

Reject excuses about unknown homework – it's stored in a wiki

Online Wiki Course

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I am constantly surprised by the number of people, including my students at school who are young and computer literate, who do not know about the wonderful world of wikis, Wikipedia excepted. I would thus like to share my first teetering steps down this road: where I gained my knowledge, what spaces I have created and how my students have reacted to this tool.

Who is responsible for my newly-gained knowledge and skills?

Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! First and foremost to thank Sheila Vine, whose article in the Autumn 2008 issue of *ETM* (p 31) opened my eyes to what wikis could do for my teaching. Check this out for useful links and facts – there is no need to repeat them here. Then to Nicky Hockly of The Consultants-E, who helped me choose the right online course as I was unable to decide whether to focus on one narrow aspect of ICT or do a full course, where many things would be explored. Nicky's phone call to me helped make the decision easier. And finally to Ana Falcao, my online coach during the 2-week course. Although she was thousands of miles away in Brazil, I never felt left to flounder alone. Any mails I wrote received prompt answers and the time difference caused no problems. Ana answered all my course content queries herself and where the techie ones got too techie, these were passed on to specialists in The Consultants-E team.

Why did I see the need for a wiki and for which classes did I set them up?

At the Abendgymnasium where I teach, it never happens that all pupils are present. Ensuring handouts make it (on time) to absentees or that the correct information is passed on regarding homework was often a problem in the past. Via a wiki, I saw the solution: a central collation point where material could be uploaded by the teacher and downloaded by the student. With in-company courses, the absentee rate is not as high but business trips or pressing projects do mean that participants cannot always make it and although colleagues often collect handouts/note down homework, they do not always have an opportunity

to pass these on, despite perhaps working only one office away from one another! A wiki, in crude terms, is a perfect 'dumping ground'. It was on this principle that I set up my first two wikis. My initial dabbling soon led me to realise that there was much more fodder here than I had possibly imagined.

Why did I (ultimately) choose to do a course instead of working everything out for myself?

After reading Sheila's article, I set up a wiki prior to school recommencing, giving little thought to which service: I selected Wikispaces because I thought pbwiki (Peanut Butter Wiki) did not sound very serious! Some things about Wikispaces soon irritated me however, e.g. I could not find out how to create sub-files like in Word and as a result was unable to organise the pages as I wanted them. Navigation became difficult because the list of pages at the side got rather long. Moreover, I was unsure as to whether I was using the wiki effectively and whether I was missing out on features that would benefit my students and me e.g. plugins for videos, chatting, spreadsheets or calendars (as I learned later). The Consultants-E advertise regularly in *ETM* and after checking out their website¹, I decided that what they were offering would suit me: the length and timing of the course (two weeks) and the price (EUR 125) were right. Registration was simple, as was payment.

How was the course structured?

It was divided into two 7-day periods of approximately 10 hours' work each, with targets set for the end of these, and all deadlines had to be met by specific times in order to obtain a course

completion certificate. After registration, I received an introductory e-mail with full course log-in instructions, including a pre-selected user name and password. Prior to course commencement, we were invited to complete an online questionnaire relating to our expectations and goals. This helped Ana to see how well participants' needs would dovetail and what we were all aiming at.

The whole course was run in Moodle. The only technical hitch I had was not being able to participate in the live wiki session – using the video conferencing platform OnSync – with Carl Dowse. This was due to a bug in Adobe's Flash Player and not my bandwidth, as had been mooted.

My fellow participants were spread around the world in England, Hungary and Saudi Arabia. Throughout the course, we were invited and expected to comment on tasks we had been working on and react to one another's postings. Slightly hesitant to start off with, the course quickly gelled and comments soon got added that did not directly relate to tasks, e.g. personal information. In the second week, we were paired up on tasks, were expected to work with a wiki our partner had created and also comment on it.

One feature of the course I particularly liked was that although pbwiki was favoured for the creation of and experimenting with a wiki, we also worked with others (wikispaces and wetpaint) and were consequently able to compare their features. With hindsight, I would plump for pbwiki as it is remarkably user friendly. It is certainly worth trying a few services so that you find the one that suits you and your course best. They are all very similar and yet different at the same time! (Note: pbwiki is about to change its name).

Another feature I appreciated was the regular exchange of e-mails from Ana. These were in the form of a digest of posts in the forums to us all or direct contact with me on matters I had raised.

Much of our time centred around a wiki we had each created at the beginning of the course and we were invited to experiment to our heart's delight here – adding photos, sounds, linking pages, changing the look of the wiki, adding a logo, backing up the wiki, adding users and setting permission levels as to who could access the wiki, deciding whether to make the wiki public or private. We also learned about tracking the changes made in a wiki, not to mention restoring a previous version. This is a vital feature, particularly if more than one person is working on a wiki: unless a page is actually deleted, it is never truly lost.

Classroom management was also part of the content. A critical aspect as it invited us to reflect on how we could use wikis with our individual classes. As all participants had different students, the range of ideas was eclectic and thought provoking. Classroom management was extended to an action plan with one specific class and project in mind, a task I found particularly useful as I set up something for school which incorporated several of the new tricks I had learned (my original wiki was still rather tame at this point). A challenging quiz on some of the possibilities that wikis and web-based tasks offer teachers also helped to broaden my knowledge.

The Consultants-E strive to improve the courses they offer; thus we had to fill out a feedback form before receiving our certificates.

How are the wikis used and how have students accepted them?

The school wiki has grown enormously but although I have tried to invite contributions and collaboration, this has not yet worked very successfully. The students are very pushed for time as most of them juggle jobs with four nights of school plus revision and homework. Nevertheless, some have been happy to share vocabulary lists they have created whilst reading some of the short stories we are working on, useful links they have found which relate to topics we have covered in class, pieces of work they have written, or to build up the log we have created for all the stories (title of story, date written, author, time and setting, etc.)

Students quite often ask about specific aspects of grammar they have trouble with. Since starting the wiki, I have prepared numerous handouts to deal with these individual requests and these are now all stored on the grammar page and are available to all. On a Friday night, I provide a quick summary of that week's lesson (we have a five-hour block on one evening) plus a list of homework, and also upload all handouts from that session. All pages except the homework page are open, thus accessible to anyone. The homework page is locked, meaning only I can edit it. All students (in fact anyone) can go into the space and read the material but only those who have accepted my invitation to join this wiki can edit it. My students' feedback and criticism have helped me improve the wiki's user-friendliness. A number of them have even set up their own wikis and use these for file sharing.

My in-company wiki is not very active, mainly because I have not yet created enough collaborative tasks. My attempts to encourage collaboration on a vocabulary list as these students are very keen on collecting and learning vocabulary failed because access to the vocab spreadsheet required one to sign up with google docs, something they did not want to do. If you have a group that is not so worried about google watching them, I would recommend setting up a spreadsheet (even though I found this somewhat tricky) as it provides a way of sharing the workload of vocabulary collation. And remember: it is always readily available, even on a business trip in a lonely hotel room in the evening! In this wiki, I have uploaded a number of video clips for working on presentations. One task I have set is to watch a clip and to assess the speaker's performance for discussion in the next meeting. Moreover, this wiki is used for saving website links: I have no internet access in the company but via a company laptop, we can get to our wiki and all the clips and material I would like to work with. This has proved a great time saver as now I no longer need to download everything onto my laptop/stick.

To sum up: although contributions to my wikis are still too infrequent, I believe my students do benefit from the wikis' existence, and not just because they are no longer able to tell me they did not know what homework I had handed out. One look from me and they know what I am about to trot out: "It's in the wiki – you should have looked!" Right now we are all still learning the ropes, but we are getting there.

Links

¹ www.theconsultants-e.com