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Inspire Conference

The delights and frustrations of using a wiki

Lisa Russell

Abstract

The delights and frustrations experienced when trying to incorporate the use of a wiki social media site with first year undergraduate childhood study students are reported. Findings are taken from two undergraduate student focus groups; one semi-structured interview with a PhD student who contributed to the maintenance and development of the wiki; the actual wiki site and use of wiki resources in assessments and the lecturer's weekly wiki diary of events from October 2015 to April 2016. The rationale behind the introduction of the wiki was twofold; firstly to inspire students to engage in student peer-learning and start writing in an academic undergraduate format and secondly to facilitate a PhD student's developmental teaching beyond the dissertation phase from PhD student to scholar. Although these aims were achieved to a degree they were reached in unexpected ways, a 'community of practice' (Laver and Wenger, 1991) was evident but more so within the actual seminar session space rather than within an online community capacity.

Introduction

There is an emergent demand to design learning experiences in Higher Education (HE) that develop collaborative and mediated social practices (Page and Reynolds, 2015). There is recognition that students are entering HE with a different skill set and are engaging with lectures and seminars in changed ways (Cole, 2009). Alongside this shift there is a movement towards more student-centred learning (Jonassen et al, 1999). HE educators are increasingly looking towards more participatory, reflective teaching practices which has created a growing interest in the use of web-based technology to create more flexible, interactive learning environments. Working collaboratively has shown to improve learners' ability to understand and retain information (Johnson and Johnson, 1986). Participatory learning among peers has evidenced improved student engagement (Cole, 2009), enhanced writing capabilities (Page and Reynolds, 2015) and developed pedagogic learning amongst new lecturers within a university teaching context (Warhurst, 2006). It is against this backdrop that the use of the wiki as an innovative teaching tool has emerged. This paper examines the pedagogic learning of 25 undergraduate childhood study students within one seminar session based on social policy and welfare and 1 sociology of education PhD student's new lecturing experiences of co-teaching alongside an experienced lecturer (myself) together with actively constructing and maintaining the related wiki site. The lens of situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) is utilised to gain insight into the ways in which the degree of full or periphery participation within the wiki online and physical seminar 'community of practice' space enhanced learner understanding and writing capabilities if managed in a mediated and (re)negotiated way.

Wiki context

A wiki is a 'hypertextual system for storage and transmission of information. Every page on a wiki is created and editable through the web using a web browser. The vision of wikis is an evolution from plain hypertextual systems for learning and information retrieval. Wikis express a high point in the

attention to the connection between community and content. The success of Wikipedia is the most prominent example of the potential of the wiki concept.’ (pg 1915, Ravid, Kalman and Rafaele, 2008). Wikis are usually discussed from two perspectives, as a software tool used to achieve social learning goals and as a social practice through which mediated social contexts are created and collaborative learning is experienced by a collective (Page and Reynolds, 2015). The use of wiki practices foster a collaborative, egalitarian learning that facilitates group interaction and challenges traditional student-teacher modes of learning (Ruth and Houghton, 2009). Pages are co-created by members to form a collective network structure ripe for communal editing, shared knowledge and understanding construction and so data and writing is co-produced and continually renegotiated, amended and developed. This differs from the traditional mode of a single person digital design or a one-way mode of communication cognizant with email (Mindel and Verma, 2006) or from document sharing services which act as a collective data storage space with independent document editing capabilities such as Dropbox or Google Drive (Page and Reynolds, 2015). From a social practice perspective a wiki is viewed as a social practice within and through which learning emerges from member interactions, co-creation of the social or learning context. The learning experience is negotiated via the group rather than on an individual basis, making within-group and virtual team working possible. Wikis have been viewed as a revolutionary educator tool that enhance peer group learning and undergraduate writing capabilities, as well as helping new university lecturers develop their pedagogic practice and lecturer identity.

Situated learning in communities of practice

Situated learning theory offers a radical critique to cognitivist theories of learning that accentuate the individualistic assumptions of learning as a discrete and decontextualized activity, founded on a positivist assessment of abstract knowledge. Rather the relational aspects of learning and the social construction of knowledge is emphasised within a context of ‘community of practice’. Learning is thought as emerging through membership in a community and not as primarily abstract. The wiki can be viewed as a ‘community of practice’, as a virtual space whereby learning and identity are co-constructed for the undergraduates, the PhD student and indeed the lecturer, but also the physical space of the seminar gathering is important. Levels of participation can be analysed and all degrees are accepted as valid with the peripheral participator moving towards full participation as time goes on. Situated learning theory positions the ‘community of practice’ as the context in which an individual develops the practices (including values, norms and relationships) and identities appropriate to that community (Handley et al, 2006). This differs from theories of socialisation (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978) which assume a natural reproduction of values, norms and identities over time. Within situated learning theory individuals bring their own personal history and norms to the group which may or may not comply with one another in the community context. Such differences need to be (re)negotiated and reconciled if the individual is to achieve a feeling of belonging to the community. This means that there needs to be an understanding of the individual’s and the groups situated learning within and beyond the community (Handley et al, 2006), but also an acceptance that the learners enter the community or wiki space with a set of personal characteristics and values that can be safely discussed and (re)negotiated within the seminar group pedagogical practices. Whilst peer-group learning has been analysed within this theoretical context in relation to the use of wiki’s, the postgraduate learners’ identity formation and pedagogic development beyond that of the doctorate have been given less consideration. The use of the wiki here is analysed in terms of group

and individual use, both within the physical space of the seminar room and beyond to include that of the virtual.

Using and analysing the pedagogic value of the wiki

The wiki was created and used with one seminar group across several sessions from October 2015 to April 2016. This one group were selected as a pilot in preparation for the use of the wiki the following academic year. The rationale behind this was twofold; firstly to inspire students to engage in student peer-learning and start writing in an academic undergraduate format – a problem that has long since been identified as a challenge for this year group on this particular module and secondly to integrate and develop a PhD student's developmental teaching beyond the dissertation phase to help her make the transition from PhD student to scholar. My PhD student participated with online discussions and was encouraged to add relevant material and assist with the general set-up and on-going maintenance and monitoring of the wiki. She and I also did some co-teaching on the module.

For the purpose of the experimental teaching session the wiki was stored, administered and accessed through unilearn – the University's virtual learning environment which provides access to electronic documents, social media tools and assignment submission tools to support students' studies. IT support was thus readily accessible and students could access all seminar work in one place.

At the start of the module and academic term, the first year childhood study undergraduates were introduced to the notion of a wiki via a group discussion led by the lecturer and use of the YouTube link uploaded by Common Craft (2007) 'Wikis in Plain English'. Together a home page was developed to include the YouTube link and a 'wiki do's and wiki don't' page that emanated from the students and lecturer consequential seminar discussion. The students were aware that this was a pilot and that the lecturer was also new to using wikis. The list comprised of the following:

Wiki do's and don't page

Wiki Do's

- HAVE A GO!
- Post relevant information related to the module (these can include book chapters, journal articles, YouTube clips, images or newspaper articles).
- Be respectful in your tone but do voice your opinion.

Wiki Don'ts

- Avoid malicious comments and arguments.
- Cite original sources for assignments.

An ideas page was established to encourage the undergraduates and the PhD student to add relevant images, website links, newspaper articles, books and journal references. During the initial stages there were technical issues setting the site up and getting all students access. Students needed reminding about how to access the wiki and what its purpose was. After the first month it became apparent that both the undergraduates and postgraduate required clear direction from me in terms of what resources to input, types of activities to engage with and set tasks to complete. Consequently activities were set and executed in session to actively engage the students and

develop a 'community of practice'. With encouragement, students started to insert photographs of their seminar group work and some extra resources were entered. Both undergraduates and the PhD student seemed reluctant to voice their own opinions and write independently and confidently on the wiki, so I instigated group discussions around set topics and asked students to form group written answers to relevant questions. Fostering a mutual 'community of practice' took time and constant direction. Although some students used the wiki, most of this was done in seminar under lecturer direction rather than taking on a life of its own. I had to do more than simply build it.

Findings are taken from two twenty minute focus group interviews with undergraduates who have used the wiki and one fifteen minute semi-structured interview with the PhD student (in February 2016) to explore their experiences of contributing to the wiki and their learning processes and outcomes. All interviews were transcribed and hand-coded. All data was triangulated alongside the document analysis of the actual wiki site content; frequency of use of wiki resources within assessments and my weekly wiki diary to analyse the use and content of the wiki, the student's contribution and level of participation with the wiki inside and outside of the seminar space (inside space is defined as the physical space of the seminar room and actual time of scheduled seminar as opposed to outside space which includes anything beyond this) and how use of it may be improved.

From PhD student to scholar

Part of the rationale for setting up the wiki was to aid my PhD student's academic career trajectory after (the near) completion of the PhD. The doctor of philosophy (PhD) degree is intended to prepare students to conduct original scholarly research for the thesis and beyond (Fleming-May and Yuro, 2009). Postdoctoral training is vital to a successful career for education-based researchers to help them gain substantive knowledge and expand their research repertoire. Evidence suggests that PhD students experience difficulty navigating this transition and require further support (Downs and Morrison, 2011). HE institutions and PhD supervisors can assist this transition for those who wish to make the shift via supporting students beyond the doctorate with their writing (for publication and grant awards) and teaching. It is within this ethos and the mutual support offered by the PhD student and the lecturer in terms of maintaining and actively contributing to the wiki that the postgraduate student (PG) was invited to take part and interject a new voice and fresh material to the wiki site. While use of the wiki helped the PhD student and added to her teaching repertoire, this participation alone was not sufficient to fully support her desired academic based career trajectory.

L R Is there anything that you've learnt through doing those seminars or doing some developmental work on the wiki?

PG Yeah. One of the things that I've picked up is about how to engage less forthcoming students particularly the first year students, I learnt how to kind of re-engage them with material at a later date and that's been particularly useful for me. It's been useful to see how a seminar is run in a university as opposed to a college.

L R Did it help in terms of your confidence or thinking about what you might do next in your career?

PG I think it's given me a bit more confidence, I wasn't entirely sure about how the teaching that I'm involved with at the moment would be different in a university setting and when I was an undergraduate student I was at a red brick

university in a huge cohort so it was very different to how things are run here so, in terms of confidence, it's made me realise that there are differences but there are also quite a lot of similarities in terms of the actual teaching, so if I was able to come and teach at a university I wouldn't have too many problems with adjusting.

Adding another voice to the wiki was useful in helping the wiki content develop and retain self-sustainability. It enabled the PhD student to experience a different way of teaching in a distinctive environment and boosted her confidence which may help her gain a paid academic position in HE. This reveals the multi-dimensional nature of teaching and the opportunity educators have to embrace the undergraduate and postgraduate experiences in a peer-group forum enabling everyone to participate in some optimising way.

A wiki way of writing for the undergraduate student

Most of the students found the wiki site of some use. It took a few months to get the wiki fully functioning. There was a familiarisation process whereby students became acquainted with university procedures and policies, in addition to familiarising themselves with the wiki. Most used it as a safe forum in which to explore ideas and as a resource rich with student, lecturer and PhD student-led content. Undergraduate students (US) used it in different ways and during different times, illustrating the benefit of this flexible, interactive pedagogical approach.

L R Did you understand the wiki?

US Yes.

L R What did you understand was its purpose?

US To share ideas on it and to look back on what we've done.

L R And do you think you've used it in that way?

US Yeah because it's gained us an understanding of other people's perspectives on their topic.

L R Have you found it useful?

US Yeah.

Some used the wiki as data storage and retrieval site, a place where they could refer back to previous seminar discussion content and useful references. Although most didn't see it as a direct means of improving their academic writing, many discussed taking care over what they wrote while simultaneously freely expressing personal opinions.

US I looked at it at the start just to get an overview of what we did in class especially before the test.

US I always forget to go on it but I've been on it twice. I don't look for references or anything like that.

L R So what do you go on it for?

US To see what I'd written the week before because I remember spelling something wrong.

L R So did you go back and change it?

US Yeah.

US I've been on it a few times just to look.

L R At what you'd written or what other people had written?

US Both.

With a little encouragement students began to voice their own opinion and write. Knowing they were writing for the seminar audience made them conscious of their writing, knowledge and understanding, encouraging some to reflect on what and how they wrote. Some undergraduates described the benefits of having this resource and while the use of the wiki was not directly related to any form of assessment, some students used it to remember seminar content and access useful references for their timed test essay. Approximately a third of students referred to references available on the wiki in their assignment, they referenced these sources directly though rather than referencing the wiki site as directed in the wiki do and don'ts list comprised at the start of the module.

L R Did anybody use it at all for the assessment?

US Yeah I looked over it.

There is evidence that the undergraduates did use the wiki in addition to their lecture-based notes and independent reading material to aid their writing in the timed test essay question. However not all used it this way and some engaged with the wiki more than others.

Levels of participation

Participation is depicted as central to situated learning since it is through participation that identity and practices develop (Handley et al, 2006). Within the theory of situated learning, participation is not just viewed as a physical event or action but rather it involves both taking part (action) and connection (Wenger, 1998). The connection element is harder to accomplish and arguably harder to document, however there was evidence of a community of practice amongst the undergraduates whereby they discussed the significance of peer-group learning outside of their physical seating arrangements within class.

US It feels like you are actually one big group instead of just a table.

Undergraduates also acknowledged the potential for conflict of ideas and recognised that each student brought a different history and context to the wiki that was negotiated and to some extent mediated by the wiki seminar group.

US I think it's good because it gives us a different perspective, I might think of something and somebody else might say it differently but in a classroom that might not happen because some people might not feel comfortable in expressing their opinions. Especially if you write something that is not popular

so if I had something to say which was different from what everybody else was saying I would just agree with what they were saying.

L R But do you put anything controversial up there?

US When we did the definitions I'm sure that everyone had different definitions. So if a different group did the same definition everyone would have different things to write.

Situated learning theory emphasises that learning is not just about developing one's knowledge and practice; rather it involves a process of understanding who we are and in which community of practice we belong (Handley et al, 2006). Some felt more part of the community than others and there was evidence to suggest that sub-groups within the overarching seminar session helped some to gain confidence in voicing their opinion and writing. Building up these safe writing environments takes time, careful management and an understanding that peer-group learning takes on a life of its own in terms of who and how people share and write ideas. There are different forms of participation ranging from 'marginal' to 'full' and not everyone achieved full participation at all times (Wenger, 1988). The dynamics of power and familiarity operating within the community of practice may affect levels of participation and it is up to the management of the educator to mediate these to enable all learners to benefit from the community of practice.

Conclusions

Essay writing is a standard practice many undergraduates are expected to demonstrate as it is thought to promote higher-order thinking (Smith et al, 1999) and is associated with deep learning (Xiao and Luckling, 2008). Peer feedback has been viewed as an effective strategy used to improve student writing skills and learning achievement (Plutsky and Wilson, 2004) and as such was implemented within this seminar via the use of the wiki to facilitate collaborative learning and improve undergraduates' academic writing capabilities. The use of the wiki enabled some undergraduates to voice their own opinion, capitalise on their own individual experiences and write.

In addition to providing graduates with the requisite knowledge to teach in their respective fields, the doctor of philosophy (PhD) degree is aimed to prepare students to conduct original scholarly research for the dissertation and beyond (Fleming-May and Yuro, 2009). By integrating a PhD student into the 'community of practice' she gained valuable experience contributing to the doctrine of an undergraduate course and assisted with the online discussions. It acted as a forum for the postgraduate to familiarise herself with HE teaching and enhance her and my repertoire of pedagogical teaching and learning styles.

Collaborative learning is an excellent way to optimise the undergraduates, postgraduate and the lecturers skills and knowledge set to enhance understanding, but also to provide a fertile safe ground to practice writing, whereby meanings are shared, renegotiated and revisited – the wiki is one way of providing this flexible peer-group orientated space, but careful, constant management and direction is also required to oversee levels of participation within and beyond the 'community of practice' and instigate student participation.

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