Wiki Nation

Craig Ullman

The word "wiki" may be so new for English, my spell check insists it's a typo, but this little Web application has profound implications for education, publishing—even defining the truth.

Although many assume it's an acronym or a neologism, "wiki" is derived from the Hawaiian "wiki wiki," which is an adjective to describe something "quick" or "fast" The word has quickly permeated the English language, but the definition now refers to the concept of a collaborative writing application on the Internet.

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Wikipedia (where I found the definition of "wiki") is by far the biggest wiki, and also a completely typical one. Someone—anyone—writes the first draft of an article that you'd normally find in an encyclopedia. Another anyone edits it, another anyone edits that, and so on, until (presumably) all these refinements add up to the closest version of the truth humans can divine. There is no guiding hand, no managing editor, no authority whatsoever. If you disagree with something, just rewrite it and leave it for the next person to clean it up.

This idea is, of course, completely antithetical to everything we value as Americans. It is true that the wiki concept seems very much like an actualization of a "marketplace of ideas"; the most accurate and complete entry, like the best jar of pickles, will eventually dominate the market until something even better comes along.

But Wikipedia—in fact, the whole concept of a wiki—strikes at the heart of our primary value: individualism. The idea that collective intelligence is more accurate than the insights of a single gifted writer (or at least someone with a PhD), strikes us as unlikely, even bizarre.

Moreover, a wiki is based on *altruism*, a totally alien concept for us individuals. Who cares if I know more about … ah, pickles … than the guy(s) who wrote the pickle article? Why would I share my knowledge? *What's in it for me?*

Well, some vague ego gratification that no one else would ever really know or care about, but otherwise—nothing. Yet collective intelligence and altruism are what drives wikis, and it seems to be working: a recent study by the magazine *Nature,* reviewing 42 science articles, determined that the average Wikipedia article had 4 errors in it, while Encyclopædia Britannica had 3. Pretty good results, considering Wikipedia started in 2001, while the Britannica folks have had since 1771 to get their act together, and that the Wikipedia articles typically are significantly longer than Britannica articles on the same subject.

My point here isn't to denigrate Britannica. Clearly, the concepts of authorship and authority have lasting value (my name's on the bloody column, after all). However, I'm making a different point: why do we assess individual students but not the whole class? Why do we assess individual student portfolios and not (with a few exceptions) projects the entire class do together?

Currently, any discussion of a class's performance is purely a means of grading the teacher—as if the interactions among the students, and the variations between classes, don't really matter. Instead of each student writing a report, maybe they should all write one report.

The very idea of grading an entire class, of looking beyond our individualist blinders, seems antithetical, even nonsensical to us. But the atomization and radical libertarianism that the Internet seemed to encourage initially might be morphing into some different and more interesting kinds of social organizations that need to be reflected in our thinking about education.

In any case, the choice between assessing the individual or assessing the group does not have to be an either/or. We can, and should, look at both levels. We can, and should, think more about how we can leverage the knowledge and interests of each student to create a better result for the whole group.

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