REFLECTIONS ON THE CO-CREATION OF A COURSE WIKI
An Editorial

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Guest Editor

Following several years in administration, I returned to teaching in 2010. My university has a strong commitment to technology in teaching and I share that commitment, but I was rusty. It seemed to me that if I wanted to stretch (and I did), I needed to start making use of social media. After considering some alternatives (Hunter & Austin, 2015), I concluded that building a course wiki would challenge my skills and those of my students. A wiki would also make it possible to maintain focus on the course content, which was “principles of learning.” I had not taught in this area for 20 years and I quickly realized how dramatically the field had changed.

The focus of the wiki, then, would be to require my students and me to consult both classical and contemporary readings and to share our learning with one another. Initially, the graduate students in the course had little or no experience in creating wikis. Many found the technical demands intimidating. I worked with them in both group and individual tutorials to minimize the impact of technical skills on wiki contributions. In subsequent offerings of the course, I provided help guides to deal with initial skill development. Though some early students were never really comfortable they managed. More recently, while it is still the case that few students have prior experience in wiki creation or editing, their general levels of skill and confidence in using technology has meant that most learn the necessary skills quickly and independently.

Each time the course is offered, the students are building on the work of previous classes and each term many of the students look at what is there and say, “What can I possibly add?” Yet they not only manage to contribute, but I believe the quality of the contributions continues to increase all the time. I see this in the growing use of visuals, the more carefully
documented entries and the expansion in both internal and external links in the entries. Several past students have published academic papers based on their work in the wiki but in 2016-17, I was encouraging so many to publish that I thought I should find a venue where the work might appear as a whole. The Canadian Journal of Action Research struck me as the right place for my students to share their reflections on the wiki work and I was grateful that the board responded favourably to my proposal for a theme issue on teaching with wikis. However, the board expressed a concern about the extent to which what I was proposing was actually action research. I sent an explanation of my reasoning. I will return to that later, but for the moment, it may useful to consider this entire issue to be an action research project examining my use of a wiki in teaching—including the remaining papers in this issue as data sources and this essay as a reflective piece. I will begin by describing the assignment that elicited the original papers that were the bases for the contributions to this. In the process, I will speak a bit more about my rationale for designing the assignment as I did; that done, I will try to make the case for why this work is action research. I will close with a brief commentary about the remaining contributions.

**The wikiography**

Fundamentally, a wiki is a website that many people can edit. To capitalize on the web technology, wiki pages (or entries) are often richly embedded with internal links (to other entries) and external links (to other websites). I coined the term “wikiography” to describe an assignment in which students documented and discussed their contributions to the course wiki. Before I talk further about the wikiography, I need to explain some of the rationale for including wiki-work in the course. Wikis originated in the mid 1990’s and grew in popularity through the next ten years, during which Wikipedia emerged as the leading application in the genre History of Wikis. Cummings (2008) outlined the potential of the technology for academic uses as follows:

> For the academy at large, the significance of Wikipedia is roughly equivalent to that which the Heisenberg uncertainty principle had in the sciences in the 1920s—stating what is not possible rather than what is. It is no longer possible to plan, tax, and budget for universities as if their model of knowledge creation is the only epistemological path. No matter how improbable it might seem that a Web page that anyone can edit would lead to valuable knowledge, Wikipedia makes clear that there is now another model for knowledge creation (p. 2).

Though Cummings (2008) thought the prospect of learning by writing/editing wiki entries might seem improbable, my preferences for constructivist approaches to learning meant that I had always tried to engage my students in writing to learn, so for me, the wiki would serve a number of aims:

- focusing on the creation a scholarly wiki would require students to engage in academic writing,
- building the wiki would involve both the students and the instructor to attend to current literature in a rapidly changing field,
• building the content of the wiki would require more than one term so it would increasingly serve as a resource in its own right and extend the wiki community over time, and
• writing for an authentic audience had the possibility of increasing the level of scholarship in the students’ wiki contributions and promote the development of high levels of critical skills.

However, while wiki software and applications were becoming more common, research on educational uses was limited. Parker & Chao’s (2007) summary of this early research concluded, “Educational institutions can offer immense value to their students by familiarizing them with the simple technologies that make collaborative networks possible.” (p. 67)

Though Wikipedia provided a model for using wiki software to create a learning resource, some instructors found novel ways to put the tool to use. Looking at the diversity of applications, Phillipson (2008) developed a taxonomy of the classroom uses of wikis which I describe below (descriptions and examples, unless otherwise stated, are mine). Phillipson (2008) also viewed this early research and developed a taxonomy of wiki applications:

• **Resource wikis** are bodies of information collaboratively assembled into a kind of “knowledge base” (Phillipson, 2008, p. 21).
• **Presentation wikis** are intended primarily as tools for sharing information within a class,
• **Gateway wikis** support engagement with and analysis of some body of information, for example a data set—normally external to the wiki. Gateway wikis therefore are less self-contained and are intended to support out-of-wiki work.
• **Simulation wikis** take advantage of the fundamental hyperlink structure (which enables both internal and external links in wiki entries) to create environments that involve choices which lead the user through a body of information in a way that is reminiscent of the much earlier technology of “choose your own adventure books.” They also share characteristics with online scavenger hunts.
• **Illuminated wikis** seek to provide environments that supports critical analysis. As Phillipson (2008) explained, “...the illuminated wiki is crucially different from its gateway cousin insofar as it incorporates the subject of study into the wiki itself and, in so doing, alters or transforms the source material” (p. 36).

That is to say, I had some choices to make. I doubt that Phillipson’s classifications are mutually exclusive, but the wiki I had my students create is primarily a resource wiki. I call it the Principles of Learning Wiki (n.d.) or PoL Wiki. I chose to use the MediaWiki platform because, as the platform that runs Wikipedia, it would look familiar to the students and would give them the opportunity to develop skills they could later use in contributing to Wikipedia if they chose. Further information on MediaWiki can be found in Ebersbach, Glaser & Heigl (2006) or Cummings & Barton (2008).
Rationale for Design of the Assignment

As noted above, my objectives for the assignment had to do with the benefits of writing to learn and of engaging in a kind of public scholarship. If that were done well, then the wiki would increasingly become a useful resource for future students. Increasingly, in the last two years, students have told me that they use the wiki as a place to get information on course topics and some have said they use it as a resource for papers in other courses after they have left PoL. That suggests to me that I should regard the PoL Wiki as a resource wiki, but my aims had much more to do with the processes of building the wiki than with the nature of its final structures and functions other than contributing to it.

Part of the task for me was deciding what a “contribution” was. Though I distinguished between original contributions and modifications to existing contributions, I was loathe to demand a specific number or type or length of contribution. My thought that what I wanted to see was “substantial” work that actually contributed to building the wiki. Clearly, the subjectivity in that statement was problematic.

Since I wanted the students to take ownership of the wiki and their contributions to it, I thought it clear that the assignment should require multiple “posts” by each student and should allow a great variety in the kind of work students did. That could mean a massive amount of additional reading for me. To deal with this situation, I devised the assignment I called a “wikiography” – a short paper that “told the story of (a student’s) contributions to the wiki.”

The assignment has changed some over time, but in the fall of 2010, it required that students write a short paper that would summarize, explain and assess their contributions to the course wiki. The course outline indicated that as an example, students might expect to make:

- two substantial contributions to entries about a learning theory (behaviorism, humanistic psychology, connectivism, etc.),
- two original entries about a learning theorist or researcher, and
- three additions, revisions or other major edits to entries made by others.

However, the outline also indicated that there could be substantial variations from this pattern and that it was the student’s responsibility to decide what was “substantial” for him or her and to have a rationale to support their decision.

Further, the outline indicated the quality of contributions would be assessed on the bases of:

- clear comprehensible prose
- accuracy of information
- originality
- inclusion of appropriate internal links
- inclusion of useful external links, and
• documentation of sources (as well as use of high quality sources, e.g., primary source material, refereed journal articles, and self-constructed illustrations that clarify concepts).

I developed a rubric for the assignment that was built on these expectations.

I emphasized that wiki contributions were an ongoing responsibility. I described the task as a form of public scholarship and made clear that any present or future member of the wiki community could edit any contribution—so that quality should improve over time.

I viewed the wiki assignment as an example of what Mezirow (1997) called a disorienting dilemma—an experience that would cause adult learners to open themselves up to new learning (Hunter, 2012). It was meant to be challenging and students reported that it was. Current students still say the task is challenging, but it is less problematic because they are less likely to be intimidated by the technology and I have created some self-help guides to get them started (see http://padlet.com/BillHunter/learningprinciples for examples of a self-help guide, the wikiography rubric, and other course materials).

Later students created a page for sharing student assignments (Course projects and papers, n.d.), providing struggling students with yet another way of improving their chances of success.

**Action Research**

In what way or ways are the contributions in this issue action research? I have already claimed that one way is my own use of the student papers (and their wiki contributions) as data upon which I might reflect in the interest of course improvement—and more generally, as a form of professional development. However, even if that were inarguable, it would remain to make the case that the remaining papers, derived from the students’ wikiographies, might be considered action research.

To begin with, Whitehead and McNiff (2006) made clear that they considered action research to be about practitioners as researchers:

> In action research, the focus swings away from the spectator researcher and onto the practitioner researchers. Practitioners investigate their own practice, observe, describe and explain what they are doing in company with one another, and produce their own explanations for what they are doing and why they are doing it (p. 13).

The authors in this issue are practitioners—all are working professionals. However, they are also students and I think it critical that we be open to considering students, at the very least, graduate students in professional programs, to be practitioners as professional learners. Their papers are reflections on the work they have done as students, but they also draw on their experience, both past and planned, as practicing teachers. In the wikiographies, and especially in this issue, they are individually and collectively engaged in
observing, describing and explaining their experiences as teachers and learners, with particular focus on their experience as public scholars creating a wiki.

Writing in the context of community health, Baum, MacDougall, and Smith (2006) also focused on the collaborative nature of action research, saying that at its heart, action research

...is collective, self-reflective [sic] inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves. The reflective process is directly linked to action, influenced by understanding of history, culture, and local context and embedded in social relationship (p. 854).

One of the things I have learned from this process is that I need to be more deliberate in promoting and supporting the collaborative nature of wiki work—as indicated by both Jones and DiPasquale (in this issue). The reader will, I think, see clearly that each of the contributors to this issue has likewise been engaged in a critical examination of their own work in the context of the joint project of building a resource wiki for the course.

Even a cursory look at the literature would reveal that “action research” is an ill-defined term. In accepting this theme issue, the editorial board of CJAR accepted that this is the case and, perhaps, recognized some merit in keeping the definition an open question. In this, they surely resisted a counter tendency to hammer down some clear limit on “what counts” as action research. In so doing, they are in accord with Whitehead and McNiff (2006):

Now a second concern has emerged, which in our opinion constitutes a threat to the democratic impulses of action research, and threatens to turn action research into a form of performance management. While maintaining a social science perspective, this new form also introduces a note of driving control, by insisting on the implementation of prescribed action plans, seasoned with an unspoken threat that unless you do action research in this particular way, you will fail as a teacher (p.15).

However, I would not want to be in a positon of arguing that action research defies definition or that it should be open to any methodological whim an author wishes to pursue. I find merit in a position put forth by Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, and Somekh (2013) which provided several descriptions of action research, including:

Action research is characterized by a continuing effort to closely inter-link, relate and confront action and reflection, to reflect upon one’s conscious and unconscious doings in order to develop one’s actions, and to act reflectively in order to develop one’s knowledge. Both sides will gain thereby: reflection opens up new options for action and is examined by being realized in action (p. 13-14).
The effort to “effort the o closely inter-link, relate and confront action and reflection” is at the heart of the wikiography assignment I use and the papers in this issue are, I believe, excellent examples of that effort.

Theme Issue Papers
As previously noted, the wikiography assignment is quite open-ended. Students may contribute to the wiki on any topic related to principles of learning, broadly conceived. They may choose to make completely new contributions or to modify existing ones. They may elect to clean up or re-organize sections of the wiki. They may ask for a new topic on the home page (I reserve the right to manage the home page and generally only add a new topic when multiple students will contribute it). Some have developed templates for sections, added images to pages they thought dull, etc. The diversity of the work will be evident in papers in this theme issue.

The papers chosen for submission to the journal were all excellent submissions in the first instance—in fact, on all of them I had noted “I’d like to see you publish this paper.” However, I did ask the authors to revise for submission here—the papers retain their original substance and quality but the authors have tried to speak to the CJAR audience rather than to a single reader. In general, links within the articles are links to the wiki pages to which they are referring.

You will have to read at least to the second page of Jesse Parsons’ paper to see his creative approach. Jesse begins by outlining some questions that are common to many students faced with this task. His reflections on his work are perhaps hyper-critical, but they pay off. He calls the browsing that people do in a wiki “sprawling” and his closing indicates that he was still working on the wiki after the course ended and, indeed, he has continued to make occasional contributions.

Monica Gagné admits that she got a late start on the wiki, but she got a renewed interest when she found the wiki page called “research study summaries.” That page is a great way for newbies to start since they can use work they have previously read and now they can build their contribution using the template Monica developed for the page drawing on her background in library science. (She also retroactively adapted the existing work so that it conformed to the template.) Her reflection on the need for “instructional scaffolding” reminded me that I sometimes overestimate the virtues of exceedingly independent learning.

Quality citations are a hallmark of academic work, including both the wiki contributions and the wikiography assignment. Terri-lyn Jones took this to heart in discussing how she might have profited by taking a more actively collaborative approach to the wiki work:

The wiki’s simplicity, openness, and linking capabilities make it a wise choice when choosing a collaboration tool for building in-depth group knowledge (Ioannou, 2011; Larusson & Alterman, 2009; Shriki & Movshovitz-Hadar, 2011).
As long as members are using wikis in a social manner, they have the potential to push the boundaries of individual zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), through peer collaboration, towards a more collective zone of proximal development that reaches past the knowledge construction capabilities of individuals alone (Kuteeva, 2011; Lund, 2008). Additionally, knowledge building is enhanced through a rigorous collaborative editing process that can be considered assessment-focused (Bransford et al., 1999; Helen et al., 2016). [See Jones’ article for references cited above.]

Joshua DiPasquale extends Monica Gagné’s call for “instructional scaffolding” by contrasting the relatively independent work in the wiki to the more collaborative discussion forums in the course Blackboard site. He attributes that difference to the more active role I played in the discussions. It is a good point and it has been instrumental in shaping his work on his M.Ed. project.

The Faculty of Education encourages graduate students to take the Principles of Learning course early in their program, but not all students take that advice. It was the last course for Adrian Hogendoorn and that let him take a unique approach to the wikiography—he used the opportunity to make the wiki work the basis for a reflection on his entire program. Adrian also made a point of talking about what I find to be one of the attractive features of wikis—it affords the learners to wonder aimlessly through a body of knowledge making connections of their own along the way and perhaps developing a sense of the field as a whole.

**Going Forward**

The wiki assignment continues to intrigue me and I have been gratified that so many of my students also say that they find the task both challenging and valuable—to be “hard fun.” In the next couple of years, I do plan a more active role for myself in the wiki work—paradoxically perhaps since my objective will be to structure student participation in ways that will enable the wiki to become a student-edited product that will survive after I cease to teach the course. This in itself is a big change from my original focus—a shift from a focus on process to a recognition of the value of this student-created product.

Readers who might be interested in developing their own course wikis might find useful guidance in the questions posed by Whitehead and McNiff (2006):

- How do we encourage educators to participate in public debates about the future of educational research?
- How do we enable practitioners to produce accounts that show the creative processes of their own living educational theories?
- What kind of resources do we produce to enable them to do so?
- What kind of practices do we personally need to engage in as we support their personal professional enquiries?
• How do we encourage practitioners to show that they understand the need to articulate the living critical standards by which they make judgements about their practices and their theories?
• How do we hold ourselves accountable as we do these things? (p. 20)

Certainly, these questions have application far beyond wiki work, but I believe action research in the context of building a wiki is certainly one way of taking these questions to heart.

REFERENCES


* More than 330 graduate students have contributed to the Principles of Learning Wiki discussed in this issue. Jasjit Sangha and Timothy Buell have each taught sections of the course and contributed to the wiki. Other individual faculty members have contributed by reviewing, editing, and updating biographical pages students created about them and their work. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to all of these individuals, to the authors who share their work in this issue and to those who provided commentary on those contributions. Thanks also to the CJAR reviewers whose critiques helped to shape the articles in this issue and to the CJAR editorial board for providing us all with the opportunity to share our learning with a wider audience.