Using Wikis to Support Online Collaboration in Libraries

By Darlene Fichter

If you're not familiar with wikis, take an hour to test-drive one and discover how easy it is to create and edit online content. Once you're familiar with how wikis work, it's easy to spot dozens of opportunities for using them in your organization that would help you get jobs done faster and easier than before.

In the past month alone, I set up three wikis: one to support a pre-conference workshop, another for behind-the-scenes conference planning by local organizers, and one for conference attendees to use before they arrived and during the sessions. In each of these cases, we chose a wiki because it helped accomplish the task at hand better than other tools in our collaboration toolbox.

A wiki is a Web application invented by Ward Cunningham in 1994 that allows anyone to add content and anyone to edit it. WikiWikiWeb describes wikis as "a tool for collaboration, really, we don't know quite what it is by it's a fun way of communicating asynchronously across the network" (http://c2.com/cgi/wiki). WikiWiki means "quick" in Hawaiian, and this application was intended to make it easy for anyone without special training in HTML or an authoring language to dive in and add content.

The reasons for organizational collaboration are diverse. Sometimes we're shar-

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ing knowledge. Other times we're creating new knowledge. We may be writing RFPs, plans, proposal, and reports. Collaboration can also happen at various levels: community level, network level, and team level. Collaboration at a community level is characterized by relatively intense interactions over a period of time. Rheingold stated in *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* that a virtual community emerges when "enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace."

The network-level collaboration is usually based around a topic or subject. This might involve competitive intelligence officers in an organization working together or a sales force in the field. Team-level interactions focus on a project or task.

In 2004, Jenny Ambrozek and Joseph Cothrel studied online communities in business to identify what collaboration tools were currently used and which companies projected they would be using them one year from now and five years from now. Internally, Web conferencing, team rooms and expertise locator systems, wireless/mobile tools, and social networking tools were identified as the collaboration tools that would significantly increase while e-mail, instant messaging, and discussion groups would decline. Weblogs and wikis were identified in the study but showed moderate use and a steady state. (See www.infonortics.com/vc/vc04/slides/cothrel.pdf). Since this study, the use of both Weblogs and wikis has definitely taken off in the enterprise.

Corporations are waking up to social software tools such as wikis and Weblogs as collaboration tools that they can use. *Infoworld* declared 2005 as the Year of the Enterprise Wiki, and *Business Week* zeroed in on the fact that "They're Web sites anyone can edit— and they could transform Corporate

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Darlene Fichter is the coordinator of data library services at the University of Saskatchewan Library. She has managed several digital library, portal, intranet and Web site projects. She is also a columnist for Online magazine *and a conference speaker about new and emerging information technologies.*

America Headlines" in their article Something Wiki This Way Come.

Wikis are ideally suited to certain types of lightweight collaboration. They are an excellent tool for building knowledge bases that are dynamic and fluid, and this has led to their early adoption for IT areas. Wikis truly excel at tracking emergent information. I asked workshop attendees how well their company intranet was able to respond to information about Hurricane Katrina assuming that their company had a branch or operations in the area. Then I asked them to consider how well a wiki might respond as a communication and collaboration vehicle in the same circumstances.

Wikis are also excellent as vehicles for moving from discussion to publication. On a wiki you can create a place where topics can be discussed, such as a "talk" page, and when some agreement is reached the group can rapidly start composing the content. This process can involve a dozen or more contributors.

Have you ever edited a Word document that has passed through a half dozen hands with "track changes" on? It's painful. You know that there has to be a better tool for collaborative writing for groups of three or more people. This is a niche where wikis are particularly useful. They will track changes made my multiple authors on a recent changes page and allow you to roll back to any previous version.

A wiki site looks like any other Web site. Visitors can explore the site with just a Web browser. Anyone with a Web browser can edit a wiki site; anyone can undo any change at any time. Within a corporate environment you may wish to set up a wiki and limit it to a particular group. Wikis on the Internet often require visitors to set up an account before posting to prevent spammers from flooding the site with bogus content.

Wiki's are built from a fundamentally different perspective than most Web sites. Wikis change the typical way of publishing content to a Web site on its head. Rather than stringent editorial controls and permissions controlling who can publish what, a wiki assumes that everyone in the community is trusted to publish anything right from the start. The wiki is an evolving Web site that anyone can add to, improve, and reorganize. The editorial control is the hands of the community, and

the software provides version control and rollback functions.

Often the idea of a wiki is met with skepticism but the incredible growth and success of Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), the free encyclopedia, has demonstrated the power of wikis to foster collaboration is very real.

Uses for Libraries

Where would a bit of wiki "power" be useful for libraries? There are dozens of places where wikis could make library tasks and functions easier.

Wikis could be used internally in libraries to create knowledge bases, to support work that moves quickly from discussion to collaborative writing, to create a place for writing, editing and storing meeting notes and reports, or it could even become the platform for the library intranet. Public wikis could be used to support courses, create subject pages, and to facilitate planning and delivering conferences and meetings.

Wikis can also be used to start a conversation with our community of users. For example, they can be used to engage the community in library planning processes, to collaborate with members of the community in recording or documenting local histories and events. Wikis can be used to enhance collections by allowing our community to contribute stories and information about collections of historical photos or places. These are just a few of the ways that libraries can use wikis.

Librarians and information professionals have started to test the wiki waters and put wikis to use. The information architecture community established IAWiki (www.iawiki.net) as a place to create a collaborative knowledge base about information architecture. This particular wiki is a good place to learn about special wiki pages like RoadMaps, StartingPoints and Talk/Discussion pages.

Meredith Farkas created Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki (www.libsuccess.org) in July 2005. This wiki exemplifies the power of wikis by the breadth and depth of its content created in the few months that it has been operating. The Library Success wiki is intended to be a one-stop shop for great ideas and information for all types of librarians to learn about successful initiatives at other libraries.

Here are some library wiki sites to explore:
• University of Connecticut Libraries' Staff Wiki.
http://wiki.lib.uconn.edu/wiki/Main_Page
• Ohio University Libraries Biz Wiki.
http://www.library.ohiou.edu/subjects/bizwiki/index.php/Main_Page
• The MIT Engineering and Science Libraries B-Team.
http://www.seedwiki.com/wiki/b-team/
• SJCPL Subject Guide WIKI.
http://www.libraryforlife.org/subjectguides/index.php/Main_Page
• Unofficial wiki for the 2005 ALA Annual Conference in Chicago.
http://meredith.wolfwater.com/wiki/index.php?title = Main_Page
• Canadian Library Association (CLA) Calgary 2005.
http://wiki.ucalgary.ca/page/CLA

When it comes to choosing wiki software, there are several choices. There are wiki engines that run on almost any server platform. There are several open source wiki packages that you can download and install locally at no charge. There are vendors targeting the enterprise market; for example Jotspot, Socialtext, and Atlassian. For more wiki software options, peruse the "List of wiki software" on Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_wiki_software).

If you don't want to install wiki software locally, don't worry. There are several sites that will host a wiki for you. Simply register online, and presto—you have a ready-made wiki! You can set up a wiki for your team or library and explore the functionality and services that different sites have to offer. Some of the free and fee-based hosted wikis are XWiki, Seed Wiki, Jotspot, EditMe, and Socialtext Workspace.

There are dozens of tools that support online collaboration with co-workers, suppliers and/or your customers. Many of these tools are familiar ones: email, mailing lists, bulletin boards, instant messaging, Web conferencing, and team rooms. Others are new to many of us; this new breed of social software applications includes wikis, Weblogs, RSS news feeds and FOAF (Friends of a Friend). Wikis are one more tool to add to your collaboration toolbox. Consider pulling a wiki out of your pocket when you spot a project that could use an online collaborative workspace. 🌐