Wikis and Collaborative Reference Services
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Librarians have long been concerned with connecting researchers with information, typically (but by no means exclusively) by means of face-to-face contact at a reference desk. With the advent of the Internet and the proliferation of online resources and services, librarians have used Web-based resources to add an asynchronic dimension to traditional synchronic reference services. One of the new Web-based technologies that has been discussed by librarians in the past few years is the wiki. Librarians have been using wikis for a variety of purposes, including research guides, knowledge-bases, and library Web sites (see Farkas 2005, Chawner and Lewis 2006, and Wikis 2007 for a number of examples), though they are flexible enough to work in most situations where collaboration or quick Web editing are desired. Wikis are an attractive tool for reference services because they are a relatively simple and inexpensive way to improve information flows among librarians and between librarians and their campus community.

What are Wikis?

Put very simply, wikis are Web pages that allow readers to edit the pages directly in their Web browser. Typically, someone who wants to edit a Web page must download a file from a server, modify its code, and then upload the file to the server. Someone who wants to edit a wiki, on the other hand, can enter new information on the Web page simply by clicking "Edit." Wikis are also different in that they use a simplified markup language that is not based on HTML. For example, a link to an external Web page in a wiki can be created simply by typing in the full URL, whereas an HTML-based Web page requires the use of the <a> tags. Less concretely, wikis are also notable for the culture of open-authorship that they create; in fact, the "author" of a wiki, especially one with an active community of

participants who regularly refine content, can be difficult to identify. The last important aspect of wikis is that they are living documents, since at any time a reader can update content (see Lamb 2004 or Chawner and Lewis 2006 for more on wiki typology and use). It is important to note that openness to anyone and everyone is not an essential characteristic of wikis: there are wikis that are password-protected so that only a select few can edit (or in some cases, read) the wiki.

Wikis and Academic Libraries

Librarians have already begun to explore the ways that wikis can enhance connections between libraries and the communities that they serve. Wikis have been used as a content management system (Chawner and Lewis 2006), to help with instruction (Allan 2007 and Deitering and Bridgewater 2007), and generally for professional development (Wikis 2007). The examples below, touching on both current and potential uses, will be focused on reference services.

Subject Guides

The Web-based subject guide is a common part of any academic library's Web presence. Librarians create these guides to enable researchers to identify and access databases or other reference resources that relate to specific subjects. These subject guides can also be useful for librarians at the reference desk, both as guides for the researcher and as aides to the librarian who may be unfamiliar with the subject-area and the specialized resources associated with it. Because of the importance of subject guides to reference librarians, most discussion of wikis in academic libraries involves at least a mention of their utility in creating subject guides. The most well-known implementation of a wiki subject guide is the *Biz Wiki* at Ohio University (Boeninger 2007).

Biz Wiki was created by Chad Boeninger to make updating his subject guides more manageable. Boeninger was dissatisfied with his pre-existing research guides due to the redundancy of resources

across the guides; the lack of interlinking between guides; the extra work involved in updating or editing content in multiple places; and the lack of searchability (Boeninger 2005). Boeninger's use of a Wiki allowed him to create a more flexible and responsive research guide; with the "Popular pages" feature of his wiki he was also able to measure use of the guide more accurately. Another important aspect of the wiki that Boeninger extols is the ability to add content "on the fly." He explains how he was able to take an answer from an email reference question and add it to the wiki while he was answering a similar question via instant messaging; Boeninger was thus able to point the person on IM to this newly created page (Boeninger 2005). Although other libraries, such as Florida State University, are starting to adopt wikis as a platform for subject guides, the practice is not yet widespread (Jackson and Blackburn 2007).

An adjunct to the subject guides created by librarians is the course-specific guide that can be both an aid to instruction and a more targeted resource for faculty and students. In 2006, I tried an experiment with a history course where I set up a wiki (http://gsuhist3000.pbwiki.com/) for use as a more open, flexible course guide (though one that was password protected so that only the class could edit it). The object was to create a space where the students and professor could recommend resources to each other, but in such a way that I was also privy to these recommendations and thus could amend them (in case erroneous information was offered) or add suggestions. Nine students (out of a class of thirty) and the professor added content; much of the rest was a modified version of a librarian-created course guide (often modified in response to student comments). Discussions with a few of the students and with the professor suggested that unfamiliarity with using a wiki and the absence of a participation requirement were major factors in the low percentage of users; the lack of a sense of community probably also played a role (see Deitering and Bridgewater 2007 and Walker 2006 for good discussions about the importance of community in wiki success). Despite the mixed results, the underlying premise is still valid: wikis provide a platform for an interactive conversation among students, faculty, and

librarians. More significantly, introducing a wiki into a course reinforces the importance of the social aspects of information-literacy. By making collaboration a focus, students experience how information sharing is central to a community of scholars.

Reference Manuals

Reference manuals are also a common part of the reference librarian's experience. These manuals are important for establishing policies and can be crucial for training, but, when paper-based, keeping them current can be time-consuming. Wikis are a natural fit for reference manuals because they are searchable and are designed for quick editing. The Australian Catholic University Library has used a wiki-based reference manual as an antidote to inadequate indexing and problems with currency (Blake 2006, 4) and librarians at Georgia State University created an Intranet wiki that provides a central point for accessing the reference manual and other library policies, guides, and even price quotes from vendors (Glogowski and Steiner 2008).

Campus Knowledge-Base

Most librarians are likely familiar with questions at the reference desk that are not library-specific, from technology services (where can I edit my video presentation?) to student advising (how do I register for courses?). These kinds of questions present a great opportunity for providing seamless service at the campus level, but they can sometimes be quite difficult to answer quickly. A library could set up a wiki to act as a knowledge-base rather than taking on the more onerous task of database development and management. Ideally, other campus departments would participate directly by having the ability to edit the wiki: this level of access would ensure that the wiki's content was current and reliable and would also increase the visibility of the resource. Such a campus-oriented wiki could also be used for training residence advisors or other peer assistants who need a reliable source of

information about a variety of campus services. Of course, the success of the wiki would depend on getting buy-in from a variety of sources but, if successful, the wiki could symbolize the library's place at the hub of campus information flows.

Readers' Advisory

Another possibility for wiki implementation is the creation of a reader's advisory wiki. The *Butler WikiRef* (http://www.seedwiki.com/wiki/butler_wikiref/) is an attempt at this, as the wiki is set up to be an annotated guide to reference sources available via the Butler University Libraries. What I envision is broader: a resource where librarians, students, and faculty can recommend books to each other. Looking for a good mystery novel, monologues for an audition, or the best book to read for an introduction to Shakespeare? The reader's advisory wiki would be the place for all of that and be both browseable by topic and fully searchable. In its broadest implementation, such a wiki could supplant subject and course guides by becoming a master guide to a variety of topics. Even with a narrow implementation, such as an annotated list of important material on a specific topic (e.g., World War I or graphic novels) or collaboration with various librarians on a more interdisciplinary topic, a reader's advisory wiki makes tacit knowledge explicit by getting more experienced advice out on the Internet where it is more accessible.

What Kinds of Problems Can Be Expected?

While proponents often note how easy wikis are to use, there is still a learning curve. Most people who have never seen a wiki before are not going to be able to sit down and make one work immediately; in fact, telling new users how easy it is can discourage those who initially struggle (Walker 2006, 69-70). Furthermore, knowing how to edit a wiki does not mean that one knows how to make use of a wiki or that one is automatically comfortable with the idea of editing "someone else's

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work" (Walker 2006, 73; Deitering and Bridgewater 2007, 40; Wiebrands 2006). Make time for training and do not underestimate the amount of training required. Consider adding detailed help pages or supply cheat sheets that users can download and look at while editing the wiki. Depending on the context, it might also be useful to have a link to an "Ask-a-Librarian" page or to embed a chat widget in order to provide another layer of assistance to users.

Although wikis are living documents that are open to editing by multiple authors, they should not be created and then ignored. At least one person should tend the wiki to ensure appropriate use and make corrections as the need arises (Wiebrands 2006). Spam can also be a problem for wikis that are open to editing by anyone, so in these instances one needs either a very active community of users who take responsibility for deleting spam or an installation of anti-spam software (Chawner and Lewis 2006, 39; Farkas 2005). If the organizational structure of the wiki is left open, sometimes the result can be a resource where specific information is difficult to find. In situations where setting standards or guidelines might be helpful (e.g., for ensuring usability or eliminating uncertainty as a way of encouraging content), have someone in charge of the wiki who can create a structure for contributions (Chawner and Lewis 2006, 43; Deitering and Bridgewater 2007, 32-33; Glogowski and Steiner 2008).

Many people fall prey to the idea that technology has inherent qualities that transfer immediately to the environment into which the technology has been introduced. Wikis, like any technology, are tools and thus are extensions of human practice: they need an active community in order to flourish. Having a wiki attached to one's library Web site will not magically attract people who will fall under its spell and feverishly use it. As Deitering and Bridgewater (2007) show so well, a successful wiki requires work: it has to be marketed, tended to, and sometimes reconceptualized based on user feedback. If there are not sufficient resources (in terms of staff time or community interest) to keep the wiki vibrant and well-groomed, then it might be best not to start at all. Nothing is more dispiriting than putting effort into starting a new project only to have it flounder. Before undertaking a

wiki project, be sure to plan in advance and take into consideration who the stakeholders are and how to ensure their continued interest.

Conclusion

If you can think of a time in your professional life when you were frustrated with keeping the phone numbers and URLs in your reference manual up to date, when you wished that you didn't have to call someone in Systems to make a simple edit to your library's Web page, or when you wanted to collaborate more with students or faculty, then wikis might be the right tool for you. Many librarians might be daunted by the thought of inviting others to participate in reference services, but opportunities for collaboration with students, faculty, and campus staff are a way of tapping into the expertise of our community. If the ultimate goal is to connect researchers with the best information available, then librarians need to harness the knowledge and experience that exists on any academic campus. Wikis provide the means for individuals to share their expertise, provide a way to reduce barriers to information, and thus are a way to improve the quality of reference services.

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> A very thorough introduction to Wiki history, technology, and uses, with in-depth explanations of wiki concepts and implementation. Notes a couple disadvantages of wikis (spam, lack of markup standardization) and enumerates factors for a successful wiki.

Deitering, Anne-Marie and Rachel Bridgewater. 2005. Stop reinventing the wheel: Using Wikis for professional knowledge sharing. *Journal of Web Librarianship* 1, no. 1: 27-44.

> Details the creation of the *Library Instruction Wiki* (http://instructionwiki.org) in great depth. The authors highlight the need for marketing, encouraging a sense of community ownership, responsiveness to feedback from users, and extensive preparatory work to make a wiki successful.

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> This article is heavily cited, in part because it was one of the first articles to address the current and potential uses of wikis in higher education. Covers the history of wikis and surveys the technical aspects with the non-expert user in mind.

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> Based on qualitative and quantitative analysis of wiki use by Information & Library Science students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Walker's research provides a welcome empirical basis for further discussion regarding the barriers that can impede the success of a wiki: the absence of a strong community; lack of technical proficiency; and perceptions of lack of knowledge/expertise.

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> A useful list of links to library-related wikis; also has a short list of suggested readings. Be sure to add your library to it when you try some of the ideas presented in this chapter!