



# Getting Ready to Wiki

**F**or many years, interactivity on the Web was limited to clicking, browsing, reading, and searching through Web sites and online databases. Web users were passive consumers of online information. However, the original vision and promise of the Web, according to Tim Berners-Lee, developer of the World Wide Web, was the possibility of its providing collaborative online spaces where “we can all meet and read and write” (Carvin, 2005, p. 1). Today, the Web facilitates a new age of participation that is closer to Berners-Lee’s original intent, inviting users to participate, co-create, edit, and collaborate, rather than merely consume (Lamb, 2004). We have moved from a read-only Web (Web 1.0) to the read-write Web (Web 2.0).

Web 2.0 tools, such as blogs, wikis, social networking software, media sharing, and others, have been instrumental in shifting the Web to its new identity as a collaborative work space, or digital commons, where “we can all meet to read and write.” The digital commons is having an impact in online classrooms, as educators begin to take advantage of free services and the variety of online collaborative tools available. Online educators now have an expanded tool set to support student-centered instruction and collaborative learning. Online students are no longer restricted to passive browsing, page reading, message posting, and other individual learning activities. In the digital commons, online students have the capacity to become collaborative partners in the knowledge-building process.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ONLINE LEARNING

The timing couldn't be more perfect. Learners in the twenty-first century have been Web consumers for much of their lives, and are now demanding online instruction that supports participation and interaction. They want learning experiences that are social and that will connect them with their peers. They expect activities and content to be relevant to the real world (Beldarrain, 2006). Today's learners expect more than online lectures or one-way communications. Activities that promote interaction and collaboration with their peers are becoming an integral part of how students learn. As a result, many educators are moving away from instructor-centered methods of teaching to more contextual learning and real-world problem-solving techniques. The new Web provides the tools and technologies that can support educators in creating a rich, collaborative learning atmosphere in their online classrooms (Lightner, Bober, & Willi, 2007).

Although some first-generation Web tools such as e-mail, chat, and threaded discussion have allowed for effective online course communication, it has often been a challenge to collaborate using these tools (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). Web 2.0 applications have greater potential for building online collaborative learning communities. Wikis, in particular, are showing great promise for enhancing online learning. Within a wiki, learners possessing little or no knowledge of HTML can collaboratively use, create, and modify Web content. The learning curve for using wikis is generally low, and learning groups given assignments with a solid purpose and clear structure have a high capacity for quickly engaging in knowledge construction, critical thinking, and contextual learning. Although wikis do not replace first-generation communication tools, they extend the online classroom beyond its current limits and boundaries. Online educators are taking notice, and the number adopting wikis grows exponentially every day (Godwin-Jones, 2003).

Before jumping on the wiki bandwagon, educators need to consider the implications these tools will have for both learning and the curriculum. It is important to consider how the available tools differ and how they can be incorporated into the classroom. Educators also need to be familiar with the wiki concept in order to make informed choices when selecting a particular wiki service or software tool. In this chapter, we address the advantages and disadvantages of wiki technology and pose critical questions to consider before you make the leap to integrating wikis into your online course.

## WHAT IS A WIKI?

A wiki is an online collaborative writing tool. As defined earlier, a wiki is a “collaborative web space where anyone can add content and anyone can edit content that has already been published” (Richardson, 2006, p. 8). Wikis are designed to help groups collaborate, share, and build online content, and are especially useful for distance learners who are separated by time and place. Wikis present an approach to group writing and editing that is more efficient than forwarding e-mail attachments with tracked changes, a method that supports only one editor at a time and can create issues with students having multiple and conflicting versions of the same document. Wiki documents are available for editing and commenting to all members at all times. No one has to wait for a current file to be forwarded to them. It is easy to track each person’s contributions and to maintain a record of all changes and edits (Waters, 2007). Anyone with access, permission, and a Web browser can contribute to a wiki. Members of a wiki can both add new pages and edit existing pages. Many wikis also offer extended editing capabilities and features that enable file sharing, commenting, and embedded discussion.

Although the concept of wikis has been around for many years, the first true wiki, called WikiWikiWeb, was created by Ward Cunningham in 1995 (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). Cunningham used the word *wiki*, derived from the Hawaiian word for “quick,” to mean a collection of Web pages that can be edited by anyone. Cunningham was inspired by early hypertext programs like HyperCard, but it wasn’t until the development of the World Wide Web that he was able to create the first wiki.

Perhaps the most well-known wiki is Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)). Wikipedia is a free online encyclopedia with completely open content: nearly every article can be edited by anyone. Since its introduction in 2001, Wikipedia has grown to be the most popular general reference work on the Web. Although there is controversy over the accuracy of its content, there is no doubt of the collaborative nature of Wikipedia. In recent years, the founders of Wikipedia have partnered with other organizations to create the Wikimedia Foundation ([wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/Home](http://wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/Home)), a nonprofit organization designed to create multiple open-content sites created using wikis, and to provide those sites to the public free of charge. One of these projects is Wikiversity ([www.wikiversity.org](http://www.wikiversity.org)), which allows users to create, edit, and share resources across multiple disciplines for use in online learning.

## **Wikis Versus Other Asynchronous Communication Tools**

Wikis are similar to other types of online communication tools, such as blogs and threaded discussions, in that these are all asynchronous forms of communication. In asynchronous communication, contributions are made not in real time but at different times. The similarities end there, however. Blogs, for example, are generally posted by a single author and may or may not invite user comments, yet wikis are specifically designed for multiple authors and group collaboration. Blog messages are posted with a linear construction, displayed chronologically, and typically present no opportunities for other users to edit previous posts. Threaded discussions also support the posting of messages from multiple contributors and, like wikis, can be designed as a means of sharing ideas, providing feedback, and generating conversation around a particular topic. Threaded discussion postings are static, however, and users can only elaborate on existing messages. Wiki pages, conversely, are dynamic and allow participants to add to, change, and even delete someone else's contribution.

## **Wikis Versus Blogs**

A blog, short for Weblog, allows users to create a personal Web site and is an easy tool to implement in online learning. Blogs are well suited to such online activities as reflection, creative expression, and journaling. Most blogs are personal or journalistic. Like wikis, blogs have the potential to expand beyond the boundaries of the online classroom in ways that allow learners to collaborate with learners, experts, practitioners, and other members of a global audience (Godwin-Jones, 2003). There are clear distinctions, however, between these two tools. Blog postings are made in a chronological sequence, with the most recent entries typically displayed at the top of the page. Wikis are organized more dynamically than blogs, with the grouping of information determined by new entries, hyperlinked concepts, and collaboratively determined structures. Further, a blog is typically managed by a single person, who has primary responsibility for the content and structure of the site. Wiki ownership is distributed and shared among all of its contributing members. Finally, and most importantly, blog postings typically cannot be modified, whereas wiki contributions are open for editing.

## **Wikis Versus Threaded Discussions**

Threaded discussion is a mainstay of online course communications. In a threaded discussion, users access a public discussion topic or thread, post

messages, and reply to the messages of others. All users who have access to the thread can read the messages. Wikis, similar to discussion forums, provide students with opportunities to elaborate on topics in an asynchronous manner. Both tools have a transparent structure that is visible to all users (Chase, 2007). As is also the case with blogs, however, once messages are posted to a threaded discussion, they typically cannot be edited, except by the original author or discussion administrator. This creates a critical difference between threaded discussions and wikis. Whereas threaded discussion supports elaboration of individual concepts and ideas, wikis allow for students' concepts and ideas to be integrated with those of the rest of the class through collaborative editing (Farabaugh, 2007). Instead of limiting users to adding to another student's contribution, the wiki opens the door to brainstorming, group problem solving, critical evaluation, synthesis, idea refinement, and group consensus.

Wikis have the potential to be more suitable than blogs or threaded discussions for supporting online collaboration, especially among learning teams with a specific, shared goal ("Educator's Guide," 2006). In online courses, blogs and discussion boards are best used as communication tools, while the wiki serves as the learning team's collaborative work space. The overall purpose of a wiki is to support the team's needs for building a shared understanding of a topic, goal, or objective; to support team processes such as planning, research, and problem solving; and to create team outcomes through a shared document or set of documents. Exhibit 1.1 summarizes the differences between wikis, blogs, and threaded discussions.

**Exhibit 1.1**  
**Comparison of Asynchronous Communication Tools**

<b>Wikis</b>	<b>Blogs</b>	<b>Threaded Discussions</b>
Collaborative authorship	Single author	Multiple authors
Dynamic	Static	Static
Nonlinear and multipage construction	Linear construction	Threaded construction

## **To Wiki or Not to Wiki . . . ?**

As an online instructor, you can choose from many online tools to support your class activities. Keep in mind, however, that your choices do not have to be exclusive. Using a wiki does not mean you have to abandon blogs, threaded discussions, or other useful tools. You can use a wiki in combination with these tools, matching the strengths and features of each with the requirements of the activity at hand.

Wikis are best suited for collaborative activities, especially those that are dynamic and nonlinear in construction and will result in a shared product or outcome. You could choose a wiki for a noncollaborative activity, such as a private journal, but a blog would be more suitable for this type of personal reporting. A threaded discussion could allow for open discussion and limited collaboration, but a wiki would provide more flexibility for students who must work together to develop a group project. The following are examples of activities that lend themselves well to collaboration in a shared wiki:

- Your learners are building an archive of resources on a particular topic.
- Your learners are exploring different sides of an issue by means of a debate.
- Your learners need to work together to create a unified project, such as a collaborative research paper or media design project.

Although it is possible to build an entire online course within a wiki, it is not recommended. It can be much more powerful to combine the collaborative nature of the wiki with other online course tools. For example, if you adopt a wiki to support a collaborative activity, such as an online debate, learners could construct and edit the two sides of the debate in the wiki, share opinions and summarize issues that were addressed in the debate in a threaded discussion topic, and vote on which side “won” the debate in an interactive survey or poll. You could also provide additional links to course materials or outside resources.

## **TYPES OF WIKIS**

Once you have decided to use a wiki, where do you find the one that will work best with your online course? Wikis are available through a wide variety of services and open-source software tools, and generally fall into three categories, each with its own set of strengths and limitations:

- Free wiki services
- Fee-based wiki services
- Self-hosted wikis

## **Free Wiki Services**

Free wiki services are available at no cost through a wiki provider, such as Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>) or WetPaint ([www.wetpaint.com](http://www.wetpaint.com)). Wiki pages are hosted and accessed from the wiki service's Web servers and require no local software installation. They are usually very easy to set up and administer. Most free services limit the number of members that can edit the wiki or the number of pages that can be created, but most offer a reasonable amount of storage space for getting started with small wiki projects. Many free services have the option of alerting the administrator whenever a page on the wiki has been edited. Free services tend to have limited administrative capabilities, however, particularly when it comes to passwords, security, and controlling access to individual wiki pages or folders.

## **Fee-Based Wiki Services**

Fee-based wikis are also hosted and accessed from the wiki service's Web servers. These services offer expanded features based on the type of subscription you select. Features may include more advanced management capabilities, more storage, or added security. In addition, fee-based services typically allow a larger, or even unlimited, number of members and pages. Most subscription services allow the administrator to add and link groups, and to control user access to specific pages in the wiki. Like the free wiki services, fee-based wikis are often very easy to use, requiring minimal technical experience and no software installation. On the downside, subscription services incur a monthly or annual cost, and you must keep subscriptions up to date in order to maintain administrative controls.

## **Self-Hosted Wikis**

Wiki software can also be installed directly on a personal or campus-controlled server space. A variety of free, open-source wiki software is available for download from the Internet, for example, MediaWiki ([www.mediawiki.org/wiki/MediaWiki](http://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/MediaWiki)) and TWiki ([www.twiki.org/](http://www.twiki.org/)). Self-hosting a wiki allows for maximum control over access and security, and typically provides much more storage

space than is available through free or fee-based services. This approach, however, can have clear disadvantages for online educators. You must first have the server space allotted to the wiki. You must also have the necessary technical expertise to customize and administer the software. Self-hosted wikis may also require additional end-user training, depending on the unique requirements of the wiki software. Exhibit 1.2 summarizes the strengths and limitations of the different types of wiki services.

**Exhibit 1.2**  
**Strengths and Limitations of Wiki Services**

Free Services	Fee-Based Services	Self-Hosting
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Strengths</b>
No cost	Advanced management capabilities	Usually allow maximum amount of control
Quick start-up	Added security	More secure
Easy to monitor	Large or unlimited number of members and pages	
Minimal technical experience required	Easy to add and link groups	
	Minimal technical experience required	
	More secure	
<b>Limitations</b>	<b>Limitations</b>	<b>Limitations</b>
Minimal management capabilities	Some cost involved, usually through a subscription	Must have own server
Least amount of security	May require more planning and time to set up	Some technical and networking experience necessary
Some limitations on number of members or pages		Often require more end-user training
		More start-up time

## **Wikis in Learning Management Systems**

Some learning management systems (LMS) have built-in wiki tools. The strengths and limitations of these can be compared to both free services (because they generally incur no cost) and self-hosted wikis (because they are locally supported). Like free wikis, LMS wiki tools are relatively easy to add to the online course and typically offer basic editing and formatting features. Most offer single-page constructions and are automatically “private” to the students who have access to the LMS. Similar to self-hosted wikis, LMS wiki tools are hosted on a local campus LMS server and are maintained by campus technology support personnel. Blackboard, Moodle, and several other LMS systems include wikis as part of their overall course systems.

### **CHOOSING THE RIGHT WIKI**

With all of the options available, how do you decide which is the right wiki for your online course? There is no doubt that a premium, fee-based wiki service offers all the bells and whistles you can imagine. Self-hosted wikis are also unlimited in what they can do. But do you really need a Cadillac if a Volkswagen will do the job? The first question you should ask is, “What do I want my students to do with the wiki?” How you answer this question will help you determine the features that you need to accomplish your goals. The following questions will help you set priorities and narrow the field of choices to a more focused set of alternatives:

#### **Key Features**

- How many people will be using the wiki?
- Do I need to have separate groups?
- Will these groups need to have access to one another’s pages?
- How secure do the pages need to be?
- Should the pages be public or private?
- What amount of administrative control will I need?

#### **Ease of Use**

- How skilled are my learners at using a computer and navigating the Web?
- Do my learners need to know how to use HTML?
- How concerned am I about formatting and page layout?

### **Cost**

- Do I have the money to pay for a fee-based wiki service?
- Is it necessary to subscribe to a service, or can I accomplish my goals with a free service?
- Will advertisements cause a distraction to my learners?

### **Support**

- Do I have the technical skills to install and set up a self-hosted wiki?
- Is technical support available if I do not have the skills?
- Will I have the necessary server space if I choose to self-host?
- How quickly do I need to set up my wiki?

Once your priorities are clear, compare specific wiki software and services. Visit the home pages of several services and view available demos and tutorials. Play in the wiki “sandbox” if one is available. A sandbox is an active wiki page that allows users to practice with the various features of a wiki, without the fear of making any mistakes. Since a sandbox is just like any other wiki page, you will have the opportunity to sample all of the features the wiki has to offer.

## **FEATURES OF WIKIS**

Before selecting a particular wiki, it is important to be familiar with the features that distinguish one wiki service from another. Wikis can differ in how they handle security and login access, backups and archives, and server space (Lamb, 2004). Wiki Matrix ([www.wikimatrix.org](http://www.wikimatrix.org)) is an excellent resource for comparing the features of different wikis (see Figure 1.1).

When determining which wiki to use and how to incorporate it into the online classroom, consider the following:

### **Access Controls**

Wikis can be either “public” or “private.” A public wiki is one that is visible to anyone on the Web, without their having to log in. Search engines will often identify these pages and include them in their databases. Users then can discover the wiki by searching on the Web. It’s easy to spread the word by sharing the wiki’s URL through e-mail, or by providing a direct link to the wiki on a Web site.

**Figure 1.1**  
**WikiMatrix Web Site (www.wikimatrix.org)**



A private wiki is visible only to those who have password access to it, or who have been “invited” to join the wiki by someone who has password access. Many wiki services allow you to invite other users to your wiki. This is often done by entering the users’ e-mail addresses. Then the wiki sends an e-mail, which contains a special link to those users. Search engines will not see the pages, and they won’t appear when users search on terms that might otherwise provide a link to the page. In addition, if someone comes across your wiki’s URL, either through a link on a different Web site or by some other means, they will not be able to view the wiki. They will instead see a login page or a password request before they can gain access to the wiki.

Most free and fee-based wiki services allow you to choose whether or not you want your wiki to be public or private. Some allow you to change these permissions after wiki creation. Self-hosted wikis can exist behind a firewall or on an internal secure server. These wikis are not accessible to anyone outside of the firewall. They may use server authentication so that only restricted users can access, edit, or manage the pages.

## Capacity

All wikis support the creation of multiple pages by multiple authors, and thus can quickly grow in size. Depending on the wiki, there may be restrictions on how many pages you can create, the length of each page, and the size of embedded images and media. For fee-based or free wikis, there may be a limit to the total storage space your wiki is allowed to occupy on the host's server. The higher the level of your service, the greater the number of pages and overall available storage space you can use. Services are competitive, and Web storage is becoming less and less expensive, so check and compare subscription services often to get the most capacity for your money.

Free wiki services generally allow the fewest number of pages and the smallest amount of storage space. Capacity is not a problem for wiki projects that involve only a few learners, creating a limited number of pages. Some free wikis offer bonuses, such as increasing the number of pages allowed, when additional users are invited to participate in the wiki or if the wiki is made public. Capacity is becoming less of a problem as the cost of storage space goes down. Unless the wiki includes a large number of media files or attachments, the wiki projects in Chapters Three through Five of this book can all be accomplished with a free wiki service.

In wikis that are self-hosted, the storage capacity of your local server determines the limits. The ability to install hard drives with hundreds of gigabytes of storage effectively means that self-hosted wikis can have an unlimited number of pages. Self-hosted wikis have the advantage of being readily able to expand or contract according to the changing needs of your online courses.

## Editing Features

Although wikis offer a variety of features that allow users to change the wiki's page layout, organization, and formatting, a wiki is not Microsoft Word! Basic word processing features, such as fonts, bullets, and simple tables, are available in most wikis and are generally easy to use. Adding complex tables or other layouts is often difficult to accomplish in a wiki. Some wikis add extra editing and formatting features when you upgrade from a free service to a fee-based service. For example, pbWiki ([www.pbWiki.com](http://www.pbWiki.com)) provides the ability to use customized cascading style sheets (CSS) in the platinum-level wiki package. Google Docs includes a very powerful page editor compared to many other wikis. Google Docs also allows learners to create pages offline using Microsoft Office products,

including Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, and then to upload the documents directly into the wiki. Most wikis allow users to edit pages in HTML mode through a “view source” option; however, the real strength of the wiki lies in the fact that users don’t have to know HTML code to be able to edit and format a wiki page.

### **Customization and Skins**

One challenge with wikis is that pages have a tendency to look plain and generic. Customizing the way a wiki looks is often limited by the editing features of the wiki or by the various “skins” that you can use. A skin is an overlaying page design theme that affects the default fonts and colors on the wiki pages. Self-hosted wikis allow you to create your own skins, but this will require some technical and Web-design expertise. Free and fee-based wikis often provide a limited number of skins with their wikis. In pbWiki, for example, the number of skins increases when you upgrade from a free wiki to one of their premium services. The advantage of multiple skins is that your learners have the ability to take control over how their wiki looks. Having multiple skins does not change how learners add and edit content on the wiki, however, and has little effect on how you administer the wiki and incorporate it into your course.

### **Advertising**

Free wiki services typically include advertising on their pages, which you cannot remove. For example, WetPaint includes ads that appear below the menu on the left and at the bottom of the page. Generally, these ads are not overwhelming, but they may become a distraction to your learners. Upgrades to fee-based wikis will often include the removal of ads as an incentive. Of course, self-hosted wikis are completely free from advertising.

### **Communication**

Most wikis support some type of embedded communication among wiki members. This can take the form of e-mail links to members, discussion threads, and page comments. The ability to communicate with other members within the wiki can be instrumental to the success of an online wiki project. WetPaint, for example, offers threaded discussions for every page in the wiki. This gives learners the ability to relate conversations and discussions to a particular wiki page or topic. WetPaint also allows users to create new threads on any added wiki page.

Self-hosted wikis, such as MediaWiki, provide a discussion tab that is always available to wiki members and visitors. Other wiki services enable users to comment on pages, but do not offer threaded discussions. Depending on the types of wiki activities you want to integrate into your online course, you may need to look closely at embedded communications before choosing your wiki service. If embedded communication is not available, consider how you might use your course management system in tandem with the wiki to provide learning teams with additional communication channels.

### **File Sharing**

Although all wikis support hyperlinks to documents and Web sites already located on the Web, some wikis support file sharing within the wiki through a file upload feature. Such files as images, media, PDF documents, and spreadsheets can be linked to, or embedded within, a wiki page. Some wikis provide a “sidebar” area for related files and hyperlinks. As you might guess, the amount of storage space you have for uploading files will depend on the level of your wiki service, with free wikis having the least amount of space. File-sharing capabilities within a wiki are important, if part of your wiki learning activity involves sharing many files with other users. One example of this is a wiki project that includes creating a resource bank of PowerPoint files that students need to share with one another.

### **Administration**

Administration of a wiki involves planning for how learners will access and use the wiki, and ensuring the security of the learners and their wiki contributions. It is important, for example, to determine your requirements for the number of users, logins, and passwords; archiving and version control; and security.

Wikis provide various levels of administrative capabilities that control user access, group setup, passwords, and version control. Free services have minimal administrative capabilities. For example, in pbWiki, the wiki creator is the only person who can delete pages or files. The wiki creator also controls the password for logging into the wiki. Free services typically have one main login and password. The administrator can invite others to participate in the wiki, but no additional passwords are assigned. Most wiki services also offer higher-end, fee-based options, which allow the creation of multiple user accounts and access controls for specific pages.

**Number of Users** Some wiki services limit the number of users that can be members of a wiki. This has usually been the case with free wikis. The trend has been to remove these user limits, however, even for the free wiki sites. For example, pbWiki no longer limits the numbers of users. Fee-based and self-hosted wikis typically do not limit the number of users.

**Logins and Passwords** All wikis provide some measure of control over access through the use of login and password protection. As you can imagine, free wiki services provide the most basic access control, and self-hosted services offer the greatest ability to customize access. Fee-based services offer various levels of password protection, depending on the wiki service and the level of service that you purchase.

The most basic level of password protection involves a general password to read and write on pages in the wiki. Most free services offer this level of password protection. The administrator of the wiki often has the ability to keep the password secret: other users of the wiki access the site through an invitation, which acts as a customized link to the wiki and serves the same purpose as providing a password. The benefit of this option is that you can quickly share a wiki with different users, without having to share the password. The drawback is that there is only one password, with one level of access. Anyone with the password has the ability to read and edit any page on the site.

A second option is to use a wiki service that has more administrative control over password and page access. This is not typically available in free wikis. The benefit, however, is that the instructor can create password groups that allow groups to read and edit some, but not all, of the pages. This method can be very effective when you are working with several different groups on related projects. You may want the entire class to see what their peers are doing but only be able to edit the pages controlled by the group to which they belong.

Self-hosted wikis provide whatever access control you may require. This level of control is often dependent on internal server information, however, and it may take considerable time for technology support personnel to create and manage login and access controls.

**Archiving and Version Control** The most common concern new wiki contributors express is the fear that they will “mess up” someone else’s work. It is not unusual for students to insert edits into the wrong place on a wiki page or

accidentally delete material that they wanted to keep. Fortunately, most wikis are set up to easily view the wiki history and to restore prior versions, just in case users overwrite or change text that they want to keep. Wikis typically save versions after each edit, and allow users to compare different versions. Members also have the ability to copy and paste from a prior version into the current version, and the administrator can simply restore an earlier version if necessary. This built-in version control protects against inadvertent errors or deletion of content (Engstrom & Jewett, 2005). Further, because the pure nature of the wiki as an editable environment makes it very easy to remove spam content and graffiti, few hackers waste their time on these activities. Watchful group members with a strong sense of ownership will easily be able to maintain the integrity of the wiki (Lamb, 2004).

**Security** It is important that teachers be aware of the risks and challenges that the read-write Web presents. They must consider issues of privacy and safety to ensure that students have the best possible learning experience (“Educator’s Guide,” 2006). Faculty may worry that someone outside the course will insert random spam or graffiti messages into their wiki projects. This outsider intrusion rarely occurs, however, and can be prevented using the wiki’s administrative features (Bold, 2006). Wikis usually have built-in safety measures to guard against malicious use, many of which we have already discussed, including password protection, version archiving, and version control (Godwin-Jones, 2003). An instructor can regulate a wiki so that learners may only edit their own work. However, that tends to defeat the purpose of the wiki as a tool for open collaboration and instructors should avoid doing this. Both the instructor and students must be willing to accept the risks involved in working in a collaborative environment, relinquish ownership, and cede control to the group (Lamb, 2004).

### **Widgets and RSS Feeds**

Wikis are continually updating their services to include additional features through the use of widgets. Widgets are small programs embedded within Web pages that can add functionality and interactivity to wiki pages. Widgets, including media players, games, and interactive calendars, are designed to be easily incorporated into your page. Widgets are often made using Adobe Flash or JAVA. A widget may be created by a wiki service, but more often it is built by third-party services who then make them available to the wiki. WetPaint has an

extensive set of widgets that you can easily add to your wiki pages. WetPaint's current widgets include Google Calendars, Google Video ([video.google.com](http://video.google.com)) and YouTube video ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)), Vizu Polls ([www.vizu.com](http://www.vizu.com)), and the Imeem Music Player ([www.imeem.com](http://www.imeem.com)). Widgets are not limited to those that the wiki service provides; most services allow you to upload widgets from other sources.

One important type of widget that many wiki services offer is an RSS feed that you can incorporate into your wiki page. RSS, which stands for Really Simple Syndication, allows users to subscribe to a page or Web site and be informed automatically when a page has been added or updated. RSS feeds can be used to monitor a news site or keep track of someone's blog entries.

Widgets are useful in that they have the potential to add flexibility and interactivity to a wiki page. For example, you could have a wiki in which group learners are monitoring developments in an election. A key resource could be a news Web site like MSNBC ([www.msnbc.msn.com/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/)), and you might set up a widget on your wiki page that consists of an RSS feed of a particular topic at MSNBC. As new articles on your topic are posted at MSNBC, the widget on your wiki is automatically updated.

## **SETTING UP THE WIKI**

When you are finally ready to take the plunge, setting up a wiki is relatively simple and involves three basic steps:

1. Select a wiki service.
2. Determine the wiki's URL.
3. Invite contributors.

### **Select a Wiki Service**

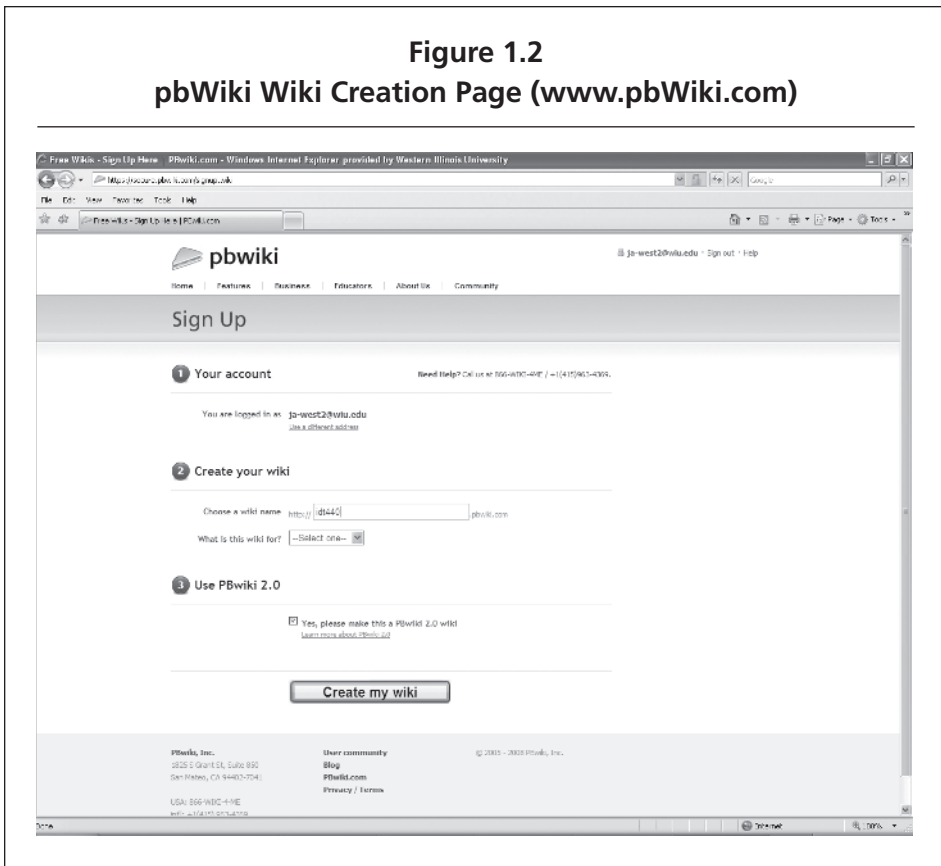
Given the variety of available services, there is a wiki that is right for you. It is important to remember that you do not need to be an expert with servers or wiki software to get a wiki up and running. Many colleges and universities are already running a wiki tool on campus, either through a self-hosted program, such as MediaWiki, or through their learning management system (LMS), such as Blackboard or Moodle. It is worth the time to check with your university's computing support department to see if they have a wiki solution already

available to you. If your campus does not have a wiki solution already installed, such free wiki services as Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>), WetPaint ([www.wetpaint.com](http://www.wetpaint.com)), Wikispaces ([www.wikispaces.com](http://www.wikispaces.com)), or pbWiki ([www.pbWiki.com](http://www.pbWiki.com)) provide simple wiki solutions that can serve the needs of many small group wiki projects. Once you have selected your wiki service, visit its home page and follow the on-screen directions to create a new wiki.

## Determine the Wiki's URL

If you are using your campus LMS wiki service, or if your campus has installed wiki software like MediaWiki, the URL will be automatically provided to you. If you are using a free or fee-based wiki service, you will have to name the URL for your wiki. You may need to set up an account first, which involves providing your e-mail address and setting up your personal password. Most wiki services

**Figure 1.2**  
**pbWiki Wiki Creation Page ([www.pbWiki.com](http://www.pbWiki.com))**



automate this process as part of creating the wiki. For example, pbWiki prompts you to choose a wiki name. You should select something that is unique to your class, such as “IDT440.” PbWiki will then check to make sure that URL is not being used by someone else. If the URL is available, you will be given a URL like this: “http://IDT440.pbWiki.com.” Figure 1.2 shows the wiki setup page in pbWiki.

### **Invite Contributors**

Once you have created your wiki, you need to invite your students to the wiki. Depending on your wiki service, you can either set up passwords for individual groups or use the wiki service’s invite feature. You invite students to your wiki by providing the wiki service with the students’ e-mail addresses. The wiki will then send an e-mail to those you invite, containing a special link that automatically logs them into your wiki. The advantage of using the invite feature is that you don’t need to worry about setting up passwords for individuals or groups; the wiki manages access for you through the e-mail link.

### **SUMMARY**

With the emergence of the read-write Web, online students have the capacity to become collaborative partners in the knowledge-building process. Wikis and other collaborative software tools have opened the door to new ways of fostering interaction and collaboration in the online classroom. Wikis are unique in that they allow members to create content as well as edit other members’ ideas and contributions. Wikis come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes: some are free, some are provided through subscription services, and some can be installed on your local server. You don’t need to be an expert to begin using wikis in your online classroom. By selecting an appropriate, free wiki service, or by using your university’s or learning management system’s existing wiki solution, getting started with a wiki can usually be accomplished with minimal time, training, or support. Now that you have set up your wiki, you are ready to begin designing and framing the wiki project. Although getting started with a wiki can be easy, designing and facilitating a wiki project for online learning is often a bigger challenge. In Chapter Two, we provide an effective process for designing wiki projects for collaborative learning and discuss best practices for managing the wiki. We address the pedagogy of online collaborative writing and offer specific guidelines for planning, designing, facilitating, and managing a successful wiki project in your online course.

