

■ John Corrigan



Improving Writing

With Wiki Discussion Forums

Writing practice and in-depth discussions go hand in hand when homework involves posting responses on wiki discussion forums.

Students' efforts increase when they know their peers will be reading and commenting on their work.

Various platforms are available for teachers to choose from.

Any experienced teacher will tell you that some so-called technological advancements prove to be of little or no educational value. The conundrum is clear: As serious educators, we are always looking for the next great thing to assist our students, searching always for the advancement that will pack the biggest pedagogical punch. Often what we get is style over substance. One use of technology, though, has helped my students achieve greater success on the annual AP language and composition exam and—more importantly—has been a tremendous pedagogical aid in honing students' writing skills: wiki discussion forums.

Wikis are open-source sites, meaning that users may add, remove, or edit most content quickly. Because they are a public venue, students became more engaged and invested in what they wrote, wrote more frequently, edited their work more carefully, collaborated, and became accustomed to frequent peer and adult feedback.

"Teens like making their point known, and

we like to publicly disprove what we don't agree with," said Brittany, a student in my 2009–10 English class and a senior at Pomfret (CT) School. "You can see this on Facebook, with 'comments' and 'likes.' You're sitting by yourself at your computer posting something online. It's so normal to us."

And online wikis offer more than social interaction. They allow students to post responses and read peers' responses, a concept that holds numerous academic possibilities. One is the creation of a collaborative-learning environment. "Reading other people's responses before writing my own let me see a lot of different interpretations and opinions on the same quote, chapter, or theme," noted Mackenzie, another Pomfret student, "and from those I could really see if I agreed, disagreed, or had my own sort of variation on that idea."

My students post daily or weekly 8- to 12-sentence responses to questions and discussion topics that are designed to stress several modes of discourse, including satire, refutation, persuasion,

narration, comparison, description, and synthesis. They may address my question directly or (politely) refute a peer's response. To earn credit, a student must cite the assigned reading using Modern Language Association (MLA) format, embed at least one quote, and use at least one term from the class's rhetorical terms vocabulary list. Participation and wiki discussion posts make up 15% of a student's term grade.

Back Story

For years, I had asked students to write directed-reading responses by assigning prompts that required students to respond to nightly readings. They were effective in that I could read them and know what a student had grasped about the content of a text. Yet they were typically hand-written, they were not always supported with textual evidence, and they were never public. I found that my students were not fully engaged and their efforts varied greatly. Overall, those directed-reading responses served as little more than a homework check.

So I searched for something that would be more engaging for my students. Instead of simply increasing the weight of the directed-reading responses, I wanted students to take ownership of their work, and I wanted to create a forum that would change the unfamiliar environment of AP Language and Composition—a rhetoric class, unique among most high school English curricula—by using a technology with which students are comfortable. I was also looking for something that would tell me who read and who did not read and which textual subtleties had been grasped and which ones were not grasped, as well as something that could also serve as a tool to improve student writing.

Enter the wiki discussion forum.

"Everyone could see my work," said Laura, a member of my 2008–09 class. "It made me much more conscientious to produce my best work with minimal errors. It also wasn't out of fear for the judgment of others, as much as I wanted to prove

to them why my thoughts were supported, in the most professional way possible."

In 2008, 72% of my students earned scores of four and five on the AP Language and Composition exam; in 2009, after the incorporation of the wiki discussion forum into my writing curriculum, nearly 80% achieved that standard. Obviously, many factors exist, but neither my curriculum (save for that lone addition) nor the Pomfret admission standards had changed.

Philosophy

Robert Frost once entered his classroom, looked at his students, looked at the stack of papers they had written and placed on the corner of his desk, and asked how many of the pupils truly believed in what they had written. No hands went up. Frost, as the story goes, simply swept the papers off his desk into the trash can. He then allegedly dismissed the class, telling students to leave and come back with work that they could truly stand behind.

Much of the success my students have had using a wiki discussion forum has been spawned from my belief that if you raise the bar, students will typically strive to meet it. "The wiki posts were taken more seriously as homework assignments," Mackenzie reported. "A big difference between the wiki forum and basic short-answer homework assignments is that it was public—both the instructor and our peers could read our responses, so even though the fact that more people can read your work shouldn't play a huge role in the amount of time and effort you put into it, I think that definitely played a part in making people take their own written work more seriously."

By way of example, here is an assignment followed by a response:

Assignment: After reading Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech and viewing it on YouTube, consider Obama's audience, his use of rhetorical strategies, and his tone. Then write an 8- to 12-sentence paragraph in

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which you explain what Obama wished to achieve.

"We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection" (Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address). This was the call to arms that America heard in 1861, but it was, in fact, a plea for Americans to hold their arms. With a looming civil war, Lincoln saw an opportunity to call Americans to be something better, to empathize and realize that they were not so different, to realize that Union truly held American power. Barack Obama did the same thing in his speech, "A More Perfect Union". The parallel here is unmistakable. Obama's opportunity was the controversial nature of Jeremiah Wright's sermons; this could have been the ruin of his campaign. Yet, Obama made it into something else while addressing the question: "Why associate myself with Reverend Wright in the first place, they may ask." [To read the student's whole response, please visit www.principals.org/pl1110corrigan1.]

Although the student took liberty with my sentence count, I think Frost would be elated. I certainly was. I cannot hang my hat on one example, but this is indicative of the effort students have put forth. The wiki discussion forum has produced longer responses, cleaner prose, tighter paragraph structure, and claims that are supported with textual evidence. In short, long gone are the days of the two-line "paragraphs" that have been hand-written in the hallway five minutes before class.

Pedagogical Benefits

Isn't this just a typed response? you may ask. No. Students are writing for public consumption. The English faculty and the academic dean have access to my discussion forum (and routinely post comments on it), and each student's peers read his or her posts as well.

Isn't this just like an e-mail folder? No. There is no opening and closing of e-mails. Students

typically read all responses in one place, allowing them to follow the thread, the ebb and flow of the conversation.

"The openness of the online dialogue challenged me to acknowledge and understand both other people's thoughts and presentation of those ideas," Laura explained. "It gave me a new perspective and tools to interpret different pieces of literature."

Likewise, I have found that the wiki discussion forum helps me meet my own time-management demands. Students post their responses prior to class meetings, so I can read them before class and know what material has been grasped. This saves time and helps to focus my lesson plan. Similarly, I ask students to post responses to summer reading projects. This is a godsend—it eliminates the traditional (and dreaded) first-day diagnostic writing sample and allows me to prepare writing-mechanics exercises and worksheets designed to address flaws I spot in summer posts before the start of the school year.

It was Hemingway who said one doesn't become a better writer, one becomes a better editor. I have found that students spend up to 30 minutes on a 12-sentence post, using a word processor to draft, revise, and edit their paragraphs before finally posting. "I would start with a paragraph that was around 18 sentences long and cut down from there," admitted Brittany. "My writing improved a lot because of that—I learned how to say a lot in a limited space." What better way to stress the writing process?

"Within the 12-sentence limit, there were possibilities to still make my responses long by using semicolons, long dashes, etc., things I took full advantage of at the beginning of the year," Mackenzie concurred, "but toward the end of the year, I found that I needed them less and less, a clear sign that practicing within a space limit was improving my ability to write extensively but at the same time concisely."

Above all, because a wiki discussion forum is interactive and public and because students may refute a peer's analysis of a reading, refutation, the use of a counterargument, and the knowledge of audience awareness are all stressed.

"Reading checks don't make you think,"

wrote Brittany. “The wiki-posts really forced you to make an opinion and to form arguments that made sense. Over time, the wiki question would almost change as we argued our points. The discussion forums acted more as a formal class discussion. You could take from the wikis as much as you gave. They made you think.” [For an example of a student’s clear grasp of an ability to use refutation, textual evidence, and counterargument, please see www.principals.org/pl1110corrigan2.]

With writing for an audience comes the necessary grasp of purpose and tone. Colleagues have asked me about the role of unnecessary peer pressure or the possibility of public humiliation. I have found neither to be a problem. In fact, a wiki discussion forum can be an example to use in discussions about responsibility, accountability, and online ethics. “When students are forced to use a wiki, they are put in a situation where they have to compete with their peers,” Pomfret senior Ashley pointed out. It’s a prime example of positive peer pressure. This sense of competition just isn’t there in other written homework. It was the desire to be impressive that motivated me to do well on the wikis. The motivation did, I think, improve my writing skills.”

Brittany, on the other hand, saw a lack of pressure, finding comfort in having the ability to revise, which the wiki discussion forum offered. “With the wikis, if your argument doesn’t make sense or if you don’t put a lot of effort into it, somebody will call you out or notice. I would much rather be able to edit and change as much as I want prior to posting instead of handing in journals or written assignments. Once you write something in a journal, you’re kind of stuck with it.” [For an example of an appropriate student response to a public article, please visit www.principals.org/pl1110corrigan3.]

Getting Started

There are many wiki hosting sites out there. Most offer Web site hosting, discussion forums, and e-mail accounts. Many are free sites that allow you to control who is allowed to enter your course’s discussion forum. With free sites, however, come a few pitfalls, including restrictive designs and templates as well as charges for add-ons.

I use Project Forum for two reasons. The first is cost. My school’s business manager wields an axe at line items like a hungry warrior, but \$119 for two courses per school year will not get me thrown out of his office. The second reason is instructional. Discussion forums use either sequentially posted comments or they use threads that organize comments by displaying each user’s reply after the comment he or she is replying to. I discovered that not all hosting sites allow the teacher to comment *inside* a student’s original response to my prompt, meaning that my comments always followed the last student comment and a student would have to scroll up and down to read his or her post and my comment on it. Project Forum enabled me to comment in or between students’ posts.

Here are some free and fee-charging hosting sites that you may wish to consider:

- www.projectforum.com (two courses for \$119/year)
- www.wetpaint.com/wiki (free)
- www.wikidot.com/learnmore:education (Free with \$5 upgrades)
- <http://pbworks.com/academic.wiki> (\$95/year)
- www.wikispaces.com/site/for/teachers (free for basic, up to \$200/year)
- www.brainkeeper.com (\$170/year)
- www.hostmonster.com/ (\$3.95/mo).

To see a generic example, visit <https://pomfretseniorenglish.wikispaces.com/>, a site that took me less than 15 minutes to join and create.

In the end, I have found the use of a wiki discussion forum to be pedagogically beneficial for all the reasons listed here. But it all comes back to the students, so perhaps Mackenzie’s summation might be appropriate: “Just practicing writing so often, with public feedback from the teacher and from our peers, allowed us to experiment with writing styles and formats, as well as look at other people’s thoughts and opinions and compare, contrast, or use them in conjunction with our own thoughts and ideas to develop them further.” **PL**

Author’s note: The essay that appears here began as a presentation at the 2009 National Advanced Placement Conference.

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Editor’s note:
Quotations in this article were collected from the students’ e-mail responses to the author’s request for feedback.