

Rob Withers

# Something wiki this way comes

## An interactive way of posting, updating, and tracking changes in information used by library staff

### So what the heck is *wiki*?

*Wiki* is a Hawaiian word for *quick*. It caught the eye of Ward Cunningham, who, in 1995, developed scripts for creating Web pages that could be created, edited, linked, deleted, or renamed without using HTML, software packages, or file transfer which he named wiki. Since that time, wiki clones and wiki-like Web content management systems (WCMS) have proliferated. As many have become available under open source licenses (which enable free downloading and use), wiki has begun to catch on as a tool for enabling groups of people to continuously refine and revise Web accessible information.<sup>1</sup>

One of the best known applications of wiki is the *Wikipedia*, an online encyclopedia consisting of articles containing more than 1.5 million entries (500,000 in its English-language edition) authored or revised by more than 7,000 people. Other uses include the *Wiktionary* and other group-edited projects.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the emergence of some well-known products, such as the *Wikipedia*, the library community hasn't always embraced the use of wiki technology. For example, Walt Crawford once noted that he had found the mechanisms and content either uninteresting or problematic and since he didn't have a need that cried out to wiki as a solution, he hadn't pursued it.<sup>3</sup> The ability of multiple people with or without credentials to add, edit, and delete information has stirred up controversy on electronic discussion lists, such as Libref-L, and opinions on wiki-supported encyclopedias, dictionaries, and books within the library community continue to vary.<sup>4</sup>

However, libraries are beginning to embrace wiki's potential to support collaborative authorship and threaded discussions.<sup>5</sup> Wiki is ideal for such activities because it empowers people to track many rapidly changing types of information, including policies and procedures that evolve over time, such as hours and locations of library service points and related services, technical glitches, and ways of approaching challenging assignments. At Miami University, information desk staff use a wiki site to share and continuously refine information needed to perform their work.

### The information desk environment

The information desk at Miami University, located in the largest of the four campus libraries, answers directional and basic informational questions, referring people to other service points, if needed. It is staffed by people who have little opportunity for interaction with one another due to the location of their workspaces away from the desk and to their desk schedule. A mixture of full-time staff, graduate students, and student employees work at the information desk. Paraprofessionals who staff the information desk are drawn from a variety of departments, including Access Services, Information Services, Technical Services, and the Center for Information Management. During renovation of the library, some of these units have been

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temporarily moved to offices outside of the building, further limiting interaction.

Scheduling also impedes communication. Information desk staff work assigned evening shifts and rotating weekend shifts. Compensatory time taken for evening and weekend shifts further impedes efforts to gather all staff in face-to-face meetings. The diverse composition of information desk staff and the nearly around-the-clock schedule makes any type of communication difficult, especially face-to-face meetings. But with the desk answering more than 10,000 questions annually, it is important that staff be able to share information about frequently repeated questions, including those about:

- difficult-to-find answers to assignments;
- information about hours and locations of services (particularly difficult to track as two out of four floors of the library are undergoing renovation); and
- rapidly changing problems involving copiers, networking, broken URLs, and network outages.

### **Wiki software**

When a candidate for a professional librarian position discussed wiki technology during his interview, its potential applications to creating and maintaining documentation immediately became evident to library staff.

Wiki was set up with MediaWiki, a free open source product that can be downloaded and used by anyone. MediaWiki is a product of the Wikipedia Foundation, a nonprofit foundation registered in the State of Florida that operates the *Wikipedia* and a number of other sites, such as the *Wictionary*, WikiBooks, and WikiQuotes.<sup>6</sup> Installation and configuration took little time, and once installed, the software has required minimal maintenance from technical staff.

### **Benefits of wiki**

Unlike discussion lists or bulletin boards, which will display additions or corrections as follow-up messages to the original, wiki enables those who read the message to make additions or corrections to the original file.

Some (particularly within the library community) might argue that wiki-based information sources are dangerous because individuals who may not have credentials are permitted to edit, update, and delete information. However, in situations where more than one person may know more accurate or up-to-date information, wiki enables immediate correction or updates of errors, eliminating bottlenecks that can occur when information for 24/7 operations must be reviewed and approved by persons who work a standard 40-hour work week. At the same time, it allows for the ability for information to be reviewed if changes are incomplete or erroneous.

### **The information desk wiki**

The information desk wiki includes a section with basic information about reference interview techniques, facilities, services and hours, renovation updates, and clock-in/clock-out procedures for staff. The main portion of the wiki is available for any information desk staff to post and edit entries about questions that may arise and possible solutions to them. Current entries include information about a heavily used service that crashed frequently during final exam week, a business research question that can be answered only by using a product available on one machine in the reference area, and troubleshooting networking problems.

Any user can edit any entry, adding questions or further information, correcting information or typos, or removing information. Changes are made using a WYSIWIG HTML editing system, meaning that little training is required.

All changes are tracked by the wiki system, which can display a history of changes to entries. Although the identity of the person making changes is not recorded, wiki does record the IP number of the computer used to make the change as well as the time and date, making it possible to pin down an identity should it be necessary.

### **Conclusion**

At the time of writing, the information desk wiki has been operational for almost one

year, and has superseded notes left at the information desk or e-mails sent to electronic discussion lists as a way of sharing information. Unlike other forms of disseminating information, a wiki-based service:

is not confined to one physical space, as a log or set of notes might be;

does not require a gatekeeper to approve or post information, as a Web site or written memoranda might;

does not lose information about changes made, as a blog might; and

does not require people to search for multiple pieces of information, one of which might supercede another, as postings to a electronic discussion list might.

Unlike notes left at the desk, the information in wiki is accessible to people regardless of where they are located, provided that they have access to the Internet. The wiki system also ensures that changes can be tracked if necessary, but that only the most current information is displayed. And best of all, wiki can be continuously updated and viewed by

all staff members; typographical errors, rapidly changing availability of online services, and new information can all be reflected in entries in a timely fashion.

### Notes

1. David Mattison, Quickwiki, Swiki, Twiki, Zwiki and the Plone Wars, *Searcher*, (April 2003): 11:4. Professional Development Collection. Ebscohost. 15 Nov 2005, search.epnet.com/login.asp?profile=web&defaultdb=tfh.

2. Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, *Wikipedia* n.d.: Available at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia.

3. Mattison.

4. A quick search on the terms wiki or wikipedia in the Libref-L Archives listserv.kent.edu/cgi-bin/wa.exe?S1=libref-l will retrieve postings that contain both sides of the issue.

5. Mattison.

6. Wikipedia Foundation MediaWiki Development. n.d. Available at wikipedia.sourceforge.net. *zz*

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