

e-Learning: Online learning, coaching, mentoring and developing peer support**9.3 Identify and use appropriate e-tools to facilitate and manage online learning**

After working through this information sheet you will be able to:

- Be aware of variety of online discussion tool options
- Understand how to use a variety of online communication tools

Introduction

The concept of on-line communication and its application to a teaching and learning context is discussed in depth in Unit 9.3.1, but it is obviously advisable to identify and try out these forms of communication as a user first. Online discussion forums, wikis, chat rooms and blogs are the most recent development in online communication apart from the more traditional email. The main advantage that they hold over email, however, lies in that they are designed specifically for collaborative learning, discussion and participation. The main disadvantage is that there are greater issues over confidentiality, security and the management of information.

This sheet looks at the various features associated with each of these modes of communication, and gives you the opportunity to try out some of them for yourself.

Forums & Chat

There are many discussion forums around in the public domain on the worldwide web. A subject is posted for discussion, which is often broken down into topics, and a 'thread' or ongoing conversation will be gradually posted over time beneath that. Any registered user will be able to read, and respond to, whatever anyone else has contributed to the debate. As can be seen from the Education Forum example below, the names of contributors and the times and dates when they submitted their thoughts are clearly shown, as are the number of users who have viewed each topic.

Click below to explore, the forum, then, click Back on your browser to return here.

Topic Title	Replies	Topic Starter	Views	Last Action
Pinned: How international are we? a poll	30	Richard Jones-Nerzie	2256	8th July 2006 - 05:41 AM Last post by: Buzz Burza
Pinned: New Start Page bookmark this page to navigate the forum better	0	Andy Walker	252	13th October 2005 - 08:48 PM Last post by: Andy Walker
Pinned: Research Section diversity on the forum	19	Andy Walker	1252	14th January 2005 - 09:06 AM Last post by: John Simkin
Pinned: Biographies and User Names	1	John Simkin	567	25th October 2004 - 10:52 PM Last post by: Susan Wilde
Forum Topics				
Ask Jeeves Education Forum joins affiliate scheme	0	Andy Walker	36	27th July 2006 - 02:37 PM Last post by: Andy Walker
Can't Reply to Messages or Post New Reply in Thread An Amazing New Phenomenon	2	Ashton Gray	51	25th July 2006 - 03:54 AM Last post by: Ashton Gray
Holidays for Teachers feeling stressed out?	5	Andy Walker	90	18th July 2006 - 11:50 AM Last post by: Jean Walker
Gary Mack suspension	12	Andy Walker	161	12th July 2006 - 05:29 PM Last post by: Andy Walker
Becta/NGFL	15	Andy Walker	281	2nd June 2006 - 02:39 PM Last post by: Andy Walker

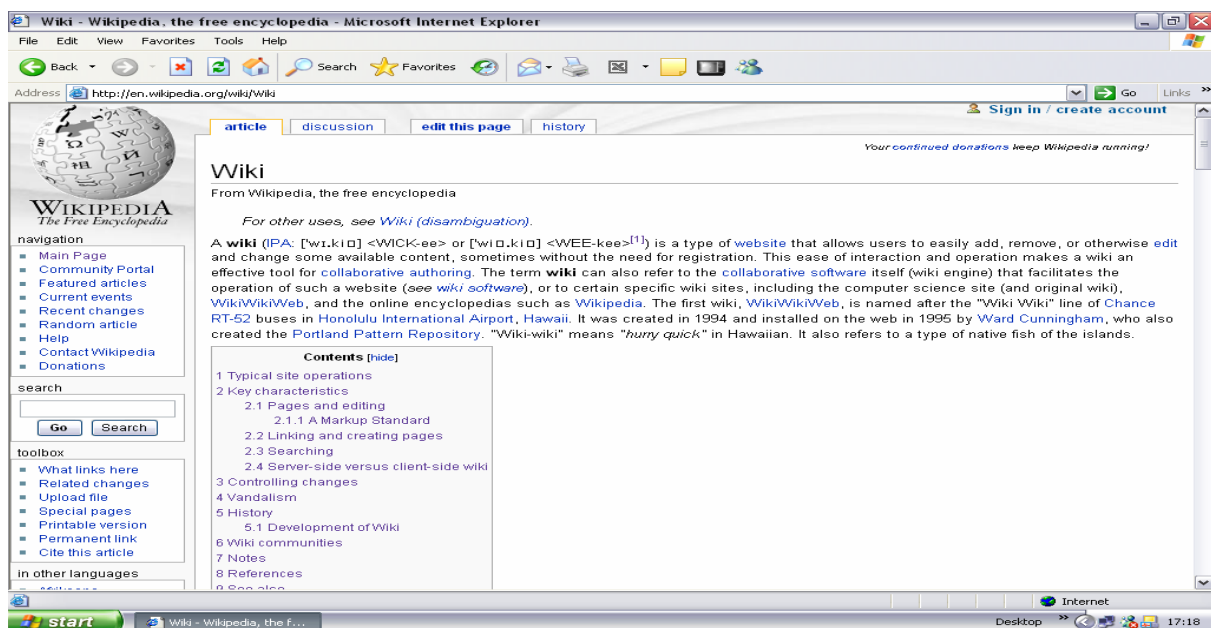
Typically, there is the potential to post a personal profile for each contributor (how much detail they include is up to them) and by clicking on their name, anyone can view it. Accessing the topic 'threads', allows you to read the 'history' of the discussion to date, and to respond to any observations made. Herein lies one of the key challenges from a teaching perspective. Whereas it is very positive that learners have the opportunity to share thoughts and experiences with one another, there is also the potential for abuse, either through a lack of acceptance of a differing perspective, or by the posting of offensive material. Monitoring and managing this environment regularly, therefore, becomes critical.

Chat rooms work in a similar way, but tend to be used in a dynamic fast-moving way, more like 'texting' on a mobile phone than the more considered discussion forum. This means that for an in-class situation 'chat' can be an engaging and motivational tool, as well as gathering some evidence of learning; whereas a forum may be better suited to a more considered developmental approach to the exchange of ideas and understanding.

Wikis

A Wiki (pronounced 'wicky') is a web site that allows a user to contribute to a discussion by not only adding text, but also by creating, editing and uploading other types of content. This is usually set up in such a way that no specialist software or knowledge is required. Once again, this raises issues of security, despite users having to be registered and agreeing to the terms and conditions of use. The screenshot from Wikipedia below, shows that you are offered the opportunity to 'edit the page' at the top or use the 'toolbox' at the side, for example, to upload files. Monitoring this kind of site is no easy matter.

Click below to explore Wikipedia, then, click Back on your browser to return here.

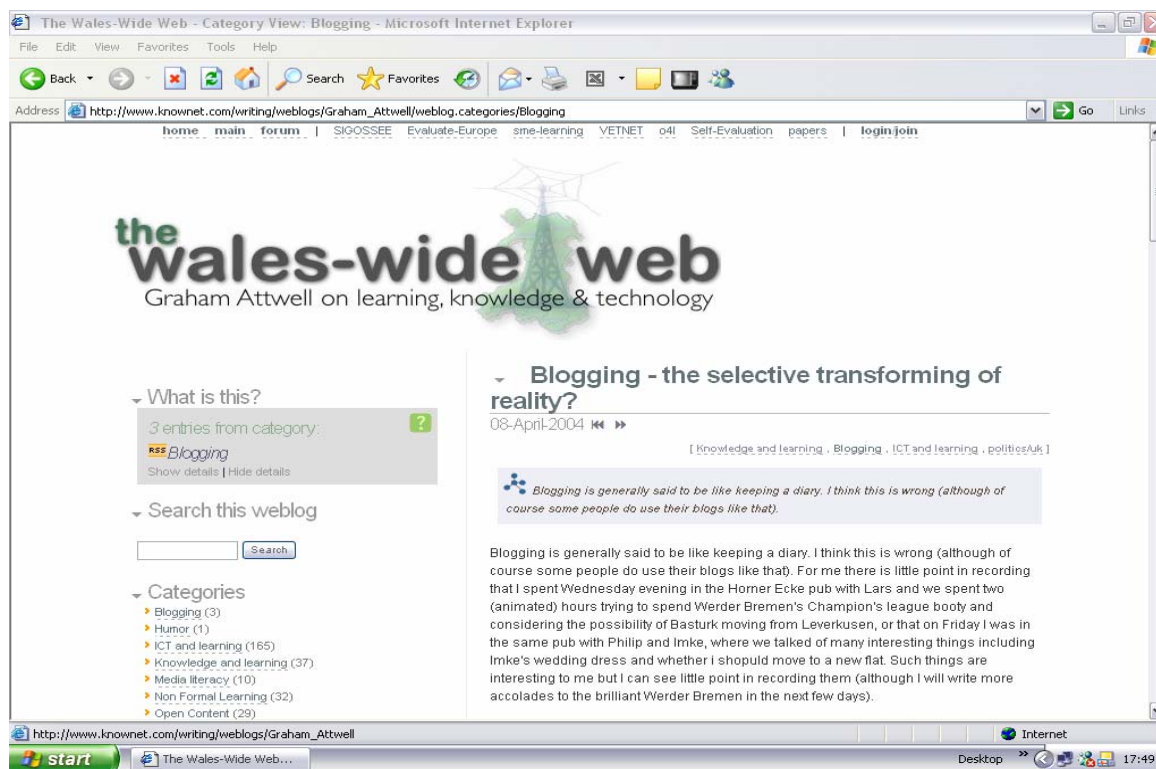


From a learning perspective, student involvement needs the assurance of the awareness that not everything they read is true or even accurate. The concept of *folksonomies* (where popular usage is redefining the meaning of words and terms constantly) has emerged partly through this type of communication sharing. This in itself is a challenge to traditional taxonomy, but again is open to abuse.

Blogs

This is short for 'web log', that is, web pages which are usually presented in a diary format, and represent an individual or group's perception of a topic of common interest. In effect, this could be quite similar to what one might find in a student's e-portfolio, for example, when they are reflecting on their learning, though this format allows you to upload many types of multimedia content file. Again, blogs allows for discussion, with responses, and 'threads', although not the ability to amend or edit the original in any way, as this remains the property of the originating author(s).

Click below to explore the Wales-wide Web, then, click Back on your browser to return here.



Once more, for learning, it is felt that this gives the student increased autonomy, time for reflection, provides evidence of distance traveled and encourages peer-to-peer interaction in a semi-structured context. Using blogs within a VLE, which would be a closed and safer environment to manage, is not always possible, due to a lack of interoperability (systems being able to 'talk' to one another). As a result, the concept of mobile blogs, or 'moblogs', has emerged, so that users can author their diaries, and upload them to the internet remotely via cellular phones or PDAs.

TASKS

1. Explore the sites shown on this sheet (or any others that might particularly interest you) that use these forms of communication.
2. What do you see as being the main advantages and disadvantages to each of them from a teaching and learning perspective?
3. Make a list of activities that you think could be supported by one of these communication channels, and how you would use them to support learning.

WEB LINKS

- An online forum concerning teaching and learning. <http://www.educationforum.co.uk/forum.html>
- Becta Communities area for links to on-line conferences, forums and discussion areas on education related issues. <http://forum.ngfl.gov.uk/>
- Cisco systems and the City of Stockholm online forum raising some of the issues surrounding online discourse. <http://nobel-summit.open.ac.uk/index.cfm>
- An Introduction To Wikis - QA Focus Briefing Document by UKOLN and AHDS for the JISC <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/qa-focus/documents/briefings/briefing-78/briefing-78-A5.doc>
- Examples of blogs through ACL <http://www.aclearn.net/display.cfm?page=1565>
- In Ariadne, Paul Trafford of the University of Oxford describes how mobile blogs may be related to organisational learning environments and draws on experiences from the RAMBLE Project. <http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue44/trafford/intro.html#top>

Places of further information

- ILT in Curriculum delivery using on-line forums – College of North West London Q Project Series 2 DVD ROM (LSDA)

CROSS REFERENCES TO OTHER INFORMATION SHEETS

- Unit 4 - 4.1.4
- Unit 9 - 9.3.1
- Unit 13