Teacher Tips for Wiki Projects

While classroom wiki projects are becoming increasingly common in schools because they are approachable and enable common classroom practices to be extended online, they are often short-lived and unsuccessful efforts. This collection of tips and tricks will help to ensure that your wiki projects can be sustained over the long run:

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Tip	**Rationale**
Start with one classroom wiki	At their core, wikis are about sharing information. Groups of students working together can use wikis to document what they are learning about concepts connected to the curriculum or to organize their thinking on topics of deep personal interest. The challenge, then, is finding enough content to fill a wiki! That's why it is best to keep your initial efforts simple and clean, creating wiki projects that are completed by entire classes instead of individual students. Consider having small groups design, monitor and manage stand-alone pages in shared classroom wikis focused on classroom content instead of creating and maintaining entire wikis on their own. Doing so will ensure that content builds quickly without overwhelming anyone with your first digital efforts!
Model classroom wiki projects after Wikipedia pages	Easily the most recognizable wiki is Wikipedia (http://www.wikipedia.org/), the freely edited encyclopedia with millions of entries crafted by users all over the world. Because of its size and influence—and because your students are likely to have used Wikipedia as a research source at some point in their school careers—consider using Wikipedia as a model for your own classroom projects. Creating your own version of a classroom encyclopedia covering the content you are studying in class will be a motivating and productive task for your students. Groups can be assigned particular topics to tackle, creating pages that mirror the format of Wikipedia entries. Conceptually, students will instantly understand your expectations and have samples to refer to while completing their final products.
Remember that wikis can make differentiated learning and extension activities easy	For many classroom teachers, finding differentiated learning opportunities for students who've mastered—or are struggling with—required concepts can be an intimidating task. Classroom wikis modeled after Wikipedia, however, can make independent work with classroom content simple for everyone. Because classroom wikis are constantly changing, they are natural sources of never-ending opportunities for students in need of differentiation. Advanced students can create new pages for your wiki, introducing concepts to peers in approachable ways. Students who finish work early can proofread content for accuracy, correcting factual errors or adding essential information. Students in need of remediation can explore links found to be valuable by peers and embedded in classroom wiki pages. Using classroom wikis as tools for remediation and enrichment will help to make the time and energy that you invest into organizing wiki work worthwhile—and will help your students to see your wiki as a valuable learning tool.
Embrace inaccurate content	Critics of wikis as research sources often point to the potential for students to stumble across inaccurate content as a fatal flaw that make wikis almost worthless. "*How can we promote wikis in our classrooms,*" the argument goes, "*if you can't trust what's posted there? I don't want my students exposed to learning tools that are just plain wrong!*" Teachers using wikis successfully in their classrooms, however, embrace inaccurate content posted on classroom wikis as a teachable moment because they know that succeeding as consumers of information in the 21st Century requires students to develop a

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	healthy skepticism of **any** content posted online. In a world where content is constantly changing and publishing is easy for anyone, researchers simply cannot assume that digital sources—wikis, blogs, websites, online videos—are accurate and up-to-date.
	Wikis give teachers built in opportunities to teach lessons about the reliability of online content to students. Errors—which are inevitable in student projects—can be spotlighted and corrected, and students can be introduced to strategies for identifying content worth trusting.
Encourage students to actively revise and edit one another's content	While wikis are designed to be collective efforts crafted by the contributions of a wide range of independent writers, the chances are good that your students will initially be hesitant to revise the work of their peers. Instead, they will concentrate on adding new content to shared pages, overlooking errors no matter how obvious they may be. Students may also become protective of the content that they post, taking offense when their contributions are changed.
	Overcoming this resistance to shared revision requires constant nudging on your part. Remind students that both the content and the composition of wiki pages are supposed to change over time. Use the page history of particularly active topics in your classroom wiki to spotlight the kinds of changes that are common in high-quality shared projects. Create your own wiki page and encourage students to revise and edit your work.
	With concentrated effort—and a commitment to introducing students to the skills necessary for giving and receiving feedback on writing—you'll be able to shift the thinking of your students from "this is my writing" to "this is our writing."
Discuss wiki vandalism	The openness encouraged in communities that embrace wikis as a tool for knowledge building can also lead to the intentional destruction of content. Users with no real attachment to wiki projects sometimes decide to delete entire pages or to add inaccurate—or inappropriate—content to wiki pages on purpose. Work that students have spent hours creating can literally be erased in an instant.
	Users who intentionally destroy the work done on wikis are called vandals—and any teacher interested in using wikis with their students must reassure their students that wiki vandalism is not a cause for major concern. Because wikis save every version of each page separately, work can be quickly restored as soon as vandalism occurs. While replacing damaged pages can be frustrating, it is important for students to know that nothing is lost forever on a wiki.
Keep your wiki open for viewing but closed to revisions.	All wiki services provide users with a wide range of viewing and editing settings. Wikis can be completely closed, requiring users to log in to see and/or edit content, or completely open, allowing anyone to view and edit without invitation!
	The best starting point for classroom wiki projects is to leave your wiki open for viewing, but to extend editing privileges to just the students in your classroom. By doing so, you'll ensure that your students benefit from the motivation provided by creating work that can be seen by a larger audience while also ensuring that the content created by your classes can't be destroyed by outsiders simply looking to cause trouble online.
	Extending editing privileges to just the students in your classroom also means that you'll be able to easily monitor the kinds of work that each student in your class is doing online. If you choose to grade contributions to classroom wiki projects, you can quickly identify the changes made under each student's username—and if wiki vandals strike, you'll be able to hold students accountable for their digital decisions.

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Use RSS feed readers to monitor changes to classroom wiki projects	Monitoring the content posted on—and changes made to—classroom wikis is often a concern that teachers wrestle with early in new digital projects. Wanting to ensure that students are acting responsibly, teachers worry when they are unable to see what kinds of work their classes are doing online together. To make monitoring manageable, consider using an RSS feed reader to track changes to individual wiki pages. While enabling RSS feeds on wiki pages will require that your wiki remain open for the world to see (a digital risk that some teachers are unwilling to take), you will quickly and easily be able to skim the contributions—new comments, edits, images, and content—being made by the students in your class.
Consider naming and training student editors	Even after setting up RSS feed readers to monitor the content being added to classroom wikis, teachers may find that monitoring ongoing wiki projects for quality can be simply overwhelming—especially when students are highly motivated and making dozens of revisions per day. Uncomfortable with unmonitored pages and unable to find the time to keep up with the new work being added to classroom wikis, teachers end up pulling the plug on projects rather than risk being embarrassed by poor final products. To avoid this all-too-common end result, consider training student editors to be responsible for tracking the changes made to individual pages in your classroom project. Student editors can visit wiki pages several times a week, checking new contributions for accuracy and appearance. When errors are found, student editors can make instant changes—or can contact student authors and ask that they polish the work they've added. Page monitoring responsibilities can be assigned based on a student's demonstrated interest in a topic of study, motivation to revise and edit content, or willingness to take responsibility for a classroom's collective efforts. While page monitoring responsibilities will be limited as groups begin shared projects, class wikis are likely to cover enough unique topics over time that every student can take responsibility for one page of content.
Emphasize the important role that quality writing plays in successful wiki projects	One reason that many teachers are drawn to wikis is that their classes are often already working on shared projects that require written final products. Wikis can make it easy for groups to collaborate around these final products. With nothing more than an Internet connection, students can revise and edit together from any computer at any time. What's more, teachers can follow—and provide feedback on—the developing work of student groups without having to collect stacks of paper torn from spiral notebooks! The challenge rests in getting students to recognize that the same standards of quality used to evaluate traditional written products extend to digital versions of the same assignments. Used to informal content creation done with peers in social networking forums, digital teens can take a lackadaisical approach to any online effort. Drawn to visual elements, students end up spending more time inserting pictures and video into shared wiki pages than they do proofreading for errors in composition and/or grammar. Teachers leading successful wiki projects remember that wikis are simply tools—and that excellent final products still depend on good teaching. They constantly emphasize that quality writing is even more important online than it is in the traditional classroom because work posted online can be seen by a much wider audience. Extraordinary work is publicly celebrated, and samples are constantly shared. With time and attention, students in these classrooms learn to balance the rewards of easy publishing with the responsibility of creating content that is worth exploring.