

Faculty Collaboration: How a Wiki Enhanced Communication, Organization, Accessibility, and Management of Writing a Book

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Faculty members have collaborated on research studies, manuscripts, books, teaching pedagogies, and ideas for years. From exchanging marked-up paper copies to exchanging email attachments, as technology has progressed so have the techniques and methods of collaborating. However, often, faculty adhere to traditional methods of sharing work and thus may be unwilling to try new, innovative methods of co-creating writing products, which can be more efficient and manageable.

Most recently, a technology appropriately named “wiki” (in Hawaiian, wiki-wiki means *quick*) has taken the web world by storm. In brief, a wiki refers to an online technology in which, using a web browser, users can contribute, change, and interact with content via one website. This technology allows for a convenient, and typically user-friendly, site in which users can share knowledge, organize and manage large projects, participate, and collaborate. Moreover, it eliminates the need for removable storage devices such as USB thumb or flash drives and CD’s. A wiki can also allow one or more collaborators (e.g., authors, educators, grant writers, and so forth) to interact with a website that can either be public (e.g., Wikipedia) or private (e.g., the one we created to manage our book writing efforts from start to finish).

Currently, we are three tenured faculty members at one major southeastern university. In our journey of promotion and tenure at that university, we noted many questions and concerns that surrounded the development of an annual academic dossier, an important collection of evidence that documents a faculty member’s successes in the academy’s triad of teaching, research, and service. In searching the literature base for recommendations regarding dossier development (i.e., the process and content), we found limited articles and books that addressed the subject. We saw an opportunity to collaborate on a much-needed book, which would help demystify the process of creating and maintaining an academic dossier. While colleagues and friends in the academy, the three of us had not previously collaborated on a project. This would be our first. As we began sharing and brainstorming ideas for the book during spring, 2007, we searched for ways to collect and archive our ideas. As our book ideas grew (e.g., multiple chapter ideas, summaries of existing literature, and collected examples), we asked ourselves *how*

will we best manage the content and process of writing this book? Common among the three of us was busy schedules in research, teaching, and service. We each had different times of the day in which we devoted to writing and research. Therefore, our primary tool to communicate was email. However, in our early stages of preparation, exchanging emails and *managing* those emails became unwieldy. At the time, one of the book authors was using wikis in her classroom as a collaborative writing space to manage students' team projects. After a brief lesson in how a wiki works and its benefits, the authors developed a wiki space and turned to the technology as a way to manage multiple documents and resources and to reduce confusion in accessing and updating each new iteration of the book manuscript and other information (e.g., correspondence with the publisher) needed throughout the book writing process.

So, how did wiki use help our writing team in collaborating more efficiently and effectively toward our eventual published book, *Tools for Dossier Success: A Guide to Promotion and Tenure*? We offer four primary domains that frame our uses of the wiki and present direction for other collaborators who may want to consider wiki use: Communication, Organization, Accessibility, and Management.

First, as we began the long process of planning the book and its contents, **communication** consisted of multiple layers and multiple parties. We were each conducting reviews of the literature to ascertain what was, at the time, available to faculty members seeking more advice on academic dossier development. We were also meeting frequently to brainstorm ideas for the book's potential chapters, including discussing annual promotion and tenure dossier examples we could include and various helpful hints and quotes we wanted to capture for inclusion into the book chapters. Therefore, one of our first steps in developing the wiki was to create one place in which we could quickly access, communicate, and store our ideas as they developed. Our first "home" page in the wiki became a collection of links to other pages in the wiki that incorporated these various needs. For example, after logging in to the wiki, each author could then click on links to other pages, such as *general thoughts, hints, meeting notes, references, review of literature, and ideas for each chapter*. These pages offered one, easy to access online location as a place to communicate, exchange, and store information.

Second, as already noted, communicating the many organizational elements of our eventual book was key to our **organization** of the wiki. While we designed the wiki based on our needs for the book, the wiki also kept each of us individually organized. Being organized added to our personal efficiency and effectiveness while we continued to collaborate and write the book. For example, no longer did we need to search through email folders to locate the email with the "latest" version of a book chapter attached, but rather we could login to our wiki and access the most current file. Further, as we "cycled" through each author on book chapter revisions, we had valuable pages (e.g., hints, review of literature) on the wiki that helped facilitate our writing. One might equate this organization to the traditional big, three-ring binder with sections for those areas valuable to the writing process. However, in using a wiki, all files were digitally stored and "stamped" with the day, time, and the name of the wiki user who had uploaded the file. Therefore, the third attribute of using a wiki as a tool to collaborate – accessibility – was important to us throughout the process.

Accessibility was perhaps the most valued element of using a wiki in preparing our book. While a creator of a wiki can choose to make a wiki "public," we chose to

utilize the privacy setting, a setting afforded by most wiki resources. Further, in preparing our book, we obviously had content that we did not want to share with the public until the manuscript was ready for publication. In keeping our wiki private, we used the invite function to ensure each of the three authors could login with her wiki account user name and password. Each author also had “administrator” status. Being an administrator allowed each user the functionality to add pages, folders, and other features available within the wiki space. We also utilized an option within the wiki settings that notified the other authors when changes had been made. The notification came in the form of an email, so each author knew when new content had been added. Since each of the authors was maintaining regular teaching, research, and service workloads, we found this feature to be invaluable throughout the process, as it often “alerted” us to login to the wiki to review updated material and revisions.

It should be apparent by now how valuable the wiki was in the **management** of our book. We were able to communicate via the wiki. We shared resources in one, easy to access place. We included charts that listed our rotation revision for each chapter. We were able to upload multiple files (e.g., images, charts, graphs, text) because of the storage space allotted to us in the wiki. As stated earlier, we could access the most recent file; yet, we also had retrievable access to previous versions of the book, as well. This allowed for us to see the evolution of our book in addition to affording the ability to reference previous drafts and ideas. For three people collaborating toward a common goal – the final book manuscript – the wiki was a perfect place to manage our informal and formal communication (e.g., book meetings, correspondence with the publisher, comments for chapters, conceptual ideas about topics, ideas about art for the book), our resources (e.g., literature, seminal quotes), and each file version/stage of the book. Being able to access one place, a virtual filing cabinet of sorts, versus sifting through numerous emails or printed documents filed in our various offices, was, in our opinion, a celebrated feature of wiki management. So, our biggest question when we first started meeting about the project, *how will we best manage the content and process of writing this book?*, was answered through our wiki project management.

Was everything about using the wiki easy? No, of course not. Whenever using a new technology in which each person on your team is not familiar, there are learning curves to overcome. For example, each of us needed to learn how to properly add pages and links to those pages. We each learned how to upload files and how to create folders to better organize the many files we uploaded, especially those associated with each chapter. We learned early in the process that it was important to consider the hierarchy of the wiki’s design and to ensure each of us understood the navigation of our wiki. We also learned that it was not always easy to just copy and paste to and from the wiki pages, as margins and font selections did not always transfer. We also experienced one major vendor upgrade to the wiki while we were in the midst of writing, which forced us to learn different techniques in accomplishing tasks we had already learned. However, given all of this, we believe the advantages of using the wiki far outweigh the possible disadvantages. For us, the wiki allowed each of us the freedom to share, communicate, manage, and collaborate in a more effective and efficient manner. The final product, our published book, *Tools for Dossier Success: A Guide to Promotion and Tenure* underscores the utility of the wiki and how to navigate the process of a collaborative writing project.

If you are planning a collaborative writing project and wondering how you will manage it all, consider using a wiki. We offer some final tips:

1. Shop around. Search online or ask colleagues for two or three wiki resources. Investigate functionality based on your team's needs (e.g., privacy settings, storage space, costs, ease of use).
2. Explore the user guides and the tutorials offered by each wiki resource. You will want to ensure each collaborator understands *how* to access and use the wiki (e.g., creating links, uploading files).
3. Discuss with your collaborators how you will utilize the wiki. This will help inform the process of designing your wiki. For example, on the "home" page of our wiki, we had links to other pages in our wiki that helped to inform our process – such as pages for our meeting notes and for each book chapter.
4. Understand and use the wiki settings, especially the privacy and permission settings.

So, how will you manage your next large project? Wiki wiki – quick – of course. From our experiences, we know that the wiki is a viable and user-friendly technology that you and your colleagues can elect to use without impinging upon the process, value, and meaning of the collaboration. We hope your collaboration via a wiki is one that evinces effective and increased communication, organization, accessibility, and management, and importantly, a great final product.

Links to Potential Wiki Resources For Collaborative Writing

PBWorks:	http://pbworks.com/
Pikiwiki:	http://www.pikiwiki.com
Google Sites:	http://www.google.com/sites
Mediawiki:	http://www.mediawiki.org/
Social Text:	http://www.socialtext.com
Wetpaint:	http://wikisineducation.wetpaint.com/
Wikispaces:	http://www.wikispaces.com/
Zohowiki:	http://www.zoho.com/