Using Wiki to tell the story of the production process

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Introduction

This paper outlines the history and processes involved in launching a specialised technical and production focussed wiki at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (RSAMD). This wiki project has opened the possibility of sharing production solutions to a worldwide audience, providing the student with an online environment to showcase their work. Furthermore the website has provided an interactive, innovative academic framework with which to explore collaborative projects.

Wiki History

Wikis have been around since the mid 1990's. The basic concept was to provide a simple web based facility for users to easily create, share, edit and discuss web page content. Initially the use of wikis remained confined to small specialist groups until 2001 when Jimmy Wales decided to use the wiki software to create an online encyclopedia. Wikipedia now has only five full time employees but content ten times greater than that of the Encyclopedia Britannica and is one of the exemplars of successful peer content production.

Wikipedia's principal ideology is that knowledge of a group is greater than that of an individual and that those who use also create. This change of focus for users of the world wide web, from consumer to active participant, helped usher in the new 21st Century "Web 2.0" technology and a host of other participatory sites such as Facebook, You Tube, Flickr and MySpace.

Paperclip

In late 2007 a telephone call instigated my need to take direct action within my own field of stage technological solutions. The call, like many before it, was made by a graduate which followed a familiar script, "We need to do an effect onstage and wondered if you had any ideas?" Several more phone calls were made to colleagues working in a variety of different sectors within the industry. By using the collective knowledge of these practitioners, a number of possible solutions were fed back to the originator for consideration. This 'commonsense' approach to problem solving had previously been researched by Scott Page at the University of Michigan. Page's seemingly obvious observations were that the more vantage points from which a complex problem is seen the easier it becomes to solve (Leadbeater. C : 2008). However, Page also noted that a group of experts who all think the same were less effective at generating a wide range of possible solutions than a diverse group of individuals with differing viewpoints. The key was to get as many different ideas as possible from a wide range of individuals. This approach has been played out repeatedly by technical managers, prop makers, costume makers and a host of other industry practitioners throughout the years, using a telephone and a personal contacts list. Surely it was time to move this network online and, using the internet, document these solutions for future reference?

At the same time as the call I had been working on a Post Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Arts Education and had become very interested in Web2.0 collaborative tools, in particular Wikis. The connection between the 'phone call' network of colleagues sharing production solutions and the creation of a constantly evolving online database for these solutions, began to take shape. In November 2007 a specialised Wiki website for Technical & Production Arts students at RSAMD was launched. The Wiki was entitled "Paperclip", the rather long acronym of "Production and Performance e-Resource Collaborative Library of Interactive Publications" or, more simply, as a tool for keeping documents together.

Under the hood

Numerous different Wiki engines exist, all offering slightly different features but they commonly share the ability to create and edit content, compare page updates and track who has edited what and when. Paperclip was built upon the MediaWiki engine, the same freely available software which powers Wikipedia, it is hoped that students may already be familiar with the Wiki text markup language. The basics of the simple code, which is required to layout and create hyperlinks, is easily and quickly learned by most, and can be accessed by clicking on the "source" tab of any Wikipedia page. Other Wiki software packages such as WikiSpaces and PBWiki are easier to use but lack the options to create a completely personalised site.

The architecture of Paperclip was designed to be simple and quick to navigate by dividing all content into Productions, People or Projects headings. This simple layout allowed a visitor to easily navigate to their desired area.

Wiki as a Production Reference Library

The primary driver to create Paperclip emerged from the desire to efficiently record and document technical details of the diverse challenges a production may require. Content such as ground plans, costume sketches, construction drawings and props lists are generated, but rarely accessible by anyone outside of the particular specialist discipline. By openly sharing these student generated production elements on a Wiki platform, we, at RSAMD, have captured the unseen processes which lead to a theatrical 'live' production. Student technicians, artists, designers and managers all involved in the staging of a live production, now have a transparency of process which currently does not exist in the industry.

Prior to Paperclip, several paper based attempts had been made to document and record this practice based research but none had proved to be successful mainly due to the heavy workload involved. These models were normally done in post production by compiling and cataloging the production paperwork from numerous individuals. Even when this paperwork was successfully gathered (usually by Stage Management), it was neatly filed upon a shelf, in a paper-based box file and only referenced by people in its immediate vicinity who knew of its existence. In short, this reference material was only of use to a very small group of people.

The idea of transferring the record of production data to a Wiki site placed the onus on the individual to present an area of production work not normally seen. If a student had worked for several weeks constructing a beautiful prop for a production, they now had the facility to take photographs and upload the content to Paperclip as the work was being undertaken. No single individual (or department) was now responsible for updating all possible production solutions, the task had been shared and students began contributing, collaborating and cooperating to the site. This desire to share one's work, combined with the ease of showcasing this work to a potential employer, began to drive the site. The more the students shared, the more impressive the individual and collective online portfolios became.

"Wiki's allow people to co-operate, to summarise a debate or amass a body of information and create documents with a collective author. They work best when many minds focus on a shared task with some clear goals: to create an encyclopedia, plan a meeting, update a list, assemble scientific data or write a report" (Leadbeater, 2008)

I believe the success of Paperclip came from the commonly shared focus of needing to document the production process by a closely defined community. The online featuring of student work and the ability for all to contribute to that documenting process, made it easy for students to become stakeholders in the resource and 'take ownership' of it.

Wiki as a tool for academic work

In the book "Wikinomics" (Tapscott D & Williams A.D.) Michael Furdyk of TakingITGlobal states "Young people's interest and enthusiasm in schoolwork has declined precipitously. It's not all down to undisciplined students, under performing teachers or toothless standards it's just that everything else has become so engaging." Furdyk continues, "Look at today's curriculum and you wont find much interactivity, we're still learning through reading and regurgitating."

While I largely agree with Furdyk, I believe the collaborative and vocational nature of the performing arts is interactive and engaging by default. However, the social media applications of the modern internet were not being used effectively as tools for engaging written work and so the BA Technical & Production Arts Programme Team at RSAMD began using Paperclip as an academic tool for submission, support and assessment of collaborative project work therefore engaging the student in participatory active online learning.

The production process is inherently collaborative and therefore Technical & Production Arts students often work on group activities based on simulations, which have traditionally been presented as paper based assignments for assessment and feedback purposes. Paper based collaborative submissions had traditionally followed one of two basic formats; either by individually submitted component parts of the group collaboration or as a single document, with a degree of trust, that all parties have been equally involved in its creation. By using Paperclip as the submission tool, it became possible for students to engage in the peer production of a live document. By default, Wiki software logs every edit with a time stamp, note of change and who made the alteration. This data is automatically generated making it possible to see clearly the levels of participation from collaborative project participants. Furthermore, as it is a 'live' document it is possible for a lecturer to comment on a student submission, providing almost instant formative feedback during the

creation of the document. This can be done at times which are convenient to both the lecturer and student. It was also noted that since the document remained 'live' and accessible after the submission deadline, it became a genuine reference paper for students who would often continue to work on the project after a paper based project would have been lying in the lecturers marking tray.

Bloxham notes that online assessment offers benefits to both teaching and student learning and has potential to improve student motivation (Bloxham 2008, Citing Nicol & MacFarlane – Dick , 2006; Thelwall 2000)

Paperclip's User Generated Books

A further, recent development of Paperclip resulted in the creation of a specific reference section called "UGBooks" or User Generated Books. For years I had written and handed my students various papers covering basic operating guidelines for theatrical equipment. In the interest of student centered learning I introduced a pedagogical development allowing the students to write these handbooks for themselves. Paperclip became the perfect tool for this weapon of mass collaboration.

The UGBook section was launched as part of a new Stage Technologies Automation module, in which one assessable component involved the student participants writing their own user manual for the automated flying equipment at RSAMD. This online handbook was significantly different to the generic user manual supplied by Stage Technologies in that it was written specifically for the installation of the equipment at RSAMD and that it was written collaboratively by the current users and by default, future professionals. During the creation of the automation UGBook, Stage Technologies were invited to act as external assessors and check technical accuracy of the students work online. Since the Automation User Generated Handbook remained online as a live document throughout the module; support, guidance, technical editing and response from both lecturer and industry practitioner was almost instantaneous, enhancing the student centered learning experience. The Automation UGBook today is one of a growing number of student generated handbooks which, as live documents, will be constantly evolving.

Wiki as a Walled Garden & Paperclip Development

My ultimate aspirations of the Paperclip project are that it will develop into a truly web-wide resource for all of the technical disciplines within a live theatre production environment. However, a newly forming Wiki is a fragile ecosystem which requires nurture and maintenance therefore Paperclip currently resides within the 'walled garden' of RSAMD's internal servers. Creation, editing and contribution to the site is restricted to RSAMD's staff and students but possibilities exist for interaction and collaboration with partner institutions and the wider industry sector. Developing new partnerships will facilitate further development of this world wide wiki, where the stories and processes which exist behind the scenes of producing live performance art can, at last, become transparent.

Paperclip can be viewed at http://paperclip.rsamd.ac.uk

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