An English teacher describes her experiences teaching a large-scale, book-club wiki project she designed for her students.

“Wiki, Wiki, Wiki—WHAT?” Assessing Online Collaborative Writing

OK, guys, how are your wiki pages coming?

“Wiki, Wiki, Wiki—WHAT?”

Every time I said wiki for the first few days of this project, my students just couldn’t resist this prime opportunity to share a little beat boxing. In fact, I still have a hard time hearing the term without hearing the beat in my head.

I conducted my first wiki project last semester because I was running into wikis so often that I knew I had to try out this new technology. Michael Pennell, in his article “Russia is not in Rhode Island: Wikitravel in the Digital Writing Classroom,” describes wikis in a nutshell: “Wikis (Hawaiian for ‘quick’ or ‘fast’) represent a set of Web pages with an open editing system; in other words, anyone can add to, delete, or change a wiki, making them highly collaborative” (79). Although cooperative learning is common in my classroom, I had never attempted a full-blown collaborative writing project.

Recognizing that my students are actively engaged in both public and peer-to-peer networks such as MySpace, Facebook, online gaming, and blogs, I knew it was time to employ networked pedagogies to further explore the collective intelligence of a community in creating knowledge. Since I knew that students were already posting information socially, I wondered if the wiki might harness their interest for writing while teaching them to use these types of technologies with discernment. In addition, I wanted to allow my students an opportunity to conduct themselves as part of a community of learners and cocreators.

These online technologies—wikis, blogs, social networks, podcasts, and tweets—are bringing the social and collaborative nature of composition into the spotlight, but as I planned my wiki project, I had little guidance in developing the way I would assess the actual collaboration taking place. In an educational environment so focused on numbers such as test scores and GPAs, it is hard to tell students that they have to depend on someone else to do their part in earning a group grade. This is where I found myself last semester, and this is an area I believe needs further discussion in composition: If we value collaboration and want students composing together, how do we teach them to deal with the conflicts that arise, and how do we assure students that the assessment is fair to all contributors?

As I conducted research on this topic in spring 2009, the Teachers College Press published Teaching the New Writing: Technology, Change, and Assessment in the 21st-Century Classroom. In this compilation, Anne Herrington, Kevin Hodgson, and Charles Moran have gathered teachers such as Troy Hicks and Glen L. Bledsoe who are actively engaging students in cutting-edge writing technology projects that encourage collaboration, process, and revision while maintaining state and national standards.

As many of the teachers in Teaching the New Writing illustrate, state and national standards seem to be "more theoretically sound and broad based," but mandated tests do not accurately assess the learning goals and thereby adversely drive instruction (Herrington, Hodgson, and Moran 10). However, we as teachers prove that our classrooms are places for authentic assessment, especially when we...
design assessments that are both standards based and innovative.

The wiki format allows teachers to provide ongoing response to assess student performance in conjunction with peer-to-peer evaluations, self-reflections, and holistic scoring guidelines. The essential nature of a wiki is to allow students to take an active role in composing while teaching them to work together to compose, revise, and edit an end product.

Having made some mistakes and learned some valuable lessons through the following collaborative wiki project, I hope my experience will shed light for others who may choose to venture into this new territory.

The Booksellers’ Convention

Having attempted independent reading projects in the past with limited success, I wanted to see if students would “buy into” independent reading more if they could discuss their books with peers who had chosen the same texts. Toward this end, I composed a long-term project I called The Booksellers’ Convention (see fig. 1). The first task for this assignment required small book groups to read and analyze the books they chose, and the second task asked them to persuade their classmates to read their book by using their creative presentation skills to “sell” the books. The wiki seemed to be a logical tool to facilitate this collaborative project, and in the meantime, my students and I would learn to navigate this new technology together.

The first concern was how to convince students to read a book that would not be formally discussed or assessed in class. I felt that providing contemporary book choices along with the novelty of using the wiki with a group of peers would be the hook that would motivate and engage students. I wanted to foster a “book club” camaraderie by allowing students to choose their books. The first important choice I made was to spend one class period allowing students to peruse the books. I compiled a list of 20 books complete with a picture of the book and a synopsis or review of each book. I had also attained copies of the books for students to hold and browse through. We spent a period choosing books, and this created a lot of excitement.

The second and more serious concern was how well students would perform on a collaborative analysis of the book. Since this was a first for my students, I used Donald M. Murray’s approach in encouraging students to engage in the process: “First by shutting up . . . [students] don’t learn a process by talking about it, but by doing it. Next by placing the opportunity for discovery in [the] student’s hands” (5). The open format of the wiki promotes the “opportunity for discovery,” and because we were learning this technology together, students not only looked to me for answers but I often looked to them. I knew students had the skill set to organize and facilitate a group presentation on the book, but I worried about the competing voices that might clash in writing as a group.

I also gave students one class period in the computer lab a few days before we began the actual project to “play” on the wiki by creating a personal page. Students loved doing this because they could post pictures, profiles, and comments on each other’s pages much like they do on Facebook or
MySpace. For me, this decision proved invaluable in getting students excited about the projects while teaching them to navigate the website.

Since I let each student choose the book he or she wanted to read and the students who selected the same book were placed in the same group, the groups were essentially self-selected and heterogeneous. Although I felt this decision to allow the students a choice was crucial to the success of the assignment, it also proved the most challenging. I had worked diligently throughout the year to establish a sense of tolerance and acceptance among students in my classroom, but I crossed my fingers when I saw students of conflicting values, wide-ranging skill levels, and diverse backgrounds choosing the same books. As Kenneth A. Bruffee warns, “Sometimes collaborative learning works beyond my highest expectations. Sometimes it doesn’t work at all” (416).

**Group Dynamics**

There is a quote from John Trimbur’s “Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning” that came to life for me in this project—points where theory met reality. Trimbur says collaborative learning “can incite desire through common work to resolve, if only symbolically, the contradictions that students face because of the prevailing conditions of production” (477). In the sections that follow, I will illustrate how some of Trimbur’s contradictions arose in my classroom, and how students dealt with these conflicts (some effectively, some not).

**Contradiction #1—“the monopoly of expertise and the impulse to know” (Trimbur 477)**

The largest and most diverse group in this project was the group that chose to read *A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah. Students from two different classes proposed to work together to make a video of scenes from the book. Because they had such admirable goals, I approved. It would also allow me to test another advantage of the wiki: students did not have to be together physically for collaboration to take place. In addition, I was curious to see how well a larger group might perform in this medium.

All the members were contributing on the wiki pages as I perused them during the project. It was immediately clear that Carmen, one of my top students who definitely has a Type A personality, was taking a lead role. This did not concern me initially because I knew that in a group of six people, someone would emerge as the “director.” I was unsure if the divide-and-conquer strategy would truly classify as collaborative writing, but according to Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede, groups can be either *dialogic* where “the group works together on all aspects of the project” or *hierarchical* where “the group divides the task into component parts and assigns certain components to each group member” (qtd. in Howard 63). While the dialogic practices inherently develop more sophisticated collaborative skills, the hierarchical practices “offer the benefit of efficiency” (63).

Carmen made sure that each group member had chosen an aspect of the book to analyze, and she volunteered to merge all the pages into the final draft. Linda was assigned her section of the paper and submitted it at the last possible moment to stay on her group’s established schedule. While Linda is hard-working, she was more deficient in skills than most of my students. She had difficulty articulating her thoughts and significant problems with grammar and syntax, so when Carmen read Linda’s page, she deleted it and rewrote that portion of the analysis herself. Linda came to me the following morning distraught that her contribution had been deleted and worried that I would think she had not contributed.

When I approached Carmen later, she replied, “Her analysis didn’t make any sense and I didn’t want the group to get a bad grade.” How was I supposed to respond to that? What Carmen claimed might have been partially true, but what she had done was inconsiderate of Linda’s feelings. As suggested in scholarship on collaboration, I had warned students that even though all drafts are saved in the page history, they needed to prepare themselves as their writing would be edited and sometimes portions deleted by the group (Howard 64). Because Linda *had* waited until the last second to turn in her work, it was too late to have Carmen conduct more peer editing and response with Linda. And how was I supposed to tell a student whose grade was on the line that she should let go of the controls?

What did I learn? There are several contextual factors that influenced this incident, but I learned that using a hierarchical method for group
work can become a real hierarchy, especially with groups who represent a widespread skill base. This is an area for caution.

Contradiction #2—“the separation of work and play” (Trimbur 477)

Charlie is a gifted student who is known for his passive resistance to schoolwork. Andy, Charlie’s classroom sidekick, is also bright but easily distracted and often rambunctious in class. These two were no longer allowed to sit together in class because they were such a distraction to one another. Of course, these two chose the same book. My initial response was to scream, “No!” But the book they wanted to read was The Road by Cormac McCarthy, which I believed was an appropriate choice for each of them. The only other student to choose the book was Natalie. I met with her privately to ask if she felt she could handle working with these two, knowing their track record. She agreed and said she would let me know if problems arose.

Surprisingly, Charlie took charge of the group by having the three work together on one computer initially to plan their project. Natalie allowed him to take charge rather than trying to take on the work all by herself. I worried about her role somewhat because I feared she was being submissive as the only female in the group, but I was pleased at the same time to see that the boys were occupied rather than idly sitting back to let her do all of the work. They engaged in a truly dialogic planning process that continued as they edited one another’s work once writing began. In the end, they delivered the most creative and entertaining presentation of all my classes.

What did I learn? For Charlie and Andy, I believe the lack of structure and the social nature of the project made it meaningful to them. (Or maybe they were just trying to convince me they should be allowed to sit together?) In any case, the freedom of choice and the authority these students had over their success worked well for them.

Contradiction #3—“allegiance to peers and dependence on faculty esteem” (Trimbur 477)

There was an interesting turn of events with the group that read Letters to a Teacher. Brandi, Amy, and Callie are all members of FTA, and they were reading this book for two purposes: (1) for my class and (2) because the author, Sam Pickering, on whom the movie Dead Poets Society is based, was scheduled to speak to their club soon after our project concluded. Although these three girls consistently maintain a high B average, Brandi and Callie often went above and beyond to reach an A average by seeking help for revisions and by doing any extra-credit assignment I sparingly provided. I had no worries about this group—they were friends; they were reading a book on a topic of common interest; and most of all, they always turned in quality work.

The day after presentations when essay submissions were due, the students filled out their final-group and self-assessments. I was not surprised to see this group give each other glowing remarks. Later that day, Amy came to me and reported that she and Brandi didn’t want to turn on their friend Callie, but they were frustrated because she had done virtually no work on the project. These two were torn between their allegiance to their friend and their desire to please me as honest, hard-working students. The real problem, however, was that they had been dishonest on their group evaluation and felt guilt and remorse over it. In this instance, my hands were tied. They wanted me to know, but they didn’t want Callie to know they had said anything. I decided to go back to their wiki pages and see how much Callie had contributed. In the planning phase, she had interacted with comments on who would do what tasks, but on the paper, I ran into a real problem. Rather than finding the essay on the wiki, they had written it on a word-processing program and uploaded it as a link on the page. There was no way for me to view their writing process.

What did I learn? I should have been checking every group page more carefully toward the end of the project.
thought it was faster. Even though these students were all technologically “insiders” (Herrington, Hodgson, and Moran 7), the wiki technology was not within their comfort zone and so they sought ways to work around the system. While the wiki provides ways for the instructor to fairly assess process, the teacher must be diligent in utilizing the tools throughout the process.

Contradiction #4—“the empowering sense of collectivity and the isolating personalization of an individual’s fate” (Trimbur 477)

This group illustrates the truth of Trimbur’s final contradiction. The group was made up of three girls of varying skill levels. Rachel is creative, motivated, opinionated, and energetic. Because she demonstrates so many extreme characteristics, her writing often has to be reined in. She is much more of a creative writer than an analytical one, but she was the best writer I had that year because she was not afraid to take risks with her writing and regularly experimented with the rhetorical devices we discussed in class. Her close friend Shelly, on the other hand, struggled with mechanics and syntactical problems that often distracted from her intended meaning. Chelsea, a bright student who often kept quiet in class, fell somewhere in between. Her writing was not outstanding, but she had moments of clarity that allowed her to shine.

This group read Sherman Alexie’s Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian. The success these girls experienced together was “empowering” because alone they each had obstacles to overcome. One of the reasons their group experienced such a high level of collaboration is that Rachel, a natural leader, led by encouraging the other two to participate in every aspect of the project. She was constantly sending messages to group members asking them what they thought about her writing and commenting on theirs with constructive criticism and glowing praise.

When I asked my students what they thought should happen to group members who failed to do their share of the work, their immediate response was, “Give them a zero!” Shelly and Chelsea responded in kind and took great pride in their overall project. On the day of peer evaluations, the girls bragged that they had the “best group EVER.”

What did I learn? I need more students like Rachel—but more realistically, that successful collaboration depends so much on the dynamics of the group members. In working with students like Carmen who are motivated by grades, it is important to encourage collaborative and constructive behaviors such as those Rachel engaged in. Grade-conscious students can be a positive influence on their group members rather than a dominant and silencing force that discourages collaboration.

Assessing the Final Projects

When I began designing my rubric for project evaluation, I found only two sources that addressed the topic of wiki assessment. I first turned to the advice Rebecca Moore Howard provides from her experiences with collaborative writing. To preserve the group’s collective effort, she advises against giving individual grades (Howard 66). The rubric I developed focused heavily on the process of collaboration involved in creating the analysis and presentation as much as on the end products. I observed group collaboration in class as we moved through the process, and I was able to check the wiki page to see how groups were interacting. The final group evaluation served as one grade for the group’s overall project (see fig. 2). On this evaluation, I looked at the quality of the collaboration, the final analysis, the presentation, and the group’s reflection. Students were asked to reflect on the benefits and drawbacks of using the wiki, working as a group on such a large-scale project, and reading a book independently rather than being “taught” the book in class.

Howard also recommends that students have a voice in how to deal with students who slack off on the group work, but she does not provide specifics (66). When I asked my students what they thought should happen to group members who failed to do their share of the work, their immediate response was, “Give them a zero!” This made it clear to me that my students resent it when someone else gets the credit for their work, but there are obvious shades of gray, as seen in some of the scenarios I have described above.

The second source of information I had for wiki assessments suggests individual participation grades based on the number of times students con-
Looking Back

I know there are many aspects of the project I will revise and improve on the next time I do it. But I will do it again. Despite the various problems we encountered, the reaction from my students in their reflections was overwhelmingly positive. Students found the wiki project fun and engaging,
fort and enthusiasm into communicating online. As Kathleen Blake Yancey has said, “we can imagine the way we might channel this energy for a cause more serious, for a purpose more worthy . . . these students know how to compose, and they know how to organize, and they know audience. How can we build on all that knowledge?” (6). The way our students communicate is fast and furious. We must learn to incorporate collaborative technologies in a way that will help students use them effectively in their personal and professional lives.

Works Cited


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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink and Christy Simon, RWT

After examining samples of movie, music, restaurant, and book reviews in “So What Do You Think? Writing a Review,” students devise guidelines for writing interesting and informative reviews. They produce reviews of the literature they’re reading in class—and compare their ideas and their pieces with published reviews. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=876