

# Using Wikis and Podcasts to Help Students Make the Transition from Consumers to Producers of Workplace Communication

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The author plunged into the world of wikis to teach students fundamental principles and analytical skills for business and technical communication. The author's students worked in teams to post and analyze their own discovered examples of workplace communication. The students were so enthusiastic they continued their wikis the following term with podcasts of their answers to job interview questions and written analyses of those answers according to criteria developed in their teams. This paper begins by describing the rationale for using wikis. Then the design of the wikis and the wiki activities, including the job interview podcasts, are explained. Next, the student and teacher participation in the wikis is described. Finally, the paper discusses the student and teacher perceptions of the wikis' effectiveness. But first, wiki and podcasting are briefly defined and a brief overview of the students' wiki activities are provided.

## Definitions and Overview of the Students' Wiki Activities

### Wikis, Podcasting, and Web 2.0

Wiki is a Hawaiian word that means "fast." It is commonly said to stand for "What I know Is," but that is a backronym, an acronym invented *after* the word's creation. A wiki is a web page that "can be structured and completed by anyone who has been granted relevant access" (Ward, 2006, p 236). Wikipedia is perhaps the best-known example of a wiki. Any user can revise entries to the web pages that constitute this encyclopedia. Because wikis are by nature interactive, enabling and encouraging user input, they form part of what is referred to as Web 2.0. The wikis used with the students described in this allowed them to revise each other's web pages. Access was only granted to the students in the class, the teacher, and technical support staff.

Podcasting is the creation of an audio or video digital computer file that is made available for downloading. The podcasts for the students were available as MP3 files to be downloaded from the institute's site on itunes.

These two Web 2.0 technologies empower users, encourage collaboration, and allow the gathering of various individual levels of expertise. Most significant is the way in which Web 2.0 "subtly inverts the traditional conception of information and knowledge that has dominated the library and information profession since its inception" (Tredinnick, 2006, p. 231).

### Students' Wiki Activities

The students' first term activities were designed to teach the fundamental principles and skills for business communication. For Part 1, as homework, students were asked to bring to class a digital example of real workplace communication either as a GIF or JPEG file. They were also asked to analyze their example and bring to class their written analysis as a WORD file. For Part 2, which took place in

class, students individually uploaded their examples and posted their analyses. In assigned home teams, students were then asked to post a team analysis, a “Team Edit,” of each team member’s analysis of her or his example of workplace communication. For Part 3, in a subsequent class, students in their home teams provided feedback to another team’s analyses. This feedback was called a “Team Review.” Students were asked to evaluate that team’s work according to a checklist provided. Students voted individually for a People’s Choice Award for the best example of workplace communication.

Students received marks for their work in the activities worth 5% of their final grade for the course. In addition, they were asked a related midterm exam question that was worth 10% of their final course mark and constituted 10 of the 30-mark exam total. A related final exam question was worth 12% of their final course mark.

In the second term, students developed a list of five job interview questions together with five criteria for evaluating the answers. Students then individually selected one of the questions and prepared an answer they might use in a real interview. In pairs, students recorded their answers using Audacity (a free, easy-to-use audio editor) and uploaded an MP3 audio file of their answers. Each student also posted an individual written analysis of their own answer on their wiki. In their home teams, students then listened to the interview answers of the members of another team and provided feedback. Students could then revise and re-record their own answers. Students’ job interview answers were worth 5% of their final grade for the course.

### **Rationale for Using Wikis**

The rationale for using wikis is based on the nature of the challenges that need to be met in a first term communication course and on the potential usefulness of the technology.

### **Challenges of the Communication Course**

The two major challenges to be met in the first term of the communication course were to introduce students to the fundamental principles and practices of workplace communication. Ensuring that by term’s end, students were not still writing essays proved to be a daunting task. Equally daunting for many students was the introduction of the practice of working and writing together in groups rather than as isolated individuals.

Students are required to take a two-term, 105-hour business and technical communication course as part of the requirements for their diplomas in technologies. Each technology receives its own separate communication course tailored to that technology. The students were in chemical sciences, mechatronics and robotics, and mining and mineral exploration. Many of the students already had an undergraduate degree and some have master’s degrees. In the case of the chemical sciences technology program, one-third of the students already had a degree. They enroll in the institution to qualify for and attain the high-paying, career-level jobs that have so far eluded them. For this reason, the emphasis of all instruction at this institution is to provide students with the combination of theoretical knowledge and practical skills that will transform them into employable professionals.

To become employable, the students need to acquire a thorough knowledge of the knowledge and practices of their future workplaces. To become professionals, they need to be able to apply their knowledge to their specific workplaces. They need to be able to analyze situations in order to solve

problems and to recommend improvements to current work processes. Their analyses, while based on academic knowledge, are not themselves academic. They must be based on the social, cultural, and above all, economic, contingencies of the specific workplace situation. For example, students in mining and mineral exploration are immediately directed to integrate economics into their technology-specific science knowledge: one of the first definitions they learn is that an ore is the “mixture of ore minerals and gangue [worthless minerals] from which at least one of the metals can be extracted at a profit” (Whyte & Brockelbank, 1996, p. 118).

Similarly, in their introductory course to business and technical communication, students need to learn how workplace communication differs from personal or academic communication and how it is to be evaluated differently. Students need to learn that while many of the essay-writing skills they have learned in English class are applicable to workplace communication, the business or technical report is not an essay. Students need to perceive workplace documents as tools created by someone for a practical purpose and as arising from real situational constraints. Finally, students need to develop the skills to separate essential messages from superfluous information, to understand the importance of separating the “ore minerals” from the “gangue.” To do so they need to be able to analyze workplace communications in terms of their audiences, purposes, features, and situational constraints. They need to be able to solve communication problems and suggest improvements to existing communications. In summary, students need to make the transition from personal and academic writing to workplace writing (Freedman, Adam, & Smart, 1994). Enabling the students to make that transition is the focus of their business and technical communication course.

A second essential component of the transition from personal and academic communication to workplace communication is the practice of teamwork (Worley, 2009). Students need to practice their skills in managing three aspects of team workplace communication. Firstly, they need to be able to work in teams to accomplish the work task. Second, they need to focus on building relationships within their teams, relationships that will allow them to accomplish future work tasks. Third, they need to present themselves as competent, contributing team members. Finally, students need to learn to view teamwork as a potentially enjoyable, essential component of workplace communication.

### **Potential Usefulness of the Technology**

Social software technologies such as wikis have attracted the attention of business (CNNMoney.com, Nussenbaum, 2008). A full-page advertisement by Microsoft featured in Canada’s *Globe and Mail Report on Business* refers to “Wikis. A silly word that can save you tons” (May 2009). Corporations are becoming aware of the need to adopt social software in order to remain competitive (Zhang, Zhu, & Hildebrandt, 2009). Businesses and the general public are getting on the bandwagon. Canada’s major daily newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, for the first time launched a “Public Policy Wiki” on the tabling of the Canadian federal budget in January 2009 and invited suggestions from the newspaper’s readers. During its first two weeks, the Policy Wiki attracted over 100,000 page views (January 2009).

Wikis have also attracted the attention of business educators (Business Education Headline News, 2008) and post-secondary educators (Moore, Fowler, & Watson, 2007). Wikis are recommended to promote active learning and knowledge retention (Moore et al., 2007); create happy collaboration (Rasmussen in Williams, 2008); support the cognitive, social and teaching presences for developing a community of inquiry (Cameron & Anderson, 2006); support higher-order thinking and more in-depth learning than online discussions (Gao & Wong, 2008); support collaboration and provide a constructivist learning

environment (Dalsgaard, 2006; Reynaud 2009); and offer several instructional advantages for college classrooms (Brescia & Miller, 2006). Wikis enable the kind of active learning advocated by Smart and Csapo (2007) and the assumption of real-life roles promoted by Holst-Larkin (2008) for the business communication classroom.

### **The Design of the Wikis and the Wiki Activities**

#### **Critical Technical Support and Assignment Preparation**

In May 2008, the author was awarded a Grassroots TEK (technology-enabled knowledge) Grant from her institution for the project “Real-Life Workplace Communication Wiki.” Support was received from the institute’s learning and teaching centre’s instructional development consultant, technical advisors, media specialists, and technical support liaisons. Subsequently, an additional Applied Educational TEK Research Grant was awarded for “Do Social Software Technologies Work for our Students? An Evaluation of a Wiki Communication Project.” These two projects ensured that faculty collaboration and support were achieved as well as the adequate training in the technology that has been shown to be critical for successful integration of technology (Rea, Hoger, & Rooney, 1999; White & Myers, 2001).

In the course’s first lecture, students were introduced to the main features of workplace writing, which were summarized in a handout (see Figure 1). The table in the handout is based on Hartley’s (1991) work summarizing the differences between technical and essay writing. Students also received part 1 of their wiki assignment and their course outlines. Students were to arrive at their third lab of the course in Week 3 with part 1 completed and ready to work on their wikis. The task of the technical advisors and support liaisons was to design a wiki in time for Week 3 of the term.

#### **Wiki Site Design**

A separate wiki site, with its own separate internet address, was designed for each of six classes. The sites were identical except for the names of the students. The student names appeared in a left-hand column.

The site’s homepage included a welcoming to the site and all course handouts related to the wiki assignment. The handouts were in PDF files because WORD documents generally take much longer to load from a website and internet browser. Students logged on to the site using their first and last names, in that order, and their student registration numbers. This procedure, while it seemed straightforward, caused difficulty because the student names were taken from their registration records and were not always the names they used in everyday life. Also, for some of the students, their first and last names did not correspond to the order of given and family names. Thus, some of them had to be shown the page on the instructor’s computer so they could see the names they needed to enter. This would have posed more of a problem if the students had not been physically present in the classroom.

Each student then had an individual web page – his or her own wiki – which was accessed by the student clicking on his or her name in the left-hand column. The student attached his or her example of workplace communication as a GIF or JPEG by clicking on “Attach” on the menu bar at the top of the site. The example would then appear at the top of the wiki page, below the student’s name, when the student clicked on “View.”

<b>Table: Features of Workplace Writing</b>	
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Email messages, memos, letters, labels, notices, signs, forms, posted instructions, manuals, policies, press releases, reports</li> </ul>
Focus on the Specific Reader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Treats the reader as a person who needs information to do a job, information the writer is supplying, and which is written for that specific reader and purpose</li> <li>Except in formal reports and other formal documents, often addresses the reader directly by using personal pronouns such as “you” and “your”</li> <li>Asks, or even commands, the reader to read and ACT</li> <li>If it asks the reader questions, it expects the reader to answer them.</li> </ul>
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To encourage and enable the reader to read and <i>act</i></li> </ul>
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gets to the point immediately <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Makes the reasoning behind any point obvious</li> <li>Puts any detailed supporting information (e.g. pages of data) where it will not distract the reader from the main purpose (e.g. in an appendix at the back of a report)</li> </ul> </li> <li>Displays information in bite-size chunks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Short paragraphs</li> <li>Titles and headings</li> <li>Point form and lists of information</li> <li>Standard formats</li> <li>Key words and phrases</li> <li>Underlining, capitalization, bold, colour, and graphics to highlight key information</li> <li>Tables, graphs and other illustrations for at-a-glance understanding</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**Figure 1. Table of Features Handout for the Wiki Assignment**

By clicking on “Edit,” the student could copy and paste his or her individual analysis from the WORD file the student had brought to class. Only minor reformatting was required. While the support liaison had originally suggested home team revisions and team reviews appear as separate categories under each name in the left-hand column, team revisions were made to appear in the same area as the student’s original analysis. The wiki was designed to retain all work in a section accessed by clicking “History” on the menu bar. This was necessary to ensure that no one’s work was lost since each student in the class was able to access every other student’s work and could change anyone’s work. However, the history section, because it saved every version, proved cumbersome. When the students had finally finished their wikis, it proved difficult for many to differentiate their individual work from the work done by their teams.

The team reviews were entered by clicking on “Team Review” under each student’s name. Unlike the edits, each team review was clearly separated from any individual work. At the beginning of the left-hand column above the first student’s name was a listing for “DEMO” and a “DEMO Team Review.” A

sample workplace communication, sample analysis, and sample team review were posted in this section since many of the students were not comfortable without a model.

In the second week of the course, students were assigned to teams of three or four based on a short piece of writing each had submitted in the first course session detailing their experiences communicating at work, in the community, and at school. The teams were selected to reflect a mix of abilities (Roebuck, 1998) and to match in diversity the groups the students can expect to encounter in their future workplaces (Grant, 2004). In addition, teams were mixed by gender, first language, and temperament. Grouping ESL and non-ESL students tends to produce more inclusive groups (Vance & Fitzpatrick, 2007). To prevent sub-teams from forming, close friends were not placed on the same team (Roebuck, 1998).

The technical support liaison attended as many classes as possible to help solve any technical problems. The liaison also provided up dated written instructions on how to download the gifs and JPEGs and post WORD files. The major technical problem was that most of the students brought in JPEGs that were much larger than the maximum size of 600 x 400 pixels listed in the instructions. The wiki was not constructed to allow downsizing of a file after it had been attached. Because many students tried to attach files that were too large, many of the wikis needed to be reset by the liaison. One student even attempted to attach the file by holding her cell phone with the image on its screen up to her computer screen. As the technical liaison remarked, we may laugh now, but that student is probably only a little bit ahead of the technology.

Instructions for all three parts of the assignment were posted on the wiki homepage for the students to refer to. Instructions for part 1 included a sheet of FAQs (see Figure 2).

#### FAQs

- Who is on my home team?
  - You will be assigned to a home team in your COMM lab.
- Does my example of workplace writing have to be in English?
  - No, but your analysis must be in English. Also, if you refer to any words in your example, you must translate them into English.
- Why can't I just take an example off the Internet?
  - This assignment is a study of real-life workplace communication and thus requires you to go out into the real world. Employers of BCIT graduates are adamant that they want you to have the skills needed to communicate effectively in the real world with live supervisors, co-workers, and customers.
- How do I upload my example of workplace writing?
  - You will receive detailed instructions in your COMM lab.
- Why is this assignment worth 15% of the final mark for COMM?
  - This assignment covers the core concept of your Term 1 Communication Course at BCIT, which is how workplace writing differs from other types of writing. Without an in-depth understanding of this concept, you will not be able to write effectively for the workplace. In addition, to complete this assignment, you will be practicing skills in communicating ideas clearly, thinking critically, and working effectively on a team. You will also be gaining important skills in the latest technology. Finally, you will appreciate just how creative workplace communication can be.

**Figure 2. Student Handout: FAQs regarding their Wiki Assignment.**

The instructions included checklists for each of the three sections. See Figure 3 for the first checklist. Checklists were used to keep the students on track by ensuring they had distilled the requirements of the assignment from the instructions and were focused on meeting them. Checklists also made grading easier for the teacher to do and for students to understand.

Provides an example of workplace writing	1 x 1 = ____
Analyzes the example of workplace writing	1 x 1 = ____
Provides specific examples of where the example of workplace writing matches the features of workplace writing in the table provided	1 x 2 = ____
Takes each feature of workplace writing in the table provided and discusses how well the example of workplace writing does its job	1 x 2 = ____
Raises a meaningful question to provoke further discussion of the example of workplace writing	1 x 2 = ____
The analysis is written in clear, correct English	1 x 2 = ____
TOTAL	____ / 10

**Figure 3. Evaluation Checklist for Part 1 of the Wiki Assignment, the Individual Example and Analysis.**

When the team received its team edit assignment, the team received a checklist (see Figure 4) to guide its activities and to be used later in grading.

Improves the individual analysis by:	
• Clarifying points and adding points	1 x 1 = ____
• Correcting any errors of interpretation of the document	1 x 1 = ____
• Correcting any errors in English	1 x 1 = ____
TOTAL	____ / 3

**Figure 4. Evaluation Checklist for Part 2 of the Wiki Assignment, the Team Edit.**

A checklist (see Figure 5) was also used to reinforce four aspects of effective feedback that students were taught in class. The team review allowed students to examine the analyses of other students in order to have a measure of their own work. The checklist ensured they were examining the analyses at a critical and objective level.

<b>Balanced.</b> States the strengths of the analysis as well as pointing out areas needing improvement.	1 x .5 = ____
<b>Specific.</b> Points out particular points rather than making vague generalizations, e.g. "You pointed out how punctuation, for example, the exclamation mark, can be used to highlight information" rather than "Your observations were good."	1 x .5 = ____
<b>Objective.</b> Refers to the table of the characteristics of workplace writing and to the assignment checklists.	1 x .5 = ____
<b>Given in a helpful spirit.</b> Includes encouraging words and phrases, such as "You omitted the apostrophe, a common error" or "You identified a feature most people would miss."	1 x .5 = ____
TOTAL	____ / 2

**Figure 5. Evaluation Checklist for Part 3 of the Wiki Assignment, the Team Review.**

## Student and Teacher Perceptions of the Wikis' Effectiveness

Assessment of the effectiveness of the Wiki activities was generally at Kirkpatrick's level 1, which measures whether the students are satisfied (for a summary of Kirkpatrick's four levels of evaluation, see Chapman, 2009). Students completed pre- and post-surveys and participated in focus groups. A researcher's journal was kept in order to provide a record of the development of the research project and perceptions (Watt, 2007). Student performance in class and on exams was also analyzed. Thus, the assessment was also partially at level 2 (whether the students have acquired new skills, knowledge, or attitudes since an analysis of student performance was based on formative evaluation instruments. While lacking the formality of a full study with a control group, the study, nonetheless, can contribute data regarding this level.

For approximately 20% of the students, the Workplace Communication Wiki was their favorite topic of the course, an extraordinary popularity given that resumes, that all-time favorite, are also covered in the course. Most of the students thought that it was a good idea to use computers and that computers helped them learn. Most students prefer to learn by doing.

Since about as many students felt they learned best working alone as felt they learned best working in a group, it was not surprising that only a little over a third of the students felt that working on the wiki made them like working in a group a little more. Wikis alone may not be enough to counteract a preexisting preference for working alone rather than in teams (Elgort, Smith, & Toland, 2008). Most of the students felt that the wiki helped them understand the key course concepts.

Most noted in the research journal was the researcher's excitement in being able to observe the students at their wikis during their team edits and reviews. They were talking, viewing, reading, and thinking about workplace communication. The researcher was also impressed with many of the students' analyses of their examples. They were discovering the common surface features of workplace communication, and many were also commenting at a deeper level. For example, one student had clearly discerned the way in which workplace communication occurs in context and thus is to be analyzed in that context rather than in isolation when she commented on a communication for customers in a warehouse that parents should watch over their young children because of the dangers. She commented that she felt that while the words clearly conveyed the message, the communication was not really effective in that if the business owners were genuinely concerned about the safety of their customers they would have provided a playroom space for young children.

Most significantly, using wikis with students resulted in a transformative learning experience both for the instructor and for the students. By transformative is meant an experience that causes the learner to rethink long-standing patterns or habits of thinking and finally to adopt new ideas and ways of thinking (Reushle & Mitchell, 2009). In *Blended Learning in Higher Education: Framework, Principles, and Guidelines*, Garrison and Vaughan extol the virtue of integrating on-line educational approaches with traditional classroom education as providing the "catalyst" to "re-conceptualize and restructure the teaching and learning transaction" (2008, p. 6). One such transformation became obvious when in the focus group students said that they read everyone's file on their wiki site, and that they really appreciated the opportunity to see each other's work. The students said they even looked at the work of the other classes because they do not usually ever get to see their work; so, in their words, they "peeked." This opportunity to see other people's work was seen as a major advantage of group work.

Students felt that their curiosity about each other's work is generally not satisfied in typical college classes so they were glad to have the files accessible to everyone.

Students also commented on the advantages of being in a group with people with English as a first and second language and discovering how much they had to contribute to the analysis. As one student stated, "I had two people [in my group] who didn't have English as a first language. Their ideas were just as valid as mine." Sparked by the discussion of other languages, students initiated a discussion of whether some of their workplace communication examples would be interpreted differently in other countries. One student said that he had been in Saudi Arabia where city people would walk on the right side of the road just like in Canada, but people newly arrived from the countryside would walk in the middle of the road. Another student asked, "if you stuck up a sign with a person walking in the middle of the road with an X through the person, would they [the person from the countryside] understand it?" One student felt it depended on what the person thought an X meant.

Another student concluded that even though many of the examples were ones he saw every day, that when he went to analyze them and think of the perspectives of the person who wrote them, he felt it gave him a good insight to see it from the other side. Many students agreed that it was very different to look at the examples from the point of view of the creator as opposed to the user. They then suggested that they would have liked, as a next step, to have designed their own signs for the workplace. The students had thus announced themselves ready to move from consumers to producers.

The researcher became acutely aware of how much she was bound by her perspective as a teacher of business communication. By daily examining students' work, it is easy to forget how little they see of each other's work. The students in these classes speak nearly 20 different languages, and the daily experience with that intelligence and insight does not recognize linguistic borders; however, the researcher had not realized how much this diversity was a new experience for some of the students. Also, as a person who grew up with print, the researcher often worried needlessly about the technology. None of the students in the focus group even mentioned problems with the technology, even though there had been some. While the researcher worried about students having to scroll down because the format required screens to be side by side, the students were used to scrolling. While the researcher was happy to post some instructions for using the wiki on the white board, the researcher was surprised to see one student take out his cell phone and take a picture of the white board. He said he was happier reading from a screen.

Finally, a constant refrain of teaching of the first term communication course was to exhort the students to put themselves in the position of their readers. As a teacher of writing, the researcher had assumed that everyone automatically saw themselves as a writer. Using wikis with the students taught the researcher that the transformation for them was to view themselves as writers trying to communicate with their readers. The researcher felt that this transformation could occur because the students, rather than the teacher, had been gathering, sharing, and analyzing the examples of workplace communication, and thus had gained enough control to define their experience of workplace communication.

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