

Using Wikis to Support Student Writing Mentors' Reflective Practice: a brief overview

Savita Bakhshi

Lynn Reynolds

Kathy Harrington

Peter O'Neill

Write Now Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning
School of Psychology
London Metropolitan University

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Background

Over the past four years, student writing mentors at the London Metropolitan University Writing Centre have provided over 3,000 hours of one-to-one academic writing support to their fellow undergraduate and postgraduate students (Harrington et al., 2007). For the past three years (2007-10), wikis have been used to support the training and development of student writing mentors. In particular, they have been used to facilitate mentors' reflective practice, including the benefits and challenges of working with fellow students for improving writing. When we first began using wikis, it was hoped that this virtual space would enable mentors with different working hours in the Centre to continue to reflect on their professional practice as mentors following the initial three-day intensive training programme. We have discovered that the mentors have gone beyond this to build a virtual community based on encouragement and respect for their fellow mentors and which has aided their own writing and learning development. This short article reports on the key aspects of our experience of using wikis to support mentors' ongoing development.

How have wikis been used by Student Writing Mentors?

Lee and Bonk (2009) define a wiki as 'a Web tool that everyone can build collaboratively – information and knowledge interact on a common document, which the participants then want to share. This process allows them to repeatedly improve the content, as well as facilitate interaction among group members' (p. 14). Due to an inability to meet regularly as a full group during term (resulting from differing teaching timetables for the majority of the mentors), we first set up a wiki

in 2007-08 as a virtual forum where mentors could communicate with and learn from each other (Lee & Bonk, 2009; Watson & Harper, 2008).

The wiki was used to supplement the topics covered during the biannual training for mentors and initial discussions were primarily focused on: the principles and ethics of the scheme, awareness of the writing process, collaborating in writing, working with students with English as a second language, and strategies for dealing with difficult situations (O'Neill et al., 2009). Once tutorials had commenced, mentors were encouraged to discuss and reflect upon how their training was put into practice by comparing their experiences of tutorials. A few weeks into the first term of wiki use, we found that the mentors were slowly building and nurturing conversations between each other with little scaffolding from Writing Centre staff, and that other unexpected topics were being discussed. Furthermore, discussions were not dominated by a select few, but the shared space allowed all of the mentors to contribute to the wiki, giving them control over their own learning development (Elgort et al., 2008).

We also recognised that the wiki acted as an effective system of social support and encouragement for the mentors in dealing with issues related to their mentoring practices. For example, there were times when new mentors (i.e. those who had joined the team in that academic year) had specific questions about how best to implement the non-directive and collaborative ethos of the Writing Centre. The returning mentors (i.e. those who had been mentoring for over a year) were able to use their past experience to answer such questions, as well as offering practical advice on how any challenges could be overcome. The returning mentors were also able to offer social support and encouragement over the academic year. This proved to be as effective as that found in everyday face-to-face conversation (Watson & Harper, 2008). It was not only the case that experienced mentors aided the newer members of the team; nearly all the mentors were able to contribute to the discussions based on their unique perspectives. This indicates to us that the existence of such a forum brought the mentors together as a team and provided reassurance and encouragement that each was an active part of the mentor community.

This sense of community also enabled the mentors to have confidence to discuss challenges and concerns arising from any aspect of their mentoring. We believe that regular contributions of such reflections were enabled because: 1) mentors were empowered to use and control their workspace according to their needs, and 2) the environment was personal and confidential to the mentors (Watson & Harper, 2008). For example, the mentors were aware that their entries would only be read by their Writing Centre colleagues, which can be seen as an advantage of using wikis over some other online learning technology support methods that are more public (Watson & Harper, 2008).

Implications for academic writing development

Using wikis in the ways described above has had various positive implications for the mentors' own academic writing and the ways in which they can aid their peers. For example, mentors often posted their own assignments on the wiki and asked their fellow mentors for feedback on their writing, regardless of their disciplinary background. This enabled the mentors to engage in a collaborative 'virtual conversation', giving and receiving informal feedback from their peers, exchanges similar to those which take place during tutorials at the Writing Centre. In addition, contributions were not limited to academic writing; mentors were also able to explore their creativity through 'fun stuff', a category giving rise to word games, fiction (including a multi-author 'round robin') and poetry. The wiki has enabled the mentors to deepen their social engagement and actively participate in this type of communication, thereby developing and improving essential skills needed in a work environment (Duffy & Bruns, 2006).

Such informal activities have helped to facilitate 'provisional' writing, whereby mentors have furthered their own disciplinary competence and broadened their repertoire of writing strategies. As a result of this large-scale release of thought onto 'paper', wiki reflections have formed the basis for a variety of Writing Centre projects, including: mentor-authored writing guides and learning resources, the Writing Centre magazine 'Freewrite', workshops, conference presentations and journal articles. We believe that participation in such activities has helped our mentors to become more confident, all-round writers, as well as consolidating skills necessary to understand and aid the writing development of students they tutor at the Centre.

Using the wiki for such purposes was not without its challenges. For example, not all of the mentors contributed to the wiki. Reasons for non-participation included: technological issues, which comprised of factors ranging from the lack of access to a computer through struggles with acquiring 'digital literacies' (Duffy & Bruns, 2006), and the reluctance to share thoughts publicly, even within a restricted-access forum. Nevertheless, an effective social forum was constructed in which mentors felt free to reflect on their own and fellow mentors' practices.

This brief article has only provided a snapshot of how wikis have been used to support mentors' reflective practice at the Writing Centre. There are numerous other ways in which wikis have been used as a training tool for aiding writing development amongst undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as a number of other practicalities and challenges. We anticipate that these will be explored in future publications. Nevertheless, we hope that this article has given a sense of how wikis can be used to facilitate writing development, and how they can be used to encourage ongoing and supportive reflective practice among students to build a Writing Centre community.

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Biographical note

Dr Savita Bakhshi is a Research Fellow for the Write Now CETL. She previously worked as a postgraduate Student Writing Mentor at the London Metropolitan University Writing Centre, and completed her PhD in Health Psychology at the School of Psychology, London Metropolitan University. Her other research interests include the predictors and consequences of negative body image, and the relationships between food, health and the media in different ethnic groups. **Email:** s.bakhshi@londonmet.ac.uk.

Lynn Reynolds worked as a Student Writing Mentor at the London Metropolitan University Writing Centre for four years. She is currently completing a novel. She is especially interested in the experience of student writers and how it compares to that of their more accomplished counterparts. **Email:** harp@phoca.net.

Dr Kathy Harrington directs the Write Now CETL, led by London Metropolitan University and run in collaboration with Liverpool Hope and Aston Universities. She also conducts qualitative and quantitative research into student and tutor experiences of writing, learning and assessment. **Email:** k.harrington@londonmet.ac.uk.

Dr Peter O'Neill is Writing Specialist at the London Metropolitan University Writing Centre, where he is responsible for the Student Writing Mentors scheme as well as collaborations with internal and external staff members. He is also involved in research into Writing in the Disciplines initiatives. **Email:** peter.oneill@londonmet.ac.uk.