# LECTURERS' EXPERIENCES OF USING WIKIS TO SUPPORT STUDENT GROUP WORK

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Participation Summary

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## BACKGROUND

There is a growing expectation for providers of higher education to include digital technology within teaching and learning.

E-learning and virtual learning environments have a number of benefits for students:

- improved student-student and student-teacher interaction
- improved sharing and generation of tutor and student made materials
- and enhanced teaching materials including media, sound, videos, and graphics [1].

In recent decades there has been a move away from traditional teacher-centred approaches which encourage learners to take a passive role in their education. One example is the increased use of small group teaching approaches requiring tutors to act as enablers and encourage independence and responsibility for learning and enhance personal growth in their students [2].

Group work enhances independent learning but can be challenging for students to co-ordinate. E-learning environments are a contemporary solution which can help students achieve group tasks by providing tools which can be accessed both on and off campus in a flexible way [1].

One e-learning tool which has been used to enhance small group tasks is the Wiki (a website developed collaboratively by a community of users, allowing any user to add and edit content).

Wikis have been positively appraised by students who:

- value the flexibility of the tool [3].
- like the transparency as tutors can monitor the contributions of individual group members [3].
- perceive Wikis as a useful tool for arranging information and sharing knowledge [e.g. 4].

While some research has reported that lecturers feel wikis make the management and marking of group work easier and more effective [4] little other evidence is available about staff experiences of using Wiki's for student group work.

In order for technology enhanced learning to work well it needs to be embraced by both tutors and students. Learning about new technologies is not always easy and the exploration of ways to support lecturers in using new technologies is needed. The best way to explore this issue is through gaining an understanding of how lecturers get to grips with new technologies within the context of their day to day teaching.

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## AIM

The aim of this evaluative project was to explore lecturers' experiences of using wikis. The key research questions were:

1. What challenges do lecturers face when using wikis?
2. What are the benefits of using wikis for lecturers?
3. How might we support teaching staff in the use of technologies such as Wikis?

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## METHOD

To answer these research questions it is important to understand the personal experiences, thoughts and reflections of lecturers in relation to the use of wiki technology. Qualitative approaches are best placed to access this type of data [5] and were therefore employed for this research. To ensure ethical requirements were met University ethical approval was obtained.

***Participants***

- The participants were lecturers on a team taught module which required students to devise and deliver two group presentations using wikis.
- An email was sent to members of staff including the information sheet and consent form. The staff members were asked to respond to the initial email if they would like to take part.
- Six staff members (2 male; 4 female) replied and agreed to participate (33% response rate).

***Interviews***

- An anonymous email account was created and consenting participants were emailed a 'grand tour' question in which they were asked to tell the story of their first use of Wikis in a teaching context. This method is designed to encourage participants to discuss issues around space, time, events, people and activities in their own words with a focus on what is important to them [6].
- Participants were asked to respond to the email within 3 weeks and reminders were sent after two weeks to non-responders.

***Analysis***

The accounts were analysed using qualitative analysis software (NVIVO) and inductive thematic analysis [7]. This involved reading and re-reading the data and coding for common themes. This was a cyclical process repeated until no new themes emerged from the data.

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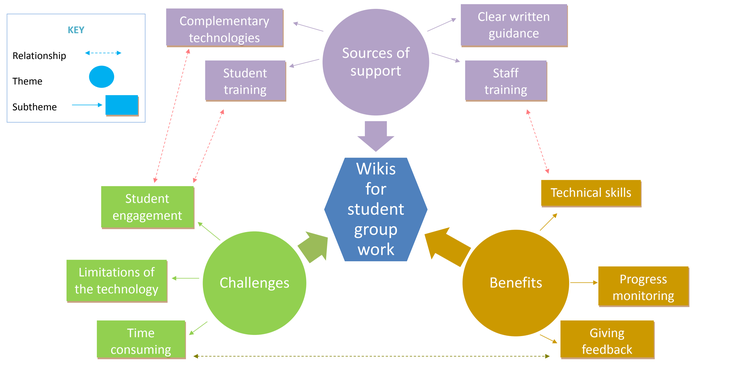
## FINDINGS: THEME DIAGRAM

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## FINDINGS

***Benefits of using wikis***

- Using Wikis in a team taught module helped lecturers develop technical skills in relation to Wikis.
- Lecturers valued the ability to monitor student's progress and the ease of providing feedback.

> *" I especially liked that I was able to observe and comment on the activities of each group, as you could keep a track of progress being made."*
>
> *"I liked using the comment function on the student wikis – I thought this was a nice and easy means of providing formative feedback to students on their group work"*

***Challenges when using wikis***

- There were challenges with ensuring students remained engaged with the Wikis and this was exacerbated by some of the limitations of the technology.
- Lecturers sometimes felt they lacked the time needed to learn about the technology and to read the students Wikis and give feedback.

> *"Wikis do not send out notifications (for example via e-mail) to group members to alert them to the fact that the wiki has been updated"*
>
> *"Many[students] seemed to prefer using emails or social media/instant messaging to discuss their work."*
>
> *"I was not keen to look through the student group files as it was time consuming"*

***Sources of support for using wikis***

- Lecturers valued the provision of clear written guidance on the use of wikis. However most felt further training would aid the development of technical skills and boost confidence.
- Lecturers also suggested that student training would be valuable to enhance engagement and understanding. In addition it was felt that the use of wikis alongside complementary technologies (file exchange, discussion boards) would aid student engagement.

> *"we were given clear [written] instructions about how to create [Wiki] groups and the whole process was straightforward"*
>
> *"I did feel a little daunted ...I thought if I have never even heard of a Wiki before coming to the module, how am I going to get the students enthusiastic about using them?!"*
>
> *"Some students seemed to struggle to understand what a Wiki was and how it could support their group work"*
>
> *"I know that this is not the primary purpose of a Wiki, but it would perhaps be useful if there was a forum for discussions"*

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## CONCLUSIONS

This work has highlighted a number of barriers and benefits for lecturers' use of wikis for student group work. Two main strategies can be proposed for improving teaching and learning when using Wiki technology.

1. **TRAINING:** Both lecturers and students need to be trained in new technologies. Clear written guidance is a useful first step in relation to this.
2. **COMPLEMENTARY TECHNOLOGIES:** Wikis should be used in collaboration with complementary group working virtual learning environment technologies (e.g. file sharing, discussion boards) to ensure student engagement .

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