

USING WIKIS IN AN ONLINE SOCIALLY NETWORKED CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

In the 2008-09 academic year two sophomore English oral communication classes at Osaka Prefecture University were offered the opportunity of using technology-enhanced classrooms enabling learners access to Web 2.0 tools. This paper illustrates how the classroom and the learners, in transition from a oral skills based syllabus, utilized one of the many freely available online content-management-systems – a wiki – to facilitate both online and face-to face communication. Results of the investigation indicated that learners - able to showcase project work in a personal space and L2 identity – felt their computer skills had improved though the use of a wiki, and also found extrinsic motivation for language improvement.

INTRODUCTION

The way people interact with the Web and what people want from it has changed and is changing. Web 1.0 consisted of mainly static pages or print media on-line; a tool, able to convey information to users for consumption, which due to limitations, restricted on-line social networking, participation and production.

Web 2.0 has opened up social software opportunities for users to consume and also create and work with information and other users on an open network. It is moving away from the notion of an exclusive right to distribute, towards a socially dynamic, collaborative environment, the threads of which are based on fundamental trends of: users and community, openness and open data, networked services and new dimensions (Dodds, 2008).

These tools are increasingly becoming available in technology-enhanced classrooms opening

learners to these same opportunities. Furthermore, web-based tools, such as blogs, micro-blogs, video blogs and podcasts are also allowing development of learner autonomy, learner identities, online social networking and peer-peer dialogue, which have reported benefits in motivation and language learning (Warschauer, Turbee & Roberts, 1996; Swain, Brooks & Tocalli-Beller, 2002).

In conjunction with the oral-communication classroom these factors have the ability to enhance interaction rather than detract from it, as learners become involved in communication and collaboration both off and on-line (Barson, Frommer & Schwartz, 1993) facilitating student empowerment by enabling greater levels of learner autonomy, equality and learning skills (Warschauer et al., 1996).

WIKIS AND COLLABORATION

A wiki is one example of an online content management system that enables a process of consume-create-consume in terms of computer-mediated communication and social networking. A common example of a well-known wiki is Wikipedia the online encyclopedia that anyone can edit and contribute towards.

When introducing learners to a technology-enhanced classroom and wiki for the first time and adapting an oral focused syllabus to feature Web 2.0 the relationship between the physical tools that are used (artifact mediation) and psychological relationships of humans and the world (social mediation or opportunities for interaction) is brought forwards (Donato & McCormick, 1994, cited in Tanaka, 2005, p. 22). Through this social interaction Vygotsky (1978) claims that an individual develops his or her cognitive system, forming part of what can be termed collaborative learning, while Dewey's view is that learners learn by being part of the surrounding community in the educational setting (Dewey, 1963, cited in Tanaka, 2005 p. 22). As such, a wiki appears a suitable tool to be used in further investigations into online collaborative learning and related studies, including the development of a learner's zone of proximal development and Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978).

HOW WERE WIKIS USED?

The presentation demonstrated how wikis - as a free, easy-to-make, personalized, editing tool on the World Wide Web - enabled learners to create a network of personal web-based showrooms of classroom and web-assisted projects. Also illustrated was how wikis made it possible for learners to view and comment on their peers' projects and facilitated asynchronous web-based communication between each other and the instructor.

One wiki was developed to become an online classroom of program information and materials, and the central hub for over fifty learner created, personalized and networked wikis; the learners' own website in English. The front page was an 'About Me' page where learners were able to create their L2 identities and retain "control over their time, space, presence, activity, identity and relationship" with other networked learners" (Atwell n.d.). Many incorporated favorite photos or pictures and gadgets that showed maps, the weather, played music or games.

The side bar - an automatic feature of the wiki - contained links to other pages on which learners were able to showcase English language achievements through text, word documents, pictures, sound and movie files produced in class tasks, thus adding purpose to activities by encouraging learners to view their work as content and published for an audience (Bicknell, 1999).

Several options are open to those interested in setting up a wiki and a comprehensive comparison of the wiki products available can be found at wikimatrix.org; the most popular for educators being pbwiki, wikispaces and wetpaint. There are also some excellent instructive videos available for teachers and students that explain how to make and use a wiki (Stannard n.d.).

STUDENTS' VIEWS

Learners were encouraged to respond to their peers' oral communication activities and wiki published projects through comments written on wiki pages. Examples of learners' comments to each other are:

- Hi~!! I enjoyed your wikipage and slideshow!! Your pronunciation is very very good~(◦·ω·)-☆So cool~!! Because there are many pictures and contents were varied

in your slideshow, I enjoyed watching it~♪♪
 You seem to enjoyed school life and the dish
 which you made looked delicious☆In
 particular, the cake is very very wonderful ㄟ
 (o·v·o)° .+:☆

- Your movie review is very very easy to understand and I can imagine how enjoyable these movies are. So I want to see these movies when I read your reviews. Thank you!
- I think your survey is interesting. Especially, our classmates are divided into a positive group or a negative group about love. ♀☆♂
 This result surprised me because I think that there were many negative groups in our class. Thank you for interesting survey.
- I watched your slide show. I thought your hometown is very beautiful. I want to go to your hometown. When I go there please guide me.
- Your front page is very stylish! Good sound and good pictures*Especially Survey Presentation page is very cool* And thank you for advising the trip plan in Paris for me. I will use it when I go.

Upon completion of the blended learning program 51 learners completed a 6-point Likert item scale online questionnaire to determine their views and experiences of wiki usage. Results illustrated that:

- 92% of students agreed if work they produced was to be shown on their wiki they wanted to improve their English language abilities;
- 100% of students enjoyed looking at classmates' wikis and work they produced;
- 98% agreed seeing their classmates' wikis made them want to improve their own;

- 100% agreed that making a wiki helped to develop computer skills.

Responses to qualitative questions identified 15 negative responses illustrating learners' difficulty using classroom technology, against 24 positive comments encouraging further use of wiki. These included:

- I made my homepage for the first time so I am very enjoying.
- I think making web-page in English is good experience because good methods of English and computer.
- It is useful to see other people's book reviews and slideshow. Wiki make this class very smooth.
- It was good to be able to practice English by using the computer and wiki.
- My PC technique was poor, but I made a studious effort. So I made satisfied wiki and slideshow.
- To see my classmates' wiki content is interesting.

CONCLUSION

Although learners indicated that they felt using a wiki to be technically challenging it created L2 social interaction both online and in the physical classroom. It enabled learners to create an online L2 identity that would be viewed by others and their wikis became showrooms for projects that would otherwise not been seen. Wikis encouraged learners to be more self-critical of the L2 work that they produced because it would be available on-line, which created extrinsic motivation to improve their language abilities.

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