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Romantic Poetry Meets 21st-Century Technology

With wikis, the new Web tool, everybody's an editor and a critic

By BROCK READ

Mark Phillipson held a few part-time jobs with Silicon Valley start-ups before he became a visiting assistant professor of English at Bowdoin College. But it was dumb luck, not technological savvy, that put him on the cutting edge of a blossoming classroom-technology trend.

During a conversation two years ago with Bowdoin's Web developer, Mr. Phillipson recited a laundry list of complaints about the technology he had used to liven up class projects in the past. When he asked students to build Web sites about literary themes and traditions, Mr. Phillipson said, he learned that he had to waste time teaching them HTML.

And when he required students to chat about reading assignments on an electronic discussion board, he found that they were more likely to post miniature essays than to converse with one another.

Mr. Phillipson also thought of some new ways he would like to use the Web for a course on Romantic poetry. He wished, for example, that students could isolate -- and comment on -- their favorite lines of a poem, instead of simply posting the entire work online. And he wanted the students to be able to interact with one another without having to scroll through a lengthy discussion forum.

Mr. Phillipson thought his wishes were pipe dreams, but the Web developer quickly grew excited. "It sounds like you're talking about a wiki," he told the professor.

In the past year, more and more professors have started talking about wikis, which are, in essence, communal Web sites that can be edited by anyone who visits them, and some wikis keep logs of past changes. Once the domain of technology enthusiasts, especially advocates of "open source" software that is jointly created by volunteers, wikis are growing increasingly popular in some unlikely corners of academe. The word "wiki" comes from a Hawaiian term for quick, in reference to the rapid rate at which the Web sites change.

A handful of professors, including Mr. Phillipson, are now making wikis the focal points of creative-writing and English-literature courses. The professors argue that the

communal Web sites promote a more casual, flexible form of class discussion than blogs and message boards.

And some campus wiki enthusiasts are making the case that the technology can actually change students' writing for the better, by encouraging them to swap ideas with their classmates and to continually revise their work, instead of turning in a paper and forgetting it forever.

New Readings of Old Masters

In his first course that dabbled with wikis -- "The Romantic Audience" -- Mr. Phillipson got a chance to test that proposition. He also got what he had told Bowdoin's Web developer he wanted: an opportunity to encourage students to perform close readings of some seminal poetry.

On the wiki that Mr. Phillipson set up for the course, John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" appears not as an old war horse, but as a hot topic of conversation. By clicking on an assortment of key phrases sprinkled throughout the poem's text, visitors can link to students' ruminations on the language's imagery and its import.

One student uses the famous line "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" as a jumping-off point for a discussion on Keats's views on mortality. Another, creating a link for the phrase "of deities or mortals," draws parallels between "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Keats's lyrical odes to Psyche and a nightingale. Both of the commentaries refer to other students' views expressed elsewhere on the Web site.

Mr. Phillipson says it is exciting to see students riff so casually on such a revered poem, and he credits the wiki for enlivening the discussion. "I think the students are seduced by the technology into doing something above and beyond," he says.

Like most wikis, Mr. Phillipson's could be described as a blog informed by socialism. Like blogs, wikis aim to demystify Web publishing by letting anyone print their thoughts online. But wikis go a step further: They typically allow anyone who happens upon them to add material, edit existing content, or even delete information. (On his wikis, Mr. Phillipson does not allow students to delete one another's work.)

A key language of the wiki is the hyperlink: Sites expand when users select a piece of text from an existing page and create a new page about that term.

As a wiki grows, these networks of links become more labyrinthine. And concepts like authorship and organization take a back seat to the exchange of ideas, at least in theory. The ideal wiki is "a group of serious people working out a way of looking at things," says M.C. Morgan, a professor of English at Bemidji State University, who has taught courses with wikis for a couple of years.

The technology has been around for quite some time: Most experts agree that the first wiki was designed by Ward Cunningham, now a researcher with Microsoft, in 1995. But the profile of wikis has risen rapidly in the past two years, in large part due to the success of Wikipedia, an open-source encyclopedia that boasts thousands of contributors and frequently appears near the top of Google search results.

Wikipedia has become especially popular as a research tool for college students -- much to the chagrin of some professors, who consider the site's often-unsourced content to be dubious at best. Others, like Mr. Morgan, argue that wiki readers can find plenty of worthwhile content, as long as they scrutinize it as carefully as they would material on regular Web sites.

Some Skeptics

When Mr. Phillipson told students in his Romantic poetry course that they would be putting together a public wiki, called the Romantic Audience Project (http://ssad.bowdoin.edu:8668/space/snipsnap-index), the response was surprisingly skeptical.

"Bowdoin students tend to come into the classes generally surprised, and maybe even freaked out, about working with digital tools," says Mr. Phillipson, who has now taught four courses, including two sessions of the Romantic course, with wikis. "They download music and take pictures with their cellphones, but for class, they are used to doing the five-page essay."

There were no five-page essays in Mr. Phillipson's course. Instead, students participated in a wiki that the professor had already started -- by posting a series of Web pages devoted to authors like Percy Bysshe Shelley and Samuel Coleridge, and by putting online several of the Romantic era's best-known poems.

Using that framework, Mr. Phillipson then gave students a set of short, weekly assignments: Take a line from "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," say, and create a linkable Web page that analyzes its meaning. Students were also asked to comment on one another's commentaries -- and to write longer essays that could be posted on the wiki.

To keep things organized, Mr. Phillipson made a few exceptions to some common wiki conventions. Not only were students prohibited from deleting their peers' work, but they were also required to post under user names, not anonymously.

Those restrictions are necessary, Mr. Phillipson says, to keep a wiki focused on scholarship, not name-calling. Unsupervised wikis can generate a lot more noise than signal, as editors at the *Los Angeles Times* recently discovered: The newspaper's "Wikitorial" Web page, which let readers rewrite staff editorials, was pulled after only three days when the site was overrun with pornography and off-color language.

Mr. Phillipson's wiki project, on the other hand, stayed clean -- and became a hit. Some students expanded the authors' pages, providing extra details on the trial of Mary Robinson, an 18th-century Romantic writer who took up poetry after being imprisoned for debt.

Others found unusual ways of analyzing works: One drew and posted a pair of pictures that represented the role of editors and publishers in shaping the work of John Clare, a 19th-century poet. Another created a short animated film about William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell."

Eventually, Mr. Phillipson says, the class developed a genuine sense of community. In classroom lectures, some students began referring to their peers by their wiki user names, composed of their first initials and last names. "I thought that was kind of cool, actually," Mr. Phillipson says.

And competitions arose over which students would get to write the coveted wiki entries for certain phrases in a popular poem. Several students raced to be the first to create links for popular search terms like "genius," as discussed by Samuel Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria,* and the quickest posters occasionally bragged about being first on the draw in class and being able to shape the discussion.

The wiki had a marked effect on students' perceptions of Romantic poetry, according to Mr. Phillipson. In many ways, he argues, his students' relationship with the Web project mirrored the experience of poets like Shelley and Coleridge, as they worked through -- and worried about -- the implications of mass-production technology made possible by the Industrial Revolution.

"I wanted students to encounter some of the thrills and anxiety that bringing their work out into the public in a new way would entail," Mr. Phillipson says. "There was a real parallel between what they were doing and what the authors we were discussing were doing."

'New Type of Literacy'

The site has not just changed the way students think, Mr. Phillipson says. It has also changed the way they write, pushing them into a more direct, self-aware style. "This is pulling them in directions that, I would argue, cultivate a new type of literacy," he says. "They have to keep their writing short, compact, screen-friendly."

Wiki writing, according to Mr. Phillipson, is "a different kind of skill" than traditional long-form essay composition.

Mr. Morgan, of Bemidji State, says that is true. But he argues the wikis can play a prominent role in teaching the finer points of traditional composition, too.

Mr. Morgan has been using wikis in class since 2001, when he happened upon one such site and "saw an immediate connection with teaching freshman composition." In that course -- and in a course called "Weblogs and Wikis," which made its debut the following year -- he has encouraged students to adopt the technology for some surprisingly ambitious writing projects. (In "Weblogs and Wikis," one student wrote a wiki novel, which he continually edited online, while another used the technology to help her mother complete an autobiography.)

Writers who understand the technology, Mr. Morgan argues, can use wikis to look at their craft in a new way. Traditionally, writers complete a draft or two, proofread their work, revise it, and consider it finished. But wiki writers, Mr. Morgan says, are more likely to use a process he calls "refactoring": posting shards of text, spinning them off into larger pieces, reworking material constantly instead of doing so at set points during the writing process.

"On a wiki, the writing space is just a browser window," Mr. Morgan says. "Students see it as pretty plastic, and they're less apprehensive about throwing things out or reorganizing themselves than when they're using Microsoft Word."

That sense of plasticity attracted Matt Bowen to the medium. Last year, while he was a senior studying language, writing, and rhetoric at the University of Maryland at College Park, Mr. Bowen developed WriteHere.net, a site he bills as the world's first English-language creative-writing wiki.

The site started as a way for Mr. Bowen to share poems and prose with his friends at other colleges. But it soon found Mr. Bowen championing a new strategy for online fiction: communal writing. Pieces posted on the site belong to the world, he says, and are open to editing from anyone who happens upon them.

By putting a piece on WriteHere, "you're giving your story over to the community," he says. And while Mr. Bowen says that he greatly overestimated writers' willingness to let go of their own works, he has put his money where his mouth is, posting several of his own pieces on the site.

One of Mr. Bowen's poems, "Run," appears on the site in two different incarnations. In its original form, it is a spare piece that obliquely evokes the Holocaust. The second version, however, takes an entirely different tack, turning the poem into a comic tale about shoplifting, simply by adding a few phrases.

But there's more to the story. The Web page devoted to the first poem contains a link to some constructive criticism made last fall by a German reader. The reader suggested that Mr. Bowen consider softening some of the piece's specific Nazi iconography, and that he replace one phrase, "Shoot him," with a more open-ended one, "Halt." By looking once more at the poem, Web surfers can see that Mr. Bowen passed on the former idea, but adopted the latter: "Shoot him" is now nowhere to be found in the text.

For Mr. Bowen, all of the takes on the poem are valid because, in the world of wikis, no work is necessarily complete. "My goal initially was to take stories that died and try to get them further," he says. But the site, he says, has "convinced me to be less frustrated with things that just stop."

Still, like Mr. Morgan, Mr. Bowen harbors the hope that the writing on his wiki will eventually result in some finished compositions. "My goal is to gain enough fiction, deemed of a high enough quality, to submit it to some writing journals," he says.

Even for a committed open-source author like Mr. Bowen, the lure of print publication -- and the publicity that comes with it -- remains inescapable. "The market really does validate art," he says, "and if we want to try to get ourselves a bigger community at WriteHere, we have to get people to notice us."