

## **Using a wiki for information services: principles and practicalities**

Peter Blake  
Electronic Services Librarian  
Australian Catholic University

Address for correspondence: PO Box 456, Virginia, QLD 4014, Australia.

E-mail: peter.blake@acu.edu.au

### **Abstract**

This article describes the process of setting up a wiki, both in installation and configuration, placing particular emphasis on community building and correct encapsulation of the desired scope of the wiki.

A prototype reference desk assistance wiki developed at ACU is demonstrated, which is, as far as we are aware, the first of its type in Australia. This system is rigorously evaluated to illustrate some of the pitfalls that colleagues may experience when constructing their own similar systems. In particular, we discuss the need to allocate time for editing, moderating, and "grooming" of the accumulated material.

The pros and cons of the wiki paradigm itself are also discussed, taking Wikipedia, including its recent controversies as an example. This are also contrasted with some professionally-run wikis to highlight the tensions between amateur and professionally-run reference services.

Finally, based on experiences at our institution, recommendations of other uses for which wikis may prove particularly well-suited are presented, and wikis are placed in the context of the current "state of the art" in information exchange technologies.

## **Introduction**

The McAuley campus of Australian Catholic University [ACU] serves 87 academic staff and 1,850 students (ACU, 2005). The campus library's reference desk manual comprises various printed materials useful for answering common enquiries. By 2005, the manual had grown to fill two A4 lever-arch files. Its indexing was inadequate and it contained a fair amount of out-of-date information. Standard practice was to pass on important changes via e-mail, word of mouth or sticky notes left at the reference desk.

It was felt that computerising the reference desk manual would lower the barriers to staff participation, thus improving the manual's accuracy and currency. It would also provide a search facility and the opportunity to introduce better structure and indexing. We additionally set ourselves the target that, when trained, a staff member should ideally find it as quick to change a page on the electronic manual as to locate a sticky note and write a message on it.

## **Why a wiki?**

The creator of the first wiki, Ward Cunningham, has defined a wiki as "the simplest online database that could possibly work" (Leuf & Cunningham, 2002, p.15). He took the name from the Hawaiian word for "fast", which was prominently displayed on local airport shuttles. Wikis are a rapidly maturing technology, and have often been in the headlines in recent years.

One pertinent argument in favour of using wikis to provide information services is that the most famous wiki, Wikipedia (Wikipedia, 2006a), is already functioning as a de-facto information service. This strongly suggests that there is something about the content, functionality, or workflows within Wikipedia that appeals to information seekers. As all wikis share the same workflow principles and basic levels of functionality, it seems probable that other wikis will appeal to information seekers in a similar fashion.

The fundamental difference between the design of a traditional webpage and that of a wiki page is that broken links are encouraged. A link to a page that does not exist is intercepted

and rendered by the wiki engine as a differently-coloured link that allows a user to create the missing page.

The life cycle of wiki pages is as follows:

- Text on the wiki page is edited to include as many relevant links as possible.
- Any linked pages that do not exist are created and filled in a minimum amount of useful content such as a definition of the subject. These minimal pages are known as *stubs*.
- The stubs are edited to contain more content, and are now regarded as fully-fledged pages.
- If a page gets too unwieldy to edit or read, its constituent parts can be placed on separate pages, which may give them room to expand further.

Each of these tasks can be performed by a different person or persons. Through this incremental process, the wiki is built and, if all goes well, “many hands make light work”.

As wikis are web-based and do not require special client software to operate, they are easily and globally accessible. Any subject page can be edited with a single click of the mouse, and these factors should together lead to information stored in a wiki being easy to keep up-to-date.

Low cost, high accessibility, and ease of collaboration, correction, and community building make wikis, which are after all a technology for information management, desirable for information services which often lack these qualities.

### **Planning and implementation**

The first and most important step in planning a wiki is to decide on what purpose it will serve. All future decisions can then be evaluated according to whether they help fulfill the purpose. The ACU wiki aimed to provide the same services as the existing reference desk manual to the same group of library staff.

Once you are clear on the specific purpose of your wiki, list all the features that you may need to fulfill that purpose. Common requirements are that the wiki allows the insertion of images and attached files, and that a version history of each page is kept, but you may also want tables, a specific syntax, the ability to lock particular users out of particular pages, or an RSS feed of recently updated pages.

Wiki pages are not stored as HTML, but as plain text with their own syntax that is converted to HTML when a page is requested. The conversion is performed by a set of scripts called the *wiki engine*. Other parts of the engine manage user logins, attached files, and administrative functions.

Select software that can provide you with all the features you need. The software will run using a combination of programming language (e.g. Perl, PHP) and database protocol (e.g. SQL) that need to be installed on your server. Be sure to budget for the purchase of any additional licences you need. Most wiki engines are open source, and the community bases of involved programmers often mean rapid development and feature addition free from commercial product release cycles. A related benefit is that open source software is available at no cost, though it may be difficult to obtain support at short notice.

To host our RefDeskEManual (as it was christened) at ACU, we opted to use the open-source wiki engine DominoWiki (Poole, 2006), which could run on our campus Lotus Notes server, as this would require minimal additional infrastructure and could be readily accessed by all staff involved in using or maintaining the manual.

After installing the wiki software, set up users and their access levels. You will need several administrators, but also decide whether you will require users to register with the wiki before being permitted to edit pages, or whether different pages will be available to different classes of users. Next, set up any pages with special functions, for example pages providing policy details, general chat, search, or help.

DominiWiki provides administrator privileges to anyone who is authorised to view the wiki through Lotus Notes (users access the wiki through a web interface). We set up two staff as administrators to provide some redundancy.

Wikis organised on an ad-hoc basis often build to-do lists of editing, grooming and moderating tasks for volunteers to complete. The task of maintaining our printed reference desk manual already belonged to one of our staff, so we put them in charge of these housekeeping tasks so the same division of labour would continue.

Clear understanding of the purpose of your wiki will assist in deciding on a central subject and what constitutes an irrelevant topic. The *scope* of your wiki will be all topics which you have not identified as irrelevant. If the scope of a wiki is very narrow, it may attract very few users and so not benefit from co-operative editing. If, however, the scope is very broad, the wiki may not accumulate a critical mass of useful material across the entire scope.

The initial structure of a wiki should be minimal and reflect both your desired central subject and scope. It should provide enough pages to provide a skeleton onto which all future content can be linked and from which additional ideas for content can spring. A structure that extends across the entire scope will indicate to users what the scope means in real terms and thus suggest to them in what directions you wish the wiki to grow.

Users should have the option of drilling down through the wiki's structure to the particular information they require as well as performing a search. If there is either too much or too little structure, users will be unable to browse to the information they desire because the route to take will, in both cases, be unclear. The problem of too much structure we might call *the Theseus problem*, with the mental picture of our hero lost in the labyrinth, unsure which path will lead him to his goal. He thus has no choice but to repeatedly guess at the right route and retrace his steps when he realises he has gone wrong. The problem of too little structure we might call *the Tarzan problem*, with the mental picture of our hero finding that there are no more vines to swing on between him and his goal. He is thus forced to attempt to reach his goal via a highly circuitous route.

An audit of the existing manual was performed and a list of the topics it covered drawn up. We then constructed a loose hierarchy to encompass all these topics, based on our existing categories for collecting enquiry statistics to ensure it would be familiar to our

users. We added links between information commonly related in the minds of staff, and between enquiry types that commonly masquerade as each other. Finally, we ensured that no information was hidden too far down in the hierarchy and added welcome text to the index page to further lower any barriers to participation.

Because wikis grow through the collaboration of many interested parties, a wiki cannot function without a community and should not be considered separate from it. As far as it is practical, work to foster a sense of ownership among the community. This will involve planned programs of advertising and demonstration. The administrators should also continue to contribute to the project after the initial setup to maintain good working relationships with other users.

Users must learn a unique syntax to successfully contribute to the majority of wikis. It is very different to HTML and, more importantly, is not WYSIWYG (“what you see is what you get”). This is a significant intimidating factor for users without a natural inclination towards IT, which goes a long way towards explaining the prevalence of computer science and mathematics pages and all manner of lists on Wikipedia.

To facilitate the speedy addition of information to a page, we decided to adapt the prior practice of using sticky notes in lieu of altering the printed manual, and ask users to place any urgent additions at the bottom of the wiki page, eliminating the need to spend time looking for the best location on a page to add new information and reducing the amount of wiki syntax users needed to know to fully participate. This, however, increases the already-present need to “groom” the content on wiki pages, which is done by folding comments that are still pertinent into the main text of pages, and monitoring their length. To make it easy to scan pages by eye, we tried to avoid having any pages in our wiki that were more than one screen long.

A person’s view of human nature, and specifically the nature of the users of a wiki, directly affects whether that person sees the wiki as being bound for anarchy, utopia, or fated to oscillate somewhere in between. The result of mass collaboration can either be a vicious circle or a virtuous circle.

As time passes and entropy takes hold, it is inevitable that inappropriate, incorrectly placed or cluttered information would appear in our wiki. We prepared for this by scheduling time each week to examine the system-generated list of recently altered pages and review each page on the list.

Examples of our manual's appearance when converted can be found in Figures 1 and 2.

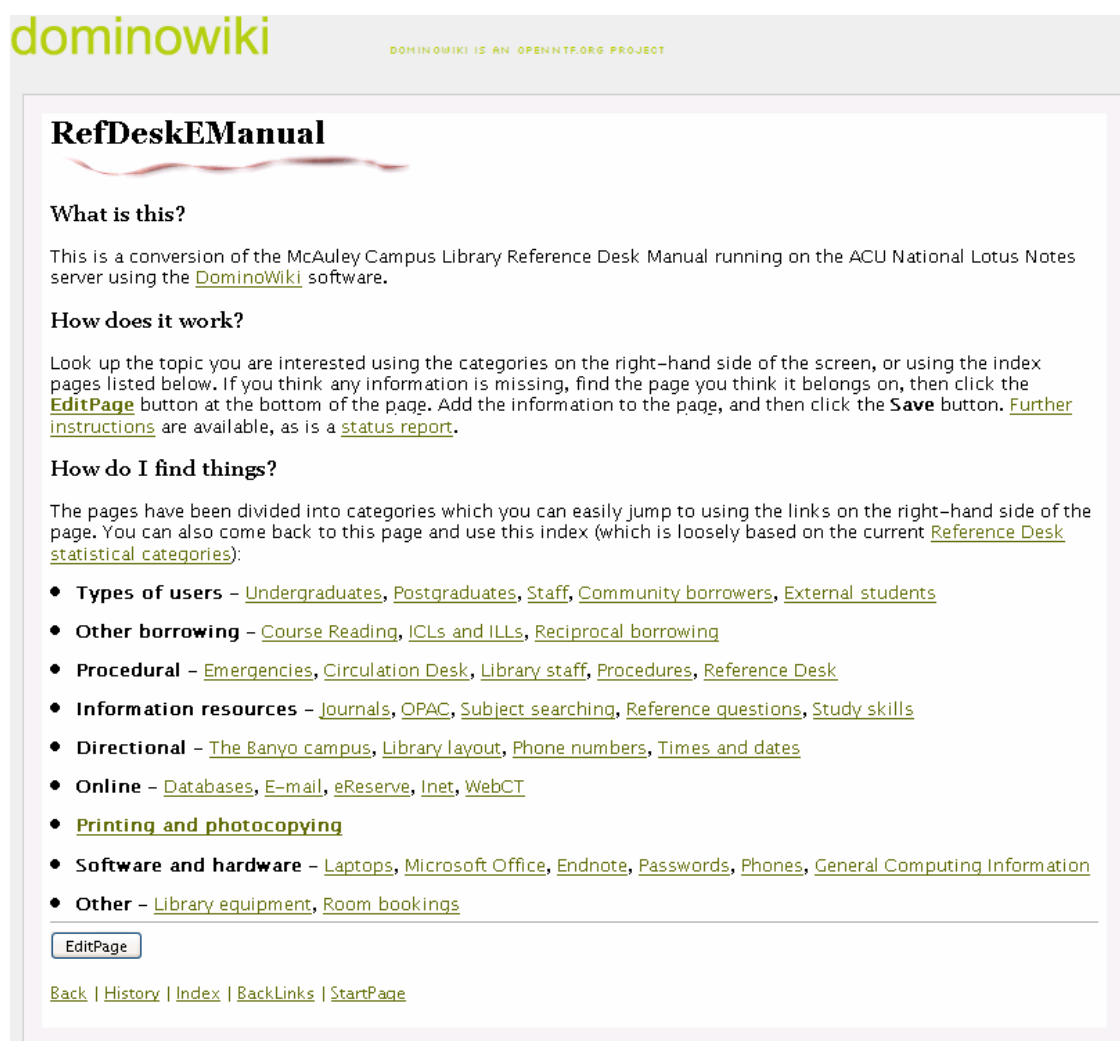


Figure 1 - RefDeskEManual home page

## Closing Procedures

### Loans Desk

#### Make Closing announcements:

- 30 mins before: "Attention please, the library will be closing at 9 o'clock. The service desks, photocopying and printing will close in 20 mins."
- 15 mins before: "The loans desk is about to close, please bring your loans to the desk now."
- 5 mins before: "The library is closing now, make your way to the exit."

Then..

- Close down PC's (including Discharge).
- Turn off [Self Check Unit](#)
- Lock front doors (two separate keys in Loans Desk drawer - turn to Lock).
- Gate Count (P figure recorded in Green Folder)
- Switch phone to [Voicemail](#) (CfwdAll then 7373)
- Turn off all lights at main switchboard in workroom except [Level B](#) Staff Area. Turn off switches at pillar (workroom lights) near entry to [CirculationDesk](#). *N.B. Security lights on Level A remain on.*
- Exit via rear door.

### Reference Desk

*Check carefully for patrons as you:*

#### Level C -

- Close down [OPACs](#) (3) (ctrl,alt,delete - shutdown).
- Study/seminar rooms - Close down PCs (4) (Rooms LC -02, 03, 04 & 07) (ctrl,alt,delete - shutdown). Turn off all lights and close all doors. [IC Annex](#) should already be locked.

#### Level A -

- Close down [OPACs](#) (3) (ctrl,alt,delete - shutdown).
- Turn off light and close door to [Photocopy Room](#).
- Check that doors to Technical Services are locked.

#### Level B -

- Turn off monitors in row 3, 4 & 5 (both sides) of [Information Commons](#)
- Check Toilets..

[EditPage](#)

[Back](#) | [History](#) | [Index](#) | [BackLinks](#) | [StartPage](#)

Figure 2 - RefDeskEManual content page

## Evaluation

<a couple of introductory sentences>

DominoWiki did not contain support for tables or, due to our choices at installation, for viewing previous versions of pages, the lack of which made the conversion of the print material more difficult. We also found it difficult to decide whether to link to information not maintained by the library or to mirror it within the wiki. Linking to external pages means we would always be linking to the most current version of the information, but the ability to annotate the page is lost and we would still have to monitor for broken links in lieu of monitoring for changed content.

We also severely under-estimated the time it would take to enter and link together the existing information. Sourcing electronic copies of pages that were clearly word-processed took almost the same amount of time as keying them ourselves. In all, the time needed was around 45 minutes per full A4 page.

The next stage of the ACU wiki project was to train all reference desk staff in the syntax and workflows of the wiki, ensure that these workflows and the wiki itself were robust under normal use conditions, and expand the scope of the wiki to cover our other five campuses. To deal with campus-specific details, we planned to use subpages (wiki pages of the form *PageName/CampusName*) or namespaces, where users on each campus logs in and the engine automatically serves campus-specific information as and when required.

These plans also demonstrate another error we made in our choice of engine: due to the configuration of our Lotus Notes servers, it would have been necessary to migrate to another wiki engine in order to provide cross-campus access for staff or any access for students. Migration between wiki engines is difficult because there are subtle differences in syntax between engines and so special programming is required to automate the process.

The ACU wiki project was ultimately superseded by the institution-wide implementation of RefTracker (Altarama Information Systems, 2006). RefTracker offers a collaborative knowledge base, and tracking of specific enquiries and response times. These statistics are particularly important as evidence of the value of our information service, and it would be difficult for a wiki to provide them.

### **Amateur reference services versus professional reference services**

There are three main elements involved in offering an information service, namely accurate determination of user need, timely gathering of the information necessary to fulfil part or all of that need, and accurate communication of the information back to the user. It is pertinent to ask in what ways amateur-run services can be, or are, interchangeable with those run by professionals.

Wikipedia was started in 2001 by Jimmy Wales & Larry Sanger (Wikipedia, 2006b, para. 2) and currently contains approximately 1.45 million articles in English (Statistics, 2006). As an encyclopedia, Wikipedia has no central subject, but also has an incredibly wide scope. There are very few topics that are considered irrelevant, as a few clicks on its “random article” link (Random article, 2006) will demonstrate.

Wikipedia offers a reference desk service (Wikipedia: Reference desk, 2006) which appears to be working quite well and have fairly knowledgeable people answering the questions. In the area of humanities (Wikipedia: Reference desk/Humanities, 2006), there were 431 recorded answered questions and no recorded unanswered questions during September 2006. Reading a sample of the questions and answers gives the impression that users were satisfied with the answers they received.

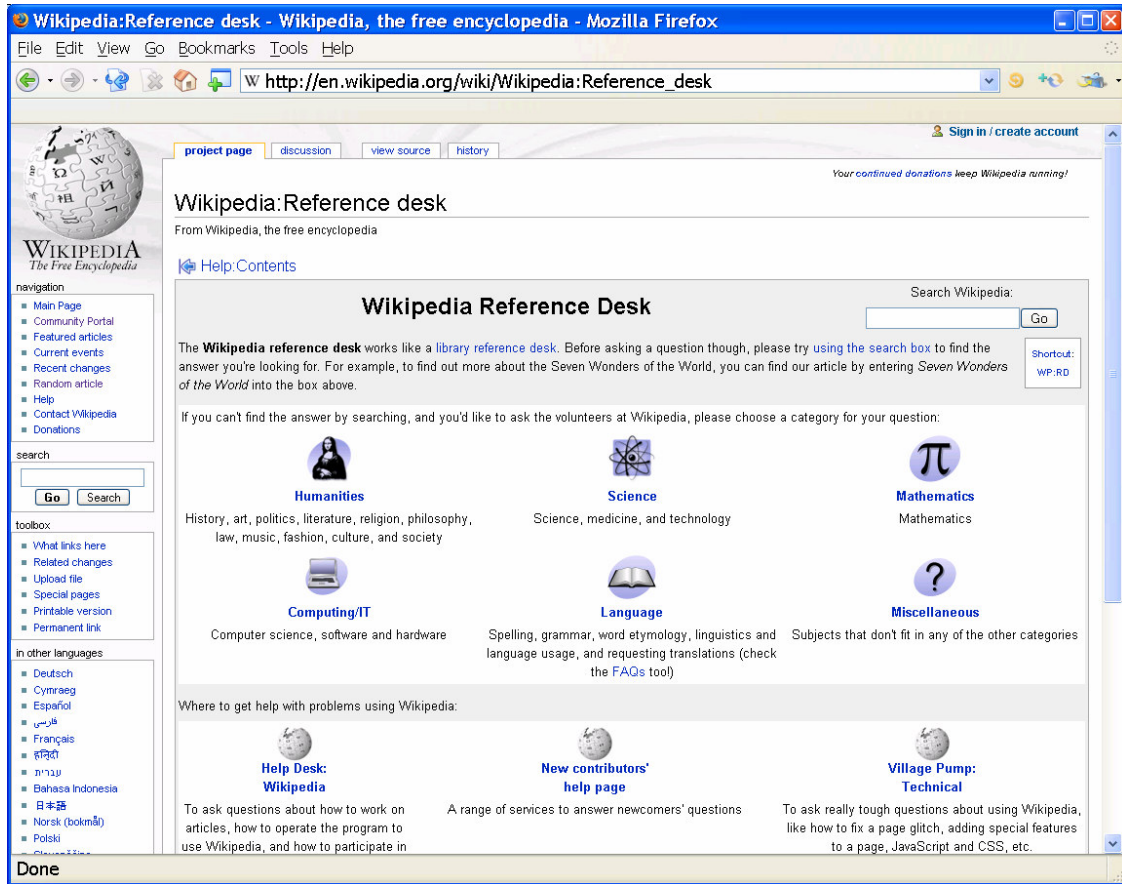


Figure 3 – Wikipedia’s reference desk (Wikipedia: Reference desk, 2006)

Oregon State University (Figure 4) and Butler University in Indianapolis (Figure 5) are both using wikis to provide information services to their clients.

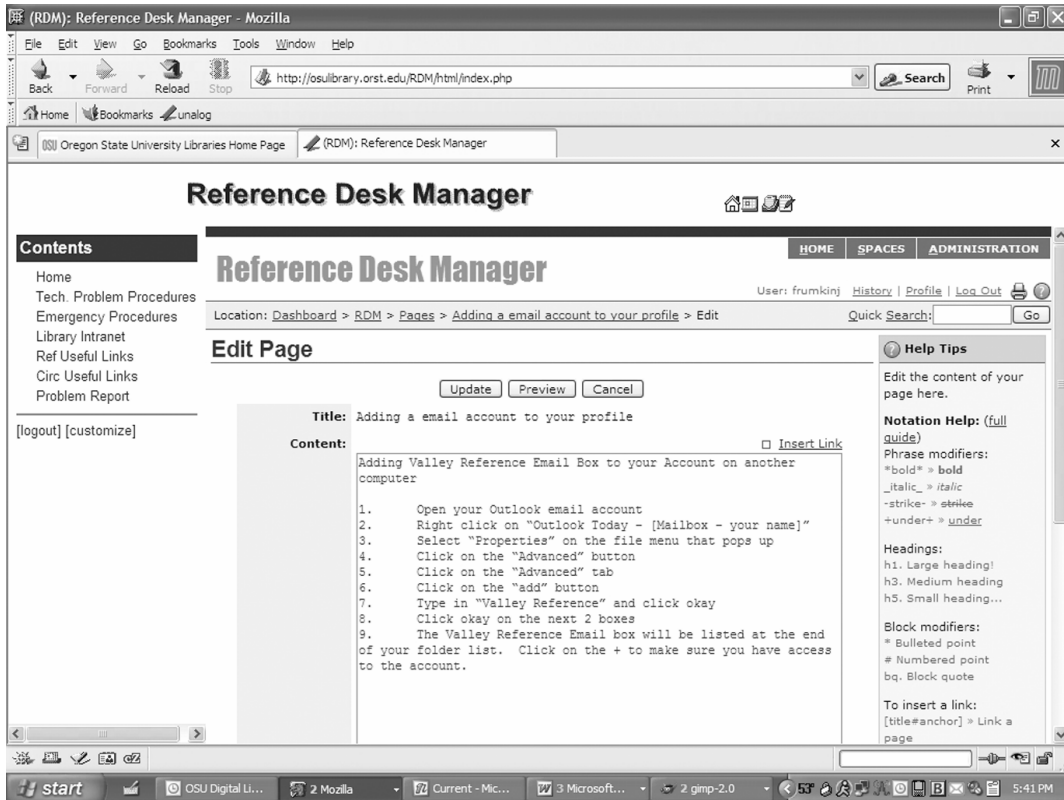


Figure 4 - Oregon State University's Reference Desk Manager (Frumkin, 2005, p. 20)

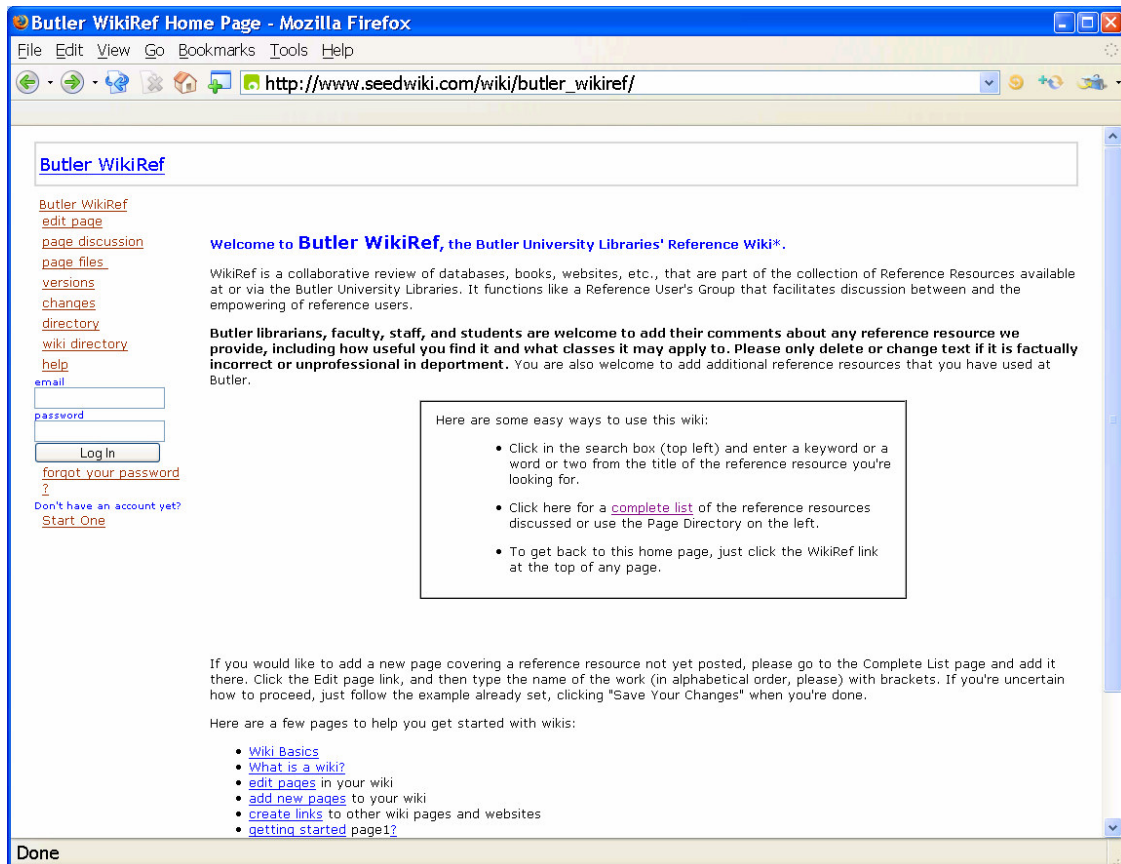


Figure 5 - Butler University's Butler WikiRef (Butler WikiRef, 2006)

WikiRef stops short of being a comprehensive information service, instead describing itself as a “collaborative review of ... Reference Resources” (Butler WikiRef, 2006) It is institution-specific and provides a niche service. By limiting itself to issues of information accessibility and suitability, it addresses a subset of the questions that its users will ask. In this way, it resembles the Wikipedia reference desk. On the other hand, it should be clear that this is not the only information service that Butler provide. As professionals, we are collectively committed to answering as many questions as possible, regardless of their difficulty or obscurity. By their very nature, there is no such commitment on the part of voluntary services.

In his blog, Pomerantz directly addresses librarians and takes a seemingly pragmatic stance on Wikipedia as a reference source:

There has been quite enough ... moaning about Wikipedia ... Because it exists, naïve users are going to use [it] ... We're the ones with vast experience in evaluating the quality and reliability of information sources. Conclusion: it's our professional responsibility to make Wikipedia a reliable information source. (Pomerantz, 2005, paras. 8-9)

However, to characterise the users of Wikipedia as “naïve” is unhelpful even if it is true, and given Wikipedia's anti-expert bent and the awareness that their contributions could be overwritten on a whim, it would be completely understandable if the providers of traditional reference services felt reticent to contribute to it or other similar wikis.

Larry Sanger, one of the founders of Wikipedia, has recently announced plans to launch a “Citizendium” (short for “citizen's compendium”) which will couple a wiki development system with a process for approving snapshots of the wiki pages that a relevant expert considers to be of good quality (Sanger, 2006, III.3). The latest snapshots will be presented to users, who can then access the dynamic wiki pages if they wish (Sanger, I.3). While an intriguing concept, it remains to be seen whether this adaptation of the standard wiki workflows can successfully produce a wealth of reliable content.

The global reach of the Internet enables diverse and dispersed groups of people with a common interest to collaborate, sometimes referred to as the “long tail” (Anderson, 2004). Wikis provide a shared workspace and the ability for users to simply correct one another, tersely expressed in the maxim that “given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow.” (Raymond, 2000, para. 1)

It has been argued that the open nature of wikis constitutes a rebellion against control by “an exclusive group of experts” (Lipczynska, 2005, p. 6) and in the wiki paradigm there is an implicit presumption that collective editing will arrive at the truth and/or a balanced exposition unaided. Wikipedia does have dispute resolution processes and other self-management measures in place (Wikipedia: Resolving disputes, 2006), but the resulting content shows they are often ineffective at preventing bias or low-quality articles (Redler, 2006). At worst, letting anyone contribute regardless of their ability, temperament or

knowledge can turn a wiki into a mosh pit rather than providing safety in numbers and space for consensus to develop.

In general, it is possible for users to delete or deface any part of a wiki, which is a particular problem for institutions, whose reputation may be harmed if they are perceived to be endorsing inaccurate or libelous content. One long-time Wikipedia contributor states that its “articles need to be watched all the time for vandalism” (van der Linde, 2006, para. 18). As a case in point, DJs on Brisbane’s Triple M have recently been commentating on the latest vandalism of Karl Stefanovic’s Wikipedia entry (e.g. Karl Stefanovic, 2006), and when one user was banned for doing this repeatedly, offered him their on-air congratulations (A. Blake, personal communication, October 29, 2006). Other vandals sadly need no such incitement.

An *edit war* occurs when a small number of people squabble over the content of a page and repeatedly edit it or reverse other people’s changes in an attempt to have the page reflect their point of view (Wikipedia: Edit war, 2006). Controversial public figures are magnets for this behaviour e.g. George W. Bush (George W. Bush, 2006). Wikipedia encourages the principle of “be bold” to overcome plateaus in article quality (Wikipedia: Be bold in updating pages, 2006, para. 2), but this same boldness also brings its own problems. Squatting (dogged persistence in reverting any changes to a page that you disagree with) often wins out over knowledge or “common sense”.

Wikis have no external guarantees of quality, which had led many experts to have a lack of confidence in material hosted on wikis. Robert McHenry, former editor-in-chief of the Encyclopedia Britannica, describes Wikipedia as “entirely faith-based” (McHenry, 2004, para. 27), while librarian Karen Schneider bluntly says “I check wikis myself. Then I go find information I can trust” (Schneider, 2004, para. 3).

Support costs, an atmosphere hostile to experts, vandalism, edit wars, quality issues, and a unique syntax present major financial, management and training issues for information services. The trustworthiness of a reference service derives both from the positive perception of its staff and from the accuracy of its responses, and careful planning is needed to ensure that these qualities can be maintained in a wiki.

## **Closing remarks**

A wiki is a simply-structured online database which stands or falls by the quality of its community. Wikis require careful planning and management in order to remain effective. In a wiki, expertise is not by default provided with a privileged position.

There are a number of reasons why a wiki might not prove to be the most appropriate solution to a given problem. Fields in which relevant information changes very slowly, and for which a delay in updating when a change occurs is acceptable will not benefit from the main advantages of a wiki. Wikis are at best democratic and at worst anarchic, so promote two-way information flows and do not promote strong divisions between information providers and information consumers. Determining who contributed what to a given page is possible but is hard without close examination of the page's history. Its constituent parts are always at different stages of completion or quality, so no wiki can ever be regarded as complete. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, the temptation to use a wiki simply because the technology is in vogue should be resisted.

At ACU, we are still interested in pursuing the use of a wiki and remain on the lookout for an appropriate opportunity to do so. Within a group of information services staff, wikis would be well-suited for managing information that needs continual irregular updates by a number of users, as a knowledge base of information that cannot usefully be arranged into a strong hierarchy, or as a means of producing documents representing the consensus of a group, particularly when artifacts of the discussion structure (such as e-mail or bulletin board threads) might otherwise render the consensus opaque.

If a wiki is open for contributions by both information services staff and their clients, much insight into clients' thoughts and behaviours can be gained. Allowing users to comment on each other's problems enables those users reluctant to admit they have a similar problem to do so, and the strength of comments demonstrates how much weight users place on obtaining a solution. When users attempt to solve each other's problems, it enables us to learn what solutions or strategies are actually in use, and then either provide targeted corrections when these solutions are inadequate or adopt the solutions when they are

superior to what we would have suggested. The dialogue also opens another route by which staff can receive suggestions for improvement from users. There is also an added benefit in that the invitation to participate, whether explicitly stated or left implicit, demonstrates that users' input is valued and so builds loyalty.

Wikis belong firmly in the current crop of information exchange technologies that provide abstractions away from HTML and static pages. The emergence of these technologies at this moment in history is a reflection of the increasing speed at which users want to send and receive information, and their increasing desire for independence from authority. To be judged positively relative to these user expectations, our information services are going to have to become much more sophisticated and nimble. Wikis are a useful technology with much untapped potential that can help achieve both these goals.

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