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Joel Glogowski and Sarah Steiner

The Life of a Wiki: How Georgia State University Library's Wiki Enhances Content Currency and Employee Collaboration

In recent years, the ease of use and collaborative nature of the wiki has made it a popular tool in many libraries. Georgia State University Library has hosted an internal wiki since 2003, and since its inception it has been utilized in many different and innovative ways. This article will provide an overview of some of the more interesting uses of the GSU Library wiki, specifically, its life as a reference guide, training manual, committee meeting and planning ground, home for material price quotes, and finally, as a place for entertaining work-related content.

Wikis, Academic Libraries, Social Software

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INTRODUCTION

Since their creation by Ward Cunningham in the mid 1990s, user-friendly wikis have become widely recognized for their unique collaborative capabilities and virtually effort-free setup. Many Web sites, including the oft-invoked Wikipedia, have created their entire interfaces using wiki software, and many libraries are following suit by adding wiki pages to their intranets or Web sites. The Georgia State University (GSU) Library wiki is one such example. This internal wiki, which can be accessed through log-in only, has developed over the past five years into a thriving multi-user environment. Though it was not used widely at first, it now includes content from seven library departments: Acquisitions, Administration, Instruction, Liaison Services, Training and Assessment, Digital Library Services, and the Learning Commons.

This article will provide a brief overview of wikis in general, and will detail the many uses of the GSU Library's internal wiki. Particular focus will be placed on its history, contents, function, and benefits. Finally, other potential uses for library wikis will be discussed.

WHAT IS A WIKI?

Ward Cunningham used the term WikiWikiWeb to describe the technology behind the online Portland Pattern Repository, which he created to encourage collaboration amongst people interested in sharing ideas about software patterns (Leuf and Cunningham 2001, 15). He needed a quick way to collaboratively publish information on these software patterns to the Web, and the wiki was his

answer. Cunningham describes his work with this software in his book, *The Wiki Way: Quick Collaboration on the Web*. His original WikiWikiWeb, later shortened to wiki, allowed users to quickly and easily edit content on a live Web site. Moreover, the simplified markup language he created for the wiki made it easy for users to contribute new pages to the project. Cunningham's wiki concept has subsequently inspired many other institutions and communities to use wikis to facilitate online collaboration (Chawner and Lewis 2006, 34).

The term wiki is derived from the Hawaiian term *wikiwiki*, which means quick (Leuf and Cunningham, 14). A wiki engine is the server-based software used to operate the site, while the Web sites that are created with this software are referred to as wikis (Chawner and Lewis, 33). Wikis enable people with no knowledge of HTML to create, organize, and share content via the Internet. Because they are accessible to anyone with an Internet connection and can quickly be edited by a community of users, wikis are an ideal tool for online collaboration.

While not all wikis are exactly alike, they all share certain characteristics. They are designed so that all viewers of any wiki page are capable of becoming editors and content providers. Web page editing software or browser add-ons are not needed to participate; a Web browser is the only requirement. To edit a page, users merely have to enter text into an online form. Many use a "what you see is what you get" (or WYSIWYG) interface, while others employ a very simple mark-up language. The mark-up language is text-based and uses a minimal amount of character driven formatting commands. For example, an asterisk (*) may indicate a bulleted list, and an equal sign (=) may be used to format a heading.

Creating a new page is also easy to do. The GSU Library intranet wiki, created with the software OpenWiki, interprets any word entered in CamelCase as a new page. CamelCase (also known as BumpyWords) is the process of typing a string of words together with no spaces separating them, but instead capitalizing the first letter of each word. Other wiki engines interpret words in brackets ([…])

as links to other pages in the wiki. Both brackets and CamelCase are common to wikis. When the wiki engine interprets a link to a page that does not yet exist, it will automatically create and link to a new blank page. The next step, then, is to populate the new page with content. This process of linking and page creation makes adding new pages almost effortless, and it is just as simple to edit the structure and organization of the wiki as a whole. Wiki software producers try to accommodate those who are reluctant to try unfamiliar technologies by offering practice pages, called “sandboxes.” These test pages allow users to make practice edits in an informal area and will not harm the wiki’s overall content or structure.

This open, collaborative setup has many advantages, one of which is the creation of a strong sense of community and common purpose. A regular misconception is that wikis must be regularly vandalized because they are so easy to edit. This concern has proven to be largely unfounded. Leuf and Cunningham have observed that “little damage is done to wiki content even in the absence of security mechanisms” (2001, 17). One explanation posits that there are more people interested in preserving a resource than destroying it. Also, many wikis require the user to register for an account and log in to edit, so each change can be traced to a particular user. Moreover, even if all edits are not constructive, most wikis allow users to revert to older versions. This feature allows administrators to quickly and easily resurrect previously saved pages if unwanted additions or deletions occur.

These versioning capabilities enhance a wiki’s strength in other ways, too. A frequent pitfall of collaborative projects is that different editions of a single document can end up saved in different locations, creating confusion and wasting time. Working with a wiki can help eliminate this multiple-version syndrome, since a number of users can view and edit the live Web document directly. The most recent version of the document will appear on the live Web site, and a dozen users can make a dozen edits without the need for a single new document name or Web link.

HOW WIKIS ARE BEING USED IN LIBRARIES?

Librarians have been using wikis in their libraries for years, and a wide variety of applications have been explored in the literature. Public wikis (those that can be viewed and edited by the general public) can be useful tools for unlimited or undefined populations; they have been used to support classroom material and promote discussion (Lamb 2004; Fitcher 2006), to create research guides (Boeninger 2006) to provide advice on best practices (Farkas 2007), and to annotate library catalogs (Farkas 2005). They also work well as knowledge bases and as storage sites for in-progress documents (Fitcher 2006; Frumkin 2005). This knowledge base approach can be applied to specific departments or topics in the library world; instruction expertise has received particularly focused attention (Allan 2007; Bridgewater and Deitering 2005). WorldCat and the University of Pennsylvania have added wiki elements to their OPACs—Wiki WorldCat allows users to comment on records (OCLC) while U Penn allows users to tag books with keywords of their choosing (University of Pennsylvania). Other libraries have chosen wikis to act as their main Web sites and content management systems; examples may be found at the University of South Carolina Aiken's Gregg-Graniteville Library (USC Aiken), and Prince William County's Bull Run Library in Manassas, VA (Bull Run).

Internal wikis are often used to manage information in libraries around the world. Librarians at the Charles C. Sherrod Library at East Tennessee State University use their wiki, accessible only to those with an invitation, as a knowledge base for instruction and resource sharing (Allan 2006). Australian Catholic University built a prototype wiki intended to be used as a reference desk manual (Blake 2006). Kille (2006) and Malo (2006) discuss how their libraries are using wikis as internal knowledge management tools. Also relevant is Weibrands' case study on the development and management of the internal wiki at Curtin University in Perth, Australia (2006).

HISTORY OF GSU LIBRARY'S WIKI

The GSU Library wiki was created in 2003 to provide a space for an intercampus collaborative team project. The seven-person team was charged with creating a document, and wanted a secure storage place that could be instantly and remotely updated by anyone in the group. GSU's Web Development Librarian suggested that a wiki might meet their needs, and the committee agreed.

Once they decided that a wiki was the best creation tool, they still needed to choose a wiki engine software. OpenWiki was selected because its coding language made it easy to implement on the library server (though there was some concern regarding its non-WYSIWYG interface). The wiki was used regularly by only a handful of people until 2005, when a small group of librarians was assigned to move frequently used policy documents and resources from the shared network drive into the wiki. As the amount of content on the wiki started to increase, so did requests for training and information on wiki use.

As mentioned previously, the open nature of wikis can be both their main selling point and their most likely downfall. The wiki at the GSU Library was no exception to this phenomenon. There was no vandalism, but as more people began adding content the wiki became more disorganized and difficult to navigate. Shortly thereafter, library administration suggested that a team be formed to generate some basic guidelines for page creation and organization. A team of three librarians was assembled to evaluate the situation, obtain feedback from wiki users, and ultimately, reorganize the wiki. The most significant outcomes of that committee were the creation of posting guidelines and the implementation of a basic tagging system. All existing pages were reviewed and assigned subject tags, and editors were asked to tag all new pages. See the Appendix for the posting guidelines document and tag list.

While there was some debate about whether it was a good idea to require tags, the committee decided that the benefits outweighed the drawbacks. The tags are extremely helpful for searching,

sorting, and organizing wiki pages. OpenWiki allows the user to search for keywords, so if staff members are interested in all the instruction related pages, tagged .LII, they may search using that code. The tags also allow the Web Services Librarian to run statistical reports to help interested parties understand what types of wiki content generate the most interest. Because they are required to include subject tags on each new page, editors are also forced to consider if and where each new page fits into the wiki's overall structure.

The period (.) in the beginning of each tag is essential, because it helps differentiate the three letter codes from words that appear in the actual text. The wiki's search feature is not case sensitive and will pull up all occurrences of any letter sequence. For tag combinations that do not naturally occur in English (such as QFM) this is a non-issue, but for tags that are likely to occur (like REF) the uniquely placed period prevents the results list from returning every page that includes the word "reference."

HOW GSU LIBRARY USES ITS WIKI

Research Support (Reference) Desk Manual

The main use of the wiki with regard to reference is the inclusion of the Research Support Desk Manual (previously known as the Reference Desk Manual). The manual was originally created as a Microsoft Word document and stored on the library's shared network drive. During its tenure there, multiple versions were created and saved under different titles, and there was general confusion over which was the most current and accurate. In an attempt to restore faith in the manual, it was converted to a Web page and moved to the library's intranet. This move created an authoritative version, but only a few administrators could access and edit the contents. Any suggested edits had to be sent to one of those administrators, who would then make the updates when time permitted. The procedures and policies at the Research Support Desk were (and are) ever-changing, and the chain of

referral led to disconnects and continual out-datedness. As a result, the librarians' trust of the manual's contents continued to wane. In an effort to address the manual's lack of currency and trustworthiness, the library's Learning Commons Coordinator decided to move it from the limited access Web page into the intranet wiki. This placement presents a perfect illustration of the usefulness of wikis in the library setting. The manual has been turned into a living document which can be edited at any time for accuracy and is available on any computer with Internet access. The manual acts not only as a guide for librarians at the Research Support Desk, but also as an effective training manual and reference point for new hires.

The new format was not immediately popular due to coding fears and other trepidations stemming from a lack of familiarity with the wiki system. One of the librarians responsible for converting the static Web-based manual into wiki format offered several formal and informal wiki training sessions consisting of both one-on-one and group classes. The training sessions greatly increased staff buy-in and enthusiasm.

The content of the Research Support Desk Manual is formally checked every six months, with more frequent informal reviews conducted as needed. A contact person was appointed for the manual to ensure that employees who were uncomfortable with wiki coding had someone to answer questions or provide assistance. Among other things, the manual includes a listing of basic desk and virtual reference procedures, departmental policies, maps and directories, and a guide for dealing with current technical issues. The ready availability of policy documents can be welcome for desk staffers who must deal with an irate patron who demands written proof that a policy exists, and the maps and directories are used regularly.

The GSU Library's wiki is housed on the password protected intranet. Only library faculty and staff, therefore, can access it. This helps the library staff to secure information that is not intended to be public. For example, the GSU Library reference staff had traditionally kept a master list of

passwords to our electronic resources on rolodex cards at the Research Support Desk. Most recently, this list was transferred from the printed cards to the wiki manual.

Committee Pages

As a result of their collaborative nature, wikis are also perfect tools for committee work. Using their wiki page, committee members can create and edit documents (such as meeting minutes), easily track changes and previous versions of documents, and collect commentary on readings. As mentioned previously, the GSU Library's wiki was begun in conjunction with a committee, and group work continues to comprise the largest percentage of new pages.

When committees are in the planning phases of projects, having an openly editable, Web-accessible document can be infinitely valuable. Once the document is finished, it can be placed in a more secure, final location. If more edits are needed later, it can be revisited in the wiki. Leslie Madden, the Instruction Coordinator at GSU Library, commented, "I liked that we all had access to post and comment. I think that it's definitely more efficient than email attachments. You might have several versions of an attachment floating around, whereas with the wiki, you can all instantly be on the same page" (Madden 2006).

Schedules and Sign-ups

Wikis are also an ideal place for sign-up sheets and schedules. The wiki at GSU Library is frequently used to schedule coverage for events that call for many volunteers. Event organizers can post a blank schedule that lists times and dates requiring coverage. Once a schedule is posted, individuals may enter the wiki and sign up for their shifts independently. This autonomous scheduling method allows event planners to devote more attention to the event itself, rather than to the schedule. Some wiki driver software even provides special schedule and calendar creation tools—Twiki is one example.

Quotes for Materials

Early in its development, the GSU Library's wiki served as a home for e-resource pricing information. The Electronic Resources Librarian at GSU placed all quotes for electronic materials in the wiki page as they were received. Consequently, librarians responsible for collection development were able to find the costs of electronic databases and materials more easily. If they received a new quote, they could update the information themselves.

Fun Pages

In order to create more employee familiarity and comfort with the wiki, library staff decided in 2006 to add a few food-related pages. Individuals wanting to share recipes that they brought to work events were encouraged to post them to the wiki, and a guide of local restaurants was also added. Each restaurant listing includes links (when available) and commentary on type of food, price, quality, and distance from work.

POTENTIAL FUTURE USES

Though current uses of the wiki have burgeoned, there are still many other ways in which this or any wiki could be used. Like many other academic libraries, the GSU Library recently modified its structure to include a Learning Commons. During the transition process, the need for collaboration and communication between departments greatly increased. By its very nature, the Learning Commons is designed to be an area of the library where different departments converge, and the wiki has made it easier to coordinate schedules and services between and among these various departments. The library staff is also discussing the possibility of the "wiki-izing" the desk schedule, and creating a publicly available knowledge repository or reader's advisory space.

LESSONS LEARNED

Through daily dealings with the wiki and its contents, the authors have learned a few practical lessons about successful wiki population and maintenance. Most importantly, thorough training sessions and individual consultations are essential in order to increase staff comfort level. Second, it is advisable to take time to analyze all software options before making a final choice. There are many different products (MediaWiki, Twiki, and Confluence, to name a few) and the best option will depend on the needs of the organization: does it make more sense to host the wiki internally, or should it to be hosted by a third party? Are RSS feeds more important than a calendar feature? Will uploading Word documents or PDFs be necessary? There is no one-size-fits-all answer, so any number of wiki drivers may best suit any given library. The creators of GSU Library's wiki chose OpenWiki's software because it fit the library's system requirements, but later regretted the choice because it lacks WYSIWYG coding capabilities. Finally, try to be descriptive when naming wiki links so that cleanup can be quick and easy. Try creating test pages, but name them something that makes it obvious that they are tests—otherwise, finding pages that can be deleted versus those that contain real content can be difficult.

WHAT WE WOULD LIKE TO DO DIFFERENTLY

As with any exploratory project, hindsight is always 20/20. In the creation and population of the GSU Library's wiki, some mistakes were made that had to be rectified later. The main complaints noted by pioneers at the GSU Library were related to layout and software choice. Because the wiki began with no discernable organizational scheme, the later imposition of order could not rectify many of the navigational difficulties that had made their way into its pages. In retrospect, it would have been prudent to begin the wiki with a set of guidelines and suggestions regarding naming conventions, appropriate contents, and organization. In its current form, the wiki forces librarians to

click through several layers before they can access the information they are seeking.

CONCLUSION

Though it is used predominantly as a place to store documents, the GSU Library wiki has come to fill a number of other roles. First, it facilitates interdepartmental communication. Since its inception, use of the wiki has spread to almost all of the library's departments, and has helped staff members from different departments to see more clearly where their policies and concerns overlap. Second, it helps staff members to feel secure with regard to the currency of the content, and consequently, they are more likely to consult the wiki when answering questions. Because the pages on the wiki are updated so frequently, there is less anxiety over obsolescence than there was when documents were not available for public editing. Finally, the wiki has helped all librarians and staff to become more involved in maintaining the desk manual and other important documents. Many people greatly appreciate the fact that they can take an active role in making corrections and updates to these materials.

It took time to gain acceptance among so many of GSU Library's employees, but since its creation the wiki has garnered much praise and recognition. The simple interface, immediacy, and openness of wikis in general make them an indispensable tool for libraries of all types and sizes.

APPENDIX

Wiki Posting Guidelines and Tag List From The GSU Library Intranet

The GSU Library wiki is best suited for living documents, collaborative pages, and small/temporary committee information. If you don't feel your page or edit falls under one of these categories, please consider posting on the intranet, intranet blog, or the S (public) Drive.

If you're going to be editing an existing page:

1. Click on UserPreferences and type your name into the UserName field. You will only need to add your name once, and any subsequent edits made from your computer will be attributed to that name.

2. Once your group is done working with a page, and the contents are exported to their final location (the intranet or S Drive) consider adding a link to the final document to help others with navigation.

If you're going to be creating a new page:

1. Click on UserPreferences and type your name into the UserName field. You will only need to add your name once, and any subsequent edits made from your computer will be attributed to that name.

2. When titling your new page, please make sure the title is descriptive. The user should be able to tell what the page is referencing from the TitleIndex only.

3. Please add navigational links to your pages. Look at the top of this page for an example.

4. **All pages** will need to be tagged with controlled, simple descriptors. Decide which categories your page falls under, and include them at the top or bottom of your new page. You may choose more than one category. (If no category fits, please consider adding a new code to this listing.)

   .ADM Administration pages

   .CIR for Circulation Pages

.COM for Committee Documents and Pages

.DLS for Digital Library Services Pages

.FRP for Food related pages

.GEN for General Library or General interest pages

.ILL for InterLibrary Loan Pages

.LIA for Liaison Related Pages

.LII for Library Instruction Pages

.MIN for Meeting Minutes Pages

.QFM for Materials Quotes

.REF for Reference Pages

.SPC for Special Collections Pages

.TCH for Technological pages

.TRA for Training Pages

.TFM for Transformation Pages

The "." preceding each code is integral. Here's an example of how your tags should look:

Tags: .REF .MIN

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