

## Teaching with Wikis

**Marianne Miserandino**  
*Arcadia University*

The use of wikis in the classroom can benefit your students, yourself, and the field of psychology. You may have already wondered how you can use wikis to manage collaborative student projects or to design innovative assignments. But as a teacher, you can also join an online collaborative community of teachers by learning from and contributing to wikis on the teaching of psychology. As teacher-scholars, I believe that we are uniquely qualified and indeed have a calling to teach others about the science of psychology. One way of realizing this is by contributing to online wikis. The goal of this essay is to teach and inspire you to use wikis in your teaching and to contribute to professional wikis.

### What is a Wiki?

According to Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, a wiki is “a medium which can be edited by anyone with access to it...wikis are typically collaborative websites.” (Retrieved March 24, 2008, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.wikipedia.org>). For example, if you visit Wikipedia and click on “English,” you will see the homepage with a featured article and a summary of news events of the day. Now enter “Psychology” into the search bar and you will see an entire article about psychology, including tabs for discussion (to add your own thoughts), editing (to add to the collaborative body of knowledge on the topic), and history (to track changes that others have made on the page). This ability for readers to virtually join the discussion of a topic which collaboratively creates a changing, living, body of knowledge is the main advantage of wikis.

### Wikis in Psychology

As of this writing, I know of only three psychology wikis publicly available on the internet: *The Psychology Portal* portion of Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Psychology>), *The Psychology Wiki* ([http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Page)) and *PsychWiki* ([http://www.psychwiki.com/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://www.psychwiki.com/wiki/Main_Page)).

When it comes to teaching, there are just three wikis for the teaching of psychology: my own *Personality Pedagogy* (<http://personalitypedagogy.arcadia.edu>), which is a resource for the teaching of personality psychology at all levels; Hunter Gehlbach’s *Social Psychology for Educators* (<http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k12519&pageid=icb.page51140>), which helps teachers K-12 incorporate ideas from social psychology into their teaching; and Amy Sweetman’s *Intro Psychology Resources* (<http://www.intropsychresources.com>).

## What Are the Advantages of a Wiki?

There are many advantages to wikis. The biggest advantage is that wikis are easy to use. The software required to create and maintain wikis is available for free and often requires merely a standard web browser. The sites themselves, being text-based, are easy to use without special knowledge of HTML or other programming languages. Wikis can be used on an intranet to share within a school or organization (e.g., Blackboard, WebCT) and wikis can also be used on the internet to share with the world. Wikis can foster and support collaboration among students, among teachers, and between students and teachers. In sum, a wiki can be a creative and effective way for teachers to manage their classes and to share information and strategies about teaching with their colleagues either within their organization or around the globe.

Given all these advantages, more teachers ought to be using wikis. However, speaking as a founder and moderator of a wiki on teaching, this is sadly not the case. From talking to teachers of psychology and from an online survey posted to *Personality Pedagogy*, people report the following reasons for why they do not contribute to a wiki: (a) not enough time to contribute, (b) lack of familiarity with wikis, (c) don't know how to contribute to a wiki, (d) never thought of contributing to a wiki, (e) feel they have nothing important to contribute, and (f) editing online makes people nervous. In sum, wikis are still a rather new technology and not fully utilized by psychology instructors, but respondents are confident this will change as people become more aware of the technology.

### The Untapped Potential of Wikis in the Teaching of Psychology, or What Can I Do with a Wiki?

Andrew Collins at the University of New South Wales requires students in his immunology course to contribute to Wikipedia by writing articles and correcting errors. "I think a lot of science students feel overwhelmed by the amount of knowledge out there in the world and they don't realize that at the end of their undergraduate studies they're really quite experts and they should have confidence in their knowledge" (Moses, 2007, para. 11). He structured the assignment so that students must make consistent contributions over the 10-week course and can't just work on this assignment at the last minute. If professor Collins has inspired you to use wikis in your teaching, here are just a few ideas of the many very creative uses of wikis by psychology teachers and others:

#### *Class assignments*

Like Professor Collins, you can devise creative assignments for your students that use already established wikis or you can instruct them to create their own wikis. For example, instead of a traditional paper, you can require students to contribute to a standard wiki, design an original wiki, or create an online textbook, handbook, supplement, or study guide. Did you know that faculty and students at over 45 universities from around the world have already contributed articles to Wikipedia as a class assignment? Check out their work and find some inspiration for your own assignments here:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:School\\_and\\_university\\_projects](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:School_and_university_projects).

### *Make your own wiki*

Have you ever bookmarked a website only to forget what was so interesting there? Or, do you work on multiple computers and have troubling finding the sites you've bookmarked? One way to solve this problem is to make your own wiki. You can then store links or upload slides, videos, notes, graphics, audio clips, spreadsheets, and other electronic information. For example, I have a personal wiki (viewable by password only) in which I collect examples and links to web sites relevant to my courses (i.e., social psychology and personality psychology); my scholarship (e.g., motivation, teaching with technology); interesting places I would like to visit (e.g., Egypt, Vienna); hobbies (e.g., knitting, cooking); and humor (e.g., cartoons, stories, pictures, videos, jokes, etc.). I like being able to provide my own comments and descriptions for material I find on the web and having the convenience of my favorite websites in one online place accessible at home or from the office.

Starting your own wiki is surprisingly easy, as there are many free or low-cost wiki-hosting sites such as PB Wiki (<http://pbwiki.com>) and Google (<http://sites.google.com>). Both of these sites provide easy viewing and editing options so that you don't need to learn any fancy programming code. If you are more of a do-it-yourselfer and want to be able to program the exact look and function of your wiki, you can talk to the IT department at your school to find out about hosting a wiki on your school's own server. Either way, you may want to see Wikipedia for an overview and comparison of web-hosting options ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_wiki\\_farms](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_wiki_farms)).

### *Coordinate group projects*

When it comes to group projects, students have two common complaints that are readily solved with a wiki. First, students report that they are unable to find a time to meet with their peers outside of class. Wikis can solve this by providing an online space for students to create, share, and edit their work at any time. They can even use a wiki to create to-do lists, assign tasks, or to give each other progress reports. You might even find this aspect of wikis valuable for your own collaborative projects with colleagues or to organize committee work at your school. Second, students resent the inevitable "social loafer" who doesn't pull his or her fair share of the work. Since most wiki software has a built-in tracking or history function, instructors can easily monitor individual students' contributions and ensure that their projects are progressing.

### *Write an online textbook or supplement*

The open access of the Internet and of Wikipedia in particular has inspired others to create and freely disseminate their work. For example, the California Open Source Textbook Project (COSTP) aspires to develop textbooks for use in all K-12 classrooms at a lower cost than commercial textbooks (see [http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/COSTP\\_World\\_History\\_Project](http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/COSTP_World_History_Project)). COSTP, in cooperation with Wikipedia, began a World History pilot for 9th grade World History/Social Studies based on the California State Curriculum Standards. Another example is a renegade group of college students who hope to eliminate textbooks altogether by encouraging faculty to write their own content (see Textbook Revolution at <http://textbookrevolution.org>)! You need not be as radical as these folks. Because a major advantage of an online text is that it can provide the most up to date information

available on a topic, you can easily create an on-line supplement to your own courses which you can update as often as you like.

### *Share and disseminate lesson plans*

A common problem, especially at small colleges, is that professors can feel isolated from other specialists who teach a given topic. A wiki is one way of connecting with other teachers through an online community where you can discuss ways of presenting material in class. For example, I know of two sites which welcome contributions specifically from teachers: Curriculum Wiki (<http://www.curriki.org>), specializing in lesson plans and materials for K-12 and some college courses (including social science, sociology and psychology); and Introductory Psychology Resources (<http://www.intropsychresources.com>), which specializes in activities, demonstrations, songs, quotes and the like for high school and college intro psych classes. Both of these sites are wikis, which makes it very easy for you to visit and share your own materials and ideas.

### *Establish a department wiki*

How many times have you answered the question, “What else do I need to take for my major?” Your department can create an online handbook outlining departmental requirements, answering students’ frequently asked questions, listing office hours, providing background and links for campus speakers, and posting important reminders and announcements. You can even encourage students to add helpful information based on their own experiences, such as applying APA format, using the library, finding research opportunities, getting into graduate school, and finding a job. An important advantage of using a wiki for this, rather than a traditional web page, is that information can be changed and updated immediately. The Canisius College Psychology Department (<http://www.canisiuspsychology.net>) established such a page for their majors. While outsiders can only access a few of the pages, you can see the potential of this medium for organizing announcements, research opportunities, graduate school information, requirements, and other information essential for psychology majors.

If the above six ideas are not enough inspiration for you, see PB Wiki for 25 additional suggestions and examples (<http://yummy.pbwiki.com/Ideas+for+using+PBwiki>).

### Wikis as a Cure-all?

Please be warned, however, wikis and wiki assignments are only as good as the thought that goes into them. As with any assignment, instructors need to be clear about what they want students to learn, practice, master, or demonstrate. That is, objectives and goals for the assignment must be thought out ahead of time. Also, instructors will need to regularly monitor students’ contributions in order to track the quality of their work and to see that students are regularly engaged in the project. This need not be as onerous as it sounds, as many wiki platforms have built in tracking features. Basically, there is nothing magical about wiki assignments, so they must be designed and assessed with as much care as traditional assignments.

Alas, wikis are not a cure-all for teachers and perhaps in a few years they may be replaced by other technologies. For now, they do provide a fun and easy way to foster

collaboration between you and your students, among students, and among teacher-scholars.

### Reference

Moses, A. (2007, October 31). Wikipedia project is a class act. *Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved March 24, 2008, from <http://www.smh.com.au/news/web/wikipedia-project-is-a-class-act/2007/10/31/1193618940842.html>.