From Wiki Woes to Wiki Wows

by Lynn Spencer

As library media specialists, we hear about Web 2.0 in numerous professional journals and during conference workshops. We know that using this aspect of the Internet is second nature to many of our students, and therefore we feel a need to become knowledgeable about this means of information sharing. What better way to learn about blogs, wikis or podcasts than to jump right in and create one with our students? Or so my thinking went . . .

Before telling you my whole story, here are a few tips from my own experience that I hope will help other library media specialists who are interested in creating wiki projects avoid some of the *wiki woes* I experienced and achieve some *wiki wows*:

- Choose a project based on a unit that is already an established and valued part of the curriculum.
- Collaborate with the classroom teachers so that students come to the library with some initial work on the research already done. In this way, time can be spent more productively on the actual creation of the project.
- Make available enough varied resources at the student's independent reading level.
- Start small. Rather than worrying about having a complete multimedia product the first time, you may want to start out with a text-based wiki, and get involved with adding graphics and additional links further down the road.

Now that you have my tips, you can read my wiki woes story.

Background

When I started at my location about five years ago, the teachers at the fourth grade level had an annual project called Famous New Yorkers. It had started out small with one classroom teacher who had her students research the signers of the Constitution, and then create a "living wax museum" by dressing up as one of the famous people and posing. Parents were invited to attend the "opening" of the museum. The following year, another teacher joined in and added some other famous names. Eventually, the entire fourth grade decided to become part of the project, so a list of 150 famous New Yorkers was created so that the content of the research would coordinate with the curriculum.

The first year I worked at this school, I focused on helping students with their research. This is when I realized that the project did not really lend itself well to true research for fourth grade students. By limiting the topic to only New Yorkers, some of the "famous" people were actually quite obscure. The names were not in any of our traditional reference books, and the on-line biographical information was way above a fourth grade reading level. Some students had to google their person's name and needed an adult's help to navigate the many irrelevant hits they received. Many of the students were even encouraged to do their "research" at home.

An Opportunity

A few years later, during one of my visits to a weekly fourth grade team meeting, I learned that the wax museum project was becoming more of a burden than a valued experience. Teachers were spending too much time helping children come up with ideas and resources for their costumes; the museum was now being set up in the gymnasium with elaborate curtain dividers, and the students often complained about having to stand for more than an hour. Since the event was held at the end of the year, some students even passed out from the heat! I saw all this feedback as an opportunity to offer the teachers a way out of this project while giving me the opportunity to possibly improve the quality of the research and incorporate the use of technology. I offered to change the project to the creation of a Famous New Yorkers on-line wiki. No dressing up, no standing in the heat, and yet the students would still be able to showcase their research work in a way that was open to the public. The teachers were enthusiastic about the idea, and I was excited to begin.

I chose the Wikispaces site for a number of reasons. I had read about it in some of my professional journals, I had explored some of the wikis created by other teachers, and there was a special offer of free space without advertising for a limited number of first-time educational users. The basics are simple. You sign up as the owner of the account, decide on a name, register, set up IDs and passwords, and you are ready to go. One caveat, this service only works well with Firefox browser if you are using a Macintosh computer.

Tackling the Project

My next challenge was to try and clean up the list of "famous" New Yorkers so that students would be able to locate information without having to use Google. The most important criterion was that if the person was not in our on-line Grolier's encyclopedia, they were eliminated from the list. As each fourth grade class came in for their weekly computer/library time, I assigned them a name.

The first week, I showed students how to log in to the encyclopedia and use the search function. If their person's name could not be located, we scratched that one off our master list and gave the student a new one. During the second week, I showed students what the original Wikipedia looked like and then introduced them to the Famous New Yorkers Wiki we would be creating. I had already made entries on the main page for each student's famous person, and had connected it to a blank web page. I didn't feel this aspect of the creation of the wiki was of high priority for the students, and would probably bog us down whenever students made spelling errors that needed to be corrected. I showed students how to sign in, select their person's name, and access the editing tools. Then, while keeping the wiki's window open, I showed students how to access Grolier's in a new window, and how to get back and forth between the two sites. Their task for the day was to determine a general category for why their person was famous. For example, the person might be a sports star, a politician, an artist, etc. Students needed to synthesize the information in Grolier and then transfer this to an introductory sentence on their wiki page.

Obstacles

Half of the one-hour computer and library time is considered to be a teacher's contractual break time, and the other half was usually also taken as a break since there was no requirement for a teacher to be present. Therefore, my assistant and I were constantly scrambling as we tried to help some of the struggling readers with

the text, while at the same time troubleshooting the technical problems such as students accidentally closing a window or having problems with editing. At this point, there were a lot of small challenges which caused us to move very slowly toward completion, but I was determined to end up with a quality project.

The next week the students' task was to find some noteworthy events or accomplishments for their famous person, and add that to their entry. Again, the going was painfully slow since Grolier's reading level was too high for many of our readers, and the analysis of the kind of information students needed proved to be developmentally inappropriate for many of the students as well. Still, I justified the project by the fact that students were being exposed to the use of an online encyclopedia and were creating a collaborative project in the format of a Wikipedia. My next goal was to have students use the built-in citation from Grolier's to cite their resource. It would have been a simple matter of cut and paste. I accomplished this with one of the classes--and then disaster hit . . .

The fourth grade teachers discovered they would still need to put on the wax museum for at least one more year, since our principal explained that we needed to consider the expectations of our parents based on past traditions. Before we made this kind of major change, we would need to introduce the new concept to the parents (next year). Now the priority became, once again, the need to locate images of the famous people so that students would know how to dress up for the museum.

Bringing It All Together
My intention had been to closely monitor this aspect of the wiki creation since it is always risky to have students googling images unsupervised. At this point, I did call upon the classroom teachers to assist. While the majority of the class was engaged in a free-time computer activity, the classroom teacher, my assistant and I would work with one row of students at a time. We helped them do an image search with the "Safe Search" filtering turned on, but we hovered over the computers so that we could quickly close out any screens if the need arose. We then had to download the image, re-title it, and upload it to the wiki page. Doing this with a class of 24 students was very time-consuming, and teachers had to leave when a half hour was up or they would be missing their planning time. In the end, my assistant and I took over this task independently and added images during the times when we did not have scheduled classes. I did not even have the opportunity to teach students how to cite the image sources, which should have been a key component of this project.

I still have not lost faith in the great potential offered by the collaborative creation of wikis. In fact, next year, instead of the third graders making a brochure about one of the countries they have studied, I would love to see them begin a wiki. They could use the classroom sets of books that are written at their level, and we could use the on-line Searchosaurus that is also more appropriate for elementary level readers. The wiki also is ideal for establishing on-going process where more details, and different aspects of a country's culture, geography, and history are added to the site each year.

Summary
As mentioned in the beginning of this article, one of my recommendations to any other library media specialists who are interested in getting involved with wikis would include choosing a project based on a unit that is already an established and valued part of the curriculum, so that you will have the greatest chance for

collaboration with the classroom teacher. The students who did work on this year's New Yorkers wiki loved being able to show others the pages they had created, and enjoyed sharing why their person was famous. Now, anyone who is interested, can access the site at http://famousnyers.wikispaces.com/. Although it is certainly not a polished product, it was most definitely a learning experience, and one that I am very willing to share with others in the hope that other library media specialists can continue to develop the exciting possibilities of a wiki.

About The Author

Lynn Spencer has more than 20 years of experience as an educator. In the Westhill Central School District in NYS, she served as both a reading teacher and as a school library media specialist. Currently, she is the SLMS for grades 3 and 4 at Cherry Road Elementary School. Lynn holds a Masters in Reading and an MLS, both from Syracuse University. We thank Lynn for contributing her story and recommendations.