Make Way for

Easy-to-use software that lets students collaborate is heading

By Eric Oatman

GRANDVIEW ELEMENTARY IN MONSEY, NY, IS ONE LUCKY SCHOOL. Its media specialist, Sarah Chauncey, is a tech-smart pioneer. Using free software called pbwiki.com (the "pb" stands for peanut butter), she spent two hours last month setting up password-protected wikis, or collaborative Web sites, for six classes totaling about 140 third graders. She created the wikis to give students a communal—and fun—space in which to sharpen their writing skills.

"A wiki," Chauncey writes on each class's home page, "is a Web site that you and a group of people you permit can create and edit as easily as typing plain text. Wikis are fantastic tools for collaborative writing. Each student and/or team of students can have their own page."

For the year's first two lessons, Chauncey will kick off writing for the school's Web-based newspaper. "Students will draft their news stories in lesson three or four," she says. "I'll review and edit them and select those I'll incorporate into our newspaper. Obviously there are so many possibilities!"

Chauncey is right. Teachers and librarians nationwide have begun to explore the role of wikis (pronounced wee-*kees* or wih-*kees*) in classroom settings—and the possibilities do appear endless. At Olde Columbine High School in Longmont, CO, Bud Hunt began an experiment last spring using a wiki to teach writing. "The quality of writing across the board was better than any of the work they had done previously," he says. "I think it was because the students had an authentic audience.

They knew others were looking." And at Cranbrook School in Bloomfield Hills, MI, music teacher Alex Ruthman has encouraged kids to share their solutions to composition problems on a wiki. "A lot of teachers want to have all the control, and I didn't want that," he says. "I wanted students to be empowered."

Wikis have also been used to help students gain insights into world events. At West Hills High School in Santee, CA, teams of students in Dan McDowell's world history courses spent two weeks last June piecing together the history of the Holocaust. "The wiki's features of easy collaboration and easy Web publishing made the project possible," McDowell says. "Overall it worked great. The students took information and built their understanding of [the topic] themselves."

Wikis hold so much promise that motivated K–12 teachers and librarians throughout Virginia will soon be wiki literate, thanks to a program designed to bring them up to speed on technology-enhanced learning as defined by the National Educational Technology Standards. Led by education professor Richard Ingram of James Madison University in Harrisonburg, the program is being largely supported by a sizable four-year Partners in Learning grant from Microsoft. Participants will join a wiki-based virtual community, where they will meet to share their best practices. "The challenge for us," Ingram says, "was how do we have people interact when they're five hours away? When I ran across the wiki, I was excited. It fit the bill."

How Wikis Work

Wiki, the Hawaiian word for quick, can refer to either a Web site or the software that runs it. Ward Cunningham, a Portland, OR, programmer, invented and named the wiki in 1995. He wanted to help a virtual community of programmers communicate efficiently.

You don't have to be a programmer to use a wiki. Wiki software that's simple to set up, easy to use, and popular with educators includes editme, courseforum, pbwiki, jotspot, and seedwiki. The last three provide free versions with limited functions. Ad blocks, extra storage space, and sometimes passwords cost extra. The basic version of Chauncey's pbwiki, for example, gives her a password and one megabyte of space on its server. For $5 a

Wikis

to your school

month or $50 a year, she can get 99 more megs of space, an ad-free environment, and a place at the front of the line if she ever needs tech support.

Most wikis share several characteristics. For one thing, visitors can often add new content, fix errors, add comments, and even insert inaccurate information. Alert users generally fix errors quickly. IBM researchers found that vandalism on controversial topics in the online encyclopedia Wikipedia was repaired so fast that most visitors never noticed it.

Most new wiki software is far easier to use than earlier versions, which relied almost entirely on a markup language called HTML. A markup language includes text and information about it—whether it's to be italicized or run as a headline, for example. In HTML, <p> before a line means "new paragraph," <em> before a word "this word is emphasized," and so forth. New WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) wiki software simplifies this language to the extent that writing on a wiki can now be as easy as using word-processing software.

Another characteristic many wikis share is that words in wiki page titles are UsuallySquishedTogether. Joining together capitalized words to make what's called a WikiWord automatically creates a new Web page and a link to it.

Finally, most wikis are never finished, and the people responsible for this—

those who create, extend, or edit the content—usually go unheralded. There are typically so many fingers in the pie that it's impossible to identify each one.

The Wikipedia Model

No wiki makes this point better than Wikipedia, the one that librarians are most aware of—and, probably in most media centers, wary of. Wikipedia contains more than two million entries in 200 languages, and it's still growing. Like any reference source, this one has its fans and its detractors.

"Its conception and construction are so different from what we're used to thinking of from encyclopedias that it's going to force us to reevaluate issues of quality and authority and accuracy," says Joseph Janes, associate dean for academics at the University of Washington's Information School.

Some librarians have done that reevaluation and found Wikipedia wanting. One of its critics is Robert Eiffert, the librarian at the Pacific Middle School in Vancouver, WA. "I see holes in the information," he says, "and poorly written, incomplete,

Making Wikis Work for You

Meredith Farkas, a self-described "wiki evangelist," works as a distance librarian at Norwich University in Northfield, VT. This past June, she set up a hugely successful wiki for ALA conference-goers in Chicago. More recently, she designed Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki, a space in which librarians can share ideas (libsuccess.org). Farkas has some thoughts on how media specialists can expand their roles in schools. Among them:
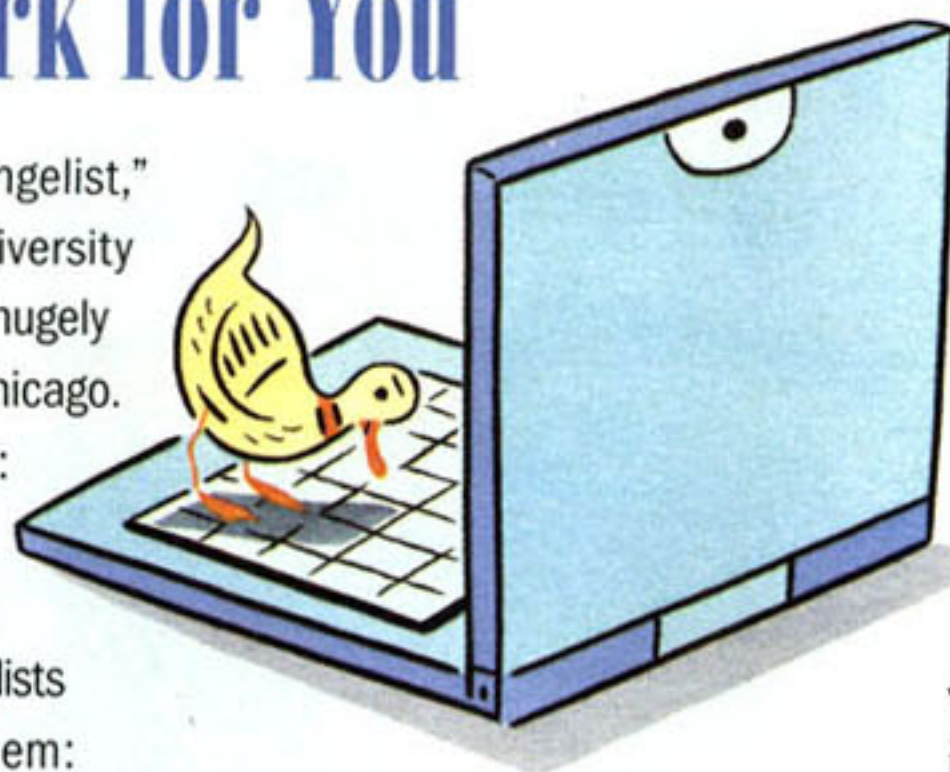
Use wikis as formats for subject guides. "The great thing about that," she says, "is that librarians would be creating the wiki themselves in concert with teachers."

Invite students and teachers to annotate your catalog on a wiki. "To students, the best advice comes from other students," she says. "You could have kids write book reviews you could add to the catalog."

Make wikis meeting places for communities inside the school. For example, create a wiki as a kind of bulletin board, a repository for information that comes from the cafeteria, the principal's office, students, teachers, and even parents.

Link librarians in your district in a collaborative enterprise. When teaching in North Carolina, Rob Lucas set up a model for such a site. His Teachers Lounge (teacherslounge.ed itme.com) is a wiki where first-year teachers can share lesson plans. Farkas's libsuccess.org is another fine model.

and inaccurate descriptions that seem to stay while other problems are fixed." The lack of sourcing also bothers him. "If we had a wiki in our school building for our teachers to use, there would be a range of information, but you'd know the source, so you could evaluate it."

Maureen Irwin, director of the library at Rye Country Day School in Rye, NY, used to share Eiffert's views. Now she's not so sure. Last month's American Association of School Librarians conference in Pittsburgh persuaded this self-described "Wikipedia snob" to take another look. "I was surprised at how much discussion there was on using Wikipedia," she says. "I've given it a second chance. But I still think the big word has to be 'wary.' Right now paper sources have higher esteem."

Terry Morriston, a librarian at the Peters Township High School in McMurray, PA, seems to be inching toward conversion. "I think we have to use some alternative ways to get to students at home and at school," she says. "Even if you don't think Wikipedia is a good source, you've got to be thinking about it because students will find it."

Morriston and an English teacher are now challenging some ninth graders to decide whether Grolier Passport or Wikipedia is the more reliable source. (Visit www.slj.com for the results.)

This is just the type of lesson that Jimmy Wales, who founded Wikipedia in 2001, hopes more students will engage in. "Wikipedia provides a teaching opportunity for teachers to talk to students about reliability and to teach them about being critical of sources and where information comes from," he says. "The same should go on if they're using [Encyclopedia] Britannica. Britannica is chock-full of errors."

Many Voices, One Product

One benefit of wikis that Wales sees is the willingness of kids who use them to try to understand views that may differ from theirs. Wikis, he says, are helping young people develop "writing skills and social skills by learning about group consensus and compromise—all the virtues you need to be a reasonable and productive member of society." (For an extended interview with Wales, visit www.slj.com.)

Others like the way that wikis let everyone play. "In my classroom," says Hunt of Olde Columbine High School, "I have a real hard time being the guy on the stage who knows everything. When you have a wiki, you're asking everyone to come to the table. You're saying your thoughts and ideas are no better than anyone else's. If we can put that all together, we can come up with something really good."

Andy Carvin, head of the Digital Divide Network, applies Hunt's point to the international sphere. "The media is controlled by people who have the resources to control it," he says. "Wikis show that all of us have an equal opportunity to contribute to knowledge." The Digital Divide Network is an online community of educators and policy makers who are seeking ways to narrow the gap between the Internet haves and have-nots.

So if wikis promise so much, why haven't more educators found a place for them in their schools? "A lot of people are cautious, as they should be about any new technology," Wales says. "It's kind of a conundrum," adds Will Richardson, head of instructional technology at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, NJ. "The beauty of wikis is that they're so open. But no one is sprinting for something that has no oversight."

But if they're not sprinting, it's clear that more and more librarians and teachers are walking in the direction of wikis. "There are various ways people collect and share data," says Morriston, "and I think that's where we're headed, and we have to be in the forefront of that."

"If you show media specialists what a wiki is, I think they'll fly with it," says Michael Stephens, the special projects librarian at the St. Joseph County Public Library in South Bend, IN, and a consultant on digital tools. "The school librarian who gets it and starts doing it and showing people how to do it—that person will be a superstar."

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