

Charles Allan

# Using a wiki to manage a library instruction program

## Sharing knowledge to better serve patrons

The multi-author, collaborative software known as a *wiki*, can be used by librarians to manage their work in library instruction programs. A library instruction wiki can create better information sharing, facilitate collaboration in the creation of resources, and efficiently divide work loads among librarians. The wiki, which is accessible by invited users at a specific URL, somewhat visually resembles a word processing program. Wiki members edit text documents and attachments. Contributors to a library instruction wiki can edit and store insightful comments into class needs, work together in the creation of subject resource guides, and update outdated material.

Library instruction wikis have two chief uses: the sharing of knowledge and the ability to cooperate in creating resources, such as informational handouts and guides.

Prior to the invention of wikis, individuals in a workplace could not store, share, and build on information as easily and coherently. E-mail messages, attaching word processing files in e-mail, and face-to-face communication were some of the methods previously employed. Using a wiki to integrate the library instruction knowledge of many librarians enables a library instruction program to better meet our patrons' needs.

### Making your own wiki

Creating your own wiki is a fairly straightforward process. Commercial sites abound on the Internet that allow anyone to create a free wiki. Some of the best known sites are seedwiki (seedwiki.com), pbwiki (pbwiki.org), jotspot (www.jot.com), twiki (twiki.org), and Phpwiki (phpwiki.org). Like free but basic e-mail service, free wikis are lacking in bells and whistles but seem to suffice for most users' needs. The option to upgrade (for a fee) is always available. Find the company with the most user-friendly interface and create an account.

Once the wiki is created, users can be invited to participate via their e-mail addresses. These users all have equal editing rights (unless denied by the wiki creator), and editing the wiki is limited to these people. The most famous wiki of all, Wikipedia, dispenses with rules of access and allows anyone to edit at will. However, most people creating a wiki will set boundaries for those able to edit and access the wiki. Vandalism and access by anyone will not be a feature of most workplace wikis.

### Literature

The use of wikis in workplaces is beginning to catch on. The deployment of wikis in libraries has also started, and wikis are starting to appear in library literature. Many articles have been written that introduce the concept of a wiki, explain how to get started creating a wiki, and inform what general purposes in a library workplace wikis might serve. Some of the best articles in this vein to read are by Donnice Cochenour,<sup>1</sup> Darlene Fichter,<sup>2,3,4</sup> Jeremy Frumkin,<sup>5</sup> Gerry McKiernan,<sup>6</sup> and Rob Withers.<sup>7</sup> Wikis are used by librarians to man-

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age public services information, collaborate on and keep track of reference questions, and assess databases. In one innovative use of a wiki, students in a library instruction session worked together using a wiki.<sup>8</sup> However, there has been no attention given to the use of wikis in managing a library instruction program.

Library instruction and wikis seem like a good partnership. There was a fair amount of uncoordinated information, such as insight about the actual execution of class sessions, information about problems with the professors' assignments (such as broken Web links), and independently produced handouts in some cases. The different schedules of all the librarians that give library instruction classes also mitigated against effective knowledge sharing and work division. E-mails and hallway conversations occurred, but these are difficult to store in a central location, build on any knowledge or share with all librarians involved in library instruction.

### **Description of the library instruction program at ETSU**

The Charles C. Sherrod Library at East Tennessee State University has a library instruction program dedicated to teaching students how to use our Web site, find journal articles, teach critical thinking about information sources, and evaluate Internet sites. We have one dedicated library instruction librarian. Work over flow is given to other public services librarians. Sherrod Library has a multimedia classroom that contains a main computer projector screen for the librarian and individual laptops for student use during library instruction sessions.

Faculty and instructors reserve the room through e-mail or phone contact with our library instruction librarian. On occasion the faculty member or instructor will teach the class, but typically this duty is handled by the librarian. During the reservation process, the library instruction session requestor usually details a few key points they would like covered in the session. The librarian may

also receive a class assignment designed by the faculty member or instructor. The session is then focused on these points and any assignment given. In the absence of specific requests, the librarian presents a general overview of the library's Web site, how to find journal articles, and how to use the internet wisely.

### **Using the wiki to share knowledge**

The first use of the wiki deals with sharing information and new experiences gained during the library instruction session itself. Now it is time to add this information to the library instruction wiki. We have learned more about the specifics of the classes' needs, unforeseen directions of the assignment, preferences of the professor that were not necessarily communicated previous to class time, and house-keeping issues, such as any broken Web links listed in a subject resource guide.

Many professors include detailed instructions concerning the emphasis of the instruction session. For example, there may be preferences for doing Web site evaluation or spending time on one particular database. However, some requests for library instruction may be vague or the directions may be terse. If the professor manifests a more specific wish during class time or the class's information needs become more evident, this information can be shared via the wiki. Many professors are repeat users of library instruction so any stored information is useful.

Many classes have an assignment they are expected to complete (or at least start) during the library instruction session. The execution of the assignment often leads to a certain direction and the librarian may get the same questions or see repeated mistakes. For example, certain keywords may not work and the concept should be reworded.

If the professor has not used the library recently or is unfamiliar with technology, their assignment may contain inaccurate instructions or wrong information. Store that knowledge in a wiki! Future librarians covering that session will know to spend more

time on a certain concept, correct mistakes, or anticipate certain problems and have the solution ready.

### The wiki and shared resource creation

The second use of the library instruction wiki is that of a centralized resource collaboration tool. The creation of general library information handouts and subject-specific resource guides can be delegated. Many librarians have subject expertise and should create the learning materials for that area. No more independently created handouts or lost e-mail attachments. Collaboration streamlines workflow and allows quick updates of outdated information. Has your library added a new database or changed instructions for accessing e-books? Using the wiki, librarians can change their pre-existing handouts to reflect the new information. Perhaps the library has purchased citation software, such as Endnote. Create a how-to guide on your wiki. Everyone in the library instruction program will know where to find the new information.

### Summary

A library instruction program includes multiple librarians dealing with changing information and gaining independently held bits of knowledge. This knowledge should be coordinated, shared, and built upon. Constant rediscovery, uncoordinated efforts, lack of smart use of others' talents, and unawareness of key information can lead to less than optimal outcomes.

Wikis are an excellent way to close these gaps and improve inefficiencies. Wikis are increasingly used to manage information in organizations, and libraries are beginning to employ them. Use everyone's specific experiences and valuable individual expertise!

### Notes

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