



Prairie Lands Writing Project  
Eder Hall 201  
Missouri Western State University  
St. Joseph, MO 64507

Phone: (816) 271-4315 Fax: (816) 271-4166 Web: [missouriwestern.edu/plwp](http://missouriwestern.edu/plwp) Email: [writingproject@missouriwestern.edu](mailto:writingproject@missouriwestern.edu)

---

## **Content Area Learning: Teaching in an Online World**

### **Wikis and Social Networking Sites: Creating a Collaborative Classroom Beyond Boundaries**

**Amy Miller**

**Saturday, October 4, 2008**

**Language Arts Teacher  
Benton High School  
[amy.miller@sjsd.k12.mo.us](mailto:amy.miller@sjsd.k12.mo.us)**

## Why Wiki and Network?

---

Successful collaboration is an absolute requirement in today's world; no one would dispute that. Collaborating with technology is also a requirement in today's *global* world, and we must embrace that. Employers expect their employees to work with their counterparts in other cities, states, and even countries. Businesses are operating without walls, using wikis as virtual offices, where employees communicate digitally from home offices around the world. If our students are going to succeed in this sort of world, they must be experienced in using a variety of technologies for more than personal or social reasons. They must have well-planned, focused experience thinking, planning, sharing, and creating in collaboration with others and on a variety of platforms. They must have experience adapting to new technologies, so that as innovation brings new tools increasingly faster, they will be ready to embrace them without faltering.

Employing these tools in, and beyond, the classroom has other benefits as well:

- Students are engaged when we validate and embrace the tools they are already using in their personal and social lives. Read "Banning Student Containers" by Alan November for more on this issue. This article is available at the following URL: [http://novemberlearning.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=62&Itemid=87](http://novemberlearning.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=62&Itemid=87)
- Students who are unwilling or unable to engage in collaborative efforts or class discussions in person often find their voices in the online environment, which seems safer and less threatening.
- Conversely, students have the opportunity to "hear" all students' voices, not just the bold ones.
- Students continue to engage in learning beyond the constraints of the classroom walls and schedule. Students can participate in class, at least to some extent, even if they are absent or homebound.
- Students have the opportunity to think through their responses and craft them more carefully online than they do in live conversation.
- Conversely, teachers have the opportunity to gain insight into students' personalities, interests, and abilities that are not always apparent in the limited space and time offered within the four walls of the classroom.

For more information on the context and importance of using web 2.0 technologies in the classroom, visit <http://www.ictineducation.org> and download a free copy of the e-book *Coming of Age: An Introduction to the new World Wide Web*.

Notes and Ideas:

# Collaborative Technologies

---

## Class Wiki

### Overview

Wikis are essentially user-created and user-edited websites. This means that anyone who visits the site is able to modify its content and add pages, links, and files. Most wikis allow the creator (administrator) to limit who may view or edit the wiki. Wikis are designed to foster collaboration, not to be pretty or flashy, so they are particularly useful in the classroom, where the focus is on thinking and learning, not on bells and whistles. For a simple, practical illustration of what wikis are and how they work, view a brief video at: <http://www.commoncraft.com/video-wikis-plain-english>.

### Roles/Purposes of Wikis in the Classroom

I first implemented a wiki in a creative writing class during the 2007-2008 school year. I started small, using it for one purpose, which was collaborative prewriting to help my students generate, select, and hone portfolio themes. The effort was a success. You can find more detailed information on this use of a wiki at the following URL: <http://www.missouriwestern.edu/plwp/techfiles/miller/index.html>.

This year, my TAG Literature & Humanities class is using our class wiki, available at <http://taglit.pbwiki.com>, for the following purposes:

- Share and provide peer and teacher feedback on student writing.
- Track the progress of a piece of writing throughout its process. (Wikis have the amazing feature of allowing users to compare different versions of each page. Users can also revert to previous versions any time they choose).
- Write and share reflections on writing processes, assignments, and activities.
- Maintain teacher and student contact information.
- Collaboratively plan events and projects, including field trips.
- Post assignment instructions and corresponding materials and resources (links, handouts, etc.)
- Submit assignments.
- Post urgent announcements.
- Collect links to useful resources.
  
- **Additional ideas** for using a wiki in order to achieve your curricular objectives include:
  - Research Projects
  - Annotated Bibliographies
  - Concept-Mapping
  - Presentation Tool
  - Group Authoring
  - Teacher Collaboration

Notes and Ideas:

## Social Networking Site

### Overview

Social networking sites like Facebook and Myspace are web-based services that allow users to create and customize personal profiles and maintain an evolving list of friends with whom they can communicate. Different sites offer different user experiences and tools for interaction. All sites offer options for restricting access to user profiles.

### Roles/Purposes of Social Networking Sites in the Classroom

My TAG Literature and Humanities class is using Shelfari (<http://www.shelfari.com>), a social networking site for readers and book lovers around the world, to manage our reading lives. Each student maintains a personal profile page with their own virtual bookshelf, and I have one as well. We have all invited and accepted each other as friends, so we can get updates on each other's activity on the site. We also belong to a group created specifically for our class. We are currently using Shelfari for the following purposes:

- Keep a continually evolving record of individual reading on personal profile pages including:
  - Books we have read, are currently reading, or plan to read
  - Books we would like to purchase in the future
  - Favorite books
  - Note: Shelfari also allows users to tag books and rate them
- Post weekly discussion comments and reviews related to books we are reading or have finished reading. This allows students to participate in a discussion with the worldwide community of readers (and potentially authors) who are reading or have read their books.
- Participate in discussion forums in our class-specific group. These discussions are related to common readings for our class.
- **Additional ideas** for using a social networking site, depending on the site you choose, in order to achieve your curricular objectives include:
  - Discussion forums for all content areas
  - Student blogs to share reflections and insights regarding learning experiences
  - Communicate and manage relationships with students, teachers, and professionals beyond the classroom
  - Teach students online etiquette and safety protocols

Notes and Ideas:

## Suggestions for Getting Started

---

### Selecting a Tool

- Carefully consider how the tool(s) you select will help your students achieve specific objectives. What do you want them to learn or be able to do as a result of using the tool(s)? Asking yourself this question will help you plan meaningful learning activities using the technology rather than focusing on the technology itself.
- Try out several different tools to find the one(s) that you feel most comfortable using.
  - There are several free wiki tools available to teachers including:
    - <http://www.pbwiki.com>
    - <http://www.wetpaint.com>
    - <http://www.wikispaces.com/site/for/teachers>
  - Free social networking sites include:
    - <http://www.shelfari.com> (designed for readers)
    - <http://www.ning.com> (excellent for general educational purposes)
    - <http://www.nicenet.org> (create online classrooms for each class period with discussion forums, events calendar, schedule, online assignment submission, messaging, and more)

### Preparing Yourself, Your Students, and Your School

- Start small. Select one purpose or objective and implement it in one class first. This will allow you to integrate the technology into your teaching without being overwhelmed.
- Obtain administrator and/or district consent before implementing a wiki or social networking site in your classroom. During this step, ensure that you and your students will be able to access and use the tool(s) on the school's computers by checking with your district's technology office.
- Obtain parental consent for students to use the tool(s) and require students to read and sign acceptable use contracts outlining the rules and expectations involved. An example is available for download at <http://teachersfirst.wikispaces.com/Wiki+Warranty>. This is designed for wiki projects, but it is easily adaptable for other purposes.
- Explore the tool(s) thoroughly before you use them in the classroom so you can answer questions and troubleshoot more efficiently.

### Implementing without Stress

- Relax. It is perfectly fine, even preferable, if you run into one or two glitches when you are helping your students use the technology for the first time. They will have a chance to watch you work through problems and see how adults, and professionals, handle unexpected situations. Depending on their age and experience with technology, your students will probably be able to solve a number of problems themselves, which will boost their self-esteem and maybe teach you a few things about using the technology at the same time!
- As always, have an alternative plan just in case the Internet is down, a site won't work, or there is a power outage.
- Periodically evaluate the effectiveness of the tool to determine if your incorporation of it should be revised or ended. Also, be on the lookout for new tools to enhance your classroom. The following site provides a well-organized, comprehensive list of social networking sites for teachers: <http://socialnetworksined.wikispaces.com/>