

## **A Journey into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Via a Wikispace**

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A wikispace is a website that contains content that can be edited by any user. Through Wikispaces.com, classroom teachers are able to sign up for free private spaces which allow any user on the internet to view pages but only members of that particular space to edit or create pages. Last winter, my middle school students embarked on a wikispace journey that has now expanded to include our whole school community: students in grades 2-12, teachers, parents and alumni.

### **Students**

Our journey originally started as an experiment for creating an outlet for written expression for my English students, scaffolding technology use and organization, and creating a collaborative space for student discussion. While I also hoped to provide additional opportunities for communicating with parents and for connecting alumni with our present school community, my students were the first layer.

I was fortunate to have my pilot students for three core classes (Math, English and Social Studies) as well as having four of them for reading labs during our afternoon classes. My students were in grades 5-8 and were students who work through school with a learning disability and/or ADHD. Of the group, I had two students who were fairly tech-phobic, one with limited exposure to computer technology, one who was proficient with technology and three who were somewhere in between. The wikispace created a forum for balancing these skill differences as well as balancing the differences in organizational skills and expressive language abilities.

My students were able to use the wikispace to create note pages that they could work on at school **and** at home, either individually or collaboratively. They were able to upload files directly to the wikispace and I could then print them out or view them electronically, eliminating the need for a thumb drive and avoiding the trap of “my printer wasn’t working” or “my dog ate it.” My favorite benefit was avoiding what we call The Paperwork Black Hole: the backpack. I was able to type out instructions or upload copies of handouts so that if they fell into The Black Hole, there was another option. I watched my students develop better problem-solving strategies and grow out of some of the learned helplessness or avoidance habits I had seen previously in the year.

Some of the benefits I had not anticipated were the best: an increase in self-esteem in all of the students and a communication of their strengths to the outside world. The students with the organizational challenges included the two who were tech-phobic, a sixth grader and an eighth grader. By the second week of using the wikispace, the sixth grade student and her mother had called two or three times from home to clear up questions as she was uploading her homework and essays. By the end of the year, this student had created her own avatar (with the help of our tech-savvy seventh grader), had been messaging her friends and had been messaging jokes to me both during computer time and from home. We were able to post sketches of hers during the school year and she was able to show them to her parents and siblings easier than trying to share her originals. I realized over the summer that she had truly gotten over her tech-phobia when she messaged me to check in and to find out if I had moved her sketches page.

By the end of the school year last spring, our second tech-phobic student had composed a re-telling of *Beowulf* entirely on a wiki page and had won a photo editing contest (created on our wiki by our tech-savvy seventh grader). This eighth grader had also completed more than 5 assignments on the wiki or accessed on-line instructions, thus avoiding long-term travel through The Paperwork Black Hole.

One of my “somewhere in between” students was new to our school around Spring Break and made friends quickly with one of our other “somewhere in between” students. These boys both were able to use the wikispace to collaborate on assignments and to message each other to maintain contact.

A third “somewhere in between” student had a travel time of an hour one way to school each day and she was able to use the wikispace to retrieve instructions that had been left at school or to input written work without having to take it all back and forth. She was also able to use the messaging to communicate with her friend who lived closer to school. Another aspect of the messaging that I enjoyed was that it supported her receiving more frequent feedback from me. During her early elementary years, she had developed some negative habits for receiving interaction from her teachers and others around her. I did not want to encourage this nor could I always provide verbal interaction to support her processing as I was instructing the class. The wikispace provided a scaffold for delayed gratification/interaction.

The wikispace also provided supports for self-esteem as student work, such as the sketches, writings or photos, were posted. Our social studies class created a Movie Maker film and we were able to post it so they could share it with their families and our school community. There was nothing on our site to identify our students as having learning disabilities. They were not showcased as “those kids.” They were all proud of their work and were able to recognize that their work was worth being showcased to people outside of our classroom.

Our tech-savvy seventh grader also created a showcase for his peers, which was one event that really pulled all of the other students into consistent use of the wikispace: a photo contest. I frequently tell my students that they need to use their “powers” for good, and he surely did. On his main page, he rotated some of his favorite YouTube videos (all extremely school appropriate) and some sample photographs that he had edited in Microsoft Paint. He then created his own page, added some additional contest entry pages and then wrote contest rules. Everyone then used their free computer time to try to create images to enter this contest. After the judging was completed, he even deleted the page when he thought some students were looking at it during class time; he didn’t want it to be a distraction (and he didn’t want to be held responsible for the distractions).

Regardless of their skill level or their confidence level, the wikispace provided a “space” for everyone’s voice. It provided the organizational support I had hoped for as well as many unexpected benefits. This year, my students from last year have been leaders in this project as we have expanded it to include our entire school and learning community. My high school Biology class will be keeping progressive entries for our key questions of study this year and 10<sup>th</sup> graders have just completed a project using the wiki as their common work space to coordinate a group explanation of the process of meiosis. The junior high Math class has been posting information

about surveys and learning disabilities from their Data Analysis and Statistics unit. Elementary students have started book discussions and a few middle grade students (5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> grade) are working collaboratively to study mysteries – and are writing one of their own!

In October, I heard Dr. David Sousa speak at the LDA of MI annual conference. He challenged us that teachers need to be teaching to the “2007 brain,” not to the “1970s brain.” The wikispace is one tool that is helping support my students and their “2007 brains” as it is bringing my teaching much more into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.