

# Medical writing teaching

## A novice's experiment with a wiki on a writing course

### A wiki? What is that?

The name 'wiki' was probably what attracted me most about using this e-learning tool in my teaching. As a New Zealander, I associated the word with the Maori terms 'waaka' (canoe) and 'tiki' (wooden carving) and of course just an odd way of spelling 'kiwi'. I thought that at the very least, I would feel some affinity for the wiki, even it proved challenging to use.

How wrong I was! At least for a good while, before I had experimented with the wiki on two writing courses. I am not the most technologically literate person, but I found it more difficult than expected to delve into the world of e-learning and to appear knowledgeable when explaining the wiki task to my students – and to feel confident that it would work.

A wiki is a series of linked pages on a website, where selected users can write freely and also edit and comment on other users' texts (it is the basis of Wikipedia). I used a wiki exercise as part of my lecturer's training course at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense. The university has made e-learning a priority within a framework of "active teaching and learning", where students are stimulated to be active in a way that generates in-depth learning and motivates both students and lecturers. During our one-year training course, we were to choose an e-learning tool and develop a project for our students that would facilitate their learning. The choice range was wide and included not just wikis but also podcasts, flipped learning, student-response systems, blogs, discussion forums, etc.

I teach academic writing to undergraduate students and PhD students, aiming to help them develop their writing skills to produce effective, scientifically sound, and ethical journal articles. One of the learning objectives is that the students can critically assess their own and other people's

manuscripts. This calls for an understanding of the required academic content, and format of a scientific journal article as well as the ability to present ideas and findings logically using common reporting standards and ethical publishing principles.

I thought it would be interesting to see if a collaborative wiki exercise could help the students to develop a list of items that should be checked before a manuscript is shared with others or submitted for publication. The aims of the task were to strengthen the individual student's ability to reflect on the quality and content of their text and to support them in identifying key elements of scientific manuscripts.

### Creating a wiki on an e-learning platform

It took me quite a while to understand how to set up the wiki and give others the opportunity to write in it, and indeed to see how to structure it. The encouragement and technical assistance from the IT consultants for the lecturer's training course were invaluable here! But then it was relatively easy to set it up in a format that gave the students a quick overview of the wiki structure and the freedom to add new items. I chose to use the wiki homepage to describe the purpose of the exercise and then created four new pages for different aspects of a manuscript (General layout, Language, Content, and Tables and figures). Each student was to add new items to the pages.

I was surprised at how much explanation was needed to describe the wiki exercise. Most of my students had never used a wiki, so I needed to:

- explain the purpose of the wiki exercise and how it related to the learning objectives
- give some examples of relevant items that could be added
- describe how to open and add wiki pages, and how to add items and comments
- provide deadlines for adding items and describe how we would work with the wiki during the course.

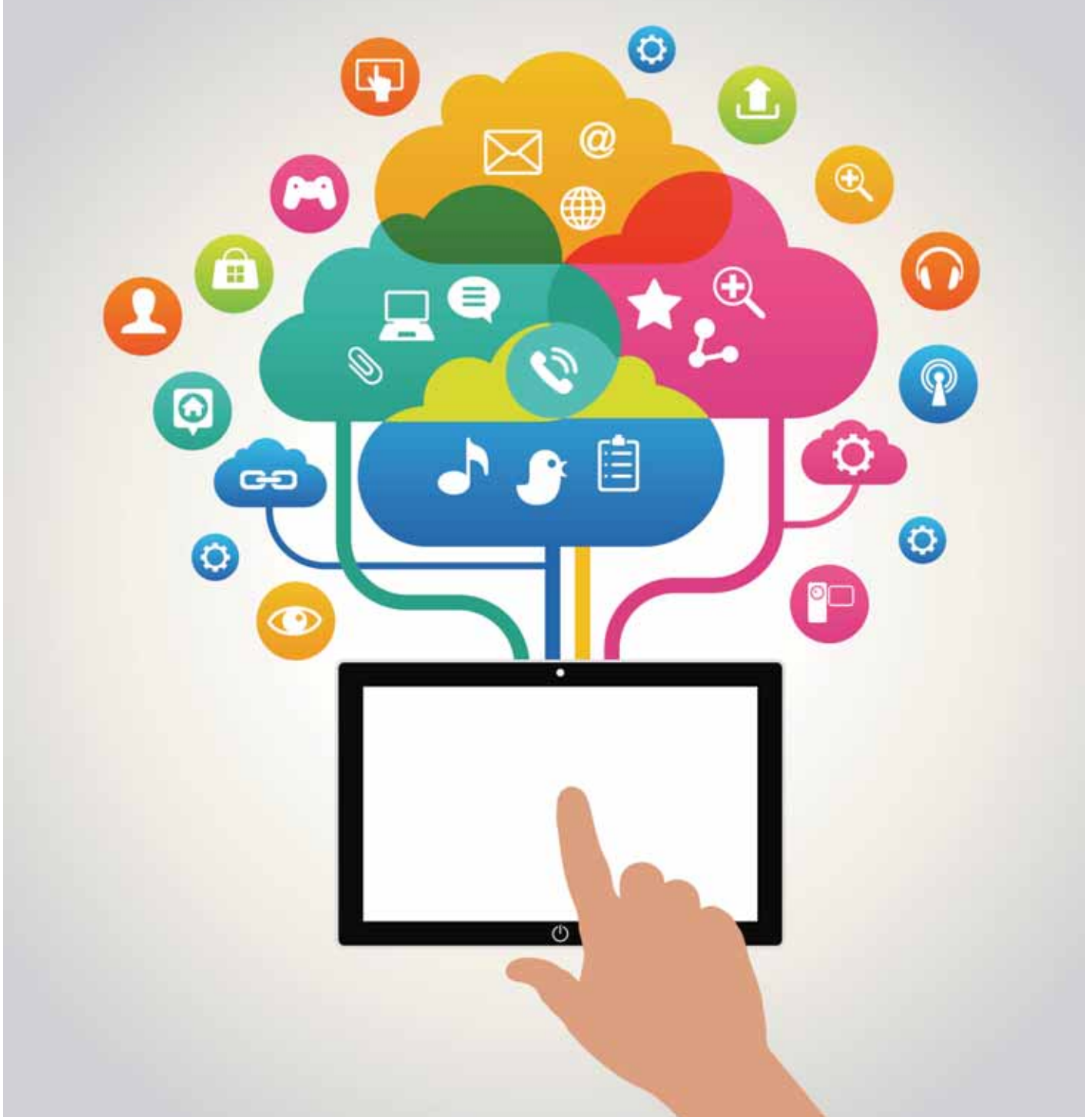
Although the students in the first writing course all added useful items to the wiki, there was little online discussion of each other's items and the students did not appear to actively use the checklist when reviewing one another's manuscripts in the final class session. I think the students hesitated to alter other students' items because they did not know each other before the course and came from different scientific backgrounds.<sup>1,2</sup> Although most students thought the exercise had been useful, and two said they had been inspired to create their own wiki checklist, it was also noted that the wiki checklist was too general. I realised that more class time should be spent on the wiki to utilise the students' varying scientific backgrounds and writing experiences.

In the second writing course, I explicitly asked the students to use the checklist while preparing their own manuscripts and then the final class session started with the students discussing the wiki checklist in small groups. This resulted in a much more lively discussion about the meaning and use of the wiki items and their relevance for different types of scientific manuscripts, and I think the students took greater ownership of the product. The written feedback from these students showed that the wiki exercise had been useful in assessing the quality of their own and others' manuscripts, and would be useful for their future manuscripts.

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## Conclusion

The wiki exercise helped open my eyes to the potential of e-learning activities. It was definitely harder than I expected, though. Not just because of the practicalities in understanding and setting up the exercise, but also because it requires you to think carefully about what you want to achieve with the activity. I spent much thought on how to inspire the students to participate actively in the exercise and thus benefit from the collaborative learning.

I think that in the end I succeeded in encouraging the students to reflect more critically and systematically over their own and others' manuscripts. In future classes though, I might experiment with a different

approach where small groups of students use an online discussion forum to jointly develop the wiki checklist, and then have the results discussed in class.

So perhaps my initial thoughts about the wiki were not so wrong after all. The approach can be tricky to handle effectively (like a canoe) and requires patience (like locating the shy, nocturnal kiwi) but after some practice, it can be mastered and used successfully as a learning tool. If others have any experience using wikis or other e-learning activities to teach (scientific) writing skills, I would very much like to hear about it.

## References

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2. Wheeler S, Wheeler D. Using wikis to promote quality learning in teacher training. *Learning, media and technology* 2009;34(1):1-10.

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