Warming to the Widening World of the Wiki

EARLIER THIS YEAR, Angela Carrington gathered one evening with a group of classmates from New York City College of Technology to talk about how to write a 500-word essay. The topic: Which of the growing crowd of Democratic and Republican candidates would make the best President?

The five students were not meeting in their English class; they were gathered online, using a collaborative Web site known as a “wiki.” Each student’s assignment was to contribute to the essay, criticizing the strengths and weaknesses of a candidate.

“We all wrote a paragraph,” recalled Carrington, a freshman from Brooklyn. “Then we IM-ed [instant-messaged] each other.” Over several days group members “explored each other’s ideas, edited each other’s paragraphs,” she said.

In the end, it was Carrington’s job to blend the paragraphs into a cohesive whole. She messaged her draft around to the group and got final comments until everyone agreed the piece was ready to show the rest of the class. “A lot of people told me, ‘I’m not sure I would have been able to do this myself,’” said Carrington. “It helped improve their writing and helped improve my writing. Our wiki got an ‘A’ for that paper.”

Welcome to wiki world.

While wikis have been used by techies for years, they’re recently sprung up in many universities like CUNY — and are starting to change the way students and faculty learn and work together. “Wikis are used pretty much for collaborative projects,” said Karen Lundstrem, Director of Instructional Technology at City Tech. “When you edit each other’s work and build on it, you promote greater critical thinking and team work.”

First created a dozen years ago by innovative West Coast software designer Ward Cunningham, the wiki is a Web site that allows its content to be created and edited by anyone who has access to it. “Some wikis are private and require users to have passwords, others are open to the public.”

“Wiki-wiki” is the Hawaiian word for “very quick,” and indeed, such sites can be quickly used by their visitors. “Just click on the page and write,” said Ann Matsuuchi, head of acquisitions for the Brooklyn College Library. The college’s librarians use their wiki for “practical information-sharing,” said Matsuuchi, as well as a “communications bridge” to make up for the fact that they meet as a staff only a few times a year.

Wikis have become popular among communities large and small, including the widely known Wikipedia, the sprawling, online encyclopedia. At CUNY, wikis are often accessed through Blackboard, the university’s online course management system. In contrast to wikis, blogs are “more linear” in nature, with one person posting a comment, the next person responding, and so on, said Lundstrem. “A wiki is more fluid. You can make changes on the same version. And you have more flexibility to add things, like film clips or articles.”

Professor of English Jane Tanev Fowler, who taught Carrington’s City Tech writing class, noted that wikis offer a lot of variation in design. In some cases, students can comment on each other’s writings, in other instances students can use it as a private blog where only the teacher can review their assignments. But when students exchange comments with each other “it’s more powerful,” Fowler said.

Another City Tech teacher, Assistant Professor of Biological Sciences Isaac Bari, has been using wikis to help his students solve problems presented in various case studies. In one study, for example, “A victim of poisoning presents a cherry-red appearance” and students are asked to determine the type of poisoning involved.

Each group of four to six students discussed a case study for a couple of weeks, posting responses and editing each other’s responses on the wiki site. Students learned not only from their group, Bari said, but from other groups in the class, who then get an opportunity to challenge the case presented by the first group.

Wikis “generate a very different vibe” from traditional learning, said Jim Russell, Director of Instructional Technology at Baruch College. Collective problem-solving helps promote greater participation and flushes out mistakes earlier in the process. “Student ownership of content becomes more real.”

At Kingsborough Community College, students enrolled in CUNY’s Institute for Virtual Enterprise program are using a wiki to assemble a business plan over the course of a semester — each student acting as a different department head. The goal is “to put students into real-world situations,” said Christoph Winkler, Associate Director of CUNY’s Institute for Virtual Enterprise.

Like their students, CUNY’s faculty are using wikis to work on joint projects and share information. At Hostos Community College, for example, librarians created a wiki to develop a collaborative assessment of the library’s goals. “It made sense because we were all working on a collaborative document,” said Catherine Lyons, Reference & Information Technology Librarian. Some faculty may be reluctant to use a wiki because, simply, “they don’t know how to use it,” acknowledged Tom Greene, Associate Professor of Biological Sciences at Kingsborough College.

Another City Tech teacher, Assistant Professor of Psychology Tamara Winkler, said “they have never met.”

Still, many faculty members have already embraced wikis as a pedagogical tool for their own skills development. At City Tech, for example, Associate Adjunct Professor Tamara Winkler President requires small groups of students in his “Using Technology in Education” course to write assignments based on two chapters of an assigned text, using a wiki to collaborate on their work.

While the wiki is “just one piece of the technology in each other’s classroom,” President says, it’s a piece that’s likely to stay awhile. In March, “wiki” was officially entered into the Oxford English Dictionary.