Online Collaborative Writing Using Wikis

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Introduction

A wiki is a website where anyone can edit anything anytime they want (Richardson, 2006). It is thus a great tool for online collaborative writing activities. I wanted to find out how applicable wikis are with ESL learners, so I planned and implemented a pilot writing project using wikis with a Secondary One (S.1) class at a secondary school in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, almost all families are equipped with Internet access. It occurred to me that wikis have great potential in promoting collaborative writing by learners outside of class.

Organisation of the Collaborative Writing Project

- 24 students from an S.1 class in the school were divided into six groups (with four students in each group).
- Each group would be responsible for describing one aspect of their S.1 secondary school life.
- A process writing approach was adopted for the writing project.

Rationale for the Organization

- I had four students in each group because it would be easier for the students to collaborate in a smaller group. They would have a stronger sense of belonging to the group.
- I chose their new secondary school life as the topic as they had just finished primary school and joined the school as new secondary students. They would have a lot to say on the topic, and their parents, teachers, and schoolmates would want to know how the students were experiencing their new school life.
- I adopted a process approach because the editing functions of wikis make them an ideal tool for students to practice drafting, re-writing, editing, and proofreading.

The Six Aspects of Secondary School Life

The project began at the beginning of October, after they had experienced secondary school life for a month. I invited each of the six groups of students to write on one aspect of their secondary school life. The six aspects were:

- Special rooms and facilities
- The school as one big "family"
- Interest clubs/Extra-curricular activities
- Lunchtime and recess
- The S.1 curriculum
- Adapting to secondary school life

Procedure for the Writing Project

Stage 1: Introducing Students to Wikis and Prewriting

I conducted a workshop on using wikis for the 24 students. They learnt how to (a) write on a wiki page, (b) edit an existing page, and (c) view previous edits. They were also introduced to the writing topic and worked in groups to brainstorm some initial ideas for their own group topic.

Stage 2: Initial Writing by Students in Groups

A wiki was created for this project. The wiki contained six pages, one for each group. Over a duration of 10 days, they logged on to the project wiki in their spare time either at school or at home, and wrote on their group page on their assigned aspect of school life. I provided a few prompt questions on each group page to start them writing. (See below for the writing prompts.) They were also encouraged to read the work of the other groups. I also alerted the students to the following potential sources of ideas:

- their own thoughts, ideas, and experience
- the school documents
- the school website
- interviews with the school personnel.

Stage 3: Revising the First Draft

A lesson on revising first drafts was given to the 24 students. This lesson focused on two writing strategies: organizing ideas into coherent paragraphs, and writing topic sentences. After this lesson, students went back to their own group page on the project wiki in their spare time and revised the draft of their group page. This went on for five days.

Stage 4: Proofreading

A lesson on proofreading was given to the students. After this lesson and in their own time, students proofread their group report for grammatical and lexical errors. This went on for four days.

Stage 5: Publishing

The "publishing" of the final wiki took the form of an announcement to all the teachers, and students and their parents, about the finished wiki. They were all given the wiki URL and invited to view the finished wiki at any time they liked.

The Writing Prompts

The following instructions were given to the six groups during Stage 2 of the project:

Group 1: Special Rooms and Facilities

You are responsible for describing the rooms and facilities that are only found in the school, such as laboratories, libraries, and computer labs. You will describe these rooms and facilities, and what students do at these places

Group 2:. The School as a Big Family

You will describe people belonging to the school: the principal, teachers with special responsibilities, teachers in general, and other school personnel such as the administrative staff, the school social worker, lab technicians, janitors, etc.

Group 3: Interest Clubs/Extra-curricular Activities

You will choose and describe some of the interest clubs and extra-curricular activities: what are these clubs and activities; how to join them; how often they meet, etc.

Group 4: Lunchtime and Recess

You will describe what the students (especially the S.1 students) do during recess and lunchtime. For example, what do they do after lunch? Where do they go for lunch?

Group 5: The Secondary One Curriculum

You will describe the S.1 curriculum, with special attention to the subjects that you did not have in primary school. What are these subjects? What do you learn in these subjects? What are the lessons like? Do you find these subjects interesting?

Group 6: Adapting to Secondary School Life

You will report on how you and your classmates are adapting to your new life in a secondary school. Do you enjoy secondary school life? Why/Why not? Are there things which you need to make an effort to adapt to, such as the medium of instruction? Are you having more homework or less? Are you making new friends quickly?

The Students' Response

1. Initial response was a bit slow, as it was the first time the students wrote collaboratively, not to mention in a wiki. But after the first couple of days after some of the students tried it and found it to be fun, participation speeded up quickly.

2. During the drafting stage, most students simply added their ideas to their group page. After the editing lesson, they began to look at their group page as a whole, and worked together to improve the organization of their group report.

3. The proofreading stage did not result in error-free group reports, as the students were still at pre-intermediate level. Nevertheless, I did not push that too far as I was of the view that instilling in them a long-term interest in writing was of greater importance.

4. Overall, the students were motivated and excited about the writing project throughout, because of the following reasons:

- The wiki was a new medium for them to express their ideas in writing.
- It was easy for them to learn and work with wikis.
- Their group report would be read by other groups; there was a real audience for their writing.
- They enjoyed the process of sharing ideas.
- They enjoyed the online contact with each other outside of class.
- The writing project led to a visible product on the Web: the completed wiki.

Further Ideas for Collaborative Writing Using Wikis

I was encouraged by the results of this attempt, and continued to explore other possible collaborative writing activities using wikis. Drawing on the methodology literature on the teaching of writing, I have identified the following activities for further experimentation:

- book reports: students write a book report collaboratively or individually to a book report wiki
- brainstorming wikis: student use a wiki to brainstorm ideas for a project or assignment
- poetry: students compose poems together
- Class (4B) wikis: students use the wiki as the class website
- school history wiki: students collaboratively write a history of the school
- exercise wikis: students create exercises for each other
- project wikis: students use a wiki to plan a project and present their work in a wiki
- class blogs: students use a wiki as a class blog
- planning a party/barbecue/concert: students use a wiki to plan and divide duties for a class or school activity

- the graduating class wiki: student use a wiki to keep in touch with each other after they graduate
- quizzes: students construct quizzes for each other to respond to
- short stories: students collaboratively write and develop a short story
- letters to the editor: students write letters to the 'editor' on a current issue assigned by the teacher
- Agony Aunt: one student writes a letter to Agony Aunt on his/her problems; other students play Agony Aunt and give the student advice on his/her problems

Organising Students for Collaborative Writing

Given the versatility of wikis, there are many possible ways of grouping students for collaborative writing projects. The following are some examples:

- the class as one big group; anyone can write to the class wiki
- the class divided into sub-groups; students write within their sub-group, but their work can be read by anyone in the class
- joint writing projects involving different classes
- joint writing projects involving different schools
- "community writing projects", eg, a wiki for all students in a school or in a school district who are interested in NBA
- writing projects involving schools from different school districts or countries.

Conclusion

I have found that wikis are useful for promoting collaborative writing for ESL learners. There are now a number of wiki tool providers on the Web where teachers and students can create their wikis for free. Wikis are easy to learn and use. Any text type can be used for a writing task with wikis. The grouping for a wiki writing activity can be very flexible. Furthermore, recent wiki tools come with a large range of formatting features, and they also allow uploading of pictures. As a result, ESL learners can easily produce written tasks that look appealing and professional. For the teacher, the process of drafting and revising by learners can be monitored and supported easily. With a little bit of imagination, teachers will be able to design wiki writing projects that effectively promote ESL students' interest in writing, develop their writing competence, and enhance their collaboration skills.

Reference

- Richardson, W. (2006). Blogs, wikis, podcasts, and other powerful web tools for classrooms. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.