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Using Wikispaces to Facilitate Teaching and Learning

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| Title | Wikispaces |
| Owner | Tangient LLC 67 Langton Street San Francisco, CA 94103 415.863.8919 |
| Contact Information | http://www.wikispaces.com/ |
| Type of product | Wiki host; provides websites where users can add, modify or delete contents to share work, ideas, links, and files. |
| Minimum hardware requirements | Computer with Internet access |
| Supplementary Software | Web Browser |
| Price | Single educational wikis (Free) Sites for K-12 schools and districts (100 users=\$1,000/ year) Sites for Higher Ed (100 users=\$1,000/ year) |

Introduction

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) technologies are widely used in second/foreign language classrooms. Beatty (2003) defines CALL as “any process in which a learner uses a computer and, as a result, improves his or her language” (p. 7). Many teachers are undoubtedly already familiar with a number of CALL resources available such as word processors, games, literature, Internet resources, corpus linguistics tools, computer-mediated communication, and so on that can be easily adapted for CALL (Beatty, 2003). This review provides readers

with a general introduction to the use of wikis for language learning as well as an introduction to one particular wiki hosting service, [Wikispaces](#).

What exactly is a wiki? A wiki is a “freely expandable collection of interlinked web pages, a hypertext system for storing and modifying information – a database, where each page is easily edited by any user with a forms-capable Web browser client” (Leuf & Cunningham, 2001, p. 14). In other words, wikis provide an online space for collaborative work. Wikis can serve as platforms for educational activities to improve teaching and learning (Castaneda, 2011; Kuteeva, 2011). Thus, it is worth exploring the use of wikis with language classes.

Using Wikis with Language Classes

There are many benefits of using wikis. For example, using wikis can increase students’ motivation, because computers are associated with fun and games and considered to be fashionable (Lee, 2000). Kuteeva (2011) used wikis in writing instruction activities and found that students increased their audience awareness and paid closer attention to grammatical correctness and structural coherence. Moreover, wikis allow users to keep e-portfolios, which ideally can serve to bridge the gap between formal instruction and informal learning (Godwin-Jones, 2008). Additionally, wikis can foster learning from peers in a low-anxiety virtual social environment.

After creating a wiki, teachers can use it in many ways with students at different ages. First and foremost, wikis can serve as online classrooms. The teacher can post announcements, class materials, pictures, videos, web resources, and so on, whereas students can follow the posts, make comments, and share ideas anywhere and anytime they have access to the Internet.

Secondly, wikis can be used for students to practice writing. This might be one of the best instructional applications of wikis. Writing in wikis provides a sense of audience and motivates students to write well. A study by Miyazoe and Anderson (2010) revealed students’ positive perceptions of using wikis as a form of online writing. Students can post their writings as a single page or as a reply to a topic. They can also view each other’s writing and do peer review if required by the teacher. Of course teachers should spend some time teaching students how to communicate effectively and politely online before asking students to do peer review or make comments or replies. Moreover, a daily or weekly short online discussion can become a routine of the class. This allows learners a meaningful context in which to develop their writing proficiency. Teachers could even allow students to create topics for online discussion to further enhance student-centered learning.

Lastly, asking students to create a wiki can be an interesting project. For instance, if the class is studying a unit about holidays, the teacher could ask students to create their own wikis and introduce their favorite holidays. Such projects are multi-skill and task-based, and can include researching, reading, speaking, listening, making presentations, and the like. Students enjoy being creative and taking ownership of their learning.

However, using wikis does have some shortcomings. As in any type of communication, the quality of the interaction depends on the efforts of the participants, and although some research suggests that using wikis can improve learners' motivation to write well (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010; Kuteena, 2011), simply using a wiki does not guarantee that students will become motivated participants. Another drawback of wikis is the fact that communication is asynchronous. Two students might be replying to the same topic at the same time, but there is no way to know that another student is online or see each other's writing until posted. In addition, in some wiki sites' discussion tools (including in Wikispaces), users cannot reply to other users' replies directly, which makes it inconvenient to respond to a specific posting. In such cases, the teacher will need to remind the students to explicitly label the post to which they are replying by starting with, for example, "To Mary: I agree with you..." This adds a layer of complexity that can be confusing. It is to be hoped that such technical limitations will be remedied by the founders of Wikispaces in the future.

Now that some of the uses of wikis in language classes have been discussed, the wiki hosting service Wikispaces will be introduced and evaluated.

An Overview of Wikispaces

Wikispaces (<http://www.wikispaces.com/>) provides wikis for educators, businesses, and individuals. According to the company, tens of millions of users and tens of thousands of institutions, such as Georgetown University, Arizona State University, Denver Public Schools, and Starbucks, and more than 6,955,248 students and teachers use Wikispaces. Furthermore, teachers can create their own wikis for different educational purposes for free. Students may join an existing wiki to participate in and complete class assignments. To start using wikis in your class, readers can follow the steps below.

Creating a Wiki

First, users will need to go to the Wikispaces homepage and choose "Teachers" (see Figure 1 below).

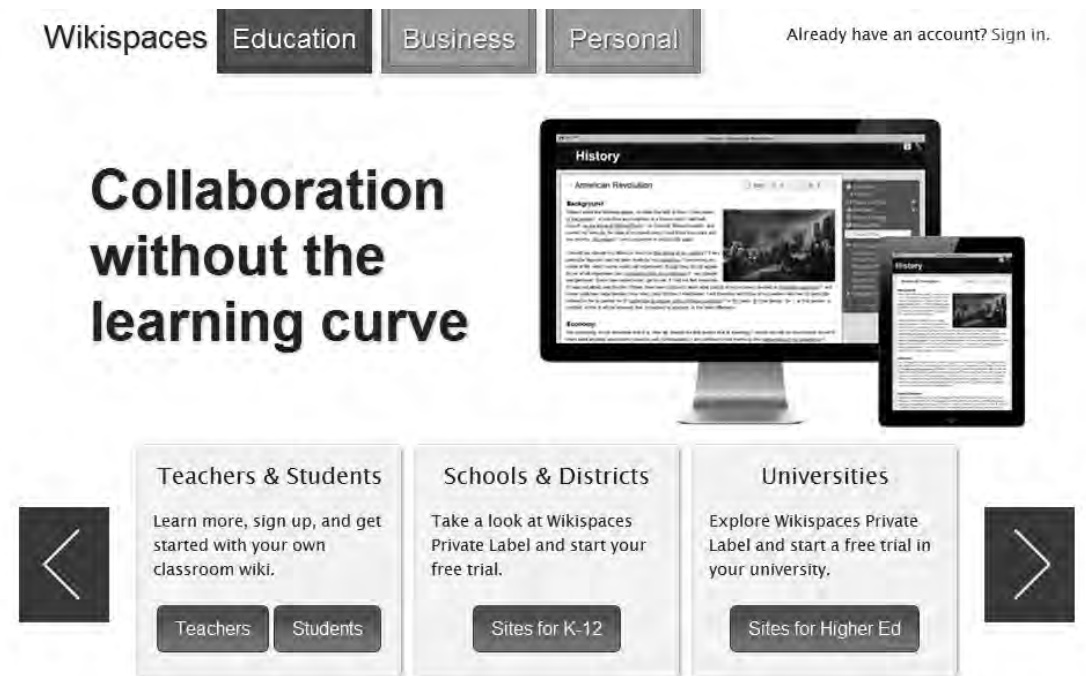


Figure 1. Wikispaces homepage

Then, users should click the “Sign up and start your wiki” button which will take them to a pop-up box (see Figure 2 below).

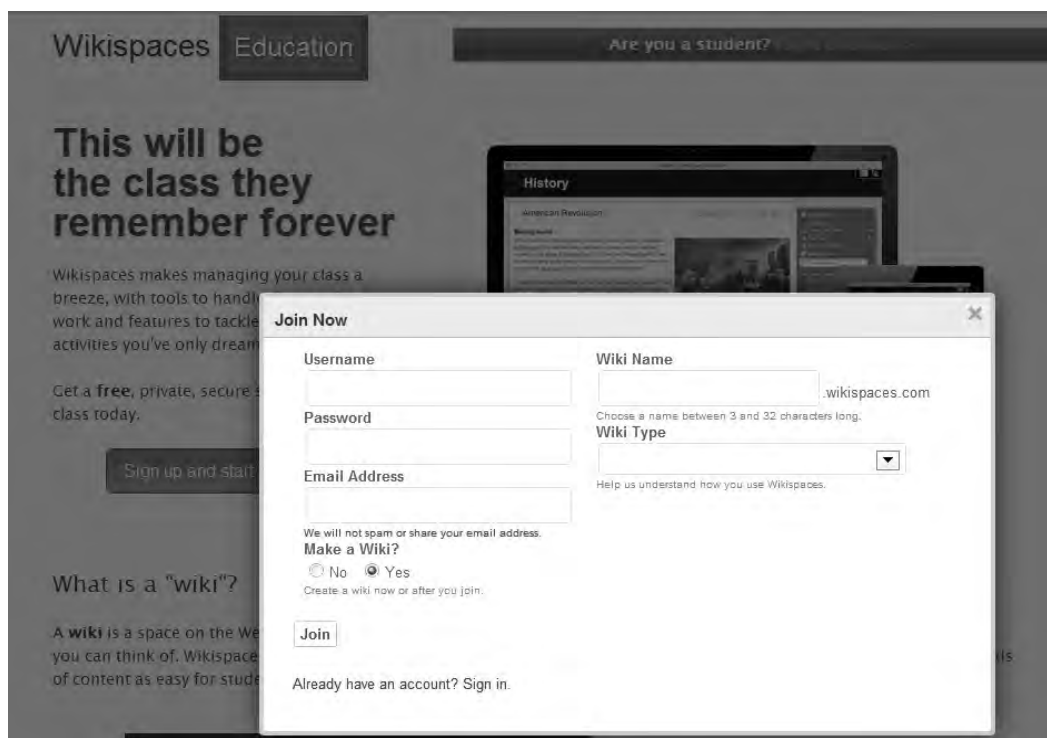


Figure 2. Wikispaces sign-up page

After filling in all the necessary information and clicking the “Join” button, users decide the name of their wiki. For example, if ILOVEENGLISH123 is chosen as the name of the wiki, then ILOVEENGLISH123.wikispaces.com will be the website address for that wiki. Then, after clicking “Join,” the user is automatically taken to the homepage of the newly created wiki (see Figure 3 below).

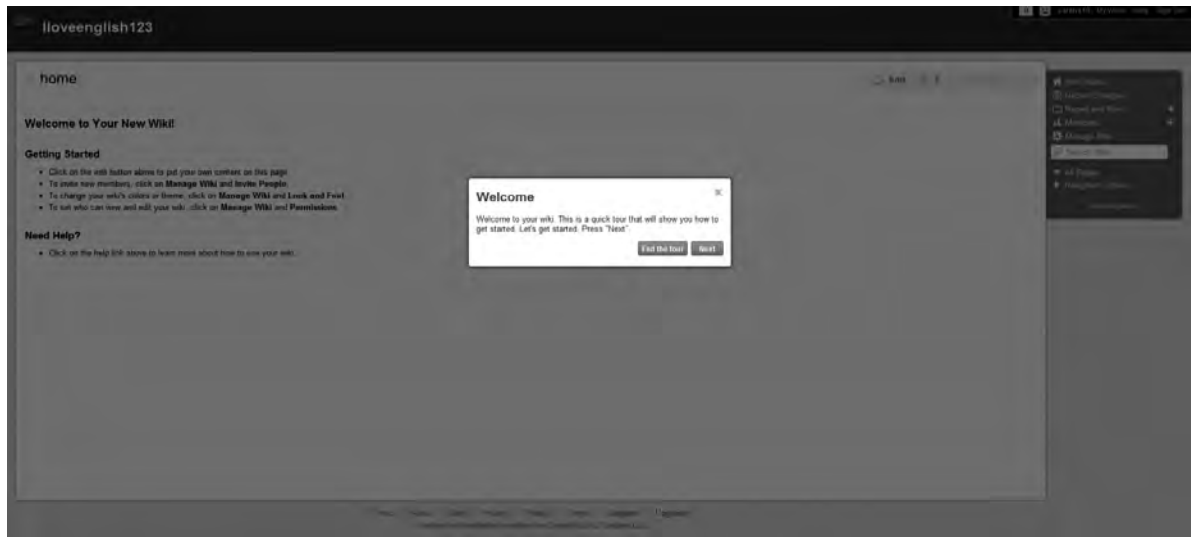


Figure 3. *ILOVEENGLISH123 Wikispaces homepage*

Editing the Wiki

First arriving at the wiki’s homepage, the user is greeted with a welcome message and is given a tour of how to edit pages, add pictures, edit navigation, add members, set wiki permissions, and change the wiki’s color. Clicking “help” in the future allows users to see the tour again.

After finishing or skipping the tour, it is time to design the wiki. To do this, users click the “Edit” button on the top right side of each page to edit the content on each page (see Figure 4 below).

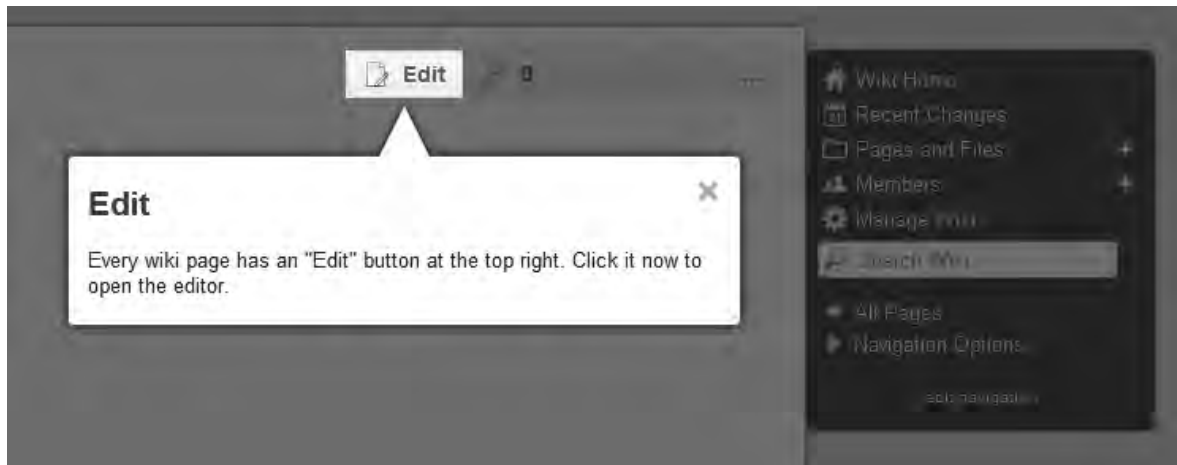


Figure 4. *The “Edit” button*

This opens the editing window (see Figure 5 below). Here, users can add links, upload files and images, embed widgets, insert tables, and add comments on the wiki’s homepage. After adding or editing content, users can click “Preview” to make sure they are satisfied with modifications and then “Save” the changes they made.



Figure 5. *Page editor*

Adding new pages and files

Additional pages can be added to the wiki by clicking the plus sign next to “Pages and Files” in the tool bar on the right side of the homepage (see Figure 6 below). Note that this tool bar appears on every page, but it may be on the top or left depending on the color and scheme of your wiki.



Figure 6. Toolbar

After clicking the plus sign, the user types the name of the new page in the pop-up box (Figure 7 below). When naming pages, it is important to consider how you want to organize your wiki. If the whole wiki is for a single class, the teacher may create several pages, such as class materials, homework, discussion, etc. If the teacher has multiple classes and would like to designate different pages for students from different classes, the teacher might use different class names for different page names. After adding the desired number of pages, users can edit pages by using the edit button as discussed above. This is also where any kind of file can be uploaded as long as it is less than 20 MB.

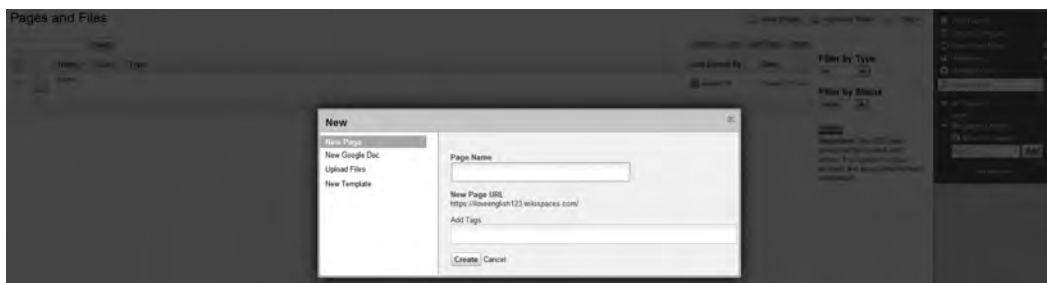


Figure 7. Add new page and files

Creating Discussions

On each page, there is a “Discussion” button next to the “Edit” button. Clicking it takes the user to the discussion forum. New discussion topics can be posted there by clicking “+ New post” (see Figure 8 below). It is important to check “Monitor this topic” if you would like to receive emails when there are new activities on this topic. After posting the topic prompt, students may reply. However, one drawback here is that users can only reply to the original topic post, not to other replies. This can make it difficult to know who is addressing whom if students are not advised to clearly state this in their reply posts.



Figure 8. Add a new post

Inviting Members

In order to post discussions, one has to be a member of the wiki if the permission level is set to “Private.” There are two ways to become a member: inviting and requesting. The teacher can invite the students to join the wiki by clicking the plus sign next to “Members” in the tool bar on the right side of the page (see Figure 6 above). In the pop-up box (see Figure 9 below), teachers can add users by listing their email addresses or usernames. There is also a “User Creator Tool” that can be used to invite students. This tool allows a spreadsheet file of new users to be uploaded from the user’s computer. Students can also join the wiki by requesting membership from the wiki organizer. They can click “Join” in the upper right corner of the wiki and be prompted to sign up or log in.

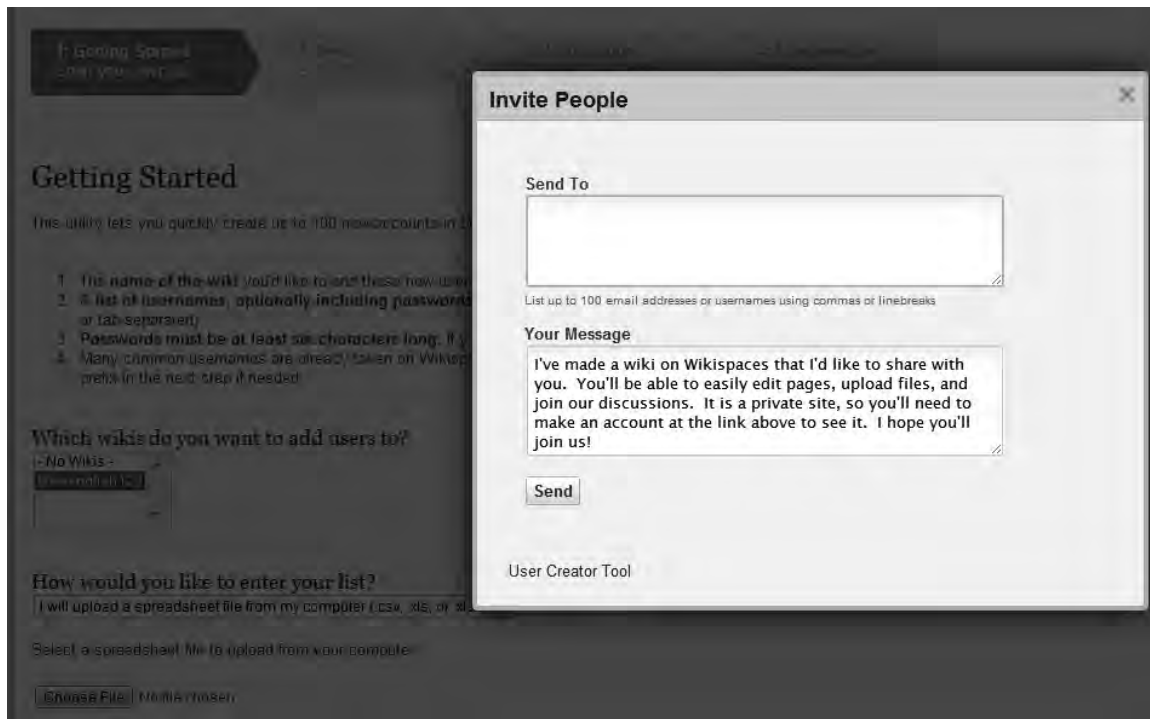


Figure 9. Invite people

Managing the Wiki

The wiki organizer (i.e. the teacher) can manage the wiki by clicking “Manage Wiki” tab in the tool bar (see Figure 6 above). On the wiki management page (see Figure 10 below), the teacher can set the permission level of your wiki. The default level is set to “Private.” Only members can view and edit the wiki under this level. If you want to change it to public or protected level, you must verify your account, for which users are charged a one-time fee of one U.S. dollar. In addition, the layout of the wiki can be changed by clicking “Look and Feel” tab. There are different themes, colors, and styles to choose from.

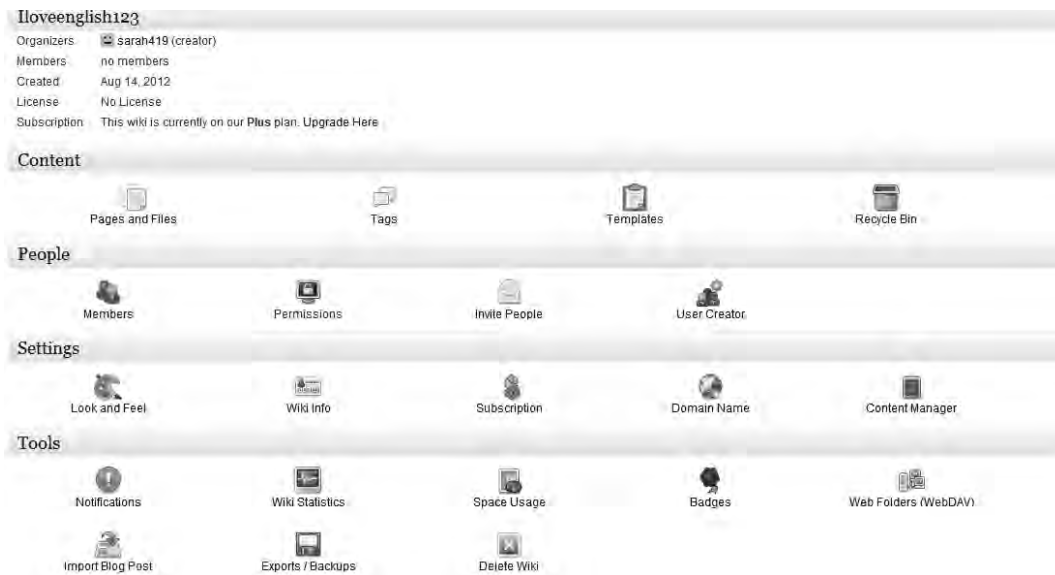


Figure 10. *Manage the wiki*

Evaluation and Applications

Overall, Wikispaces is user-friendly and free or low cost. The developer also offers free Webinars on the Wikispaces Blog (<http://blog.wikispaces.com/>) to teach beginning and advanced tips and tricks. With some exploration, anyone with basic computer skills will be able to utilize Wikispaces. However, it does take time for teachers to learn and create wikis in the beginning.

Conclusion

In summary, Wikispaces is a great website to create wikis for teaching and learning. Anyone can create a wiki by following a few simple steps. It may take some time to set up a new wiki, but the potential benefits make it worthwhile. Wikis are especially useful for creating an online learning community for any type of class and providing online collaborative writing opportunities. Wikis can be fun and effective tools not only for improving students' motivation to learn, but also for enhancing their language skills, especially grammar, reading, and writing.

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About the Reviewer

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