

## Critical Review: Collaborative Writing with Wiki

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### 1. Defining Wiki

According to What is Wiki (2002), a Wiki is a web site that utilizes a database for users to publish and edit information freely and quickly on the web. Because of the nature of Wiki to be open and freely accessible to the public, it is claimed to promote democracy in the World Wide Web, and induce “nontechnical” writers to publish material on the web. The word *Wiki* originates from the Hawaiian word *Wiki Wiki* which means “quick” or “super-fast” (Wikipedia, 2004). The first Wiki web site was created in 1995 for the Portland Pattern Repository. Ever since, numerous Wiki web sites have been created in many countries for various purposes. An exemplary Wiki web site is a free, on-line encyclopedia called *Wikipedia*, which can be located at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page).

### 2. Questionable Aspects of Wiki

Having a Wiki web site open to the public for unrestricted editing may raise questions concerning reliability or even hacking. However, Wiki web sites are designed to store virtually every instance of article submission or editing in the database. For example, if a hacker were to corrupt or delete all the pages within a Wiki web site, the previous content can be promptly restored. Not only is the previous content stored in a database, but the Wiki interface makes it possible for any user to restore the documents at any point in time the article was contributed or modified. As for reliability, because the Wiki web sites are scrutinized by countless numbers of

readers on the World Wide Web, unreliable information tends to be corrected or pointed out in a timely manner.

### **3. Applications of Wiki for Language Learning**

Although Wiki web sites are usually created for sharing information, they may have important values for on-line collaborative writing activities for teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language purposes. In second language writing, many researchers and teachers are interested in the writing processes of learners. More specifically, researchers are interested in the effect of feedback and student revisions (Berg, 1999; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; and Ferris, Pezone, Tade, & Tini, 1997). Comparisons of drafts for the analysis of student initiated corrections, corrections after feedback as well as types of teacher feedback are some specific issues and concerns of research. Wiki web sites facilitates the tracking of these kinds of information with a logging system that stores information regarding the contributor that writes or edits an article, the time when the information was provided or modified, and the changes of the articles before and after they are saved.

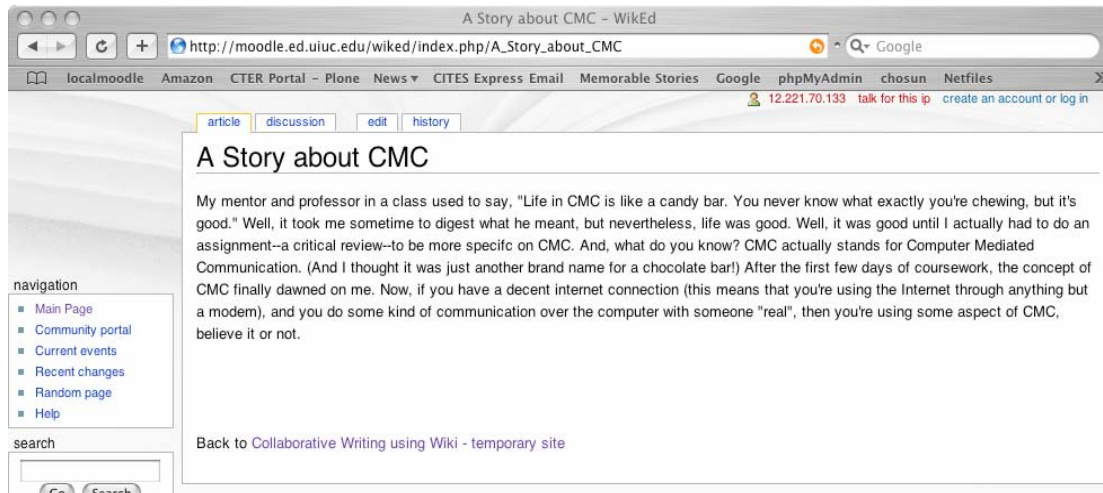
In order to demonstrate the utility of Wiki as a language learning environment for on-line collaborative writing, a Wiki-based collaboration site was created on a server at the College of Education at the University of Illinois (<http://moodle.ed.uiuc.edu/wiked>) as shown in Figure 1 in the page overleaf. In the next few sections, I will describe the four main features of Wiki. The main features of Wiki are displayed on the tab at the top portion of the screen that reads “article”, “discussion”, “edit”, and “history”.

#### *Feature 1. Article*



<Figure 1: A Collaborative Writing Wiki Web Site for Language Learning>

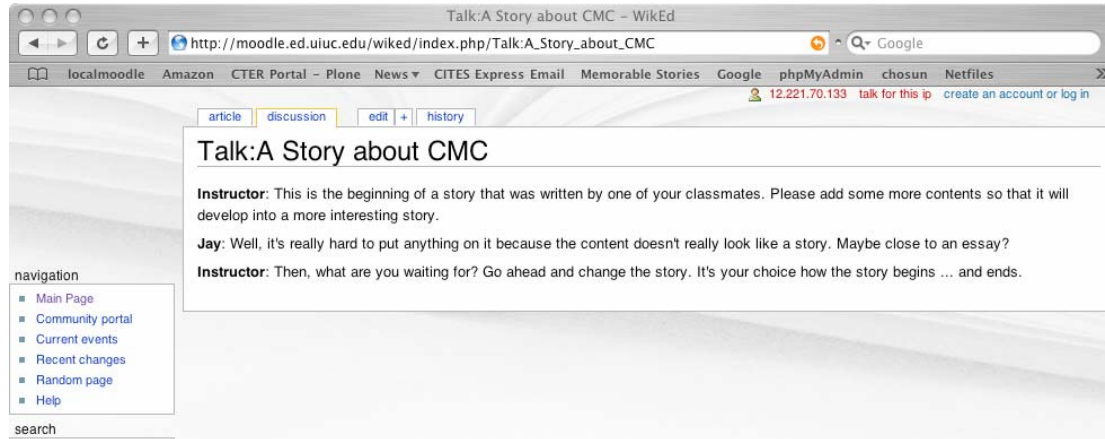
In the article section, any activity can be displayed for instructions or links to other activities. It can also serve as a place to display student work such as compositions as shown below:



<Figure 2: Example Composition--A Story about CMC>

### Feature 2. Discussion

By clicking on "discussion", teachers or other students can provide comments.

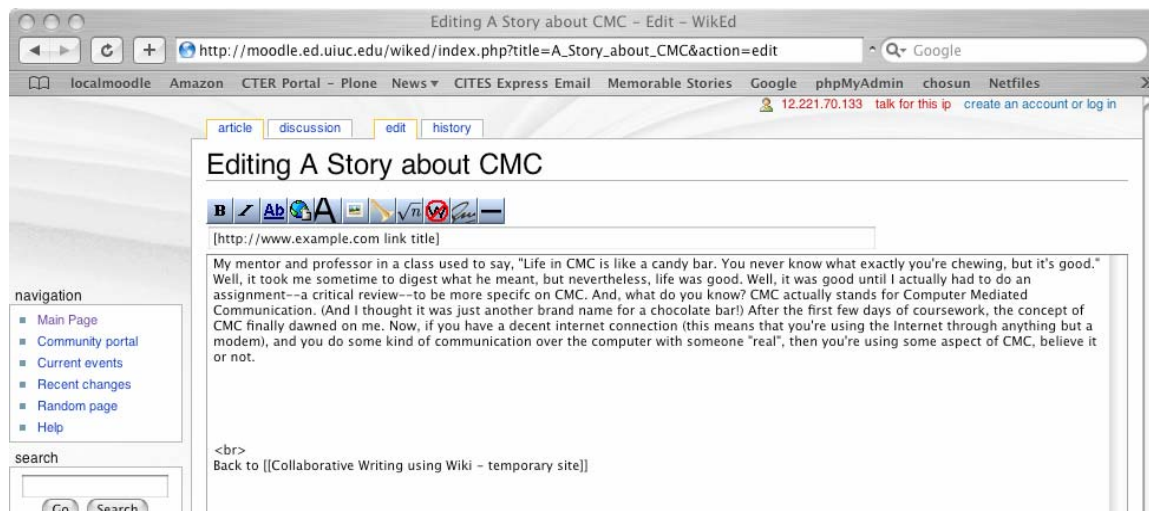


<Figure 3: Providing Feedback through the Discussion Tab>

By commenting outside of the text, teachers and peers can unobtrusively provide feedback on content and meaning. The discussion is always stored with the article, and it, too, can be edited by any person at any time.

### *Feature 3. Edit*

Editing the contents of an article or feedback in display is possible by clicking on the “edit” tab when viewing an article or a discussion. A graphical user interface helps adding different styles or links to external or internal pages.

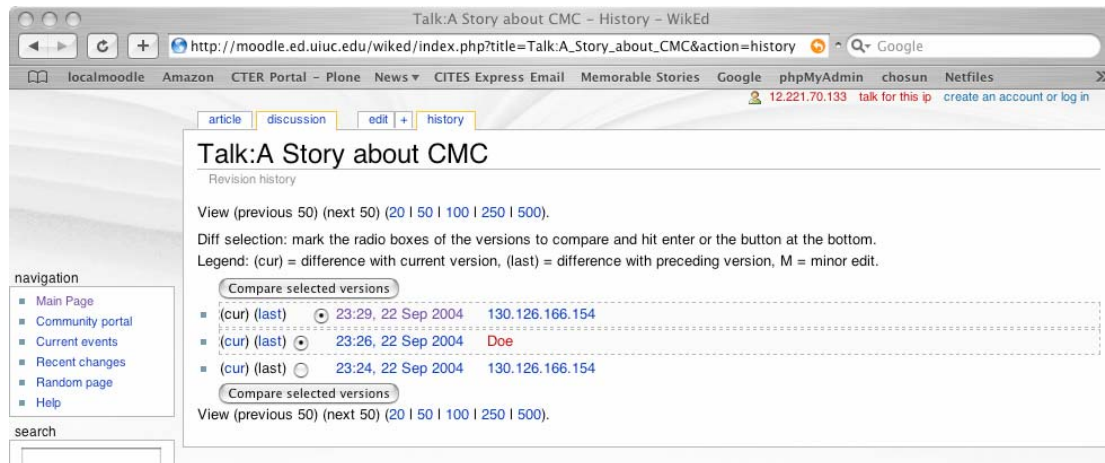


<Figure 4: Editing an Article>

And every instance of editing is stored in the database. The editing screen utilizes some portions of HTML, but has its own coding scripts to format text. For example, in order to format a word in boldface characters, three apostrophes must be on each side of the word to render it bold-faced. Highlighting the word with a mouse, and clicking on the “B” button simplifies this formatting procedure. Teachers can additionally enter remarks or make corrections on the student text itself if they wish to use the editing feature.

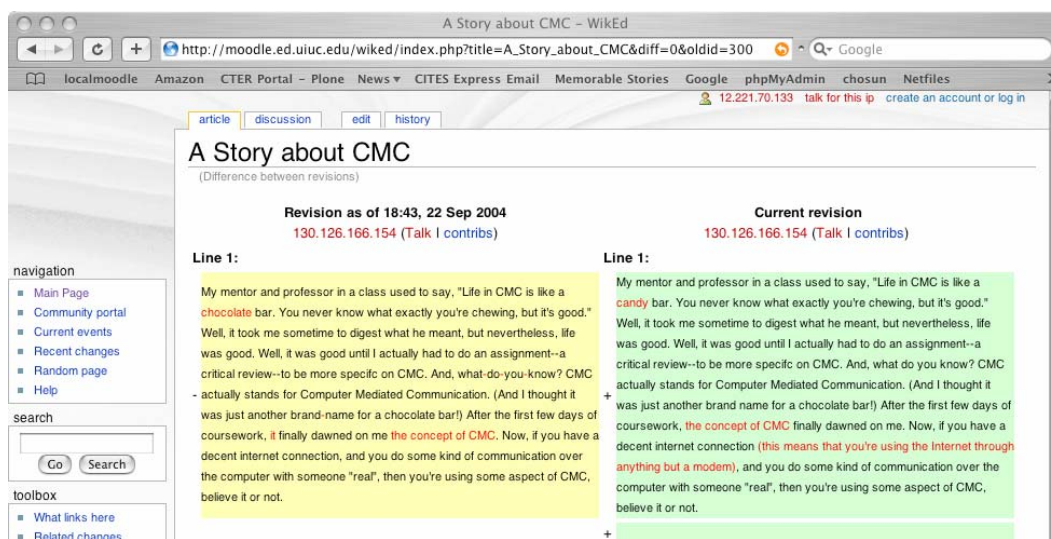
#### *Feature 4. History*

Being able to save and restore documents to an earlier point in time seems to be a critical feature of Wiki web sites. The “history” tab provides a previous record of articles of up to 500 instances. The figure below shows the current and last examples of the articles, the date and time the articles are modified, and the person who modified it as well. Users can choose to create an account or edit anonymously.



<Figure 5: History>

Anonymous users appear as IP addresses on the screen. By clicking on any previous two versions of the article, it is possible to compare the articles as the following figure overleaf shows:



<Figure 6: Comparison of Two Versions of an Article>

In Figure 6, it is notable that Wiki highlights where the changes occur, and thus facilitates the process of tracking the changes. Moreover, it is possible to view changes or contributions made by an individual. Teachers and researchers can use this comparison to monitor student progress or make note of corrections worth investigating. Students can also use this comparison to see how their writing or even others' writings can be modified.

#### 4. Implications and Critique

The features in Wiki can be used for a variety of purposes for on-line language learning. As was discussed in this paper, Wiki can be utilized for on-line collaborative activities such as writing. While students are focused on writing and editing articles, teachers and researchers can see how individuals are using the language as part of a process. Because the changes can be tracked individually and longitudinally, teachers can have a better sense of how students develop their writing, and how their composition and editing skills improve over time. By analyzing errors or problems in the editing, teachers can become more aware of what to focus on when providing sentence-level or rhetorical feedback.

More importantly, the collaborative task environment provided in Wiki also seems to meet the “conditions for optimal language learning environments” as described by Egbert, Chao, and Hanson-Smith (1999). Wiki offers a place for interaction and negotiation of meaning with the unlimited amount of editing opportunities. Since the audience of Wiki-based articles is the entire World Wide Web users, the writing students publish is always accessible to an authentic audience. Since Wiki web sites are used authentically for various purposes, the task of utilizing Wiki for activities can also be authentic. Because the task can be done asynchronously, students, ideally, can have enough time to work on the task and receive feedback. Through feedback from peers and instructors, learners can not only be guided in the learning process, but also work in an ideal level of stress or anxiety. Finally, learner autonomy can be supported in this environment as well because they are free to choose what to edit to view the writing processes of others as well.

The drawbacks of Wiki can be that if teachers design the tasks to be inauthentic, there is a possibility of a Wiki task becoming non-authentic. For example, if teachers were to create fill-in-the-blank grammatical drills, the task itself would not be meaningful. Since all the activities provided in the Wiki web site are subject to modification, teachers may need to exert some control or become aware of these possibilities. Teachers may opt to provide instructions in an external link or through email. Another drawback may be that for the everyday teacher to use Wiki, permission may be necessary to set it up on a school server. Since this requires some level of maintenance, not all IT administrators may likely agree to maintain such a web site. However, currently, teachers may freely use WikEd for educational purposes with permission from the Curriculum, Technology, Education, and Reform (CTER) program. Finally, as with all computer-based technology, if a hardware failure occurs, there is the risk of losing all the contents.

In conclusion, Wiki can be used for a variety of purposes for language learning. The number of ways of applying Wiki for language learning may be unlimited depending on the instructional and theoretical approach the instructor or researcher may take. For teachers, a variety of content-based or form-based activities can be created. Students can create graphical pages and links to external sources, creating a hypertext-based document that can be helpful in creating a report or a presentation. For researchers, tasks that encourage negotiation of meaning or the use of certain forms may help students produce language that would be valuable for longitudinal studies. A corpus of learner composition can easily be created with Wiki as well.



## References

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