

Building learning power with wikis

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Overview

Anna set out to explore the value of wikis to develop skills in independent and collaborative learning with two Year 8 classes. She wanted to explore whether using a wiki would enable her to implement ideas in Guy Claxton's *Building Learning Power*. Her focus, as in a number of other case studies, was on poetry. She discovered that allowing students access to learning from home removed the constraints of the classroom further and developed the personalisation of learning. The project began to take on a life of its own when another class became interested and conversations about poetry between the groups developed, not just during lessons but also at lunch times and at home. Anna was delighted at the sophistication of some of the discussions and the way the wiki gave all students, no matter what ability, a voice and enabled them to ask questions themselves and interrogate texts naturally. Using the wiki totally transformed a number of the students' views of English and, more importantly, of themselves.

Introduction

In recent years, Wikipedia has become one of the best known and most popular websites, attracts 683 million visitors a year. The name *Wikipedia* derives from two words: 'encyclopaedia' and 'wiki'. As an encyclopaedia, the site provides access to more than two million entries. However, as a 'wiki' it also allows its users to create their own entries, and to alter or add to those already on the site. As such, it is a collaborative webspace controlled by its users; a space designed so that anyone who accesses it can contribute to or modify its content.

Having recently attended staff training at my own school, I decided to explore the potential of wikis for making 'hard topics' easier to teach with ICT. So, despite very little knowledge of what a wiki really was or what it might have to offer, I set out with the following aims and objectives:

Aims and objectives

- to learn how to use a 'wiki';
- to develop skills in independent and collaborative learning;
- to see how much impact wikis can have on learning and teaching, including contributing to 'Building Learning Power';
- to see if wikis really could make hard topics easier to teach.

Context

Deciding which year group I would involve in the project and what exactly to teach through the wiki was one of the first decisions that had to be made. Due to timetabling issues, examinations and Year 10 work experience, in the end I had very little choice. I work in a school that begins the GCSE course in Year 9 so I decided to trial teaching some of the Anthology poems to a transition group: Year 8 going into Year 9.

The hard-to-teach topic

Clearly this was an ambitious task as teaching AQA Anthology poems was one of the problem areas that was thought of as 'hard-to-teach'. As I was teaching two Year 8 classes, one at the higher end of the ability spectrum and one mixed set, I thought this would give me ample opportunity to compare the effect of teaching through wikis across ability ranges.

I decided that the following English skills could be taught through the wiki site:

1. Understanding poetry
2. Comparing texts
3. Reading between the lines
4. Metaphorical language
5. Alternative interpretations – achievable through the discussion pages
6. Themes
7. Writing about poem and texts using 'PEE'

Process

The first step of the project was to create and develop the webspace. Although this sounds extremely daunting, it really isn't as hard as it sounds; in fact, I was pleasantly surprised at how quickly I got to grips with it (see the 'How to use a Wiki' help sheet if you are interested in setting up your own).

The transition scheme that I was using with my year 8s had a section on poetry with a focus on the poem 'Havisham' by Carol Ann Duffy. This was preceded by looking at Dickens' portrayal of Miss Havisham and followed by a comparison with 'Song' by Auden, looking at similar themes, and this then led into some creative writing.

I began by uploading the poem 'Havisham' on to the wiki and created a page with a number of resources that I would normally have delivered to the class myself. I uploaded a PowerPoint which I had previously delivered to other classes on the poem, a set of questions, some notes in a word document and two links to useful websites which analysed the poem. I briefly showed the students how to use the site, got them signed up with their own usernames and then set them off to answer some fairly difficult questions. They had to use the resources on the site to answer the questions. It was up to them which resources they used from the site; I deliberately did not specify this. I also briefly introduced the students to the discussion pages, encouraged them to communicate with each other this way in order to get some answers to the questions. I also used the discussion tool as a plenary at the end of the lesson: I gave them a question which they all had to post a response to.

It may be relevant to mention at this point that this was one of my objectives for this project. I had become very interested in the ideas around Guy Claxton's *Building Learning Power: Helping Young People Become Better Learners* (2002) and students becoming more independent; this seemed like an ideal opportunity to see how resourceful and resilient students could be if they were given the opportunity. Additionally, allowing students access to learning from home removes the constraints of the classroom walls and develops even further the personalisation of learning.¹

¹ Taken from NCSL's 'National Conversation on personalising learning'

Following this, for home learning, I asked them to go back on to the site and read the poem 'Song' by Auden and join in a discussion about the poem's meaning; they had to contribute to a discussion or ask a question about the poem themselves. At this point, after seeing my enthusiasm for all things wiki, a colleague of mine became interested and asked if she could be involved. My students taught her students how to use the wiki and before we knew it, there were conversations going on about poetry on-line, not just during lessons but also at lunch times and at home – an extraordinary response!

Another colleague used the wiki with some year 10 students who were completing some coursework on *Our Day Out* by Willy Russell. She uploaded useful website addresses and documents to help students with the essay (such as essay plans) and began using the discussion as a tool to help students develop the depth of their responses in the coursework.

The wiki has since developed and now lots of English teachers and students are involved in creating the site and adding what they feel is important. This is particularly important as it gives students a voice and some control over their own learning. As yet, absolutely no one has abused the site. Clearly 'cyber bullying' is a potential issue but is very easy to monitor as you have full access to everything on the space and can delete anything inappropriate. Using school policies and pastoral support, as with any classroom bullying issues, is the best way to prevent this.

Results

My study suggests a number of benefits from teaching through wikis. The discussion below highlights key learning in relation to the content of the scheme as well as a number of skills being employed by the students whilst using the wiki.

Without doubt, the most useful tool is the discussion page. Some of the discussions going on between students of all abilities was, quite frankly, unbelievable. Indeed, it was the response to the requirement to discuss 'Song' that confirmed to me that using a wiki was extremely beneficial. Suddenly, lower ability year 8 students were reading a poem for meaning and giving their own personal opinions, explaining their views in detail, using quotations, commenting on language and offering alternative interpretations. Most importantly, students were now interrogating the poem themselves, asking questions and explaining things to each other. A number of students posted questions asking for help reading the meaning of different lines from the poem; these were promptly answered and explained by others in the class. Suddenly, it seemed there was no need for me!

Considering I had not explicitly 'taught' the poems to these year 8s, the way in which they were discussing them was fantastic. They naturally used the 'PEE' structure without being told as I think they felt they were arguing their point and somehow having a 'real' audience meant that they did not assume the person reading their entry to the discussion understood their point. All of a sudden therefore, my middle set year 8s were making points, using correct evidence to back up their point and explaining it effectively. This is part of a discussion which took place between a student in the top set and a student from the mixed set based on the question I posed:



[rob95](#) re: Dickens Vs Duffy

Dickens makes Havisham sound bossy but not angry. Dickens uses lines like: 'Walk me, Walk me'and come, come, come.

Duffy is the other way around - she makes Havisham seem angry and sad but fragmented and frail. 'Beloved Sweetheart Bastard' is an oxymoron so it implies her fragmented mind and angryness.

Posted Jun 27, 2008 8:56 am - [\[delete\]](#)



[stinky_potatoe_head](#) re: Dickens Vs Duffy

dickens, even though he makes her sound a bit mean, he also creates a bit in us, which makes us want to feel sorry for her. Whereas duffy makes her sound much more angry and scary, its makes us want to hate her, except for in the last paragraph

Posted Jul 4, 2008 2:05 am - [\[delete\]](#)

This demonstrates what I consider to be one of the most important factors as to why wiki is so successful: it gives all students, no matter what ability, a voice. Those quiet students in class who never put their hand up to answer a question will happily join in all kinds of discussions on the wiki. This is helped by the fact that they can choose their own usernames so actually their identity is hidden from other students, lessening any chance of ridicule.

Additionally, one of the other hidden delights for me was the fact that not only were all students responding in detail to questions I asked, but they were now beginning to ask questions themselves and interrogate texts naturally. Some questions were of a very high level, others were just on a very mundane level but meant that the students were connecting with the text in a more personal way: they were now beginning to see the poem as relevant to them.

if miss havisham were alive today, which celebrity wud she be best with??

[\[delete topic\]](#)



[stinky_potatoe_head](#) if miss havisham were alive today, which celebrity wud she be best with??

hey, JOIN THE DISCUSSION!! lets hear wat u think??

Posted Jun 27, 2008 2:27 am - [\[delete\]](#)



[bef_luvs_u](#) re: if miss havisham were alive today, which celebrity wud she be best with??

i reckon she would go really well with ozzy osbourne, he neva changes his clothes nethal lmao...x

Posted Jun 27, 2008 2:34 am - [\[delete\]](#)



[stinky_potatoe_head](#) re: if miss havisham were alive today, which celebrity wud she be best with??

i think she wud be really gud with pete doherty, hehe lol

Posted Jun 27, 2008 2:36 am - [\[delete\]](#)



[XxlouxX](#) re: if miss havisham were alive today, which celebrity wud she be best with??

I soooooo agree with bef_luvs_u dat is sooooo true...xxx

Posted Jun 27, 2008 2:36 am - [\[delete\]](#)



[wba-boy](#) re: if miss havisham were alive today, which celebrity wud she be best with??

amy winehouse

Posted Jun 27, 2008 9:25 am - [\[delete\]](#)



[Bran2](#) re: if miss havisham were alive today, which celebrity wud she be best with??

Britney spears =D

Posted Jun 27, 2008 11:17 am - [\[delete\]](#)

Additionally, students were becoming collaborative, helping each other rather than relying on me for the answers. I am convinced that the following interpretation would not have been drawn out of the poem had I taught it to the students and then got them to answer questions on it:

What does this line mean?

[\[delete topic\]](#)



[rob95](#) **What does this line mean?**

What does this line mean? Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves.

Isn't Crepe the french word for pancake? Or does it mean something different in this context?

Posted Jun 27, 2008 2:53 am - [\[delete\]](#)



[Bran2](#) re: What this line could mean

Crepe is the french word for pancake, however a crepe bow is also a type of bow tie worn around the neck. As doves regularly crowd public places like pigeons it could symbolise that the narrators sadness is such that all the birds should wear black bow ties as a symbol of their remorse. this could show that the narrator wants everybody to show that they are remorseful, a bit like when football players wear black armbands to show how they're sorry.

Hope this helps!

Posted Jun 27, 2008 11:04 am - [\[delete\]](#)

The exploration of this poem was carried out totally independently by all students; they all read the poem and joined in a number of discussions, asking and answering questions with absolutely no input from me. Although it was clear that some of the students initially had a very basic understanding of the poem, the very fact that they were 'discussing' it meant that their understanding was developing. Others' ideas were built on and challenged. The following lesson, I set some questions on the poem and was astounded by the level of understanding and inference that nearly all students of all abilities had. Not only this, but through their responses they were linking in and comparing the poem to 'Havisham' through themes and character. For year 8s I think this speaks for itself.

These results were reiterated by the experiences of my colleague using wiki as part of her year 10 coursework. For her class also, the discussion forum gave students a safety net to ask questions and clear up their understanding of things in a way that they perhaps did not feel comfortable doing in a classroom environment.

Warnings and potential problems

Like many things, creating a wiki has obvious negative points. Firstly and most importantly is the issue of Internet access. Fortunately, when I asked the classes involved in my project, nearly all of them had access to the Internet at home or knew somewhere where they could go to complete on line learning. The computer facilities in my school are also excellent so, for me, this did not prove a problem.

As with all approaches, this style of learning suits some and not others. Although my year 8s all seemed to enjoy learning in this way, my colleague who tested this with her year 10s found that some of them did not enjoy it. However, as long as the wiki is to *aid* your teaching, it can be left up to the students when and how they use it.

The time it took to initially start the wiki is a potential problem. However, I would recommend starting small and building up the site gradually. Getting students involved in helping you do this is also a good tactic; they will know far more about it than you anyway! Again, this in itself could be a problem as it means that students can edit the pages and therefore upload inappropriate things. However, you are emailed any time anybody makes any changes and can therefore keep a tight control. My rule was that

anybody who abused the site would not be a member. I had no problems with this. As yet, no one has abused the site.

Clearly, such an enthusiastic response from my students can be put down to the fact that this was something 'new'. While there is nothing wrong with this, I am aware that in order to maintain the momentum, the wiki will need to be constantly updated and reinvented. There are a number of tools available on wiki pages that I have not yet been able to play with. This is something which I will be doing when developing this resource.

Conclusions

When I looked back at my original aims and intentions, and at the things which the group originally stated were 'hard topics', I realised that the wiki had met more of these objectives than I had originally intended. It had certainly made the topic of poetry easier to teach; in fact, I'm not sure how much 'teaching' I actually did: I merely facilitated their learning.

As illustrated above, students not only appear to help to teach content but, more importantly in my view, develop the all important learning skills that so many of our older students in the school just do not have. One of the biggest criticisms of students in our school is that they are 'spoon fed' and 'cannot do anything for themselves'. Using the wiki totally transformed a number of these students' views on English and, more importantly, on themselves in a very short space of time. The skills that the wiki had developed in the students were:

- seeing implicit meaning/ reading between the lines
- understanding metaphorical language
- seeing alternative readings
- developing critical thinking
- research skills.

I can confidently say that all students who have used the wiki have made progress in all of these areas. The responses to the poems which I assessed made this clear; students achieved at a much higher level in this assessment than students from last year.

Basically, wiki works because it is fun. The students are curious and it is a medium with which they are familiar – it's like learning through Facebook! A wiki is also useful because it encourages students to be more independent, to be creative and to think for themselves, asking questions as well as answering them. It allows them to be co-constructors and therefore gives them a sense of ownership of their learning.

This project was so rewarding and I and my department are 100% convinced that wikis can enhance learning. Although initially it took a lot of time setting up, it now completely runs itself and I am in the process of getting a group of students to take ownership of the Wiki and giving them the responsibility of adding to it and updating it as necessary.

Next steps

The success of this project has inspired me to take the project further. My planned next steps are:

- to create a team of students to develop and update the wiki;
- to use the wiki with one class and not another and see what happens to results;
- to make better use of the other resources available on wikis such as:
 - polls and surveys
 - live 'MSN' style chat rooms
 - slide shows
 - audio and video files.

The potential of having a site like this is endless and I really would recommend everyone to have a go.

Appendix: Wikispaces: a guide to setting one up for use in the classroom

Wikispaces: a guide to setting one up for use in the classroom

What is a wiki?

A web page which can be edited by all users, making it perfect for collaborative learning.

Getting started

The first thing you need to do is to go to www.wikispaces.com and create your own space. On the right hand side of the page is a light green box which asks you to enter a username, password, email address and a space name.



Your space name will be the name of your wikispace so choose this carefully. Your username is displayed on all the message boards so choose something that will allow your students to recognise you.

When you have entered these details, you are asked to choose what kind of wiki you would like. There are three options to choose from:

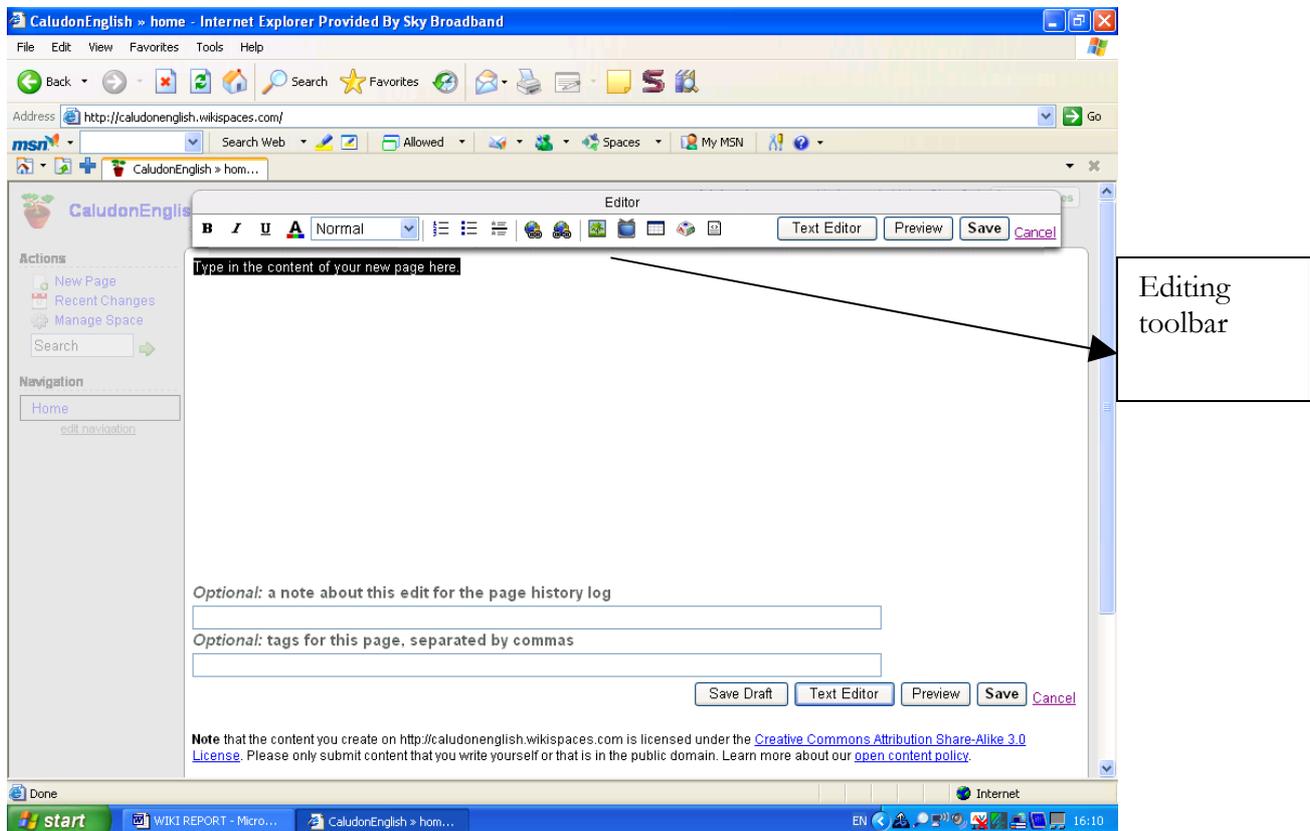
- **Public:** anyone can view or edit your wikispace.
- **Protected:** anyone can view your space but only members can edit it.
- **Private:** only members can view or edit your space.

Wikispaces allows teachers to set up private areas for students, so make sure you click on the link to 'Wikispaces K-12 Educational Plan' (this is an American site, so the reference is to students in compulsory education). It is possible to upgrade to the educational version later; either way you will need to use the site to submit a request and wait a short time for confirmation. This allows you to select a private space where you can control who views and edits the content.

Following this you are presented with a page entitled 'Getting started with your wiki' which gives you a quick and easy guide to all the things you can do. You can access this page at any other time to help jog your memory should you forget by going to the 'help' tag at the top of your wiki page.

You then get to what will be your 'Home Page'. You can customise this and make it your own by going to the 'manage space' link on the left hand side of the page and then head in to 'look and feel'. This allows you to customise colour, upload logos and so on. Really, the best way to get to grips with this is to just have a play.

To add content to your page, you then need to click on the link 'Edit This Page', which brings you to a page which looks like this:



You are then free to type or copy and paste in any text that you want on your home page, you can format it with bold, italics, font, headings and more. Remember to click save when you are done.

The most important thing to understand how to use is the tool bar at the top of the page which allows you to create new pages, add in links to Internet sites and import documents, files and pictures of your choice.



On the left hand side of the tool box are the tools you need to edit your text: change the colour; font size; font; spacing.

Adding images/files to your wiki

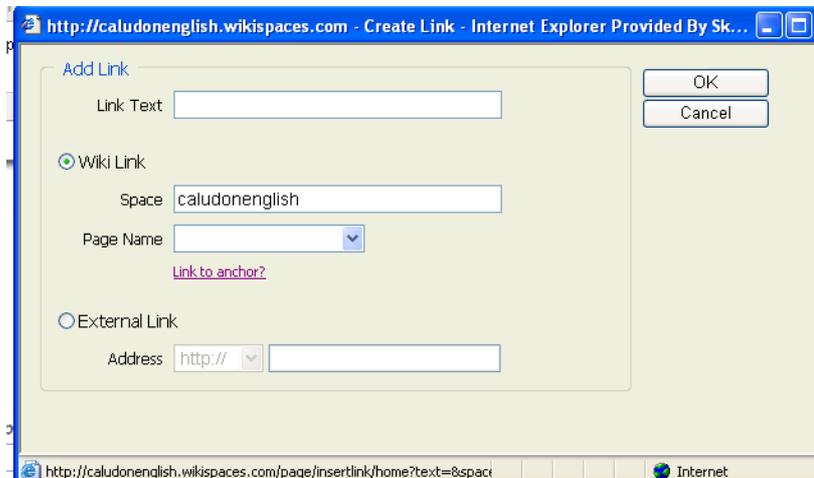
- Click **Edit this page**.
- Click the icon that looks like a tree.
- Browse your computer for the files of images you want to upload (just as if you were attaching files to an email).
- Place your cursor where you would like the image on the page.
- Double click and the image/a link to the file will appear on the page.

Adding media to your wiki

- Click on the icon that looks like a TV in the toolbar.
- Choose the object you would like to embed.
- Follow the instructions for embedding the media device.
- Click save.

Adding pages and hyperlinks to your wiki

There are two little world/globe shapes next to each other, one for adding in links and one for removing them. If you click on the first world, it opens up the following:



- This is the tool you need to create additional pages on your website. You need to add in the name of the page, say for example, 'Poems from Different Cultures' and write this in to the box that says 'link text'.
- Click OK and then save your edited page and you will now have a 'Home' page and a page called 'Poems from Different Cultures.'
- The link to this page will appear in the navigation box on the left hand side of your page and when you click on the link it will take you to your new page.
- You will then need to edit and add in different pages for all the poems.