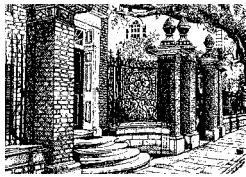


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ATG Special Report — Collaboration and Context: Wikis in the Workplace

by **Keith Engwall** (Head of Library Systems and Technology, Catawba College Library)
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While wikis are nothing new, it may be that libraries are just now discovering their potential. At least that was the case with us at **Catawba College**. Like most of our colleagues in academic libraries, we had a mountain of internal files, documents, proposals, and meeting minutes — all in desperate need of organization. Yes, we had the documents (any healthy library produces all sorts of documents), but we couldn't find them half the time. Looking for documents was like trying to find something in your teenage son's closet. Were the files stored somewhere on a network drive? Maybe the systems librarian had them tucked away in an email file. Then again, maybe the departmental assistant was hoarding them in a filing cabinet. Most of the time, we gave up. It was too hard to decide where to look first.

But that was not all. In addition to our organizational malaise, we had a crying need for improved networking. We needed better information sharing — old-fashioned office

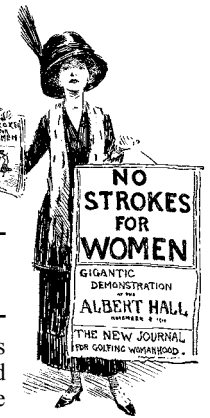
communication, if you will — and talking things over around the water cooler wasn't going to cut it. What we needed was a simple, easy-to-use online tool that would increase our communication but not require a bevy of workshops to learn. In short, we wanted a tool that would enhance our communication and organize our documents. As it turned out, our wiki did both, and a great deal more besides.

Wikis: What They Are and What They Aren't

Most of us know about wikis by way of Wikipedia, the free, Web-based encyclopedia that almost anyone can edit. **Wikipedia** styles itself as "the biggest multilingual free-content encyclopedia on the Internet," and this self-serving description is close to the truth as **Wikipedia** hosts over two million articles. Part *Whole Earth Catalog*, part *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and part rambling outlet for would-be scholars and ambitious, pretended authorities, **Wikipedia** is one of the virtual wonders of

the world — a ubiquitous source of information and misinformation — the marvel of freshmen, the bane of librarians, the envy of scholars.

But the wiki part of **Wikipedia** is only the messenger, the wherewithal that makes the encyclopedia possible. **Wikipedia** itself is the most famous or infamous use of wiki functionality on the Web. Wikis quite simply are online software tools that enable one to manipulate and manage files, and to use and store texts and documents, with relative ease. The software has enormous flexibility and outstanding user-friendliness — dimensions that largely explain **Wikipedia's** success. Almost anyone can use the software. Editing is fluid. Corrections are simple. Indeed, the wild functionality that made **Wikipedia** so usable, so dynamic, so exasperatingly democratic, is exactly the kind of feature that can make wikis such a valuable in-house librarian tool.



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The Genius of Wikis: Speed and Efficiency

The word “wiki” is Hawaiian for “fast.” Wikis are designed to be collaborative information repositories that are quick and easy to use. This is the genius of wikis: they have the features of hypertext, but do not require users to learn complex markup languages. Instead, a simple set of markup rules (consisting primarily of extensions of punctuation) governs formatting and linking on the wiki pages. These shorthand markup rules are easy for people to learn and implement, therefore more people can create and maintain the content.

In our library, this means we can build a context-rich structure for our internal information. Rather than store our ideas in documents and keep them in folders, we simply enter the information directly into the wiki as an “article” (an individual page of information). We then link that page to wherever it seems most appropriate. And since our wiki is open to our entire staff, individuals can provide content relevant to their area of expertise and organize it accordingly.

Examples: How Does it Really Work?

Some examples may suffice. We have, for instance, a *Projects and Plans* section on our wiki. Within that, we have an article on our library building project, which links to several documents about the renovation of the library. We have several librarians involved, so each of us is able to contribute information. Moreover, we have another article about how to disseminate information about the library building project via the library Website. Since that article involves both the library building project section as well as the Website section, we worked together on the content of the article and linked it to both sections within the wiki.

Prior to the creation of our local wiki, we might have held a meeting to collaborate, or passed emails back and forth. We may have created a document in a network folder. With the wiki, however, we worked asynchronously and placed everything in one place, where it was easy to find. In addition, our wiki has a history and a discussion page, so we can compare the current version of an article with any previous version — a feature that enables us to carry on a conversation about the content without any disruption of the content itself.

Also, wikis provide an excellent means of tracking proposed ideas before they are fleshed out. If one of us has an idea for a project (perhaps a book sale or a display case concept), we can create a quick and rough draft, or even establish an empty link. Then, later on when we have time, we can simply click on that link and flesh out the idea.

Due to their informal nature, wikis are an excellent vessel for the kind of relaxed information sharing that is usually relegated to the staffroom bulletin board. For instance, local places of interest, good restaurants, and book/movie recommendations are all excellent wiki fodder and encourage staff participation. Moreover, the decision to include information does not have to come from the top. Anyone with a particular interest can create a place for that on the wiki, and everyone can then contribute.

While the lack of control inherent in a wiki can be unnerving to some, the benefits of open collaboration far outweigh the risks. Many wikis are designed to be fault-tolerant, and it is easy to recover from mistakes (such as reverting to a previous version of a document) and very difficult to cause permanent damage (such as deleting an article, which can only be done by an administrator). Still, there are ways to secure wikis from those outside a given community as well as provide different levels of access to those within a community, so a wiki does not have to be an absolute free-for-all.

Getting Started: Some Technical Considerations

There are literally dozens of wikis to choose from. Some cost money. Many are free. Some are hosted, and some you can host on your own Web server. There are similarities among most wiki software, but there are also a lot of variables. Most have a “sandbox” where you can try them out. We suggest that in most cases the best way to select a wiki is to use the site’s experimental “sandbox.”

Some of the common features found in many (but not all) wikis are:

- **Page History.** Many wikis are designed to keep a history of each page so that you can go back and compare earlier versions to the current one.
- **WYSIWYG.** Nearly all wikis use some kind of shorthand to mark up text (bold, bullet list, headings, etc.). Some wikis provide a What-You-See-Is-What-You-

Get (WYSIWYG) interface, similar to common MS Office-type products.

- **Access Control.** Wikis are designed to be collaborative. Some are completely open (anyone can change anything), others allow administrators to lock specific pages, while others provide several layers of authority (e.g., read, comment, edit, delete, etc.).
- **Comments/Discussion.** Some wikis have special comments or discussion pages that accommodate content and discussion about the content.
- **Images and Files.** Some wikis can only tolerate formatted text, some allow images, and others allow local storage of files (such as pdf documents).

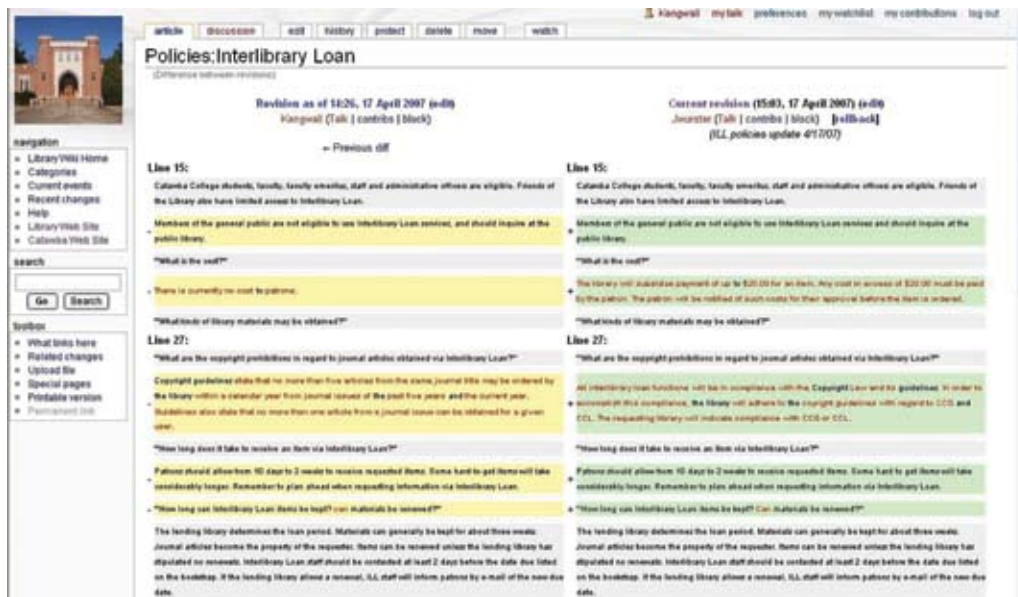
We list these various wiki features to give you a sense of the wide and varied functionality that wikis offer. Knowing about these features (and our list is not exhaustive) will go a long way in helping you decide which wiki is right for you and your library.

We also strongly recommend that you visit the *WikiMatrix* site, with its Wiki Choice Wizard (<http://www.wikimatrix.org/wizard.php>), a well-written and heuristic interactive Web tool. The Choice Wizard will help you compare wikis by walking you through a battery of questions that gradually narrow your options. Beyond this, consult your Webmaster, especially if you plan to host your own site. Remember, some wikis have specific technical requirements (operating system, programming language, etc.), and some may be harder to manage than others. In the final analysis, choosing the right wiki will take some time. Even so, it is a task that will be worth the effort.

The Catawba College Experience: Practical Issues

Currently, the **Catawba College Library** hosts its own wiki. We use MediaWiki software on the same Ubuntu LAMP (Linux, Apache, MySQL, PHP) server that hosts the library Website. We chose this wiki because

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of its feature set, its ease of maintenance, and because Wikipedia uses it, which makes it both familiar and mature (in terms of software development). We also wanted wiki software that allowed flexibility for a wide variety of contexts. For example, since we first introduced the library wiki, we have created a wiki on a specific course for faculty use and another one for a subcommittee. Each of these wikis was configured with its own set of features and restrictions, such as who can create, edit and/or read pages, and whether or not files can be uploaded. Because the wikis are simple to set up and require little maintenance, we can support these wikis as well as others that may develop over time. We may eventually create a wiki for our patrons; however, we wanted to familiarize ourselves with our own private wiki before taking on one with a public face.

Right now, all library faculty and staff can read and edit the library wiki. However, the wiki maintains an edit history for each page, so it is protected against editing mishaps. Only the wiki administrator (the systems librarian) has the capability to delete pages from the wiki. Currently, only a few library faculty do most of the editing. The content is still fairly sparse, but is steadily, if slowly, growing. We are investigating ways in which we can encourage other staff to experiment with the wiki.

The primary cost of implementing a wiki is the time and expertise involved in the initial set-up. It only takes a few hours to get a wiki up and running, and most of that is spent in planning. Of course, this can be sidestepped by opting for a hosted wiki, but then you generally have to contend with either advertising or recurring hosting fees. Because we were already maintaining our own LAMP server for our Website, it required little extra effort to implement our wiki software

The amount of effort necessary to maintain a wiki will depend greatly on how it is used. A small, closed wiki, for instance, will require little maintenance, since only a few people will be adding content. A more open wiki could require more effort, particularly in protecting the wiki against abuse. Because open wikis allow anonymous submission of content, one must provide protection against automated software called bots, which distribute spam and wreak havoc. There are software programs available to combat spam bots, but some risk

is unavoidable. Thus, open wikis will require more monitoring than restricted ones.

Our wiki has its limitations. It is more useful for presenting text and images than for providing access to a large number of files. The process of adding a file and linking to it is relatively complicated and requires several steps. Some wiki software may have more robust support for sharing files, but this was not a high priority for us and might have required giving up the flexibility that our wiki software provides. In addition, we cannot link a calendar to our staff wiki because this exceeds the capabilities of our (and most) wiki software. These features are more common in Content Management Systems (CMS), and we investigated a few but found them to be more complicated to set up and maintain.

Additional Applications

An interesting application of our wiki is that we use it to update library policies on our library Website. The staff updates the policy document, then supervisors review the changes and make corrections, and finally the Web administrator compares versions and updates the Website accordingly. Previously this process involved a series of emails with a variety of attached documents in various stages of editing. Now, library policies live on the wiki as a single, cumulative, collaborative document.

In addition to our staff wiki, one librarian and several faculty created a wiki about a Con-

ference of Independent College's workshop, "Technology and Learning Spaces." This wiki served as a faculty forum for discussion about campus learning spaces and as a place for faculty conference attendees to share what they learned. Once again, a wiki allowed for maximum collaborative input, and it was done within a relatively short amount of time.

Conclusion

The whole purpose of our article is to shout the merits of wikis for local libraries. Our enthusiasm comes quite frankly from our own practice. Our library's wiki has been surprisingly rewarding and especially useful. Wikis, in short, are invaluable tools — well-nigh indispensable in the life of modern libraries.

Of course, we hasten to add that wikis cannot do everything. They cannot so restructure your library that your institution becomes a dynamic Library 2.0 trendsetter. They cannot enable your technical and public service staff to get along with one another. They cannot help you understand, much less like, your director. Wikis can, however, greatly advance your file and document management. They can also improve your internal communication. These are no small accomplishments in the characteristically **Dilbert**-like environment of most libraries. In the end, our advice is simple: get a wiki. It will revolutionize your library's organizational life. 🌱

