Chapter 19

Collaborative Writing: Wikis and the Co-Construction of Meaning

Katina Zammit
Western Sydney University, Australia

ABSTRACT

As people, of all ages, take advantage of the opportunities offered by Web 2.0 to be active participants in the process of knowledge building, they become publishers and producers of knowledge not simply consumers of information. In this chapter I will draw upon Bruns and Humphrey’s (2007) concept of produsage and the four capacities of produsers as a frame through which to consider the use of wikis for collaborative writing and the social construction of meaning in an online environment. In presenting an overview of the literature on wikis in educational, work and interest-group (affinity spaces) contexts, the issues and gaps, connections will be made between these two concepts and other complementary ideas. While the chapter focuses, primarily, on wiki usage in educational contexts commentary is also included on wikis in workplace environments and for interest-groups (affinity spaces).

INTRODUCTION

In the information age of the 21st century, knowledge is a powerful tool that is ever changing. We can no longer know everything or even hope to be able to achieve an outcome without the support of others: their intellectual input, their critique of our ideas, their suggested directions, and their contribution to an end product. We are no longer silos of knowledge transmitting this knowledge to others but are part of knowledge building communities, contributing together for the advancement of society. As such the skills and capacities to work in a knowledge building community are essential for students to learn throughout their education, from the early years of school through to university.

The online environments that offer opportunities for people to connect with each other and create spaces for the exchange and development of knowledge are part of what is collectively known as Web 2.0. Examples of Web 2.0 platforms are blogs, forums, Google docs and wikis. Web 2.0 encourages individual users to coordinate with others by creating spaces for user collaboration and the means for them to explore, combine, annotate, edit, splice and mix a range of communication modes, such as images, sound, video.
Collaborative Writing

and writing re-expressing ideas and creating new content (Cole, 2009; Crook et al., 2008; Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009; Tay & Allen, 2011). It is the active participation in communities of practice (Crook et al., 2008; Wenger, 1999) that affords the potential for greater conceptual understanding because what is created collaboratively is greater than what could be produced independently (Kallantzi & Cope, 2012; Thornton, 2013). Involvement in these communities, builds an individual’s repertoire of practices.

As people, of all ages, take advantage of the opportunities offered by Web 2.0 to be active participants in the process of knowledge building, they become publishers and producers of knowledge not simply consumers of information (Cole, 2009; Forte & Bruckman, 2007; Greenhow et al., 2009), blurring the boundaries between the two, and becoming “produsers” (users/producers) (Bruns & Humphrey, 2007). Produsage, as Bruns and Humphrey (2007) point out, involves the “collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement” (p. 2). It has four fundamental characteristics that are not characteristic of traditional linear modes of production and work where individual ownership of knowledge is valued. The four characteristics of produsage are:

1. **It is community based.**
2. **Participants occupy fluid roles participating as is appropriate to their personal skills, interests, and knowledges.**
3. **The “artifacts” are unfinished.**
4. **What is produced is common property.** (Bruns & Humphreys, 2007, p. 2)

Produsage occurs within a ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006) enabled by Web 2.0 technology. Involvement in a participatory culture occurs when people have a social connection with others, share ideas and believe their contributions matter. Within their varied communities, people contribute to knowledge building and knowledge sharing through participatory, collaborative, and distributed practices (Greenhow et al., 2009; Jenkins et al., 2006; Thornton, 2013). Participatory cultures can be identified as:

- **Affiliations** — memberships, formal and informal, in online communities centered around various forms of media, (such as Facebook, message boards, metagaming, game clans).
- **Expressions** — producing new creative forms, (such as digital sampling, skinning and modding, fan videomaking, fan fiction writing, zines, mash-ups).
- **Collaborative Problem-solving** — working together in teams, formal and informal, to complete tasks and develop new knowledge (such as through Wikipedia, alternative reality gaming, spoiling).
- **Circulations** — Shaping the flow of media (such as podcasting, blogging). (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 3)

Whether in an educational environment, a social environment, an organizational or workplace environment, members involved in knowledge building through the deployment of Web 2.0 technology need to learn the skills and capacities to negotiate these spaces. They also need to consider these spaces an advantage to them and the learning or work practices (Stocker, Richter, Hoeffler, & Tochtermann, 2012). Educational environments are more able to provide support and opportunities for produsage than corporate environments, as they are more flexible and dynamic and hence better placed to develop participatory cultures and form communities of practices.

Bruns and Humphrey (2007) suggest four capacities that students require in order to be produsers in collaborative environments, which promote learning in the information age. They are the capacities to be: