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Wikis and Widgets: Ways to Tech up Your Teaching

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Abstract

Wikis supply educators with a tool to generate interest and motivation among learners for almost any activity. Their ease of use has been compared to learning and familiarizing oneself with e-mail technology. Due to this fact they are being applied in countless learning environments. Their capacity for adaptability allows instructors to match wikis with the needs of learners. The driving force behinds wikis are their ease of input of technological advances such as online video, links, and embedding capabilities. The principal focus of this paper explains the widgets that comprise a wiki. How they can benefit the learner as well as lecturer in utilizing current applied sciences in the language classroom for today's students who will live and work in tomorrow's world.

Introduction

Although they have been around since the mid- 90's, new functions for applying wikis in educational environments continues to expand. Developed as an easy-to-use and fast collaborative writing tool for publishing online content, the use of wiki applications in higher education is increasing (Liu, Kalk, Kinney & Orr, 2010). The reason for this may be that wikis are extremely simple to understand and operate. Lessons in language learning can encompass all the latest aspects of current technology such as downloading videos and creating audio files. This evokes a motivation to learn among students that is not found in ordinary courses such as Compositional writing, ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and TOEIC (Test of English in International Conversation) test preparation. Today, technology is essential to the efficient operation of nearly all social institutions, including business, community centres, and schools, and the demand for technology adept employees is currently growing faster than the number of people in the labour market possessing these skills (Goad, 2002).

The beneficial factor behind the use of wikis also has to do with the concept of authentic learning. One of the most important activities of a college or university is enabling student learning (Oblinger, 2005). Authentic learning engages students in the multidisciplinary problem solving and critical thinking researchers and experts use every day (Windam, 2007). Much of the rhetoric about contemporary higher education suggests that colleges and universities need to embrace change due to advances in knowledge, technology, transportation, and more—advances that have dramatically shifted the way we all function in the modern world (Moore, Fowler, &Watson, 2007) The use of activities and projects that typically in the past involved paper, pen, scissors and glue, can now be executed with the latest technology and techniques. Students frequently cite skills development as a benefit to the use of authentic learning over more traditional methods, but the value stretches much further (Windham, 2007).

A wikis as explained by the authors Chawner and Lewis (2006); a Wiki is a server-based collaboration tool that allows any authorized user to edit Web pages and create new ones using nothing more than a Web browser and a text entry form on a Web page. The authors continue by stating that; Wikis make it possible for people to collaborate in a Web environment by creating, organizing, and maintaining a Web site of automatically linked pages. Simply put, wikis are accessible web pages compressed together to form one large web page. There is no limit as to how many pages can be in an individual wiki; this element is especially advantageous for large classes. The recent explosion of Web 2.0 technologies holds "incredible potential for foreign language instruction" (Simon, 2008, p. 6).

Their value in the classroom can be measured by the student's reactions to utilizing applied sciences in a language course. As the writer Oblinger (2007) specifies;

> Across the board, students cite relevance as the key value to authentic learning in the classroom. Employing industry standards or allowing students to adopt a role helps them see the connection between course content and their future careers. Or they understand how the discipline might be employed to solve contemporary issues. With this in mind, students say they are more likely to engage with the material because they do not regard it as "busy work".

Wiki Sites and Registration

There are a number of wiki software sites. Currently there are a least one hundred separate publicly available Wiki engines to choose from, according to an extensive list of wiki software projects maintained at http://c2com/cgi/wiki?WikiEngine (Chawner & Lewis, 2006). One only has to browse through a few to decide which wiki would best suit the user's needs best. The author currently uses Wikipaces.com for his course needs. The screen shot below shows the homepage for Wikispaces.com.

First time users are asked to register. Options include the choice of either K-12 or higher education. Either alternative is free. Once registered, the user will be asked for a Wikispaces name. This author usually includes something of the course name when deciding a title. Various examples of this being, *SkillUpA* (for a TOEIC prep. Course) or *EngComp2B,* (for an English composition course, second semester). This way the titles are easily identifiable to the lecturer as well as the learner.

Security features provided for various choices.

- *Public* access where anyone can see the wiki as well as be allowed to edit pages. In an educational environment this would be the least desirable. In fact, it is this author's opinion that is the one option NOT to be selected. Allowing for open access is allowing for trouble with users from the world-wide internet having free entrance to your learner's content.

- ***Protected* access**. This is undoubtedly the style of access most commonly chosen. This option allows for anyone to view the pages but restricts access to members of the learning community (your class). This provides all the basic functions of a wiki. Learners are able to accomplish any task required and there is no need to worry about spam or undesirable content appearing.

- *Private* access is allowed for only a limited time then it becomes fee based. The wikis are only viewed and edited by members. This author has never required such stringent security. For those that feel the need though, this is a viable option.

Once one has established their own wiki; remembering that there is no limit to the number of one can have; it is time for the learners to establish their own page. Once that is done, all the learners' names will appear along the left side of the wiki page.
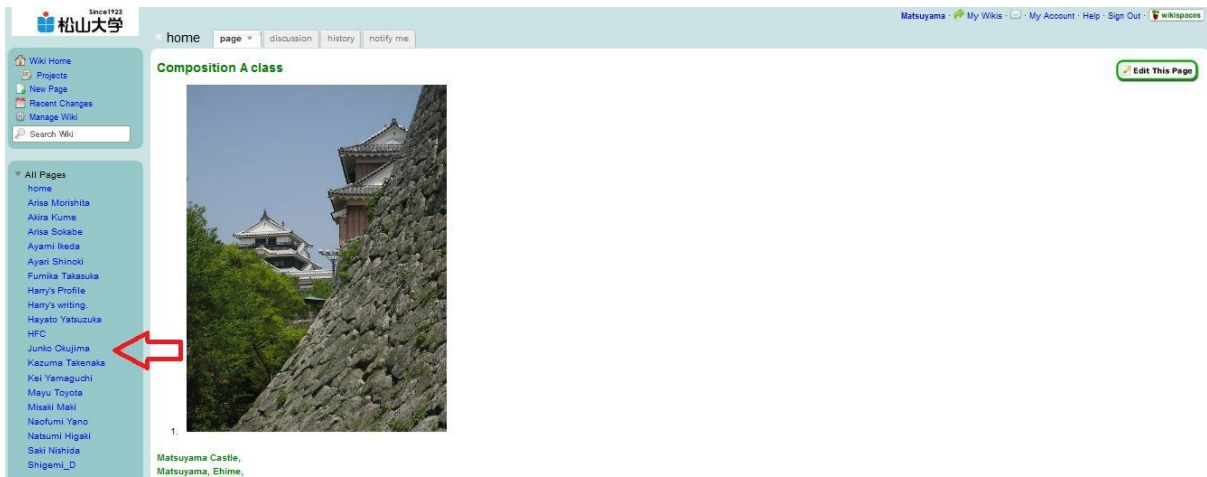
Widgets and Other Functions

The heart of the wiki is the widgets. These allow for content outside the wiki to be downloaded, copied and pasted to each individual's wiki page. Prior to accessing the widgets, one must open the page. This is done by pressing the *edit* button this allows for new content to be added or current content to be altered.

Upon pressing the edit button not only will changes or additions be allowed to take place but also the widget task bar will appear directly above the wiki page. To edit a page on a Wiki site, all a user needs to do is to click on the **Edit** button that appears on that page, modify the text that is then displayed in an editable field, and click on a **Save** button (Désilets, & Paquet, 2005).
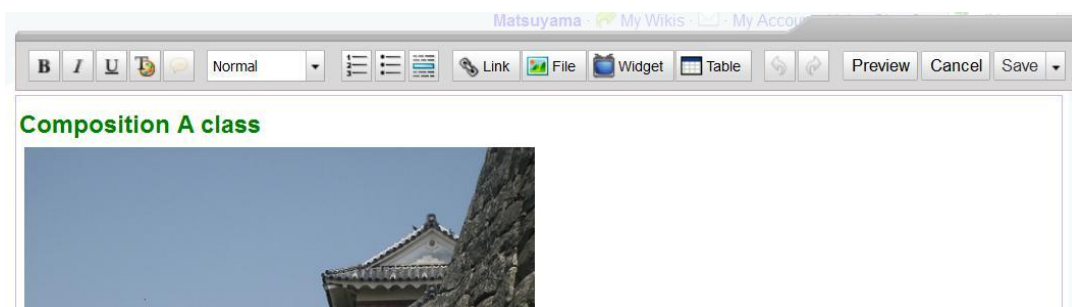
Each of these buttons is similar to many other types of software, such as e-mail applications or word processing.

As with Microsoft Word, PowerPoint or others these symbol when pressed will make type **bold,** *italic,* or underlined.

The next button allows for text to be changed to a different font such as ARIAL or COMICS SANS.

The benefit of having these buttons and functions as they are is that most learners are already familiar with them; having used other software such as Microsoft Word or PowerPoint.
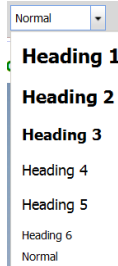
The next button (shown above) allows for differentiating among text sizes and headings. This is especially useful when students are doing projects or writing and need to make divisions between their works.

The ensuing three features allow for button lists, numbered lists, or to add a horizontal line, as seen below.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Again, these are welcome features to have depending on how the wikis are being utilized in the course. For writing classes the horizontal line can be added in between writing assignments such as the author does with his courses.


The link button, while self explanatory can be a very useful function. After pressing it a new window will appear.

Again to the ease of use within wikis each item is either self-explanatory or easy to resolve once or twice, through trial and error. It took the author an extremely short time but not without a few errors along the way to accomplish each of the tasks. In a course with a large number of students and computers it is surprisingly fast for learners to catch on. Prior to the beginning of each new lesson the author always reviews any new functions that the students may have used in a previous lesson. Any learners that experience difficulty, the instructor is always there to assist. Naturally, any students that have frequent absences will have extreme difficulty with wikis as well as passing any course.


The next function allows for pictures to be inserted either from the users own computer (insert file) or from outside web sources (external images). Again either typing the picture file name or copying and pasting the picture identification from an outside source is simple and easy to do. Occasionally as earlier mentioned small problems may arise but nothing that cannot be solved through patience and practice.
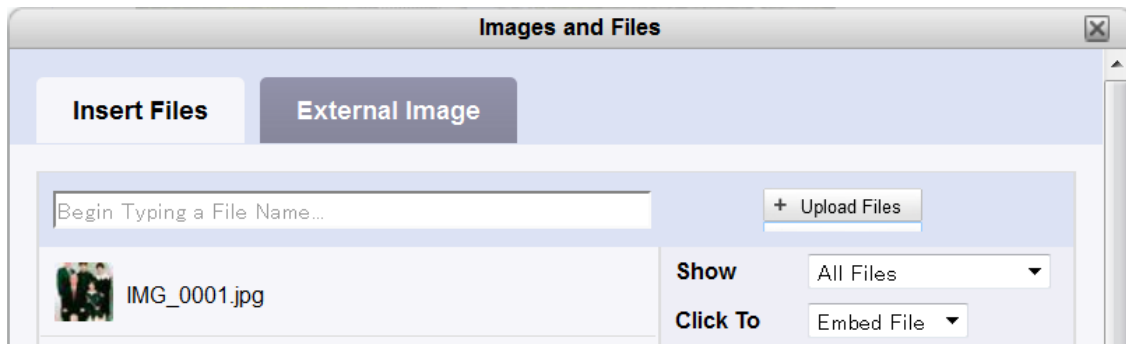
The next button is where all the widget functions are stored. Since there are many not all of them will be explained here. They all operate on the same concept of either copying the web page address or embedding code of that particular video, map, or other item. The most commonly utilized in this author's courses are video, calendar, polls and map.

To embed a video into a wiki is an extremely easy process. Upon pressing video, the user will get the following screen to appear.
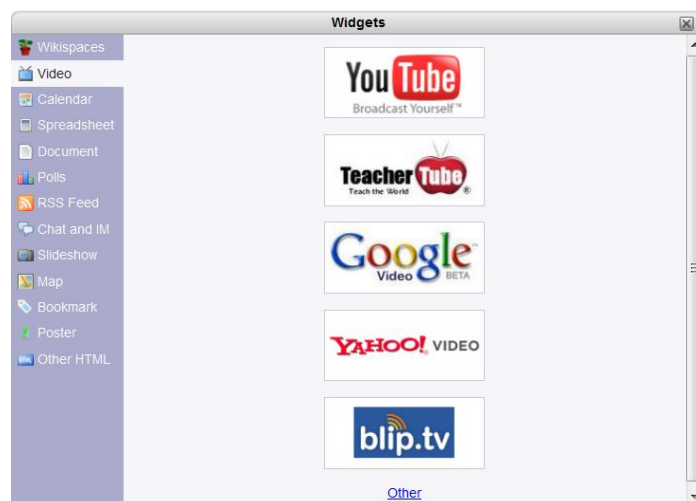
Any type of video viewer is fine. It is up to the lecturer and learners preference. Using YouTube as an example, and pressing on it; the following screen will pop up. On it are step by step instructions.

Again, with most things, first time users may experience slight difficulty. It is advisable that the instructor having familiarized him or herself with the functions of wikis beforehand so that they can aid the learner. For this author when working with students who are using wikis for the first time, he uses a large screen or viewer at the front of the room. This way the instructor can work through the steps of the widgets as students observe and take note of the steps. Once this is complete, students can then try it by themselves; those experiencing difficulty the instructor can provide educational support.
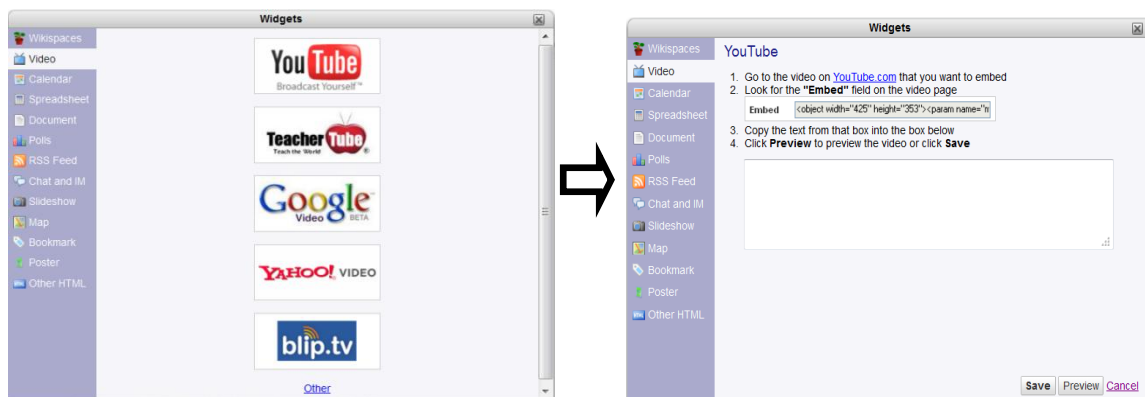
It is basically the same step for all widgets. Follow the instructions, allow for some trial and error and learners will have a multitude of options for their wiki pages

Calendar
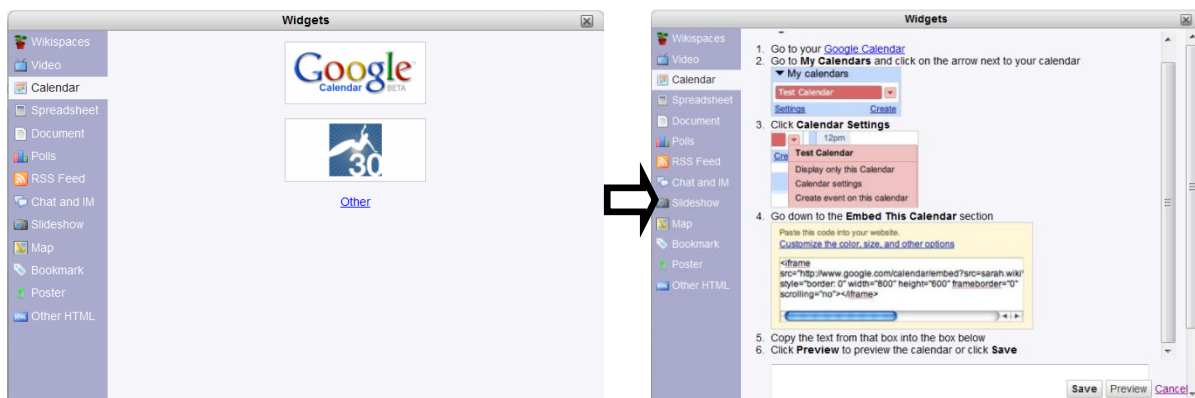
Maps
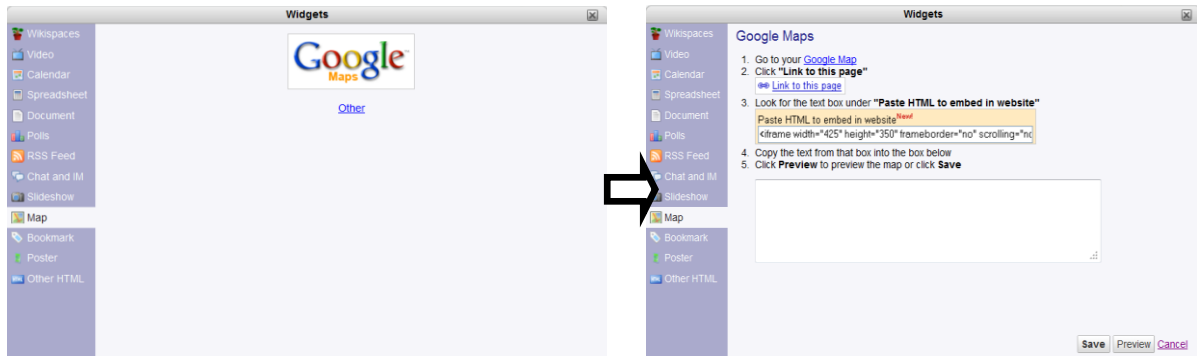
With all options of widgets there are three buttons on the bottom of the pop up window. It provides an opportunity to *Save*, *Preview*, or *Cancel*.
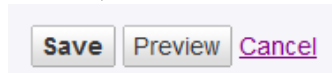
Upon saving any one of the widget tasks, a blue box will appear. The wiki page should look like the example below.

After completion of this step, the final step is to press the save box in the upper right hand corner of the wiki.

The wiki should look similar to the screen shot below. Of course, editing can continue at any time by going back and pressing *Edit*, once again. In this method learners can add to a wiki, make changes to their wiki, or completely delete a wiki and make a new page.
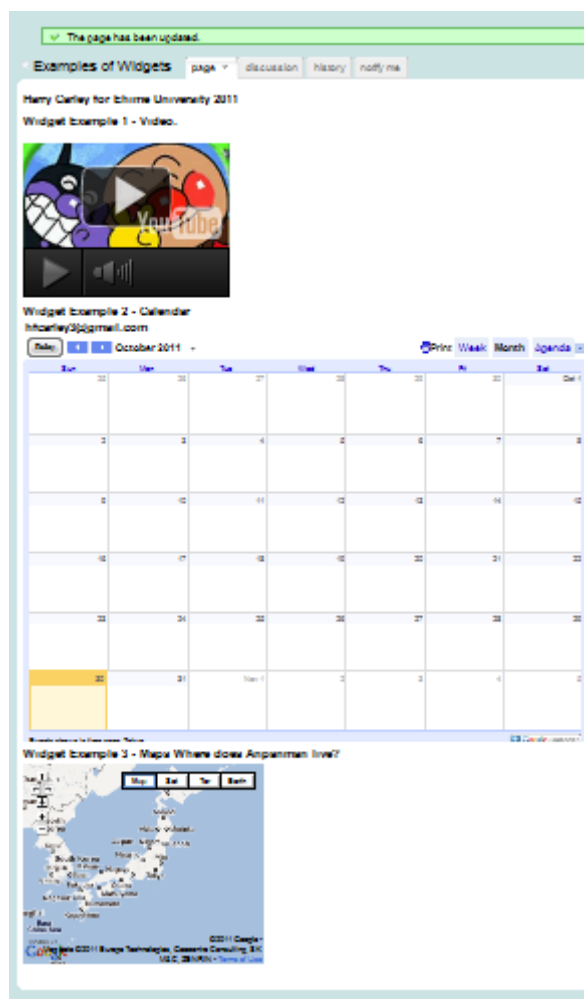
Wikis at Work

The possibilities for adaptation into a language course are still being discovered and applied to educational modes. As examples the author will briefly describe such uses in various courses at Matsuyama University, Ehime, Japan. The adaptability of wikis to almost any course environment should especially become evident.

Currently the author along with a colleague at Kurume University, Kyushu, Japan is conducting research into the use of wikis and TOEIC preparation classes. As part of the course requirement students are shown the functions of wikis and how they can be applied to constructing their own TOEIC tests; the reasoning behind this being that students at the university level have already taken enough TOEIC tests. Traditional *teach,* read the *text* and play a *tape* for listening exercises had proven to this author anyway, to be unreliable for any improvement in students TOEIC scores. Attendance by most learners was spotty and motivation was lacking for a majority of the participants.

While working with wikis it is explained to the students how they must construct the test, check for grammar and avoid similarity in questions. Questions are constructed with the use of pictures, the generating of sentences with missing words and many other tasks that are similar to those asked on an authentic TOEIC test. They are also reminded they later on they will be taking each other's TOEIC test for practice.

As previously mentioned this is an ongoing project. Hopeful results will show improvement in TOEIC scores. Items that have been noted during this undertaking is that motivation is extremely high, they seem to sense the authentic learning taking place and most importantly attendance has been at or near 100% for the two semesters that this project has been taking place.

Another course that utilizes wikis is that of *Travel English.* This is a course that non-English majors tend to sign up for to fulfil part of their language requirements at the university. Language level is thusly low, as is motivation. Prior courses utilized a PowerPoint (PP) presentation format where each student was assigned a country to research and later give 3 or 4 short presentations throughout the course. The author found out though that after listening to numerous PP presentations and after viewing slide after slide, that their similarity was obvious. Students were not necessarily motivated; it was questionable what learning if any was taking place. Since switching to a wiki style format the author has noticed a garnered interest in the course. Wikis allow for more individualism and creativity in their presentations. Students seem not only interested in the information that they are gathering but also the technology that they are utilizing.

The final example is a writing course. This was actually the author's initial thought for using a wiki. It is becoming more and more evident with mobile computing devices and the introduction of tablet computers that the day of paper and pen is on its way out. By the time these current students graduate and certainly during their working careers they will be doing much more work with computers than paper, pen, and notebook.

In this type of environment wikis have traditionally been used as a collaboration tool. Collaborative writing via wikis clearly has great potential to recast traditional writing tasks in terms of co-construction, both within and across diverse cohorts of learners (Thompson, & Absalom, 2011). One student writes something on one wiki and another student comes along and edits, adds, or deletes some of the writing. From his experience with Japanese learners though, the author felt that it would be beneficial to the learners if their wikis were constructed on an individual basis. A large majority of this reasoning was due to the make-up of the class (2nd, 3rd, 4th, and Graduate students) and the observation of Japanese culture and their regard toward criticizing others.

Some of the tasks have involved team writing, were members have been paired with another student. This was more to instil a team spirit though, along with making other members of the course feel more involved; since as with most courses there were some students who seemed to have many friends while others didn't. The ultimate aim though was to this provide a demonstration of the difficulty of team writing.

It is only in the last five to seven years that various Web 2.0 social technologies have begun to be included in the curricula of higher education courses (Thompson, & Absalom, 2011). All of these examples have so far proven to be a more tech-savvy alternative to the traditional classroom course work. Motivation to attend courses has been almost perfect. Students seem to sense the practicality of the lessons and understand how technology is becoming more and more a part of their world. The lecturer has shifted from the centre of the information core to being alongside the learner guiding them down a path of knowledge and discovery.

Conclusion

Integration between the classroom, faculty, and institutional levels in a higher education setting is crucial to a school's success in the contemporary information era (Langer & Knefelkamp, 2008). As awareness of Wikis has grown, people in the education sector have become increasingly interested in using them for computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) (Désilets & Paquet, 2005). The use of wikis are not all inclusive, there are many forms of technology that can be used to enhance and authenticate today's learning experience.

> English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has always paralleled the advancement of technology. Such technologies have included cassette tapes, video tapes, CDs, DVDs, radio, television, computers, and now the Internet. During the past few years, English education has entered a new era. The students do not necessarily have to buy books, newspapers, or CDs to listen or read authentic English. In the twenty-first century, authentic English materials are abundant on the Web (Anzai, 2009).

Because they constitute an environment where, as users, students and teachers have the same power and flexibility, there is a shift in agency which has been found to boost student engagement (Guzdial, 1999). Examples of use in educational settings include using Wikis to store storyboards, scripts, code and drafts in a course on digital video special effects, and to collaboratively critique poems and essays in English composition classes at the Georgia Institute of Technology (Mattison, 2003; Rick et al., 2002). Wikis have also been used to break the ice and facilitate interaction between members of new online learning groups by enabling them to build personal profile pages (Augar, 2004). A number of other uses in education have been inventoried by Georgia Tech's Collaborative Software Lab (2000). These special functions of Wiki are claimed to be very useful for EFL students.

Wikis provides options for educators not found in other software that is currently available, Options that can open new opportunities for lecturers and learners alike in a variety of study environments. Current technology enhancing courses that will help students work and live their lives to their full potential.

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Slide 2

Wikis and Widgets:
Ways to Tech-Up Your Teaching

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Slide 3

Education

- The past, the present and the future.

Teachers who learned in the past, Preparing today's students to live and work in the future.

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Slide 4

Wikis: What are they?

- Open source
- Free
- Protected
- Easy to use

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Slide 5

Wikis

- Wikispaces.com

Security features
Providing safety and stability for learners

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Slide 6

Widgets and other functions

- Ease of editing
  - Changing text
  - Altering color
  - Images and files
  - Calendar
  - Maps

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Wikis at work

Possibilities for the classroom

- TOEIC Preparation
- ESP –Travel English
- Writing – Collaborative / Individual environments

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Conclusion

- The possibilities are in the hands of the teachers

What will you give to your learners?

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Thank You

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