Implementing a WIKI as a Collaboration Tool for Small Group Projects

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Implementing a WIKI as a Collaboration Tool for Small Group Projects

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By Michael Geraci

Introduction

A Wiki is a readily available service on the World Wide Web that allows for the creation and management of content by anyone who is able, and hopefully qualified, to contribute. Perhaps the best-known Wiki is the Wikipedia (http://www.wikipedia.org), which is the Web’s largest and most popular reference site. The Wikipedia represents an excellent model for education by the ways in which it empowers individuals to supply and edit content with little or no experience in Web authoring. As an assistant professor of media arts, I was curious to know if this model could serve as a means for collaboration and knowledge capture among my students, so I implemented a free Wiki in one of my courses to test the Wiki waters.

The course where I used the Wiki introduces students to the planning and design of a major hypermedia project for a real client who has an actual need for such an application. Throughout this 14-week process, students are taught to use industry standard tools and methodologies from the field of project management throughout their planning activities. The first term culminates in the creation of a comprehensive written project specification and a proof-of-concept multimedia prototype, which are delivered to the client for approval.

A succeeding course resumes this experience by changing the students’ foci from planning to implementation. Every decision conceived and recorded during the first class is brought to life in a development environment in which students find themselves managing a variety of tasks — from designing interfaces to writing the underlying code — under the guidance of a project manager, in this case, the instructor.

The project specification created by the class is designed to reflect many of the best practices in Web site pre-production; the “spec” includes ten major sections and generally runs 30-40 pages
not including appendices. The class develops the entire spec during the final few weeks of the term, with students holding both major and minor responsibilities for its development.

**Opportunity For Change**

Collaboration in this environment is a foregone conclusion, with students all pulling together to plan and design the project, they are highly dependent on each other throughout the entire process… except in the creation of the specification. Because of the limited amount of time to create it, and the variety of content, each student retired to his or her own corner to compose the disparate parts that, in the end, had to mesh together and represent a single vision and voice for the project. Suddenly collaboration needed a boost.

**Why a Wiki**

According to the Wikipedia, Wikis are “…a simple, easy-to-use user-maintained database for searching or even creating information… edits are made in real-time, and appear almost instantaneously online.” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki)). Wikis are hosted like other traditional web services such as chat rooms, and blogs. There are myriad free and fee-based sites that one can use to create, host, and maintain a Wiki.

The [Wiki Hosting Comparison Guide](http://www.editthis.info/wiki/Wiki_hosting_comparison_guide) at [http://www.editthis.info/wiki/Wiki_hosting_comparison_guide](http://www.editthis.info/wiki/Wiki_hosting_comparison_guide) is a good source for evaluating the many services and their individual offerings. The Wiki Matrix at [http://www.wikimatrix.org](http://www.wikimatrix.org) is a comprehensive clearinghouse of information on Wiki hosts that allows direct comparisons and a convenient “Choice Wizard” that uses a Q & A format to help narrow your hosting choices down.

**Setting Up a Wiki**

Getting started with a Wiki is a painless process, which, for most hosts, involves clicking a “create new Wiki” button. Every Wiki needs an Administrator; someone who manages users and can make global changes to the Wiki. Typically, this is the person setting up the Wiki for the first time. Once an admin is established, user accounts can be created if desired. Setting up users and user groups allows you to have more control over who can post content to the Wiki; it also enables additional features like private messaging and attribution for user-generated content. In my particular case, I did not want content supplied from anyone outside the course, so I was able to limit posts to only the users I established for the Wiki. The Wiki itself was accessible to the general public in read-only format. There are also private Wiki hosts that require a password before content can be viewed.

Almost all Wikis have some type of “Control Panel” page that allows for the establishment of private/public privileges and parameters for content creation and editing by users who are logged in. Overall, the experience was simple, and did not require prolonged study.
Content is added to the Wiki in one of two ways: WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) or WikiText. WYSIWYG is just that, users can compose content in a word processor-like environment that allows for basic formatting, image insertion and hyperlinking. WikiText is an HTML-like system where users can enter content as plain text and then apply special formatting, through the insertion of special codes (similar to tags in HTML) that format the content when published. For example, == This is a Headline == is WikiText for a page header. Wikis that rely on WikiText offer a toolbar that allows the user to select content and apply basic formatting via a button so that the various key sequences need not be memorized. Knowledge of HTML mark up is valuable since Wikis allow standard HTML to be added without issue.

Pages are added to the Wiki by creating a hyperlink to them in an existing page (all newly created Wikis have at least one page by default). When the link is clicked, The Wiki recognizes that the page does not exist and it confirms that you want to create a new one. Once the page is created, you can link to it from any other page in the Wiki.

Most Wikis feature other capabilities that further enhance their functionality as collaboration tools. Chief among these features are:

1. The ability to track changes to content, and even see version histories of pages,
2. the ability to time/date stamp content and show attribution; and
3. the auto-generation of a linked intra-page table of contents for long pages that include subheadings for sections of content.

Results

I was very pleased with the results of my experiment. Requests for assistance were well below what I expected coming into it, and in numerous instances, I found the students using the Wiki in ways that I had not originally planned. During the design phase, students craft numerous sketches and storyboards that illustrate the creative direction they want to take with the project. A digital whiteboard is used during this process and all drawings are captured to my laptop computer. The students started posting the whiteboard drawings to the Wiki for long-term reference.

Knowledge capture has always been a challenge in a creative environment where students work both independently and in teams to produce all aspects of the project’s user interface and key functions. In the many instances where the work product was already digital, it was converted to a Web-compatible format and uploaded to the “Notes” section of the Wiki. In the few cases, where output was hand-drawn, scanners were used to capture the work for posting to the site.

The specification was built and made available to the client. Prior to releasing the spec to the client, I was able to review it, and make changes and comments that I felt were necessary. These comments were date stamped and attributed to me, and they served as assessment opportunities where I could point out content that was especially well done and conversely that
which fell short of the expectations. This opened the process to the client, who was impressed to see the amount of time and thought that went into the spec’s creation as well as the transparency of the educational process at hand.

I am hard-pressed to find a significant disadvantage to using a Wiki for this type of work. I think it is an excellent tool for small group projects that require long-term commitment from students and on-going review and feedback from stakeholders. The project spec is publicly available at http://www.editthis.info/meda360_spec/.

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16 THOUGHTS ON “IMPLEMENTING A WIKI AS A COLLABORATION TOOL FOR SMALL GROUP PROJECTS”

Gino Creselious on January 30, 2014 at 6:16 PM said:

I think this is among the most significant information for me. And i’m glad studying your article. However should statement on some general things, The web site style is perfect, the articles is in reality excellent : D. Good job, cheers

best tankless water heater on February 2, 2014 at 8:31 AM said:

Howdy, i read your blog from time to time and i own a similar one and i was just curious if you get a lot of spam feedback? If so how do you protect against it, any plugin or anything you can suggest? I get so much lately it’s driving me crazy so any support is very much appreciated.

best crossfit shoes on February 3, 2014 at 6:46 PM said:

It’s very simple to find out any topic on net as compared to textbooks, as I found this piece of writing at this web page.
best vacuum for hardwood floors
on February 3, 2014 at 9:25 PM said:

Please let me know if you’re looking for a article writer for your blog. You have some really great articles and I feel I would be a good asset. If you ever want to take some of the load off, I’d really like to write some material for your blog in exchange for a link back to mine. Please send me an e-mail if interested. Cheers!

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on February 3, 2014 at 11:06 PM said:

Thank you for the good writeup. It in fact was a amusement account it. Look advanced to far added agreeable from you! However, how could we communicate?

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on February 3, 2014 at 11:14 PM said:

What’s Taking place i am new to this, I stumbled upon this I have found It absolutely helpful and it has aided me out loads. I’m hoping to contribute & help other users like its helped me. Good job.

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on February 4, 2014 at 12:36 AM said:

I am not sure where you’re getting your information, but great topic. I needs to spend a while learning more or figuring out more. Thank you for wonderful information I used to be on the lookout for this information for my mission.
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on February 4, 2014 at 3:38 AM said:

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on February 4, 2014 at 5:19 AM said:

I always used to study article in news papers but now as I am a user of internet thus from now I am using net for articles or reviews, thanks to web.

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Thanks , I've recently been looking for information about this topic for a while and yours is the best I have came upon so far. However, what in regards to the conclusion?

Are you sure concerning the supply?

best rifle scope
on February 4, 2014 at 5:32 AM said:

We stumbled over here coming from a different website and thought I might as well check things out. I like what I see so now i’m following you. Look forward to looking at your web page repeatedly.
recumbent bike reviews on February 4, 2014 at 10:00 AM said:

If some one needs expert view on the topic of blogging afterward i suggest him/her to visit this blog. Keep up the fastidious job.

nigeria on February 4, 2014 at 10:15 AM said:

Hey, thank you to your feedback! I would suggest that saying “God died on the cross” is not particular more than enough theological terminology to accurately describe what happened there. Vague terminology like that will lead to deviant considering within the trinity. Of course I do not feel it is the cardinal sin to use vague phrases, but I think it can reveal our confusion with regards to the trinity.

nigeria entertainment news on February 4, 2014 at 10:27 AM said:

great work, i like reading your post. Retain the nice work.

nigeria entertainment news on February 4, 2014 at 10:35 AM said:

Hurrah, that is certainly what I was searching for, what a information! provide the following at this website, thanks admin of this website.

best vacuum sealer on February 4, 2014 at 11:51 PM said:

Remarkable issues here. I am very glad to peer your
article. Thank you so much and I am looking forward to touch you.
Will you kindly drop me a mail?