Wikis Are Worth It!

Implementing and Evaluating t

What do you do with *59 grade five students* in a library? No, this is not the beginning of a corny teacher joke but the reality a colleague and I faced last spring in the library shared by Keele Street Junior Public School and Mountview Alternative School in Toronto.

While their grade six classmates wrote the EQAO test, grade five students from four different classes joined together in the library for a total of six mornings, supervised by the French teacher, Randy Doiron, and myself, the teacher-librarian. We considered many options for activities but finally decided to create a wiki – a collaborative website — with the students.

"I knew about wikis, like Wikipedia, but I didn't know how to make one," says Valentina Wilches, a Keele/Mountview student who took part in the project.

Websites that allow individual and groups to make free wikis include: Wikispaces (www.wikispaces.com), Wetpaint (www.wetpaint.com) and the one that we ultimately used at Keele/Mountview, PBWiki (www.pbwiki.com). For our project, the students had to research one person from history who made a meaningful contribution to the world. We called it the *People Who Made a Difference Project.* Instead of just typing up a biography or making a bristol board display about their chosen person, the students created a wiki page.

So What's Wrong with Bristol Board?

Let me emphasize there is nothing wrong with bristol board displays, but I had a few reasons for wanting to try wikis.

First, we needed something with a "cool, never-been-done-before" vibe to engage our 59 students initially and to keep them engaged.

Second, we wanted to give them something that was more current and useful. The web 2.0 world is their reality now. Wikis and other forms of online communication and collaboration are the tools they will use to move forward. We need to start teaching them now, even as young as grade five, how to use these tools effectively and responsibly.

Finally, creating a wiki is an authentic learning task that requires higher-order thinking as the students analyze, summarize, edit and evaluate information with their group members.

"A really cool feature of the wiki was the comments section. We could express our ideas about other people's work, congratulate them and even give them tips on how they could make it better," says Miles Avalos, another student who also worked on the wiki project.

Nikola Pupic adds, "I enjoyed working with my partner, Miles, on the wiki. We could edit it whenever we wanted at home or at school; it made working in a group really easy."

With such a rich learning task, the teachable moments and mini-lesson possibilities are endless. Some of the lessons we gave included how to use the wiki itself – how to edit and save, insert graphics, and link to other web pages. Research lessons were also important. Students learned how to generate effective keyword searches and how to take useful jot-notes.

Wikis and other web 2.0 tools do require teaching in another area as well – social and ethical conduct on the Internet, generally known as "netiquette." We talked about how to give constructive online comments to other wiki users, the ethical and legal reasons for only using public domain photos, and the importance of protecting your user name and password.

And of course, beyond the process-related learning, there was the content-related learning on the subject itself – making a difference in the world. "From researching Helen Keller, I learned that you can do anything that you set your mind to," says Lana Jevremovic, a Keele/Mountview student.