

Wikis in the Classroom—It's the Process, not the Product

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“May I be granted the serenity to accept the pages I should not edit, the courage to edit the pages I should, and the wisdom to know the difference.” The Wiki Prayer

At the University of St. Thomas, as part of the core curriculum, freshmen take the Critical Reading and Writing sequence. The two classes that make up the Critical Reading and Writing sequence are writing-intensive. Regarding the critical writing part of the class, the writing assignments are designed to enable students to:

- See themselves as writers who have a responsibility for their own development as writers.
- Employ a writing process that incorporates effective strategies for generating, developing, and organizing ideas.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the nature and practice of revision.
- Synthesize ideas and information from various sources.

- Devise an arguable thesis and organize a paper in support and clarification of it.
- Understand the role of evidence, textual and otherwise, in informing and articulating their own interpretations.
- Demonstrate an ability to recognize and respond to other views when arguing on behalf of a thesis.

Wanting to refurbish my freshman English classes, and with these course goals in mind, I asked myself what new types of assignments would help my students develop their skills as critical writers. Eventually, I decided to have students write in the wiki environment, since wikis are specifically designed as a writing space. They offer a highly collaborative avenue for composition and creativity where writers continually invent, build upon, revise, and edit a text.

More specifically, my reason for choosing the wiki environment is that it provides endless opportunities for revision. In describing the writing process employed in UST's English classes, the Department of English Faculty Handbook states that: “Revision ... is the very heart of the writing process, since it entails paying attention to nearly every aspect of writing from the discovery of ideas and arguments to the assessment of the fit between the formal qualities of a piece of writing and the thematic emphasis the writer hopes to achieve” (Section 3.1.2). Persuading students as to the significance of revision in the writing process can be frustrating. So, what better way to engage students in revision and persuade them toward its significance than by having the students write in the wiki environment at the heart of which lies revision? I intend to use this assignment over three years so that I can assess whether working in the wiki environment truly does enhance students' skills in terms of revision.

Wikis emerged around 1995 and are credited to a founding figure, Ward Cunningham, a software engineer. Cunningham and his peers used wikis to create dynamic knowledge bases, i.e. repositories where content could be immediately viewed and commented on, with users possessing both author and editor privileges. This practice, which is referred to as “open editing,”

is what ultimately persuaded me to use the wiki environment as one of my writing assignments.

So, what is a wiki? At its simplest level, a “Wiki is a website that allows the visitors to easily add, remove, edit and change available content” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>). As the definition makes clear, wikis are collaborative websites where anyone can edit and publish. They are writing spaces that privilege revision. All that is needed to participate in a wiki is a computer, an Internet connection, and a web browser. The formatting rules in wikis are simple so no one needs to understand HTML or possess skills in such HTML authoring tools as Dreamweaver.

The wiki as an online writing space means that each reader of the wiki is potentially a writer in the same wiki. There is no one author who can claim ownership of the text. In this collaborative space, participants have to understand and accept that their contribution to the wiki may be deleted or changed. Yet that does not mean the original contribution, deleted or changed, is lost. Each time the text is changed, a new version is saved. Thus, wikis provide a history of all the drafts.] This is what is invaluable regarding wikis in the English classroom. Students and teachers can peruse the various versions. Most especially, students see the writing process in action. Meanwhile, teachers can track the work in progress and see how much each group member has contributed to the assignment. Teachers may or may not choose to be an actively writing member of the wiki. For the purposes of my work, as work on the wiki progressed, I chose to delay my comments until class time. That way, the wiki remained sacrosanct for the students.

Since the foundation of a wiki is an empty webpage, the expectation is that a wiki will generally be published online. An obvious question for a teacher would be whether it is possible to keep a wiki closed, allowing access to teachers and students only. The answer is yes; gated wikis are possible. At the University of St. Thomas we use Blackboard which provides a wiki function as part of the overall system, and as part of that system the wiki can be closed to class members and teachers only.

The wiki assignment I set for my students took place in

Critical Reading and Writing II, a class in which we concentrate on poetry and drama. In this class, beyond the various readings from poetry, we studied plays ranging from the 17th to the 20th centuries. Our earliest text was Shakespeare’s *Othello* and our latest was Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd*. At the beginning of the semester, the class was divided into four groups. Each group was assigned a specific text to research and “present” on. The wiki assignment, therefore, encompassed a number of goals: research, writing, and (online) presentation of research.

Only after the class had worked on a couple of one-act plays did we begin work on the wiki assignment. The students toiled at the assignment over a number of weeks both inside and outside of class. The specific description of the assignment was as follows:

This project is the primary research component of the semester. What I’m looking for as components of the wiki are the following:

- (a) A group document to which you each contribute a portion. In the document you describe how you, the group, decided which areas/aspects/themes of the play should be researched. Then as individuals you write about how you went about your individual research (its goals, fruitful paths you followed, dead ends you met).
- (b) Choose a format in which you each share something of what you learned research-wise for the particular theme or topic that you chose as a member of the group. The simplest way would be to create a link on the page for each individual and her or his contribution. Or, you could put together a PowerPoint slide show in which your information is offered. Or, ...
- (c) Each member of the group has to post to the wiki an annotated bibliography of 5 items. These items will be peer reviewed journal articles and/or websites (each of my sections are taken through a

library research session in which the peer-reviewed definition of a journal is clarified for students).

- (d) Miscellaneous: Here, as a group, you can post whatever you wish that you think might add to the general understanding of the play. For example, are there movie versions of the play that you could link to? There might be YouTube snippets/scenes from movies or productions that you come across.

Despite the fact that incoming freshmen are mostly very comfortable with different technologies, and are more than familiar with that wiki of all wikis, Wikipedia, that does not mean they understand the concept of a wiki or have ever been a contributor to a wiki. Certainly, no one in my Critical Reading and Writing classes had acted as a reader/author/editor in a wiki community before the assignment.

For me, the most pressing issue was conveying to students how a wiki works while allaying the fears of those who were computer resistant or simply feeling a natural anxiety in the face of something new. Happily, I found a short video on YouTube called “Wikis in Plain English” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dnL00TdmlY>). Through the example of a group of people using a wiki to plan a camping trip, the video producers make clear that there are two functions or buttons you need to master in a wiki: Edit and Save. Nothing more, nothing less. It is as simple as that. You do not need to swallow a software manual to work in the medium.

The authors of “7 things you should know about ... Wikis” explain the Edit/Save process thus:

When you click a wiki page’s “Edit” link, the script sends the raw text file to your browser in an editable form, allowing you to modify the content of the page. Pressing the “Save” button sends the modified text back to the wiki server, which replaces the existing text file with your changed version for all to see. When you request a wiki page, the script gathers the corresponding text

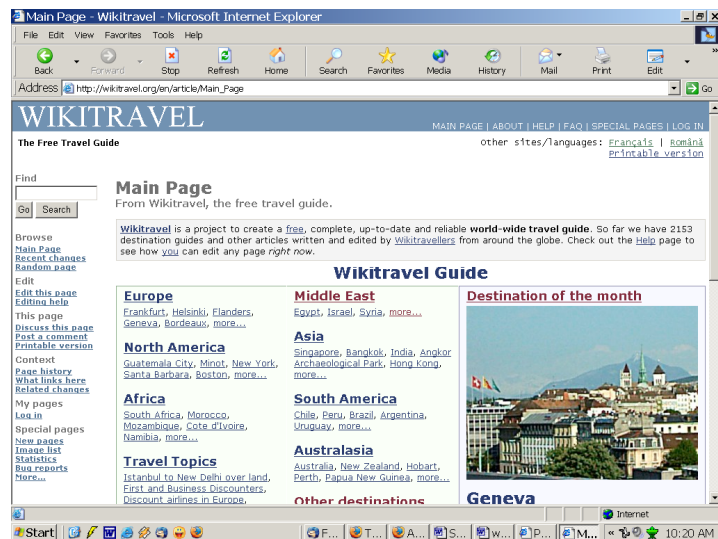
file, changes its marked-up text into HTML, turns user-selected words into hyperlinks, inserts this information into a page template, and sends the results to your browser. (<http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7004.pdf>)

The YouTube video clip worked well for the students. At our class website I had created an external link to the video so that students could remind themselves whenever needed that the basic concept behind wikis is Edit and Save.

Before having the students begin the assignment, I had them go online to our class website to a wiki I had created specifically for the purposes of practicing editing and saving. I informed them that they could do whatever they wanted to the wiki since it was simply for practice. They could upload images, links to video clips with sound files, write whatever they wanted as long as they practiced the Edit/Save functions and became familiar with how the wiki was altered/revised. We spent one complete class period on this exercise allowing me to go around the room and answer students’ questions and also work at the keyboard one-on-one. I also left the trial wiki online for the duration of the assignment so that the students could go there and practice their “maneuver” before working in their own wiki. That way, I hoped to lessen any anxiety about the technological aspects of the assignment. Once students gained comfort with working in the wiki environment, it was time to turn to the assignment itself.

Having been assigned the play they were to research, each group had to decide basic questions such as who was going to do what? Which themes would be addressed? And so on. Once the reading and research was done, and the information was amassed, it came time for the construction of the wiki. The basic question, of course, was how to organize the wiki. Some wiki software has built-in templates or even a common template that the authors must follow. However, the software we use at UST leaves the field wide open. Therefore, it’s important to provide the students with some kind of template or style sheet. For the purposes of the project, I chose to have the students organize the wiki as people would organize a catalog.

Catalogs are organized with an opening “index” page which points the reader to the appropriate page according to subject. In the wiki environment, the authors can use the “catalog” system. On the wiki’s opening page or home page, the authors provide links to the various pages of the wiki rather than the page numbers employed in a catalog. Below is an example from TravelWiki of the catalog style. The source of the example is http://wikitravel.org/en/article/Main_Page.



With this catalog style in mind, groups had to decide what they were going to call the page. How would they structure it? Would there be one page miles in length? Or would they hypertext from one page to another? (Hypertextuality or “hotlinking” allows the wiki community to have a basic homepage which links to groups of other pages.) If they opted for a basic homepage, would they want all their subheadings on the homepage or in different places? All of this requires active participation in the decisions that writers make as they “plan, develop, design, write, test,” what it is they’re trying to say (Spinuzzi & Zachary 170).

Here follow two examples that illustrate how the groups chose to organize the home page of their respective wiki using the catalog style. Rather than insert a screenshot of the groups’ pages I have copied and pasted the information from the home

page. My reason for doing so is that a screenshot would not include a full picture of how the page is organized. The first example is from a wiki created by Eddie Kocourek, Greg Morse, Jennifer Niccum, Thinh Pham, and Phung Phung. on *Sweeney Todd*.

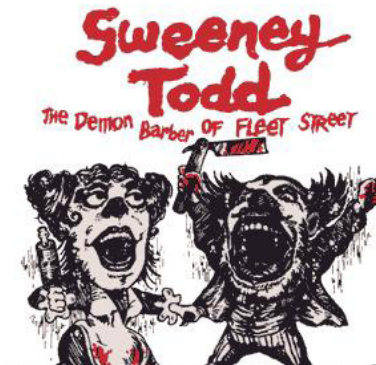


IMAGE: www.blogwaybaby.com

Welcome to the Wiki of Sweeney Todd! We have provided a variety of information to enhance your knowledge and further your interest in this gruesome play! ENJOY

SWEENEY TODD

Cast of Characters

Various Productions

History of Play Productions

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Book by Hugh Wheeler

Story Line of Sweeney Todd

Musical Numbers

Interesting Information

Fact or Fiction??

GROUP EVALUATION & ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Group Evaluation

Individual Evaluations

Annotated Bibliography

The group has broken down the page into three sections: a copy of the text's cover; a section on the play itself which contains links to pages on the story line of Sweeney Todd and so on; and a section which contains links to pages on which the group evaluates its research as group, how the individual members conducted their specific research, and the required annotated bibliography.

The second example again illustrates the catalog style. As you can see, the group chose to break down their work under a different set of categories. This wiki is the work of Tim Cameron, Katelyn Childs, Annie Hejny, Kelsey Shurson, Danielle Tagg.

THE PIANO LESSON BY AUGUST WILSON

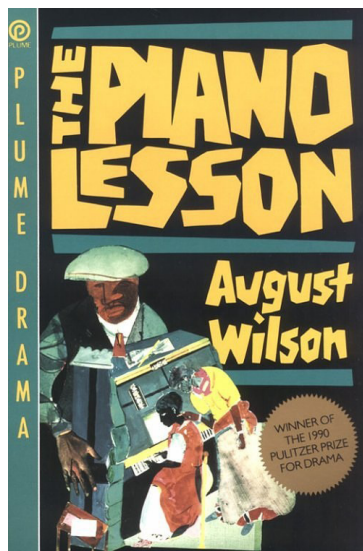


IMAGE: <http://www.gpschools.org/ci/images/wilson.jpg>

Author

August Wilson was born in 1945 in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. His influences include Ralph Ellison, Romare Bearden, Arna Bontemps, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes, just to name a few.

Areas of Interest

Meet the Characters: [The Piano Lesson.ppt](#)

[Setting and Plot Outline](#)

[Art & Music](#)

[Theatrics](#)

[The Life of August Wilson.ppt](#)

[The Great Migration, Symbolism of the Piano, and Themes.](#)

[Highlights of United States history in the 1930's](#)

[Photo Gallery](#)

Bibliographies

[Tim's Annotated bibliography](#)

[Kelsey's Annotated Bibliography](#)

[Katelyn's Annotated Bibliography](#)

[Annie's Annotated Bibliography](#)

[Danielle's Annotated Bibliography](#)

Evaluations

[group evaluation.doc](#)

[Kelsey Shurson's Evaluation](#)

[Katelyn Childs' Evaluation](#)

[Annie Hejny's Evaluation](#)

[Danielle Tagg's Evaluation](#)

[Tim Cameron's Evaluation](#)

Once the project was completed students had these points to make:

- They liked the ease with which they could add, modify, or delete material from the wiki.
- They liked the fact that they could track each other's participation and that I could see how much each participant contributed to the assignment. That way any individual not pulling her or his weight would be exposed.
- They liked the fact that wikis are webpages that make linking to references very handy.
- They liked the fact that they could collaborate on a document without having to have extensive training or purchase a completely new piece of software.
- They liked the fact that they could modify the wiki with nothing more than a computer and a web browser.
- They found the initial structuring of the content tough. However, once they realized the ease with which they could restructure the wiki they felt more confident. Yet, the ease of restructuring the wiki presented its own difficulties. As they said, "when does a group know that the structure they have is enough or right for the purpose of the project?"
- They had difficulties stepping out of the traditional notion of authorship.

- They were sometimes unhappy about contributions being revised or deleted. However, they agreed that discussing why a contribution should be revised or deleted could be helpful in letting them know how readers responded to their writing.
- Despite the relative simplicity of editing and saving some still did not like working in such a technological environment.

While the collaborative research aspect of the assignment was essential, what was important to me was mostly in terms of writing. In creating and designing the wiki, students learned how to organize documents and resources. They also received plenty of peer review and learned better how to offer peer review, particularly when it came to discussing why a contribution should be revised or deleted. Because of the way a wiki works students had to focus on the process of writing, especially in recognizing the necessity of keeping track of drafts. Also, I believe, the students came to understand that writing is a social process even though it might in some situations seem solitary.

Thus, from my point of view the assignment was successful. In working in the wiki environment, students learned as a community of writers and readers to invent, build upon, revise, and edit a text. While the product was important, what they learned was the process.

Works Cited

- "7 things you should know about ... Wikis." July 2005. EDU-CAUSE Learning Initiative. 3 Jan. 2009. <<http://net.edu-cause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7004.pdf>>.
- Spinuzzi, C., & Zachary, M. "Genre ecologies: an open system approach to understanding and constructing documentation." *Journal of Computer Documentat*on. 24 (2000): 169-181.