I Thought Wikis Were Creatures in “Star Wars!”

A NEW TECHNOLOGY has grown in popularity over the past year or two. It allows multiple “authors” to edit each other’s content on the Internet. Why would anyone be interested in such a thing? Why would anyone allow such a thing? What purpose could something like this serve in education and athletic training? Why would anyone call it a wiki?

What Is a Wiki?

Since the first wiki came online years ago this technology has grown in popularity, the most popular example of which is Wikipedia.com. So, what is a wiki? A wiki is “a piece of server software that allows users to freely create and edit Web page content using any Web browser.”

Wikis allow for easy editing by multiple authors, including those who are not very technoliterate.

Wikipedia® is an excellent example of the use of a wiki. Wikipedia is “an international web-based free-content encyclopedia project.” By August 2006 it contained over 4.6 million articles, over 1.3 million in the English language. Basically, Wikipedia is a Web site that allows visitors to edit its content. The format the creators have used for this medium is that of an online encyclopedia that allows those around the globe who have information regarding a particular content area to provide that information for the rest of the community to use and comment on.

For example, if you are interested in the topic athletic training, you could find a page devoted to that topic (see Figure 1). Suppose you discovered some factual errors on this page and wanted to correct them, or you had additional information you would like included on the page—you can simply click on the tab at the top titled “edit this page.” This would bring up the entire text of the page on athletic training contained in a textbox (see Figure 2). At this point you can find the location where you wish to insert your content, insert it, and then submit it to the Web site. Your content will immediately become visible to the next person who visits that particular page. All the changes are tracked by the Web site, and earlier versions of the pages are archived and can be obtained through the “history” tab.
This system sounds very user friendly and can have some very powerful uses but, as with any tool, it can be misused. One would hope that most individuals who would contribute to a wiki like Wikipedia would do so to enhance the information contained there, to serve “the community.” Most of the information that is found in Wikipedia is accurate, and much is provided by content experts in each area, but, because of the editing freedom a wiki provides, some erroneous information can be posted and represented as fact. This is an important consideration that needs to be pointed out to those who wish to quote Wikipedia as factual information. It can be a valuable resource for an overview of a topic but should be confirmed with additional sources rather than relying on it as a primary source.

**What Are Other Uses for Wikis?**

Wikipedia is an example of a wiki that is completely editable by any person who visits the Web site. Some wikis are private or semiprivate, restricting access to only those the creator of the wiki invites.

Some individuals are finding wikis valuable to use for collaborative projects. For example, suppose an athletic training staff were interested in creating a policy manual. The draft of the policy manual could be posted on a wiki site such as JotSpot (www.jot.com). Access can be restricted to just members of the sports-medicine team (e.g., athletic trainers, team physicians). Each member of the team could go to the Web site to review and edit the policy manual. All the modifications or individual drafts would be tracked, and the wiki could keep track of who provided each change to the document. This would allow all the “editors” to work on the document remotely at their leisure, based on their individual schedules.

Educators might want to use wikis to post class projects or design group projects that require students to create their own version of an online encyclopedia on a topic from a particular course. For example, an instructor for a course on evaluating athletic injuries could set up a wiki and have groups in the class create content to be posted on it, such as etiology and pathology of dermatological conditions. Each group could be assigned a particular skin disorder. The group would then have the responsibility to research the topic and provide a summary of its research on the wiki. After the group had finished collaborating on the assignment, the final version could be posted on a public wiki site, allowing all the other students in the class to benefit by reviewing each others’ projects.

Some wikis also provide the opportunity to post spreadsheets and perform simple mathematical calculations. If an athletic training staff were preparing a budget for the upcoming year and wanted to work on it collaboratively, the spreadsheet could be posted on a wiki, which would allow each member of the athletic training team access to provide input. The wiki could even provide the capability to track supply inventories online via a wiki-based spreadsheet.