Using wikis to create a student knowledge hub

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Background

Peter wanted to use a couple of different tools to extend classroom conversation, to explore what he likes to term “third-space teaching”, creating an environment which is genuinely collaborative, genuinely owned by students, but which also intersects with the live experience of the classroom and locates what we are doing in a wider community of independent responsibility and gives them a sense of empowerment. He used Twitter on one module and Moodle wikis on another.

The module is Shakespeare and Jonson, a comparative early modern theatrical literature course. Important to this is now that we are entering the end of a period of relative textual stability and that when Gutenberg invented the printing press we replaced a culture of primarily oral transmission / scribal transmission with fixity printed texts. Digital media is reversing that, taking us back into a culture where people were more inclined to scribble, to compile, create multiple kinds of texts, none of which has more authority than others.

What did you do?

Peter decided to use wikis as a way of replicating the “commonplace book” – a personal log of one’s own experiences into which people would “copy and paste” quotations, references, texts, etc. Commonplace books were objects owned by individuals but always intersecting, often shared, often passed around. The wiki is a really interesting way of replicating these ideas – a wiki does not need to be authoritative (don’t cite Wikipedia!)

The wiki was used to give students a chance to become experts in a particular contextual area of the course, log their ideas and share their ideas at an early stage. The course has two classes of 20 students, and two students in each class were given a research specialism, such as The Blackfriars, the Globe, Shakespeare’s life, Jonson’s life, boy actors etc. The students were told from day one they would be the class’s knowledge expert (“go-to person”) on this subject.

Wikis provided the commonplace book which supplemented them. All students have access to all the wikis, with the ‘experts’ taking responsibility for editing a particular one. Peter gave them starting suggestions, and specific seminar sessions which they were to contribute to, then week by week they were required to put together wikis online. As they built up ideas they created a digital commonplace book, bringing in pictures, article reviews, summaries, diagrams and computer modules, and began critiquing the materials.

How did it work out?
This level of research was in the past carried out at the end of the module when preparing their individual essays – very contained individual sequence of tasks. The students started this in the knowledge that it would contribute to their individual essays – their research questions. The students responsible for each wiki did not meet in person, so the wiki was a third space where students in different seminar groups collaborated on these wikis, reading each other’s work, supplementing it and building together a collaborative research base much broader than any of them would have been able to achieve individually.

And as the class went on, they continued building up the wikis, using them in class. Peter could also pick up on them in class, to introduce the kind of work they’d been doing.

The alchemy example shows pages representing several thousand words’ worth of writing.

The students could:

- pool their resources
- parcel out work
- create collaboratively
- go off and write very different individual essays
- take ownership of their learning (finding out things even Peter didn’t know about)
What did students think?

Peter gave more firsts than he’d ever given before – because essays were written from a much deeper research base not created at the end

For students:

- it removed anxiety they had about writing up to the correct standard
- they could take initial notes and readings and share “raw” before needing to have extensive distillation of it
- they had the freedom to practice writing in a more informal context
- they could identify their specialisation
- they could build on rich shared foundation of knowledge
- They were writing worth something from day 1 not just an essay only seen by them and their marker

More information

Presentation

Using wikis to create student knowledge hubs - Peter Kirwan.ppt

Video

- Peter Kirwan talking about the wikis

How to achieve this:

- How to add a wiki