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David Kangas
Wayne Memorial High School, Wayne, MI

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Wikis: Revising Our Theories on Writing, Authority and Expert

David Kangas
Wayne Memorial High School
Wayne, MI

Kids were shuffling out to the hallway and down to the library when Erica, waiting until the room was empty, said to me that her contributions to her group wiki had been deleted. Erica wondered how her grade would be affected. Picking up my notes and preparing to meet the others in her group, I tried to think of a quick response to her concern; yet I struggled to explain concisely how this is part of using wikis to write, and that we would continue to talk as a class about this issue.

We all teach writing with particular beliefs about how a text should be produced. In other words, we present for students a model and specific expectations about how writing is to be learned and practiced (Ivanic 220). As computerized, or digital, technology becomes more and more accessible in classrooms and in student lives, expectations and beliefs that students and teachers have about how a written texts can be produced becomes more complex. When using digital tools, learning to write potentially becomes multidimensional, one way among many, a point in a "constellation of beliefs" about how we write (Ivanic 220).

When we ask students to write one way over another using these technologies we are asking them to reconsider or revise their beliefs and values about what counts as academic writing. For example, by asking students to re-conceptualize academic writing as collaborative, we are urging them to take on different roles in different contexts and to recognize that there are ways of writing that ask us to reconsider our roles in getting the writing right, and in learning how to write within particular contexts for particular purposes.

Inviting Students into Classroom Opportunities to See Writing Differently

Teaching a writing class for juniors and seniors at Wayne Memorial High School this past year, I strived to understand how to integrate technology in helping students to compose written texts, and how to make visible these expectations. I set out to describe how writers make connections across different texts over extended periods of time and seek to revise how they understand processes of writing, e.g., how ideas emerge or are clarified through writing, or how to consider alternative perspectives on their ideas, or those of others. For example, we may read a variety of texts ranging from Macbeth to an essay on genetic engineering, presenting to students ideas or concepts that are "out there in the world," or dilemmas that have no easy answers; and we discuss how these different problems or perspectives are linked, and how resolutions or responses emerge through composing oral or written texts.

Through these discussions about how complex problems of our society and texts can be linked, I planned to show students a view of learning to write through collaborative responses to example problems or dilemmas. I sought to create for students a different context and opportunity to write: proposing dilemmas, making visible beliefs about how to write through recent technology, and writing collaboratively. Wikis would provide the platform for this approach.

Students' Views on Revising

The typical writing assignment in my class usually goes something like this: we read a text, discuss it, and eventually respond to the ideas through writing an essay; and I assess the written text. However, I began to wonder what and how students were learning over time during this traditional process. I began asking how students were developing their ideas, making changes, considering other perspectives, rethinking, or re-seeing their ideas? Such questions surfaced when I began to ask what my students believed or understood about revising.

Early on, I asked students to write definitions of revision, and a common theme surfaced from their

responses. Many students viewed revision as an editorial activity, where, as Melissa stated, a writer "fixes mistakes," or, as Art said, a writer works on "improving a piece for the better." These beliefs suggested that revision was an activity focused on correctness. From my perspective, I view these concerns about revising—actually, editing—as a significant part of writing; however, this perspective often limits what students learn about writing and, consequently, towards how they understand particular ideas in their text.

Editing is a significant part of writing, but the associated actions (e.g., correcting or "fixing" spelling, grammar, or other conventions) appeared to limit how students conceptualized revising. Instead of viewing revision as a process central to learning through writing, and understanding how responses to their writing makes this a collaborative activity, which includes interpreting perspectives and evidence, students appeared to equate revising and editing as corrective measures. Furthermore, I was not interested in seeing students reproduce what someone says about, for example, genetic engineering, I wanted them to consider these issues in addition to perspectives found in the texts through collaborative inquires.

What questions did they as readers and writers have along the way? How did their interactions in class or writing conferences with others or me influence their thinking? These questions challenged me to consider how to provide students with opportunities to raise questions, seek alternative perspectives through collaborative efforts, and re-see their ideas through revision; furthermore, I sought an approach that would make these processes visible. So when I found out about wikis, I was eager to give them a try.

Shifting to Wikis: Opening New Perspectives

Before trying to incorporate wikis in class, I tried another recent technology, *track changes*, as means of responding to student writing. Track changes allowed me to point to specific areas of writing and suggest alternatives, which students could "accept or reject." But I discovered that the program's implicit view of learning how to write was built on a framework of exchange between one writer and one reader, with little room for a community of writers working together over time on a common dilemma or topic. Track changes didn't provoke connections between the objectives of collaborating and learning as writers that I was planning to establish, specifically, a context where learning takes place among writers, responses and revisions.

When I described the concept of a wiki to students, how one works or what it offers teachers and students, I discussed it in terms of a metaphor, a dry erase board. A person can write on the board and erase any text he or she composes on the space, and usually one person has control over what goes on the board at a particular moment. The wiki appears similar, except that any person with access can at anytime read what is on the "board," or common space, and add to, or delete from, the text. This "read-write" capability is a unique challenge to integrating wikis into the classroom because this capability presents different assumptions and dimensions to processes (and products) of writing.

When writing exists on a wiki, the text is malleable: to be read and changed by multiple readers/writers, challenging our beliefs about the role readers can take on when responding to a text, and how their role(s) can play a key part in the composing process of the text, and, therefore, impacting an author's (or authors') role(s) in composing a text (Kawakita). In traditional print, the role of the reader is more fixed and less visible as a collaborator of the writing. A text on a printed page can certainly be changed, but access to this process is limited mostly to the author. With a wiki, any text on the screen can be read and rewritten, changed by anyone with access with a click on the link "edit this page." Suddenly a written text becomes an open, public document, or a collaborative effort where boundaries between the role of reader and writer, expert and novice, are revealed (cf. *Wikipedia*, http://www.wikipedia.org/). And this process offers significant concepts in learning to write with wikis.

Will Richardson, an educational technology advocate claims that "everyone together is smarter then anyone alone," suggesting collaborative learning tools like wikis are better because knowledge is socially constructed (61). By unpacking the advantages to using this tool, we again notice the dual roles students can take on as reader and writer of a collaborative text, roles revealing a flux in the boundaries between who may be expert and who may be a novice, and a major reason why "everyone

together is smarter." Furthermore, by linking reader and writer roles and learning how collaboration works towards getting a text "right," writing in this context also becomes a way of practicing inquiry and learning how to negotiate perspectives. Revising becomes a more obvious sociocultural practice, where writing and learning processes occur in recursive layers, a textual one and a social one.

When I researched how wikis are used in classrooms, I found a common pattern to their use: roles shift. In some cases, teachers--normally the experts--become novices and students become experts, but I wondered how fixed these categories were. I wondered what my students understood about writing and how these categories related to using wikis to guide them as writers; and I reflected on what I understood about using recent technologies.

Incorporating Wikis in My Classroom

At the start of the year, I wanted to know how my students would respond to the question, "What counts as good writing?" Student beliefs about good writing ranged from "getting the reader's attention" to comments about "form and purpose," and a belief that "confidence" of the writer proved to be important. These different perspectives seemed far from mine, and the plans I had outlined. I did not read anything in their reflections about making connections, or how good writing offers acknowledgement of alternative perspectives, or the importance of writing in different contexts. I planned to close this conceptual gap and make my beliefs about learning to write more visible by conducting conferences with students and following up with written comments to drafts on individual student wikis.

For example, in a conference with Art, I asked him to write about his experience with writing over the last week (he read a particular text, raised questions and discussed it with others), and add the material (of that text) to his essay. He responded with unease, "You want me to tell a story about how I came to these ideas by writing a paper about how I am writing this paper?" I could sense Art was clearly frustrated and uncertain by what I was suggesting. The way of learning to write I presented to him was at odds with his own beliefs about writing. The exploration and hurdles and numerous classroom discussions mattered from my perspective, yet Art felt this approach to writing, one where collaboration, or a belief that "everyone together is smarter then anyone alone," was unfamiliar. From his perspective, how could any of these classroom events matter in terms of developing the essay? The students and I were working from different beliefs about writing. How could I bridge this gap? How could I demonstrate a collaborative—and different—approach of writing through wikis?

The Wiki

When approaching a student wiki I used *Wikispaces*, a free site (http://www.wikispaces.com/). The top of the page is arranged with four tabs, and the first tab, labeled "edit this page," changes the function of the student wiki page from one where a viewer can read only to a page where the reader can add or delete text. The discussion tab is where the author can post messages. The history page is a key, particularly for teachers: it's a place where all edits or changes made to the page are made visible, whether those changes are made by the original author or someone who visits and reads. These changes are arranged chronologically, recent revisions are listed at the top. Next to this list, a person can select and compare revisions to view progress, including the deleted or added material, and each activity is color coded to show where changes occurred in the text. In the last column, a name of the person responsible for a particular change appears. A person can select this name and contact the individual by email, the address of which is entered by the student when he or she registers for the wiki.

I recalled the writing conference with Art. Unlike that typical one-on-one conference, which is constrained by time and can be easily forgotten, the wiki freezes moments where students are trying to rethink ideas and can show how a response from a teacher (or other reader) impacts the writing. One noticeable feature wikis offer is a record of how many a changes a writer makes and where these take place in the text. Some students may only edit four or five times while others make twenty changes. In some ways, the wiki provides an overwhelming wealth of material documenting how a paper changes over time, and the relationship these changes have with response, so it is difficult sifting through the edits. However, I decided to follow representative students' revisions over time to gain insights into how they incorporated responses, and what difference the responses appeared to make.

The Wiki Over Time, Authority and Cautions

I posted questions online to Art, and he responded to them on the same page where his writing was in progress. Later, revisiting this exchange while conducting research for how I incorporated wikis, I wanted to know how reader responses affected, or did not affect, subsequent revisions. Searching the history page revealed how Art eventually incorporated my comments in a later draft. Now observing a writer who seemed to be considering alternative perspectives, I wondered whether this example could count as learning. In other words, did Art's take up of a teacher's response represent learning? More generally, how can teachers use wikis to assess learning? How do—or could—teachers grade features of writing and revising, such as how the student incorporated suggestions? While pondering these questions, another one was raised during a different project using a wiki.

One of the projects on the wiki followed a lesson I gleaned from NCTE's ReadWriteThink (http://www.readwritethink.org/). This project (see Kawakita) asks student groups to compose a wiki page where they present a top-ten list of songs that protest some social issue. I pointed out, that in addition to some text on these pages, the students could add images or other digital features. Students worked in groups of three, and I again was surprised to face social dilemmas, specifically changing roles, experts and novices, and a new piece to the puzzle I had not considered, authority. Who is the authority on a particular wiki, particularly within school settings, particularly when wikis are accessed through school computers?

The Library's Computer Lab and the Changing Authority

Students worked in the library's computer lab for a couple of days. Soon, students were complaining that their Internet access was being blocked. The librarian then asked me what students were doing, because she was concerned that students had accessed YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/) videos and were viewing and listening to inappropriate videos and lyrics, and that they were revising the filters on the computers. Suddenly I was not the expert, or authority, of the wiki assignment. I learned how easy it was for students to "get around" the school filter that normally blocked YouTube, or other sites labeled "inappropriate."

After talking over the situation, the librarian was still concerned. She was bound as a librarian not only by a set of statutes, but also by legalities, and she believed district policy was being broken. Yet, I could see the benefit of students navigating through images—even ones from selected sites filtered by the school. I did not dismiss what she said. Teachers are supposed to supervise what students are consuming online, yet I was not an expert on the issues of filters. As a parent myself, situations like this one become complex because, ultimately, a parent has final say on whether lyrics or images are deemed inappropriate, yet the school bears responsibility too.

Using wikis had again created a continuum of roles, some of them conflicting. Lisa Chizek, who incorporated wikis in her classes, claims she too became aware of her assumptions about role when she used wikis, suggesting that when we use digital texts interactions with students, staff and community can shift. In my situation, teacher as expert changed to novice. I had assigned students to create group wikis displaying a social problem from selected songs and to design a virtual space to demonstrate awareness of this problem and of the social groups trying to resolve the issues. In a way, I was hoping to have them create a social networking site for illustrating a social issue, but social networking design is far from my own area of expertise, aside from my growing understanding of how this process counts as writing, or fits the curriculum.

As writers, students selected and researched topics, soon becoming "experts" on the topics and designing wiki spaces that included video of music that were critical aspects of the social issues, such as war or racism. The librarian asserted her expertise by exercising her role as the authority of this virtual space in the library. Therefore, students were learning that coming to understand a topic, or complete an assignment, might require ingenuity and initiative. Yet, roles were shifting and I was wondering how I could negotiate the emerging perspectives this project was creating.

We continued the project, and the kids continued circumventing the filter. On one hand, I believed I had to step in and be the adult: the filter is in place for a reason, so follow the rules. On the other hand, I also was aware that filters were arbitrary and often blocked sites I thought were educational.

I had a conversation with members of the tech department at the district office, and they too saw the dilemma and wanted to know more about the project and purpose.

Eventually I ended the project because so much effort was put into negotiating the different roles the assignment and wikis were creating for us. Since the end of the year and finals were around the corner, I had to tell students that this was as far as we could go with the project because I could not rethink how to assess changes to the assignment that the filters were creating. To continue with the scrutiny from the district and library filters would have left us with little information to use, and I learned that I needed to survey the parents and check with administrators before changes could be made. The wikis would now simply be a text, absent any digital design. Things were getting complex and challenging. The kids were disappointed, so was I, but I had to end the project.

From these classroom experiences, wiki projects and Art's conference with me, contradictions began to develop between my theoretical position and how I practiced these theories about learning to write. Students were part of this struggle in how to make sense of how technology creates new ways of conceptualizing writing, how these ways can be learned and how ways of writing may contradict each other in one semester of a class, leading to new and unforeseen learning situations. At the center of these experiences are questions about roles students and teachers take on during different ways of learning to write when using recent technologies.

Lessons Learned about Writing to Learn through Wikis

At the end of the year I asked students about how knowledge is acquired through writing. One student, Carly, said: "[by] putting ourselves out there," suggesting a theory of writing, a role one could take, where getting your point across and expressing personal experience matters. Such a stance towards writing is not unfamiliar to creative writers who value creative self-expression, but it may pose dilemmas in a writing context advocating exploring alternative perspectives through writing.

Alicia seemed to express a different, more traditional role a student writer could take, "You know nothing until you are taught it." Her perspective led me to wonder where dialogue or the negotiation of meaning would fit, or how entertaining diverse perspectives can "lead to learning to create mutual understanding" (Lakoff and Johnson 231). From Alicia's perspective, what purpose would a response to writing serve other than informing the writer about a particular point or validating a grade? How could I help a student, such as Alicia, shift her understanding of how learning occurs, particularly how it could occur through a wiki, a place where meaning and understanding are negotiated? If using wikis suggests that students take on different roles, such a shift may require we first consider students' writing experiences before asking them to take on new roles. By asking our students to talk about their perspectives about writing, we are modeling how to create "mutual understanding" out of diverse views.

To even ask students about their experiences, beliefs or theories about writing would, from Alicia's perspective, seem contrary to her understanding of a student's role in school. To recognize these differences among student perspectives implies that teachers can learn from students. In order to help students recognize that writing is contextual, we may need to weave their beliefs about writing into our teaching practice and make visible their underlying assumptions and perspectives about writing, so we can present more clearly—juxtapose—our own expectations.

After initially feeling confused, Art entered into dialogues of different perspectives through the wiki. For Art, there is dialogue or conversation taking place in writing, suggesting he is aware that interaction is fundamental to learning. This view is very different from Alicia's belief where knowledge is something fixed or transmitted. If Art believes knowledge "grows" his theory, his idea of student role is closer to my framework than Alicia's, and guiding Alicia to contrast and see the differences becomes the next step for me as her teacher.

Conclusion

Through these experiences, I uncovered dilemmas that are raised for us as teachers when we begin to suggest writing is learning to recognize different roles and contexts and collaboratively working between and among them. How do we make visible these roles and contexts that we are

preparing students for as writers and responders to writing? How can we help students shift the way they view how writing happens in public (or virtual) spaces, particularly if their view is from a traditional, transmission model of learning? How do we evaluate students fairly when some of them appear to hold beliefs contrary to our own and others appear to align their beliefs with ours? And how can these differences become a foundation for discussing and learning, and of evaluating student development?

I began using wikis in the classroom because I believed collaboration is a fundamental part of writing, and a part of my students' futures. Wikis in many ways challenge us to rethink our attitudes or theories about learning, and how this changes our concepts writing. For example, who counts as the expert or novice in the classroom (or library)? According to whom? Wikis reveal that multiple roles exist when we read or write a text in the classroom, and from these experiences we can elicit students' beliefs about writing before making our own assumptions, theoretical stances, and expectations visible. How writing contexts categorize us as novices or experts could lead to a critical awareness our students need in order to compose in future contexts, and we need to engage students with "instruction that unpacks these naturally occurring roles" in order to help them learn to write (Sperling 130).

When we claim a student is a "struggling writer," yet he or she is constructing Web pages and we are not, we are in some ways talking about roles, or "patterns of privileging" from which students can learn how to negotiate different writing contexts (Ivanic 238). The ACT writing test privileges a much different stance towards knowledge and learning than writing on a wiki. How these "privileges" impact students' interactions with a text is a question brought into the open when using new technology.

These patterns of privilege seem to take place between students, as Erica's experience shows us, leading me to wonder how these patterns of privilege circulate during class. From her experience we see how some students learn how difficult it may be to collaborate, to create mutual understanding through collaborative writing, particularly when individual grades still rule, and to shift their views of learning how to write, or how writing happens in different contexts. These are challenges for teachers also. If as Richard Beach claims, "the degree which students learn to revise their thinking may be related to teacher and student attitudes towards knowledge" (ix), we may need to consider how these categories of experience, expert and novice, influence the ability of our students to write in different contexts; and how they influence how we teach students to write in these changing contexts.

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About the Author

David Kangas (kangasd@wwcsd.net) teaches English at Wayne Memorial High School, and he thanks members of the Eastern Michigan Teacher Research Group for their support on this project.