an online graduate course in youth development leadership. The paper discusses the framing of the assignment, its connection to course objectives, and considerations for the use of wikis in other courses.

KEYWORDS: Collaborative learning, technology, wikis, youth development, organizational leadership

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The shift from instructor-centered teaching approaches to student-centered learning approaches has been a source of discussion in higher education for more than a decade (Barr & Tagg, 1996). Collaborative learning is one of the more popular applications of this shift, and draws from a rich theoretical base. Collaborative learning draws from two major frameworks—Piaget’s (1969) constructivist theory and Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development. Both theoretical approaches hold that students learn more from social interaction, peer collaboration, and adult guidance than they do from working alone (Thompson & Ku, 2006).

Collaboration among students has been shown to promote creativity, increase critical thinking competencies, build stronger interpersonal skills, enhance relationships with faculty, provide exposure to diverse viewpoints, and prepare students for the workforce (Barfield, 2003; Mello, 1993; Payne & Monk-Turner, 2006). For graduate students who are working professionals, collaborative learning approaches provide multiple “windows on the field” by exposing adult learners to a diverse range of viewpoints, perspectives, and real-world experiences. In addition, recognizing the knowledge and lived experience that students bring to the higher education table may be particularly important for adult learners who are working professionals (Ormrod, 1999; Villarruel, Perkins, Bordon, & Keith, 2003).

One strategy that is gaining more attention as a potential facilitator of collaborative learning is the use of instructional computing technology (ICT). The focus and promise for educators is not in building students’ technological competence per se, but rather in using technology to leverage the development of skills such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, innovation, and problem solving (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Kay & Honey, 2006). As ICT becomes more robust in applications and capacity, online learning environments have become more ubiquitous (Allen & Seaman, 2008). Despite the potential of ICT in facilitating collaboration, time and distance factors create unique challenges for online faculty in designing learning interventions that move students away from isolated and atomized learning situations and into dynamic and interactive learning communities.

Theory to Practice

Clemson University offers an online master’s degree in youth development leadership (YDL) designed for full-time working professionals in the youth development field. Because students come to the YDL program from all over the world and are rarely face to face in the same instructional space, creating more collaborative learning opportunities is a continuous instructional challenge. The focus of this paper is a collaborative learning activity offered in HEHD 803 (Creative and Ethical Leadership in Youth Development), one of 12 online courses offered as part of the YDL degree program. Among other topics, students in the course focus on mission development, strategic planning, organizational structure, human resources, internal and external politics, and the development of organizational culture in youth-serving organizations.

HEHD 803 Learning Goals

In addition to developing an understanding of the concepts listed above, HEHD 803 has two overarching learning goals. The first goal is for students to understand

the systemic nature of organizations, including the interactions and interdependencies that exist between the organization's environment, mission, structure, staffing, funding, etc. Students are asked to apply their understanding of this concept within the context of organizational design. The second goal is to understand the importance of collaborative relationships and partnerships in the larger community youth development system (Wheeler, 2000), and to put collaboration into practice within the scope of the course.

HEHD 803 is delivered online and students are familiar with a variety of ICT applications. This provided the course instructor with an opportunity to investigate technology platforms that could be used to meet the course learning goals and to encourage collaborative learning among students (see Barcelona & Rockey, 2010 for a review). One tool (among many) that has the potential to foster collaborative learning is the wiki. While faculty may be most familiar with Wikipedia, wiki technology has broader application as a shared web space where individual users can publish their own content and edit the previously published work of others (West & West, 2009). Wikis are easily available for instructional use and have relatively short learning curves. They are often more convenient for group writing than sharing word processing files because the version of the wiki that one sees is always the most updated, and with web access, is always accessible. Because these features made sense both practically and pedagogically, a wiki was the platform of choice for the development of a collaborative case study project designed to address the two main learning goals in HEHD 803¹.

The Learning Activity—The HEHD 803 Wiki

For this assignment, the class was asked to create its own youth development organization based on the features of a fictional town called Granite Station. The wiki provided students with a shared space to build their organization. They were asked to think of the HEHD 803 wiki as their organization's first website. As such, they were encouraged to take advantage of the wiki's tools to enhance the design (color, layout, font, images, etc.) and overall presentation of their work. Students were given free rein over how the wiki looked, and they were free to add pages, delete content, add applications, and change color schemes.

To get the students started, the class was provided with a general description of the Granite Station community and its various neighborhoods. Students were asked to think about the kind of organization that they wanted to develop based on the assets, needs, and external characteristics of the community that they would serve, and were instructed to keep this in mind during the development process. This was done to emphasize the interdependence between the external environment and organizational design (Morgan, 1997).

To complete the assignment, students were broken into teams and were asked to develop various components of the organization (e.g. strategic plan, organizational structure, human resources, organizational culture). Teams were provided with between three and five specific work charges that they were to produce. Each team was required

¹ Access to the full case can be obtained by contacting the author, Dr. Bob Barcelona at Clemson University (rbj@clemson.edu).

to coordinate its work with other teams to ensure coherence and a seamless final product, and to emphasize the importance of collaboration as a key competency of youth development leaders. This collaborative approach was also useful because it emphasized the interdependence between various organizational subsystems, one of the key learning goals of the course (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Senge, 1994). Students were also encouraged to ask the course instructor questions about elements of the case, including questions about capital development (i.e., “can we build a new facility or buy an existing one?”) and questions of context (i.e., “are the schools amenable to partnerships?”). In this way, the course instructor became involved in the process as a facilitator and guide—the role that online graduate students like to see faculty play (Barcelona, 2009; Mandernach, 2009).

The features of the wiki provided students with opportunities to collaborate on their project in several unique ways. Teams generally divided the charges up and assigned each member to work on individual tasks. Individual team members would then publish their work on the wiki for the class to see. Team members would use the threaded discussion board function built into each page to discuss the content that had been published, and they would use the edit functions to edit published work that had mistakes, was not consistent with team goals, or when other team members had something to contribute. The digital artifacts that were left behind, including the final work product, discussion threads, and edit histories proved to be very useful during the grading process when assessing group performance.

Implications, Recommendations, and Summary

For HEHD 803, the wiki platform of choice was Wikispaces (<http://www.wikispaces.com>). Wikispaces offers a variety of choices, ranging from a free, basic package with limited features to their fee-based packages, which provide more flexibility and customization. In addition to the features of the wiki (e.g. editing functions, file storage size), course instructors need to decide whether they want their wiki to be open to the general public or be accessible only to the students in the course. This decision will be largely dependent on the course and assignment objectives. Open wikis have real pedagogical advantages, particularly in promoting high expectations for students, as their work is made publicly available for all to see (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996). In this case, HEHD 803 utilized a private wiki because the assignment was specific to the course and had little utility for the larger public.

It is important to note that wikis are tools that help facilitate collaborative learning—they do not magically produce collaboration by themselves (Elgort, Smith, & Toland, 2008). Wiki assignments must be well planned to encourage collaboration both within and among work teams. The instructor plays an important role in the process by scaffolding the learning experience and serving as both a facilitator and a guide during the collaboration process. Research suggests that collaboration occurs best when students are immersed in an academic culture that encourages and fosters collaborative learning beyond the individual class (Elgort et al.). This is especially important for online distance learning, as a culture of collaboration should be established from the very beginning of the degree program. This can be accomplished by embedding

team-based assignments similar to the HEHD 803 wiki project into every online course. While wikis are certainly useful in this process, they are but one of a number of online tools that course instructors should consider when designing their approaches to collaborative learning.

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