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Using Wikis To Facilitate Team Work: German And Irish Students' Perspectives^{*}

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Abstract

Enhanced collaboration among multicultural European countries is necessary for effective enterprise development and innovation. The current climate of an increasingly competitive global economy provides opportunities to explore alternative methods of enterprise sustainability including the creation of collaborative clusters of individuals working together towards a common goal. A key challenge for higher education institutions is how best to provide authentic collaborative environments and learning activities that simulate real life scenarios, where the participants may come from pan-European and/or non-European locations. This paper presents a comparative analysis of the usage and of the outcomes of wiki technology in a learning environment in Industrial Engineering. The results show the benefits and highlight also the crucial aspects when introducing this innovative approach as a supporting tool for collaborative work.

Keywords: Collaboration, Learning, Wiki technology

* Research Article. URL: <http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/48>

1. Introduction

Wikis are frequently cited in higher education research as appropriate and powerful web spaces which provide opportunities to capture, discuss, and review individual, group, project or organizational activities. These activities, in turn, offer possibilities for knowledge development by utilizing wiki collaborative active spaces (Lamb 2004; Choy & Ng 2007; Doolan 2006; Jones 2007; Raman et al. 2005). As an internet-based Web 2.0 tool, wikis provide an accessible collaborative platform to enable international student teams to work on common authentic learning tasks (Barkley et al. 2005). These collaborative practice scenarios provide opportunities to simulate real life decision making in many areas but especially in high value manufacturing and in research and development (Ebersbach et al. 2006; Elgort et al. 2008; Powazek 2002; Pallof & Pratt 2005).

The research presented in this paper builds on a previous paper (Dempsey et al. 2009) which explored the implementation of wiki technology as a technology-enhanced learning tool in NUI Galway, Ireland for a multidisciplinary cohort of business and engineering students. This paper examines in addition the uses of wiki technologies in Chemnitz University of Technology, Germany with a similar cohort of students undertaking related collaborative problem-based authentic tasks. A comparative analysis of the student and lecturer experiences is presented, along with plans for future research with global collaborative student groups in this area.

2. Background

The increasing need for effective collaboration among interdisciplinary groups suggests the necessity of developing teaching pedagogy that infuses teaching techniques with technologies. Combining Business and Engineering graduate expertise is paramount in developing skills sets for high end product and service innovation. Opportunities also arise if groups have experience and familiarity with other cultures.

A wiki is defined as 'a freely expandable collection of interlinked Web pages, a hypertext system for storing and modifying information – a database where each page is easily editable by any user with a forms-capable web browser client' (Leuf & Cunningham 2001, p.14). Wikis' flexibility, adaptability and potential for increased functionality via Web 2.0 plug-and-play features, has led to their adoption across a wide range of social, educational and business contexts. Wikis are easy to create, use and deploy. From a pedagogical perspective, wikis provide an environment that enables students to contribute to a web page in a collaborative manner. A key attraction of using wikis is that their structure is shaped from within, rather than being imposed from above by proprietary institutional systems. Therefore, users do not have to adapt their practice to the 'dictates of a system', but can allow their practice to define the structure of that system instead (Lamb 2004). The widespread adoption of Web 2.0 technology-enhanced learning tools such as wikis in higher education institutions supports a paradigm shift towards a more student-centered, collaborative approach to learning and teaching that ultimately supports the development of independent, flexible and sustainable problem-solving skills.

3. Case Study

This case study examines the integration of wiki technology with face-to-face teaching to an undergraduate engineering class in Chemnitz University of Technology, Germany, held in July 2009. The learning environment was supported by the PB Wiki virtual learning platform¹ which utilized the Learning Objects Teams LX building block to create group wikis.

The results of the German study are compared to results from an Irish 2009 study where an interdisciplinary undergraduate class utilized face-to-face teaching combined with a learning environment supported by the NUIG Blackboard virtual learning platform.

Nowadays, graduate real-time collaborative expertise is paramount in developing skills sets leading to product and service innovation.

A key element of the student learning environment employed in both the Irish and German scenarios centers on individual, small group and whole group activities aimed at developing problem-solving approaches and strategies to resolve issues identified across a range of case study scenarios. This situation simulates real time problem solving.

Groups are set up and are then allocated a wiki which serves as a communication and collaboration space to develop group responses and to trigger questions. During class contact time, a common case study is distributed to each group for analysis and discussion together with a number of trigger questions for group consideration and group resolution. Groups are asked to upload their co-constructed response via their group wiki in real-time. Groups are then invited to present their summary responses to particular question to trigger whole-group discussion. While wiki membership editing rights are restricted to the immediate group, all members enrolled in the module can view each others' wikis. This opens up the prospect of peer-review and evaluation exercises and allows knowledge sharing amongst the wider cohort.

The principle wiki activities take place in the classroom setting. However, wiki access is available outside the class contact time for further edits, additions, comments and reflections. All group members have permission to export a .zip file copy of their wiki and this can be used to demonstrate team work and collaborative working practices to external stakeholders, such as potential employers.

1 <http://www.pbworks.com/>

4. Evaluation Methodology

This case study was evaluated using student questionnaires, group reflective exercises, individual student video interviews and lecturer video interviews.

4.1 Affordance of the Technology

57% of the German students had not used a wiki previously compared with 84% of the Irish students. The entire Irish and German student cohort found the wiki software easy or very easy to use. On further examination, 58% of the Irish students and 57% of the German students found the wiki software very easy to use. 42% of the Irish students and 43% of the German students found the wiki software easy to use.

The student feedback also identified that the wiki page was easy to edit with 95% of the Irish students in agreement and 100% of the German students found editing easy.

The addition of a new page to the wiki was found to be an easy task with 87% of the Irish students and 100% of the German students finding this easy. However some issues were raised by Irish students concerning the formatting of text that had been copied from MS Word into the wiki space.

90% of the Irish and 100% of the German students found that the technology was stable. 96% of the Irish and 100% of the German students were very satisfied with the 24/7 access provided to their group wikis. There were no browser issues of concern to either cohort.

Critically, being able to export and take a copy of the wiki was important to all the students as it allowed them to provide evidence of group work activities.

Irish students contributed reflective comments such as:

- *'I am not great at computers but it's really easy to use the wikis.'* [Irish Student 1]
- *'It's very very easy; very very simple'* [Irish Student 2]

German Students contributed reflective comments such as:

- *'Exchange of knowledge in a group using a wiki is important for a detailed solution of a problem.'* [German Student 2]
- *'The wiki could be used for documentation purposes in a factory. It would allow for collaboration within the factory.'* [German Student 3]

4.2 Collaboration

The students explained how they used the group wikis:

- *'We use the group wikis to tie in the class theory with practical case studies. It gets you to think outside the box. You think 'this is the real world.'* [Irish Student 3]
- *'We can edit together as a group in class, and then go afterwards and contribute online strategies amongst the team. We use the wikis to coordinate groups so that we can get together outside the classroom. It has transformed the learning from two hours in class to several hours outside the classroom.'* [Irish Student 4]
- *'The wikis builds up into a portfolio of case studies, strategies and ideas. We can then compare and the various strategies and approaches.'* [Irish Student 1]
- *'We identified the team leads, who worked with the wiki and coordinated the function/method of operation. We discussed in several stages: collecting ideas/brainstorming and categorizing collected facts.'* [German Student 1]
- *'I was motivated by watching our solutions progressing. I experienced a deeper learning experience by exchange of knowledge with other groups.'* [German Student 2]
- *'If you can see the progress and see the information of the other groups. So you can have a deeper learning experience, communication and discussions.'* [German Student 3]

4.3 Co-Construction of Knowledge

The students appreciated the benefit of working in groups and clearly identified the 'real-world' relevance of replicating industry scenarios and problem-solving activities in the classroom:

- *'It's about learning by doing, by interacting and getting ideas from other people. We have shared our details within the group. It's a challenge to work in a group but it's also fun. If there are conflicting issues, we can challenge them as a group and come to a consensus.'* [Irish Student 3]
- *'The wikis allow multiple ways to come up with a final answer and open up new ideas. It's a great way to get group and class feedback. You learn a lot from that. It's a good challenge for future life and working in industry.'* [Irish Student 2]
- Important aspects are *'listening to different opinions, discussing topics, getting feedback from the group'* [German Student 2] and *'more idea/solutions, immediate feedback on your own ideas, sharing the tasks/work'* [German Student 5].

4.4 Engagement

Students liked working in groups and identified the relevance of using their wikis to aid their activities:

- *'You are helping your classmates. It helps to learn how to work in a group which is essential for project work. It's definitely a better way of learning because it's practical and more of a real working environment.'* [Irish Student 6]
- *'Everyone has a connection to the internet - knowledge available. Everyone can work together on the project.'* [German Student 6]

The students identified opportunities to apply their learning to wider contexts:

- *'When in other classes I'm thinking: 'there are better ways to do this' having used wikis in group situations.'* [Irish Student 8]
- *'After providing our results to the wiki we had access to all the other group results and now if we need to improve our project.'* [German Student 8]
- *'I got a new impression of using a wiki to consolidate results and harmonize them with other students. It did not help me directly within my subject, but it is a new dimension of information management, easy to use in every field and by nearly everyone.'* [German Student 1]
- *'Working in international project teams could be much easier, even when the participants are located all around the world. Using wiki will attend me on my further way at university and also in industry. Even when working on small projects at university I'm going to try to use wiki's whenever possible.'* [German Student 8]

All students commented that a motivating factor in their engagement with the environment was the opportunity to take a personal copy of their wiki to showcase their achievements to external audiences, such as potential employers.

The following comments indicate student use of the group wiki to aid personal reflection on learning and knowledge gained through the learning activities:

- *'Because we can access the wiki permanently, and take our own copy of the wiki, I can look back see what I wrote and how I wrote it. That's when I'll really recognize the leaning.'* [Irish Student 4]
- *'The advantages are real group work/ team work and the availability of a communication base which enables a deeper team effect.'* [German Student 3]

The course coordinators felt that the use of wikis has proven successful in facilitating knowledge construction and exchange:

- *'The wiki tool was new for our students. My observation was that students got access to that technology very fast and after the seminar I received some feedback that it has been helpful for idea exchange especially in a team. The seminar will surely enhance the*

ability of our students to use sophisticated technology and tools which will improve students' abilities in problem solving. We will enlarge the use of this technology in different settings.' [German course coordinator]

- *'The use of wiki technology as a pedagogical tool has really engaged the students. I have had a wonderful time observing the group dynamics and problem solving approaches demonstrated in the class. The wiki tool was seen as cool, novel and engaging, and very much supported the simulation of real-world scenarios. We aim to expand this successful example of student engagement by setting up international student teams from various third level universities worldwide facilitated by wiki technology.'* [Irish course coordinator]

5. Conclusions and Future research

The responses from the Irish and German students indicate that incorporating wiki as an on-line collaborative tool resulted in extremely engaged students who became self motivated both inside and outside the classroom. The responses also highlight that the learning outcomes set at the start of the semester were achieved. The results suggest a deeper understanding of the course materials when compared to rote memorization as students deepened their engagement and are required to use some of the higher level cognitive styles from Bloom's taxonomy. The groups also rotated the leadership role and this facilitated group problem solving, communication and leadership skills enhancement. Disadvantages of integrating wikis into teaching were minimal.

The authors plan to create European and International wiki platforms. Students from Germany and Ireland will be soon facilitated to work together on teams through wiki technology to evaluate cases in the area of operations strategy. The plan also extends to allow on-line collaboration with future international partners.

Recently a team of five students from five different countries worldwide from each of the four continents are working together on a pilot project forming an on-line international wiki team.

Future analysis will focus on developing structures to identify collaboration barriers and system boundaries, as well identifying critical success factors underpinning the development of authentic online collaborative activities in non-wiki learning spaces.

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