

Wiki ecosystems: the development and growth of online communities of practice

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Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of collaborative wikis managed by the New South Wales public library Reference and Information Services Group. The Reference Excellence wiki, the Readers Advisory wiki and the Reference and Information Services Group wiki are examined to explore the development of collaboration and community amongst and between the participants. There is a discussion of the different purposes of the wikis, their effectiveness, planning, outcomes, time frames and software. How the communities of writers and editors have developed is also discussed. Why people are attracted to participating in and contributing to the different wikis is explored.

Introduction

Wikis are being extensively used for information sharing between communities of practice in New South Wales public libraries including by the Document Delivery Working Group, the Evaluation Working Group, the Marketing Working Group, the Reference and Information Services Group and the Literacy Working Group.

The longest established is the Readers Advisory wiki (Readers Advisory wiki, 2010) which has been operating since March 2007. The Reference and Information Services Group also manages the Ref-ex wiki and the Reference and Information Services Group wiki.

The idea of a community of practice was defined by the anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. It includes the concept that *through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally* (Community of practice, Wikipedia n.d.). This description includes many kinds of interactions of information sharing and collaboration. Wikis are just one possibility.

These wikis are being explored as ecosystems because like environmental ecosystems they flourish with a diversity of participation and with people having varying roles. They also have time of fast growth and time when slower and more detailed processes are undertaken. For wikis to be effective there need to be organisers, editors, taggers, those who comment, as well as the writers, those with big ideas and the experimenters who will try things just to see if they will work. All of these wikis are in growth phases and their ecosystems are still under development.

Background to the New South Wales Reference and Information Services Group (RISG)

The Ref-ex wiki (Ref-ex wiki 2009), the Reference and Information Services Group wiki and the Readers Advisory wiki (Readers Advisory wiki 2007) are both managed by members of the New South Wales public library Reference and Information Services Group (RISG) (New South Wales public library reference and information services group website 2009). RISG has been established for over five years and includes working groups for local studies and readers advisory services. Its members are public library staff across New South Wales. The purpose of the group is to promote the development of information services through New South Wales public libraries. This includes information sharing, collaboration and encouraging innovation in service delivery.

For this group, communication across New South Wales is crucial, as many of the people involved may not meet up each year, and they will never all meet up in one place. There is an annual reference and information services seminar in May and three meetings. One meeting a year is held outside Sydney to make it easier for country public library staff to participate. This means at most a couple of hundred people will be involved in these face-to-face encounters, out of a total New South Wales public library workforce of 2,300 people, many of whom are involved in providing reference and information services in their libraries. There is a wide range of staff participating in the meetings and seminars. Understandably, participation

varies by location and time. Part of the author's work involves working with RISG to facilitate their collaboration and work.

The aim of encouraging interaction and involvement by as many people as possible quickly caused this group to realise that there needed to be good online communication, to involve public library staff right across New South Wales. It was, and still is, important for all public library staff who wished to be involved in the group to be able to be involved and for it not to be a Sydney-centric group. E-mail worked well, but there needed to be the opportunity for actual interaction and collaboration between people in different public libraries.

RISG and Web 2.0 tools

RISG started with an e-mail list (New South Wales public library reference and information services e-mail list 2006) provided by the State Library of New South Wales, which is still in use today. They soon added a website (New South Wales public library reference and information services group website 2009) that went quiet for a while but was revitalised in mid-2009 to bring together all the communication tools used by the Reference and Information Services Group. RISG next added a blog (Reference and Information Services Group blog, 2007) with half a dozen public library staff writing for it. This blog covers topics of relevance to reference and information services. The writers are located across New South Wales.

As part of the group's development, the Readers Advisory wiki (Readers advisory wiki, 2007) was set up by the Readers Advisory Working Group (part of the Reference and Information Services Group), as they thought a wiki with multiple writers, forums and other possibilities would best match their information needs, which were to reduce the duplication in the production of reading lists and to encourage greater collaboration in readers advisory work between public libraries.

The other Web 2.0 communication tools continued to expand. RISG added a forum (RISG forum 2008) to discuss reference and information services. This has a growing number of participants and discussions.

A second multi author blog on new technologies (RISG new technologies blog 2008) was added. This was set up because not all of the ideas and tools discussed may be of relevance to reference and information services, or their relevance may not be clear yet. A Flickr account (New South Wales Reference and Information Services Group's photostream on Flickr 2008) was set up, mainly for sharing the results of post it notes brainstorming sessions, although a few other image groups have been added.

The Ref-ex wiki (Ref-ex wiki 2009) went live in early 2009. Later that year, the Reference and Information Services Group wiki (Reference and information services wiki, 2009) was developed. The most recent addition to the communication tools used by RISG is a Twitter account (New South Wales RISG on twitter 2009) (with multiple writers).

There has been a proliferation of social media tools used by RISG because different people in the group prefer different tools. There is no one Web 2.0 tool which suites everyone equally. This proliferation has required good links between tools and active participation of a core of writers and content creators. For communication to be effective, it has meant that there need to be an active community involved, not just an active set of isolated individuals.

The wikis

Readers advisory wiki

The Readers Advisory Working Group is part of the Reference and Information Services Group. It focuses on readers advisory services in public libraries in New South Wales. The members of the group are New South Wales public library staff.

In early 2007, the Readers Advisory wiki, using Wetpaint (Wetpaint 2010), was set up for information sharing, mainly to help reduce the duplication of work in preparing reading lists. Wetpaint is free web-based wiki software. It is very easy for people who have no understanding of computer programming to use. This means there are very low barriers to participation. Wetpaint allows some customisation.

This wiki was also set up to see what a wiki was like to use, as most of the readers advisory group had no wiki-editing experience at that time. It developed slowly over the first 12 months. The development occurred as new writers joined and added in content. This is a self-managed wiki and operates without a management team. There was a significant increase in the number of members and writers when it was promoted at the 2008 readers advisory seminar, and at the same time many New South Wales public library staff had reached the 'wiki week' of the state-wide New South Wales public library Learning 2.0 course (New South Wales public library learning 2.0, 2008). The seminar and the Learning 2.0 course enabled people to understand that they had the technical skills to edit and add content to a wiki, and in the area of readers advisory work they had the subject expertise as well.

The wiki has a loose structure. Different people self select for roles that interest them some start pages, some add tags, some edit for grammar, others put content out for others to edit. This gives many people the opportunity for operating within their comfort zones as they can do something they are familiar with like editing and others can try new things like creating pages. This wiki develops according to the interests and activities of individual participants, and groups of participants, rather than as the result of strategic planning. There are several moderators who can each approve requests for people to become writers.

As at September 2009, the wiki had over 120 members, including twenty-two writers and seven moderators, all of whom have different degrees of activity and involvement on the wiki. The moderators have made between 20 and 243 edits each. Half the writers have only made one edit, with the others contributing between three and twenty-three edits of varying size. Some of these edits have involved creating new pages and adding content to them. As at September 2009, there were 195 pages in this wiki.

This wiki grows as people become motivated by personal interest or need. For example, the sections on book groups, non-fiction and romance readers advisory work all started after these topics were discussed at annual seminars, and have continued to evolve.

With this relatively small wiki community, there is the need to regularly remind people that this is their wiki and they can edit it and add to it. This is done at the face to face meetings and by e-mail by any of the wiki writers. To aid this, demonstrations of editing the wiki occur in the readers advisory meetings, with different writers and moderators showing others how easy it is to contribute to the wiki in this way.

A strength of the readers advisory wiki, like all public wikis, is that people anywhere can edit, and there is no geographical limit on the interaction. This wiki also includes a very small number of members from Northern Territory and the ACT.

Readers Advisory wiki statistics and survey

Google analytics indicated that the Readers Advisory wiki has between 850 and 1000 visits per month from 54 countries. Most visits come from Australia, and within that most visits are from New South Wales, with people from all other states and territories represented as visitors each month as well. Up to 15 percent of visitors are repeat visitors. Over 1% of visitors have visited the site just three times, and 2% of visitors have visited the site between 50 and 100 times. The average time on the site is between one and two minutes.

Most recent 12 months of statistics of use for the Readers Advisory wiki

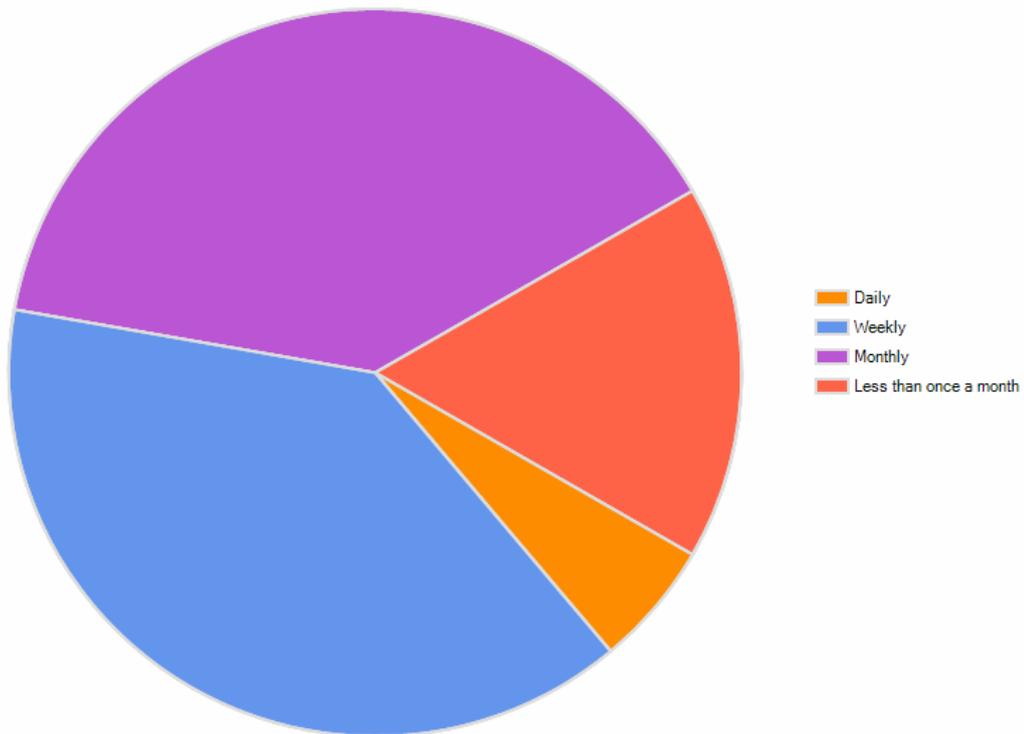


Members' visits

A survey of members of the Readers Advisory wiki was sent to all wiki members, using internal Wetpaint communication tools. It asked people to comment on their experiences of participating in the wiki as well as asking what other wikis people were active members of. This survey showed that the regularity of visits varied considerably: 5.6% visited daily, 38.9% visited weekly, 38.9% visited monthly and 16.7% visited less than once a month.

Members' reported frequency for visiting the Readers Advisory wiki

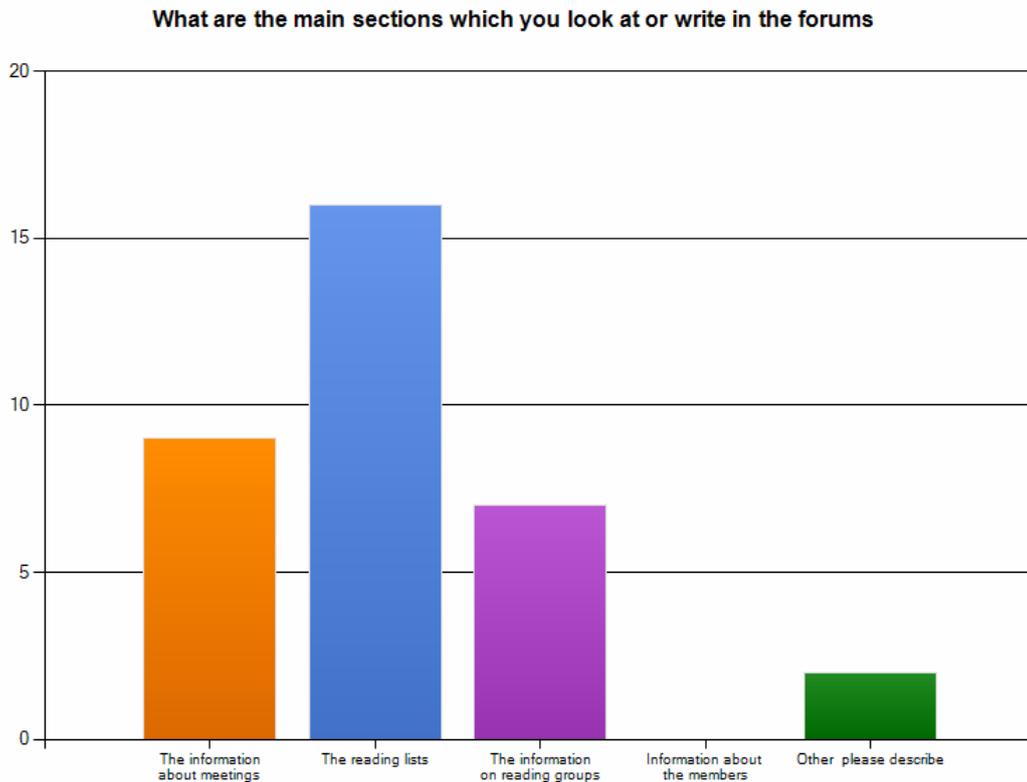
How often do you visit the readers advisory wiki?



Amongst the wiki members, 89% visit for the reading lists, which is the largest part of the wiki, 50% for the information about meetings, and 39% for the information on reading groups.

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Members' reported use of the Readers Advisory wiki



Some participants commented that they were looking at discussions about genres, and useful readers advisory tips. Others were looking at new entries. 88.2% of wiki members said they joined to “participate or contribute to the wiki”, and a few joined to see what being a member of a wiki was like.

The other wikis the Readers Advisory wiki members belong to and contribute content to include: Ref-ex, Reference and Information Services wiki, Literacy and public libraries wiki (Literacy and public libraries wiki, 2009), the Inter library loans for New South Wales public libraries (Inter library loans for New South Wales public libraries wiki, 2007), Public Libraries NSW marketing group wiki (Public Libraries NSW marketing group wiki, 2008) (also New South Wales public library wikis) Wikipedia, and various local staff and recreational wikis.

60% of the members stated that they felt part of a community by being part of the Readers Advisory wiki, 20% did not feel part of a community, and 20% were not sure. Some of the people who did not feel that they were part of a community commented

As I visit it infrequently, it is not really relevant to me

They don't have much happening so any sense of community dissipates quickly with no community activity.

These two comments highlight varying expectations amongst members. The first member, as the wiki is described as being “not really relevant”, would seem not to be actively engaged in readers advisory work and so really does not need to be a

member of this wiki community; being a casual visitor would probably fit better with their requirements. The second comment seems to indicate that other people are supposed to make the wiki interesting, and there is no responsibility for this particular member to contribute. The second comment is also interesting as the wiki does have activity each week. Each member receives a wiki-generated e-mail with each week's activity highlighted on it.

Other survey respondents saw that they had the ability to influence the change, for example:

Would be better if I did more to contribute

Easy way to share ideas and work on joint projects

Some of the issues were raised were also about the nature of wikis as a communication tool; one respondent commented:

Email list membership feels like [a] more directed way of belonging and of keeping up to date, because the information comes directly in one package straight to a field I use every day and keep open all the time...

This highlights that people have unique communication preferences and no one communication tool is going to suit everyone. This is one of the reasons for the diverse range of Web 2.0 communication tools used by RISG.

When asked what would make people feel more part of the readers advisory wiki community, the responses varied. 75% said they would like regular updates whether on Twitter, Facebook or e-mail (and this is despite the fact that all wiki members already receive a weekly e-mail with changes to the site highlighted). 50% said they would like to meet the other members. Other said they would feel more part of the community if they did more to contribute to the community.

The comments on the activity of the community of the Readers Advisory wiki ranged from:

Not much going on really

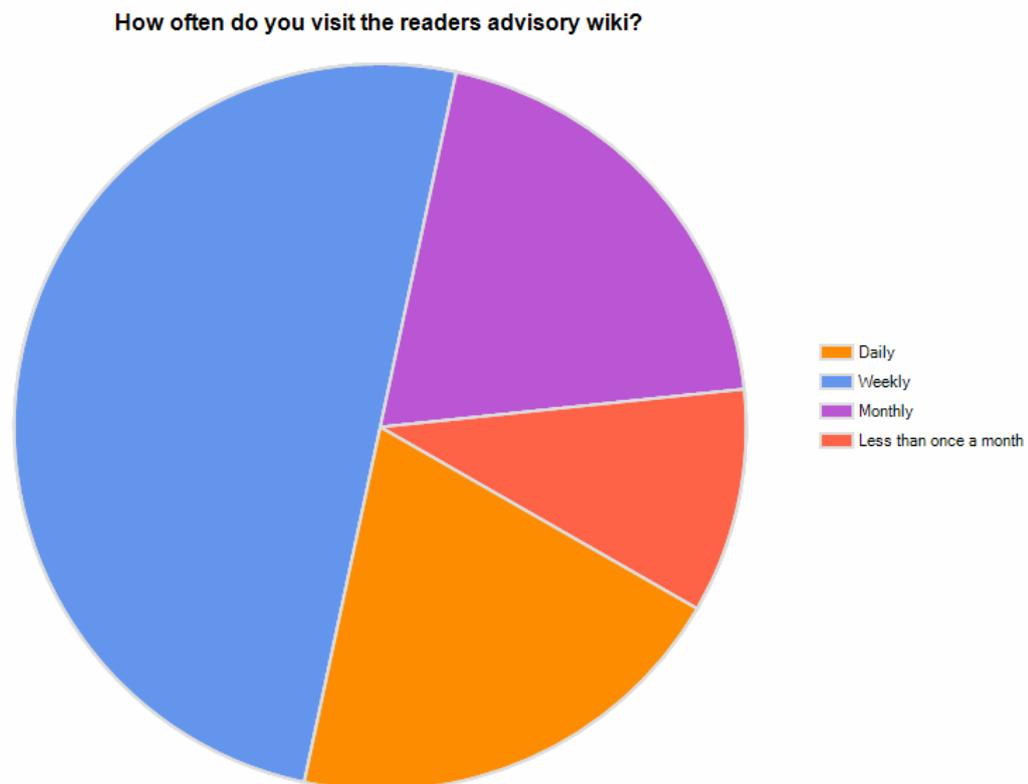
to *It seems very active with some dynamic members (I'm afraid I'm not one of them)*

and *The greatest benefit I've seen with this wiki is that everything about the community is here – only a few days after RA meetings the minutes and info from people is up on the wiki ready to share with those who couldn't make it to the meetings, etc. It's a community that has really taken the concept of sharing, contributing and collaborating for a common purpose a step forward.*

Writers' visits

The survey on the Readers Advisory wiki provided slightly different results for writers to those for the members. 100% of them joined the wiki to participate or contribute to the wiki, 80% of them are also members of the Reference and Information Services wiki, and 40% are members of the Ref-ex wiki. Their membership also included Wikipedia, staff wikis and the AnswerBoards Librarians wiki (AnswerBoards Librarians wiki, 2007). 50% of the writers look at the Readers Advisory wiki weekly, 20% look at it daily and another 20% look at it monthly.

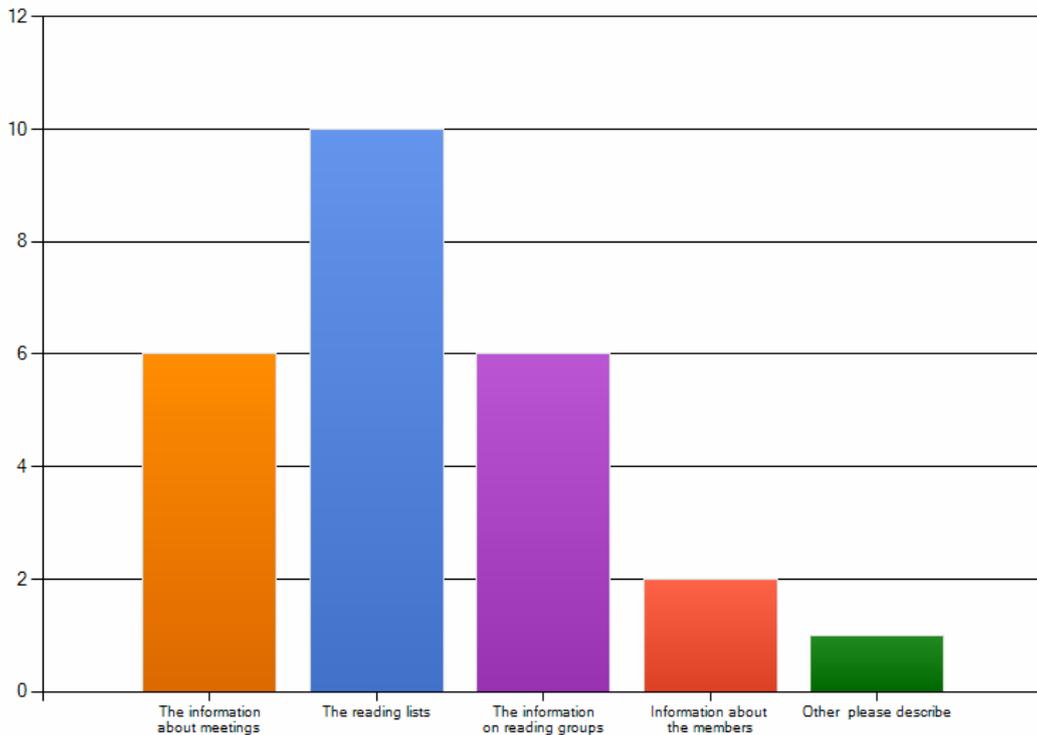
Writers' reported frequency of visits to the Readers Advisory wiki



All the writers look at the reading lists. 60% look at the information about meetings and the information on reading groups, and 20% look at the information about members.

Writers' reported use of the Readers Advisory wiki

What are the main sections which you look at or edit



This comment demonstrates the range of interests:

Info about genres, emerging genres, general discussions, reading through what others have put up and perhaps tweaking it on occasion

The writers are either editing a couple of times a month (44%) or less than once a month (56%), which means they are looking at the readers advisory wiki even when they are not editing it. 89% of the writers feel part of a community by their involvement in the readers advisory wiki, while 11% do not.

Comments about this include

I do not contribute or read this wiki often enough for a sense of community to have developed yet.

I think we all have useful information to share and the wiki is a great area in which to do it. I really like the different views and information that is shared from people who are not in my immediate work place

I wish I could find the time to contribute more. The ideas are certainly there.

Excellent way to communicate. Can do it from any computer, when it suits you.

I can help generate content and contribute knowledge. I also have the ability to alter the layout, if I think it needs improving. I like it that not just one person is responsible for maintaining the wiki, that it is done piecemeal by a number of, not only experts, but also users. The wiki has its own quality control – us, and collectively we work together to improve functionality. There are few

things in life more annoying than a website that doesn't work well. The hierarchy and functionality of this wiki are organic, in that they are always developing and improving – and I like that I am part of that.

75% of the writers said they would like regular updates by e-mail, Twitter or Facebook. 50% said they would like to meet the other members. These figures match those of the wiki members.

The comments included some clarifying information for example

Making more time to contribute and read the wiki

Whilst the wiki administration can work remotely it helps to have a few get together to not only put faces to names and voices but also to inspire continued contributions and to mould the directions and development of the wiki

Having more time to spend updating things. Perhaps updates would help – driving the agenda of the wiki, reminding people of what needs updating and contributions etc.

The writers were also asked for any additional comments about their involvement in the Readers Advisory wiki.

Comments included:

Let's keep expanding. It's good information and such instant gratification to be able to add information and see it all there...immediately

This has always been a community which inspires and supports all its members, it's a very positive group of people who really believe that RA can achieve both in libraries as well as personally; someone always has an idea and someone always steps up to help move these ideas along...

Ref-ex

The Reference Excellence wiki, better known as Ref-ex (Ref-ex wiki 2009) has been in operation since January 2009. It is based on the Ohio Reference Excellence project, and went live in early 2009 (Balharrie, Forsyth and Johnstone 2009). The Ohio Reference Excellence project is a state-wide training program, in Ohio in the USA, to train public library staff in how to provide excellent reference and information services. It is based on earlier work done in California and Minnesota.

The core of Ref-ex is six modules, based on the original six modules created by Ohio librarians. These modules cover an overview of the reference process, reference interview skills and question types, people skills and models reference behaviour, search strategies, reference resources, ethics and legislation

Additional modules are being written by New South Wales public librarians to target specialised reference services for local studies, family history and children's services. Modules developed in New South Wales are available under creative commons attribution non-commercial share-alike agreement. Ref-ex is to train New South Wales public library staff in how to deliver excellent reference and information

services. It is a more controlled and managed wiki than the Readers Advisory wiki. The Ref-ex wiki is constructed using MediaWiki (MediaWiki, 2010), as this was the software recommended by the State Library's information technology staff. A detailed evaluation of the first year of operation will be undertaken in February 2010.

This wiki has a maintenance and modification team to develop and manage the changes required. This wiki, developed using MediaWiki, can only be edited by members of the maintenance and modification team. It has a deliberate structure, which has more restricted opportunities for change than the Readers Advisory wiki.

This training wiki has very small community of writers and editors and so has a different kind of community, although there are overlaps between the writers here and on the readers advisory and reference and information services wiki. Each wiki has at least two writers in common.

Communication about the planning and development for the Ref-ex wiki occurs by e-mail and teleconference discussions. There were face-to-face meetings in the early stages, but the number of these meetings has declined over time as the wiki has become more established. As new modules are written, new writers are recruited to this group from subject specialists. This is a structured wiki where the new modules closely reflect the format of earlier modules.

Google analytics data indicates this wiki has 168 pages, and has between 450 and 550 visits per month. The average time on site is between eight and nine minutes. The vast majority of visitors are from Australia, with most of those coming from New South Wales.

Ref-ex wiki statistics and survey

75% of the writers for this wiki look at it monthly, with 25% looking at it weekly. The main areas looked at or edited are modules three (people skills and reference behaviours), five (reference resources) and seven (roving reference). The use of this wiki will be analysed in detail in February 2010.

Most recent 12 months of statistics of use for the Re-ex wiki



The comments on use of the Rex-ex wiki included:

Most modules get a look at, it depends on whether I'm in there looking to edit or whether I'm preparing a training session and making sure it will all flow smoothly

Well initially I did visit the wiki on a weekly basis (if not daily for a while. Now that it is up and running I probably only look at it once or twice a month.

Module 7 is the most interesting at present as we are contemplating roving reference

Predominantly navigation and design. I have edited all modules at different stages to bring consistency of design to all pages.

The motivation to join this wiki was mainly to participate or contribute. One writer commented that they joined

To be part of a community of like minded people that came together to create something new that others can use. Altruism is not dead!

Another wrote:

It looked like an interesting project and I could see that the end product would be a valuable tool for the library community. I also had no exposure to editing a wiki at the time so the benefit of participating provided me with an opportunity to develop an important skill set

which shows a healthy mix of altruism and self-interest.

Given this commitment level, it is understandable that these participants would be likely to be members of other wikis. All of them are members of the reference and information services group wiki, 25% are also members of the readers advisory wiki and Wikipedia. There is also membership to the New South Wales Local Government Corporate Librarians wiki (New South Wales local government corporate librarians group, 2009) and the Public Library evaluation group wiki, both based in New South Wales. Local staff wikis and the AnswerBoard Librarians wiki also featured.

The response to the question about feeling part of the Ref-ex wiki community was very similar to the reference and information services wiki, with 75% of writers feeling part of the community and 25% not sure.

The comments help elaborate on this, as the following examples indicate

At the moment the wiki is not high on the radar in my particular work environment, but probably it should be. Hopefully better use will be made if we move towards a roving reference model.

I really value [the] feeling of community that being part of the ref-ex project has given me. Rather than individual libraries and librarians reinventing the wheel for each new project, collaboration on this state-wide scale (and broader) is the future for libraries

Participating in the ref-ex project from the beginning has helped me expand my professional network. Having the opportunity to discuss the various

stages of this project with the various members over the past few years has created a professional bond with other participants.

50% of this group said they would like regular updates by e-mail, Twitter or Facebook, but they provided some clarification about this in comments as these examples show:

*I have met the other members and receive regular updates via email as it is
More time at work to play with ref-ex! but seriously contact at regular
Reference Meetings and the annual seminar along with electronic
communication keeps me involved and informed.*

25% said they would like to meet the other members. Both of these figures are lower than those for the same categories in the Readers Advisory wiki.

There were other comments which demonstrated that being part of something collaborative was also important

The ref-ex wiki has such potential to provide training and networking support to so many staff who may otherwise not get access to the same; it's great to feel a part of this community and know that it's having an impact on reference & information services throughout NSW public libraries

and

The ref-ex project ebbed and flowed with the ability of volunteers to afford time to the project. It was interesting to see how people gravitated towards tasks that matched their area of expertise. Although a number of brave individuals learnt new skill sets in order to ensure progress.

This wiki, because of its nature, benefited from a different management style to that of the Readers Advisory wiki.

Reference and Information Services wiki

This was done partly as a forum for the discussion of the Ref-ex wiki, because Wetpaint had more advanced forums than MediaWiki, but also for other functions of the group, such as meeting agendas and minutes. The local studies working group (part of the reference and information services group) is adding relevant content to the reference and information services wiki rather than setting up another wiki.

The reference and information services wiki (Reference and information services wiki, 2009) was started to bring together reference and information services and as a place for the local studies group working group to contribute their information.

It provides the opportunity for a discussion forum about Ref-ex wiki, as well as being the location of meeting agendas and minutes for the reference group. It also provides links to other information including contact information for the various working groups and tools associated with the Ref-ex wiki. This wiki has 25 pages. It has low use, as it is early in its life cycle, and it has more administrators than general members. In comparison to Ref-ex wiki, this wiki has a wider scope. Additionally, it was found that MediaWiki software is harder wiki software to learn than Wetpaint.

Reference and Information Services wiki statistics and survey

75% of the administrators visit the wiki each week. The most popular areas to look at were local studies, events and meetings (each with 50% of people looking at them regularly). Ref-ex and contacts also featured with people looking at the relevant pages 25% of the time. Google analytics data was not included, as this wiki has not been in operation for one year.

One of the administrators commented:

All of it [the wiki] – I like to see what's new, what's changed, where I can perhaps add something in or edit to improve.

Another explained their lower use by saying:

Local studies related material should start to be added shortly which will increase my usage of the site.

This last comment highlights the need for relevance of the material to the activity on the site. It helps for people to be clearly able to see what is in it for them. Many people also do not like being leaders, and prefer material placed on the wiki so they can edit it, add tags, or in other ways tailor it, rather than being actual content creators themselves.

All the administrators joined the reference and information services wiki to participate or contribute to the wiki, highlighting the proactive nature of some people's participation. These leaders are critical to adding other members to the wiki later on. The other wikis they are members of included the Ref-ex wiki, the Readers Advisory wiki and Wikipedia. They also were members of staff wikis and the AnswerBoard wiki. The other wiki memberships show consistent activity in this area.

Even the administrators were not totally sure about being part of a wiki community. 75% felt they were part of a community, however 25% were not sure. This uncertainty is represented by the following comment

As this wiki is in its very early stages, I have not yet had time to contribute or write material. Once I get started, no doubt a sense of community will develop.

Comments from the administrators who felt part of a community included

Other members and writing and contributing and this wiki is growing – because we are all working on it

and

This wiki, perhaps more than the others, pulls the other wikis together in such a way that it enables the creation of new directions for Reference & Information Services, and RA, and Local Studies, and so on. It provides a forum for determining changes to those other wikis (especially the Ref-ex wikis training modules) and for enhancing future seminars and meetings – this combined community is dynamic and eclectic and therefore inspirational.

The responses to the question asking what would make people feel more part of a community reinforced that while the wiki was a strong centre, people wanted other

contact as well. 66% of administrators said they would like regular updates by some form such as e-mail, Twitter or Facebook. 33% would like face-to-face meetings with other members.

The comments for this area show a range of motivations as these following three examples demonstrate.

It is fine as it is

Unsure. I believe that my own personal motivation is a key factor. It is, as you realise, difficult to get time to write and contribute within hours.

Given that this wiki pulls the others together as a common hub the need to network (in person, teleconference, goodledoc etc) is a little stronger. This is certainly influenced through having some of the same people working on all the other wikis too so sometimes we really need to get together to maintain focus and direction for all or one particular wiki. Communication is essential so we're lucky that is it so strong within this group.

Importance of community

Recent research at the Queensland University of Technology highlighted the value placed on online communities. The study was not of wiki communities, but it is relevant to them as it involves research into another active online community, the game World of Warcraft (Blizzard n.d.). As at December 2009, only preliminary information is available from the research, as it will be published later (World of Warcraft friendships benefit off-line life 2009), but the information available highlights that online communities are very valuable and enhance the experience of being online. Wikis and online games are slightly different, but both should be fun to participate in and build skills. If they can also help build collaboration and a sense of well being this all increases the value that the wiki (or the game) can provide. I have used this online game example to show the similarity between online communities regardless of format. Some games can almost be described as large flexible wikis, with the toons or avatars within the game being the equivalent of wiki pages. I have used this approach as there is little work that has been done exploring wiki communities (Roth, Taraborelli and Gilbert 2008)

Common themes

The New South Wales public library wikis are all active. They are well used and have new content added regularly. From the information obtained by surveying members, writers and administrators of these wikis, what helps make people feel involved and part of a wiki community is actually being involved, although there were a couple of comments which indicated that other people being actively involved was also important. These are obvious statements to make, but they show the importance of perceptions as much as action.

The activity of participants was crucial, and it was not just about the wikis changing and developing, but they had to be perceived as doing this as well. For active participants, it is about seeing other people working on something that is important to them as well. It raised ideas of toiling together for an agreed goal, like a sports

team, which happens to be in different locations. For watchers, rather than doers, it is also important, as they want to have a different experience with the wikis over time. They want to be aligned with a strong wiki and a strong community associated with that. It is also about people wanting to contribute and wanting to have their contributions valued. Face-to-face meetings are still valued, as people want to meet their colleagues who are working in the same electronic space. The face-to-face meetings can enhance the online experience: after meeting you can 'see' the person behind the editing or writing.

There were also comments about not having enough time to be involved, or needing to create more content to increase interest and involvement. This is a tough one as it is about how people choose to prioritise their time. Some people will prioritise for the good of a broader community while for others this is not an option they are able to consider.

These wikis are examples of volunteers working together. Some are able to participate during their work time, but for others, this is activity outside of work time.

What works in the New South Wales public library wiki community?

In each of the wiki communities discussed, the writers and the administrators continue to develop. New writers are added, and make their contributions. In two weeks in January 2010, twelve new writers have already been added to the Readers Advisory wiki. More could be done with these wikis if there were more volunteers willing to work on them.

Some people working on these wikis are learning new skills and going outside their comfort zones to do this, while others are operating well within their comfort zone. Both kinds of people are needed on a wiki. The keen tagger and editor is just as crucial as the creator of new pages and content.

It is important for each person to see a role for themselves within the wiki community, as people are more likely to participate if they can see a place. Some of this role-finding can be helped by other participants talking about their involvement, so that others can be helped to visualise how they also might be involved.

It is also important that the wiki can be 'our wiki' rather than 'their' wiki. This means that people firstly feel ownership, to read it regularly and then to be involved in content editing and creation.

Enthusiasm from participants is crucial. There needs to be some self-motivation involved and this can come from the concepts of ownership, subject expertise or a range of other motivations. Current participants also need to use their enthusiasm to encourage participation by other people, that it, that it is not a closed shop and that everyone knows this. New people have to feel they will be welcome, and their ideas, skills and input will be welcome.

Effective communication is critical to the community. Preferences vary from individual to individual so a range of approaches has to be considered and tried. Not everyone will want to communicate with others as they will be happy working away at their part in the wiki, while others will want to interact with the other people who are excited about the same wiki they are.

Seeing progress and change on the wiki is important for the its community. For its community to be effective, the wiki needs to keep changing and developing, it cannot stay the same.

What could work better on the New South Wales wikis?

Improved communication

Communication is crucial, as shown by the survey results mentioned earlier. Between 50% and 75% of people wanted different communication channels used to help with the wiki communities. For the wikis to be effective often e-mail and other tools need to be used as well. Wetpaint provided weekly e-mails with summaries of each week's activity on the relevant wiki. More frequent e-mails are provided for specific pages on individual "watch lists", which are usually set up for a page or pages you have created or edited.

During the evaluation of the New South Wales public library Learning 2.0 course (New South Wales public library learning 2.0, 2008) it became apparent that while many people can happily use Web 2.0 tools, and actively comment on other people's blogs with little encouragement, other people wanted to know they were not blogging to a void (Forsyth, Joseph and Perry 2009, and Perry, Joseph and Forsyth 2009). The participants valued feedback. This highlighted that people need to know their contribution is valued, or at least that it has been read,

Ideas about time management

One of the hardest elements of creating a community around a wiki is encouraging people to give time to it, as both contributors and users. It is about working out how collaborative wikis can become part of the daily or weekly work flow of more people. This will need to be explored in more detail with the various wiki writers.

Time is always a factor for the volunteers, as people have to prioritise working on these wikis as part of their work as some do, or decide to work on them outside work time, which is how others are involved. For some people even this is not possible, which may be why there are not more active writers on these wikis. The wikis will probably continue to develop and improve with the same number of participants as now, just more slowly.

Helping people see that a large time commitment is not required to be an active part of the community is important. The Ref-ex wiki does have a higher technical skill requirement, which is a slight bar to wider participation. This is not the case with the Readers Advisory and the Reference and Information Services wikis, which use Wetpaint. With Wetpaint, as long as you can use a basic word processing program

you can participate. Being a writer on a New South Wales public library wiki does not mean that you are expected to contribute epic tomes; it means you will do between one and hundreds of edits, but you may only do 20 edits. You may only spend five minutes a month editing, but that five minutes would still add value to the wiki and to the wiki community.

More people seeing that editing and making sure 'something is happening' is their job, not someone else's, is vital, as everyone is busy and this kind of voluntary participation is just that, voluntary, and usually taking place in addition to an existing workload.

It is important to acknowledge the contributions volunteers make to these wikis, and this is done at present, but could be done better, without embarrassing the participants.

The future of these wikis and their communities

Each week the Wetpaint site-report e-mails show there is activity on the wikis, and the Google analytics statistics report continued use. It would help to have a few more people seeing the wiki as their community, although, with 60% or more of the participants experiencing a sense of community in their participation in each of the wikis discussed, there is a strong basis for further development. The community itself enables people taking ownership of a wiki, knowing it is their wiki to change, develop and grow.

Wikis, backed up with e-mail and other communication tools, are effective in facilitating collaborations between communities of practice in New South Wales public libraries. The wikis already discussed continue to grow and develop, attracting new writers to contribute to their development. This reinforces the ecosystem idea, which has interconnecting organisms; in this case actual people working together in an interdependent way. These wikis are successful for information sharing, community and skill development.

The following comments provide a helpful summary of the value placed by participants on these wiki ecosystems and the communities of practice that build them:

Let's keep expanding. It's good information and such instant gratification to be able to add information and see it all there...immediately

This has always been a community which inspires and supports all its members, it's a very positive group of people who really believe that RA can achieve both in libraries as well as personally; someone always has an idea and someone always steps up to help move these ideas along...

Altruism is not dead!

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