



## Wiki Storyline in Second Language Teaching

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### Abstract

*Wiki Storyline is a web-based Storyline project. The interdisciplinary approach to second language teaching provided by combining the Storyline method and ICT is dynamic, and ideal for practicing receptive and productive skills in English. Being a learner-centered approach, the Storyline creates motivation for written and oral communication and this is facilitated by digital tools. The Wiki Storyline project has been carried out with two in-service courses and this study presents a comparative analysis of the various technical solutions, as well as of the pedagogical potential explored in the two courses. In addition to the wiki, Etherpad and a blog were the key digital media tools included in the project. In the wiki a virtual world was created, while Etherpad served as a tool for real time collaborative text editing, and the blog as an arena for reflection for the participants, outside the virtual world.*

**Keywords:** Basic skills in English, blog, co-writing, motivation, multi modal texts, sharing, Storyline, wiki

### Introduction

The project discussed in this paper was interdisciplinary, involving English lecturers from the Faculty of Education and staff from the Center for New Media at Bergen University College, as well as the 2009-10 and 2010-11 participants in the English 2 in-service course. Bringing together the Storyline method and a variety of technological solutions, the project had as its aim to

develop participants' competence as second-language (SL) users and second-language teachers, as well as their digital competence. The digital Storyline is particularly appropriate for this purpose because this in-service course is partly seminar-based and partly web-based. In the first semester the participants met three times and each session extended over three days. The Storyline has been integrated fully into the course programme for this semester, including the assessment; the Storyline tasks must be completed satisfactorily before participants can sit the midterm exam. The insights reported here are based on two years' experience using the Storyline method and wikis.

In this project, participants practiced receptive and productive skills in English, both in the discussions and presentations in class sessions and on the wiki websites and blogs. Rather than simply being told about various online resources and their potential for teaching, they actually gained experience using these. At the same time, they gained first-hand experience of a motivating teaching method for SL teaching. Thus, the project was built on three pillars: the Storyline method, SL competence and digital resources. The question is: Will the Wiki Storyline project have an impact on the course participants' own language development and/or on their teaching practices?

## **The Storyline Method**

The Storyline method is based on the theory that knowledge is complex and many layered, that learning is guided by one's prior knowledge and experience, and that learners construct their own meaning through action and experience. The Storyline creates a context for learning with the active involvement of the child. (Harkness and Bell as cited in Cresswell, 1979:3)

In the late 1960s, the Storyline approach was developed by a group of educators in Glasgow, Scotland in response to changes in the education system and focus. It was designed to meet the new demands for increased emphasis on the child's personal development and active participation, and for subject integration. Maintaining these basic principles, Storyline has since been widely adapted for use in a variety of subjects and levels. According to one of the Storyline developers, Sallie Harkness, Storyline's "flexibility has permitted teachers and curriculum developers to adapt it to their own purposes. It has travelled well and proved its worth in various cultures and educational systems" (as cited in Cresswell, 1979:xvi). Harkness goes on to enumerate the many benefits of the method in terms of pupil motivation, classroom relations, discovery learning, parental involvement, community links, cooperative teaching, pupil output, and skills practiced, as well as enjoyment.

According to the Storyline Scotland website, "The main feature that differentiates this approach from others is that it recognizes the value of the existing knowledge of the learner" ("Storyline Scotland," n.d.). Thus, Storyline is a learner-centered approach that draws upon learners' existing schemata, their previous knowledge and their experiences outside the classroom. On this foundation, in accordance with constructivist principles, "the students construct and build their new knowledge structures around the themes that the teacher introduces" (Purtic, 2006:1). By implication, the learners' role is active, while the teacher's role is that of facilitator, scaffolding the process by providing the learning framework in the form of a Storyline. This scaffolding involves setting the learning goals, and designing a sequence of incidents and trigger activities that will activate not only the learners' prior knowledge about a topic, but also their problem-solving skills.

Storyline also stresses active learning and discovery processes, relying upon Vygotsky's insights into how children learn through activity. Focusing on this

dimension, it is possible to identify four factors: interaction, artifacts, context and creativity. In Storyline, the interaction dimension is central since learners are not alone; they work in groups and engage in a variety of activities that develop their social and collaborative competence. Artifacts are also important since learning involves the use of both head and hands; tools are used in working with the story, in remembering and in communicating. Perhaps the most distinctive dimension is the story context; learners are transported out of the classroom into an imaginary situation in which the various areas of knowledge are integrated and skills can be practiced in a meaningful way. Finally, as in all storytelling, Storyline is a creative process; the learners are no longer themselves but story characters, who guide the plot and create the artifacts. All of these dimensions contribute to the learning process, both in terms of knowledge and of thinking, questioning and problem-solving skills.

In this respect, Storyline may also be considered a skills-and-concepts approach. It is not a topic, project or theme, although it may share some of the same features and aims. Working on a story implies a focus on creativity, experience and a variety of skills, and not simply on knowledge. It also implies a large degree of learner control over the direction and outcome. This means that learners develop a sense of ownership and level of engagement that is infrequent in more conventional theme-based approaches. According to Jeff Cresswell, “the major difference between the Storyline method and thematic teaching (is that) Storyline begins by having the child create his or her own conceptual model first” (1997:7). Using their imagination, children fill in the gaps in their knowledge. They then compare their ideas with reality, asking questions related to the key issues they have identified.

We would suggest that the principle of communication lies at the heart of this method. In the course of the Storyline process, pupils are constantly interacting with group members: discussing, negotiating and collaborating to produce a wide variety of artifacts in different genre and materials. These artifacts serve to communicate the pupils’ developing knowledge and skills.

Since one of the central aims in most second-language (SL) curricula is communication, Storyline provides an ideal context in which to develop learner competence. This is particularly important since “Communicative competence is determined and achieved by diverse and interwoven processes when individuals interact with each other” (Ehlers et al., 2006:8). Storyline allows SL teachers to develop situations in which authentic communication can take place and provides a meaningful framework in which to practice communication skills. According to Steve Bell, “Storyline, as a strategy, helps to create a **context** which provides an **audience** and a **purpose** for the use of language in all its various forms” (as cited in Ehlers, 2006:56).

The relevance of the Storyline approach in the SL classroom goes beyond the emphasis on interaction and communication. This approach also integrates subjects in a meaningful way, as in the journey Storyline in which pupils use their knowledge of mathematics to draw up a budget. From the learners’ perspective, it allows for individual interests and strengths, and caters for various intelligences and learning styles. This facilitates learners’ engagement in their own learning, as well as serving as a motivational factor.

On the basis of curricular goals and themes, teachers plan their Storyline; they then engage the class in the story in a number of episodes, structured like the chapters in a story. The elements of a Storyline are also the same as those of a story: setting, characters, theme and plot. As part of the story frame, a specific time and place is established – this is the imaginary context and is further elaborated by the learners. It is this context that sets the premises for the story; for example, the language that will be needed, the problems that may occur and the categories of characters that will be appropriate. Then the characters are developed by the learners themselves, who take on a persona

and present him/her using a variety of images and texts. While a general theme is set in relation to the context, often involving the investigation of some phenomenon that is familiar – for example, farms, markets or journeys - the details are filled in by the learners. The plot develops in a series of incidents in which the characters have to decide what to do in the face of a ‘real-life’ problem; for example, an accident, an important visitor or a new neighbor. Also like a story, a Storyline opens with an introduction of the theme and presentation of the context and the characters. The typical structure of a Storyline has been summed up in the following diagram:

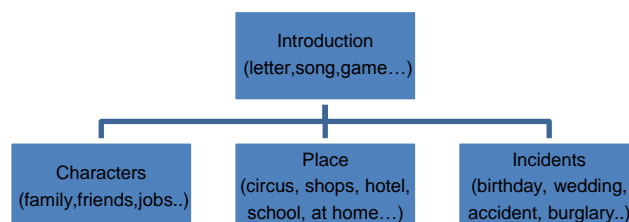


Figure 1: The typical structure of a Storyline. (Ehlers et al., 2006:19)

For each Storyline episode, key questions, activities and objectives are specified; this is the ‘thread’ to be followed. The function of the questions is to stimulate the learners’ existing knowledge and draw out their experiences; for example, what they know about a particular context/setting or what they might do in a given situation. The activities are varied and may include artwork, writing, oral presentations, calculations, ICT and problem solving. The choice of both questions and activities is guided by the objectives, which are in turn derived from the learning goals in the curriculum. The products of the activities provide a means for measuring the achievement of the objectives and a basis for self, peer and teacher feedback and evaluation.

## Methods

The data reported in this study consisted of texts produced by 28 course participants, divided into two groups of 14. Documentation was collected throughout the project, since the focus was on the process as well as the end product. The multi-modal texts that were collected in the wiki serve to document the students' competences.

There were two main sources of data related to students’ evaluations: reflection texts and unstructured group interviews. The texts written by the students in their blog entries focused on their experiences related to the project elements and the process. They commented upon both the individual tasks and the group work. These texts were analyzed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the various elements, as well as general interest in the Storyline method. In addition, they provided evaluations of the various ICT solutions. The unstructured group interviews were used to supplement the data obtained from the reflection texts. They provided an opportunity to ask questions that would fill in the gaps in the information provided; they also provided a forum in which to confirm the findings related to these texts.

## The Storyline project: in-service course for English teachers

The Storyline described in this paper was not the first digital Storyline to be developed. It was inspired by Hilde Brox’s presentation of the wiki site she had developed with her students at the University of Tromsø (presented at a seminar for members of the National Network for English and Second

languages in Halden, 29-30 January, 2009). At the initial planning meeting for the English 2 (30 ects) in-service course, there were several reasons why we decided to develop a digital Storyline specifically for teachers. First, this is a method that few teachers are familiar with and those who have used it have not done so in English. Second, in keeping with the Storyline tradition, a theoretical introduction to the method would be inappropriate; being activity-based, the approach should be experienced rather than simply talked about. Third, it is important in an in-service course with only 3 gatherings per semester to develop a learning context in which participants are using English actively. Being an activity-based approach, Storyline allows us to integrate online and in-class oral and written tasks for inclusion in the course assessment. Finally, we chose to make this a digital Storyline because the role of ICT in teaching has grown and digital competence is now included in the English curriculum beginning in fourth grade. This means that English teachers not only need the skills and knowledge necessary to develop their pupils' digital competence, but also those required to utilize the potential of this channel for teaching. Since digital skills development was a course aim, we decided that this could best be achieved by utilizing online services suitable for schools in the Storyline activities.

Our decision to use digital media in this project was supported by research. According to the report "Writing, Learning and Leading in the Digital Age" by the National Writing Project in the USA, "the use of Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, podcasts, wikis, and comics-creating software can heighten students' engagement and enhance their writing and thinking skills in all grade levels and across all subjects" (Prabhu, 2010). This is confirmed in the Norwegian context by Hoem, who states "that education should be focusing on the possibilities of utilising the qualities of the digital media in new ways by introducing learners to working methods that emphasise the co-operative and collective production forms facilitated by new digital technology" (Hoem, 2009:220).

The basic skills in *The Knowledge Promotion (LKO6)* – reading, writing, oral, ICT and arithmetic – overlap with the basic skills in language teaching in English. Thus, "English is one of the subjects in which the five basic skills can be readily and strategically integrated, since three of the basic skills (reading, writing and oral) are in the field of language and the remaining two involve language as a tool for investigation and expression" (Blair and Rimmereide, 2009:162). All of these competencies were included in the wiki Storyline design, reflecting the integrated nature of this method.

In developing the Storyline, we started with the standard Storyline chart and planned our Storyline around this, as shown in Table 1. Prior to the first meeting, the wiki site was created by the college staff, who were then the administrators. At the first session, the participants were introduced to the basic idea of Storyline and given technical instructions regarding how to use the wiki. Once the participants had created their accounts, they were invited in. Since they are invited in by the administrator, the administrator has complete control over who does what in the wiki.

<b>Episodes</b>	<b>Key Questions</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Resources</b>	<b>Goals &amp; Objectives</b>
1. Place	<p>1. Where is the town located?</p> <p>2. What information can we provide about the town(s)?</p> <p>3. What workplaces are in the town?</p>	<p><b>Discussion</b> (group + class) &gt; decision regarding location</p> <p><b>Brain storming</b> (class) &gt; decision regarding information to provide about the town wiki site</p> <p><b>Collaborative writing</b> (group)– description of specific features of town</p> <p><b>Brain storming</b> (class) &gt; options</p> <p><b>Selection of workplace</b> (group)</p> <p><b>Presentation of workplace</b> (group)</p> <p><b>Collaborative writing</b> (group) - description of a fictional workplace</p> <p><b>Upload texts + pictures</b> (group)</p>	<p>Etherpad</p> <p>Etherpad</p> <p>Wiki</p>	<p><b>Oral skills + negotiation</b></p> <p><b>Writing</b> descriptions of place + digital competence</p> <p><b>Oral skills + negotiation</b></p> <p><b>Writing + digital competence</b></p> <p><b>Digital skills + ethics</b></p>
2. Characters	<p>What information can we provide about the people in the town?</p>	<p><b>Brain storming</b> (class) &gt;</p> <p><b>Discussion</b> of characters (group)</p> <p><b>Write and post a biography</b> of 'their' character (individual)</p> <p><b>Find and post pictures</b> of 'their' character (individual)</p> <p><b>Introduction of the characters</b> to the class (individual)</p>	<p>Wiki</p> <p>Internet</p>	<p><b>Oral skills + description</b></p> <p><b>Writing</b> descriptions of people</p> <p><b>Digital skills</b></p> <p><b>Presentation skills</b></p>
3. Incident	<p>1. What do you feel about the proposal?</p> <p>2. What can you do in response?</p>	<p><b>Discussion</b> of the proposal (groups + class)</p> <p><b>Write a list of issues</b> (group)</p> <p>- how the oil refinery will affect their workplace</p> <p>- how the community should respond</p> <p><b>Write a letter</b> stating how this will affect them personally (individual)</p> <p><b>Give an interview</b> about how they will be affected (individual)</p>	<p>Wiki</p> <p>Recording devices</p>	<p><b>Oral skills – expressing opinions</b></p> <p><b>Problem solving</b></p> <p><b>Structuring arguments</b></p> <p><b>Writing formal letters</b></p> <p><b>Oral skills – pronunciation + intonation</b></p>

Table 1: The Wiki Storyline.

### Session 1

For practical and technical reasons the name of the town had to be decided prior to meeting the students; the year-one town was named Golgwera and the year-two town was named Kwikston<sup>1</sup>. At the opening session, the participants were divided into groups of 3-4 and the first Storyline question was posed: Where is the town located? They discussed the question first in their groups

and then the decision was made following a class discussion. Interestingly, the chosen location was the northern tip of the Northern Island in New Zealand both years. The third question was then posed, and following a brief discussion of what sort of activities go on in a town, the groups decided what their role would be in terms of their workplace. All of these activities provided a context for the authentic use of oral English. In addition, episode 2 was begun and the participants decided upon their characters and developed their roles in the story. Since Storyline is a role play, an imaginary world, it encourages creativity, which thrilled the participants.

During the first class session, episodes 1 and 2 tasks were assigned. In connection with episode 1, the participants were assigned two group tasks. The first was to write about the town, as a follow-up to question 2; all the participants were responsible for adding information about the town. The second group task was to write about their group's workplace, in response to question 3. In connection with episode 2, the participants were to complete the online tasks and come prepared to introduce their character at the next session.

The group activities meant that the participants had to cooperate online. They were introduced to *Etherpad*<sup>ii</sup> as a tool for writing about Kwikston and their workplace and subsequently post their final document. Since they were told to post background information when "everyone is satisfied with the text," the group task forces the participants to collaborate, co-writing, and to take responsibility for content and language. In contrast, the individual task was each person's responsibility and was to be posted directly onto the wiki. The publication of group and individual texts in this manner increased the amount of effort put into the texts in two ways. First, the fact that participants were forced to think and write creatively provided an opportunity to improve their writing. Second, the open forum where everybody in the group could read the others' writing motivated them to carefully check their work. An additional factor was the fact that the tasks were elements in the continuous evaluation.

The participants produced and posted their texts on the wiki. Since some were finished earlier than others, this may have inspired those who were not entirely certain of how and what to write. This meant that participants could function as writing models for one another.

The students were also asked to post their personal experiences in a blog which was created for the purpose. The blog was by invitation only, and restricted to the course participants. The purpose of using the blog was to provide a forum in which participants could express their thoughts on the process as the instructions indicate (fig. 1). In addition to its intended purpose – to provide a forum in which to give feedback on the digital media and Storyline process – the blog also served as a channel for venting frustrations and asking for, and receiving, help with technical problems.

Tables, illustrations and figures:

The "Kwikston Reflected" link is to a blog in which you can record your experiences after each Storyline session. This is a forum in which you, as course participants (not characters), can discuss the process etc. This will enable you to take up any problems as they arise, it will help staff to follow the Storyline process, and it will make it easier for you to write the final reflection text.

*Figure 2: Instructions for the use of the blog.*

The concerns expressed by the year-two project participants tended to relate to the Storyline activities: what to write, and when to stop writing and post their

texts. As one participant put it, “I wasn’t sure what to do, and how to do it. I was also afraid to post bad work.” The only guideline they were given was to create a person and work place, and it was not specified how much they should write. This revealed a shortcoming in the task formulation that will be rectified.

The year-one project encountered layout problems with Wikispaces, which were a central concern. There were fewer technical problems in the year-two, thanks to the decision to switch platforms. The Google version seems to be more seamless and user friendly than the Wikispaces solution.

It was evident that the activities opened for creativity, as is seen in some of the fantastical names of the character: for example, “Victoria Helpless” and “Arrow Forrest” allude to the role these ‘characters’ would play in the wiki, while “Serendipity” and “Bonnie Clyde” appealed to cultural humour. The layout and photos of the biographies reflected some participants’ willingness to explore the potential in the wiki and others’ more cautious approach. The general opinion of the students is summed up in the statement: “I think it is fun to play a role in a fantasy world.”

## **Session 2**

At the second session, the groups presented their workplaces and all the participants introduced their characters. The participants had a thorough knowledge of their characters’ biographies, and eagerly presented them to the rest of the group. This was another activity that developed the oral language element of the Storyline.

Having developed the setting and characters, the action of the Storyline could begin in episode 3. The key incident was the disruption of the town by an announcement in the local news (fig. 2): an oil refinery was to be built on the coast. Questions 1 and 2 in Table 1 were then raised, and as in the previous episodes, there were both group and individual tasks. The groups were asked to write a description of how this development would affect their workplace, and make suggestions regarding possible action. This collaborative task was designed to help the participants complete the two individual tasks: to write a letter to the Mayor explaining how this would affect their daily life and to present their views in a one-minute, recorded interview at the next session. The incident was designed to activate and encourage participant’s problem-solving skills and ability to express opinions and develop arguments.

In the year-one project, the participants were given time in class to discuss the implications of the oil refinery. Feedback revealed that this discussion had generated excitement in the role play. Due to lack of time, the year-two participants did not have the opportunity for in-class discussion. The impact this has had on the level of engagement may be revealed when the feedback on this episode has been collected.



### New Zealand Forges Ahead – in Kwikston!

After 10 years of discussion and several surveys and reports, a site for the new oil refinery has been selected: Kwikston. This small town is located on the North-eastern tip of the North Island.

Kwikston is ideally suited for this development for a number of reasons:

- A good natural harbor.
- A location on international navigation routes
- Available land suitable for development
- A river that can provide hydro-electric power
- An existing road network that can be expanded

It is expected that the refinery will bring new life, growth and prosperity to this isolated community. There will be new residents, new workplaces and new economic opportunities.

*Figure 3: Incident 1: Announcement in the local newspaper.*

### **Session 3**

At the final/concluding session in the first semester, the final activity of the Storyline was carried out. The students were interviewed by the mayor about how the oil refinery would affect their work place as well as them personally. The interview was carried out and recorded by the phonetics teacher. Participants were subsequently given feedback on their oral English. This format may have been a source of stress for the participants since it resembles an oral exam. Instead of a face-to-face interview, the participants could have done the recording themselves and simply sent in an MP3 file. The results might have been better since they would be more relaxed and they could have re-recorded the text if they were not satisfied. Nevertheless, the participants seemed to enjoy the task, and appreciated the concrete feedback on their pronunciation and intonation, which are important elements of being a good English teacher. This task was also included in the project assessment.

### **Reflections on the project**

Only a few of the participants were familiar with the Storyline method at the beginning of the project, and none had experience setting up a wiki on their own, or even using a wiki.

The reflection texts and unstructured group interview at the end of the 2009-2010 wiki Storyline revealed that nine out of 14 participants considered implementing a similar project with their own groups of pupils. The 2010-2011 texts and interviews revealed virtually the same breakdown.

The students reported their reflections in a blog that was set up for the purpose. In general, the students were positive about implementing a storyline in the form of a wiki. Only one from each course claimed that they would not use it with their own students, because it was too time consuming. Four or five stated that they were not sure whether they would implement a wiki because of the technical competence required. Two participants in the second group had actually begun projects with their own classes before completing the project. In addition, one participant reported that she had initiated a similar project later. Whatever their position, they all recognized the advantages of using a wiki storyline in language learning, based on their personal experience in the project.

## The technical solutions

Somewhat different solutions were chosen in the first and second years of this project for a variety of reasons. The Wiki is at the core of the entire project. Wikis are publishing solutions, which make any user able to instantly update the online information. Changes are logged and can be reviewed and compared to previous versions by other users. This has proved to be a very fast and reliable way of creating and maintaining online information resources. Wikis are made for easy sharing and updating of information, which make them powerful tools for collaboration. They are often accessible to a large public on the open Internet, but can also be used in smaller, closed work groups, like a class. Wiki-technology represents a considerable learning-potential for developing a common content resource within communities of various sizes.

## Wikispaces

Wikispaces ([www.wikispaces.com](http://www.wikispaces.com)) is a service that uses wiki technology which has gained some popularity in the field of education. It can be used as a free service<sup>iii</sup>, but this is financed by advertisements and cannot be closed, so the content can be read by anyone. Wikispaces have, however, opened for use of the cheapest paid versions, without charge, in primary and secondary education. In this version it is possible to create a "private room", into which the owner invites others, choosing who will be able to write and read the texts. As a teacher, one can create a wiki dedicated to a specific class or group. Another advantage is that the users do not need any special knowledge about how to use a wiki as a publication tool. Being a true wiki, Wikispaces is based on the idea that a number of people can work with the same text and develop it over a period of time. Thus, the written products differ from those with which most teachers in Norway are familiar, due to their collaborative nature.

In 2009 the staff designed the Golgwera wiki (fig.3) following the standard procedures for this version of Wikispaces. The participants were responsible for developing the fictional universe, using text and pictures. To make navigation within the wiki as easy as possible, the menu to the left was edited and displayed on all pages.



Figure 4: The main page of Golgwera, made with Wikispaces.

When editing a page, there is a visual editor that resembles a simplified word processor. The user can format the text, insert images and files, add widgets, and link to other pages or external resources. It is also possible to include media from external services, like a video from YouTube, presentations from Slideshare, documents published by Issuu, and numerous other sources. This also makes it possible to embed media that others have produced.

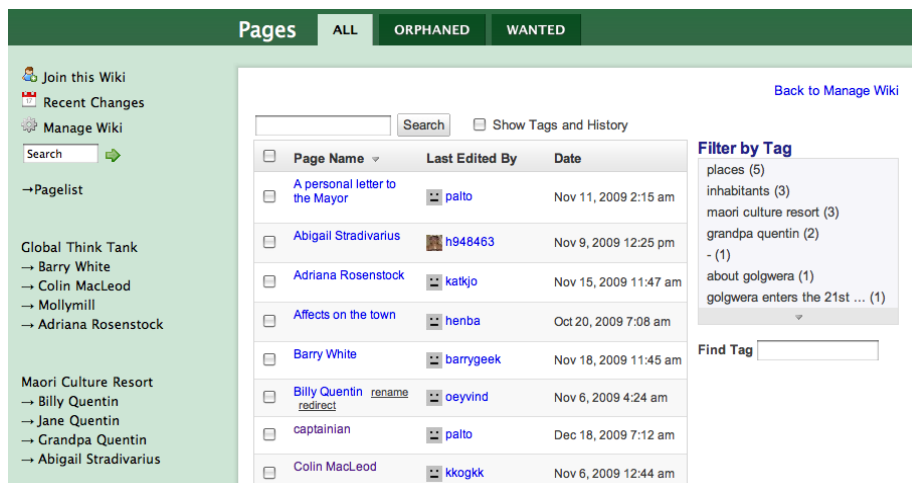


Figure 5: The alphabetic list of pages in the Golgwera wiki.

In addition, an alphabetic list of all pages made in this wiki is available (fig. 4), showing when the latest edit was done and which user was responsible for the editing. Wikispaces also has a feature common to most wikis: a page displaying “recent changes”, which makes it easy to monitor activity on the wiki.

## Google Sites

While Wikispaces was generally satisfactory, both the teachers and the participants considered the interface rather unappealing. In addition, the editor had limited options for customizing the layout of individual pages. A different service was therefore chosen for Kwikston in the year-two project (fig. 5): Google Sites. This is available from Google as part of the Google Apps Productivity suite, and is closely integrated with services like Google Documents, Google Mail etc. An example of the integrated nature of this site is the map of Kwikston provided on the wikis main page, which was produced in Google Maps. Google Sites can also be used as an independent service. This solution has many of the characteristics of wikis, which reflects its origin as social software<sup>iv</sup> targeted at small- and medium-scale businesses. In spite of the fact that Google Sites is owned by a company that makes its money from advertising, the pages have no advertisements unless the site owner decides to allow such displays.

A number of users can work together on a site, editing pages and adding file attachments and information from other Google applications (like Google Documents, Google Calendar, YouTube and Picasa Webalbums). As in Wikispaces, the site owner can control access, whether it is just the user and a group or the rest of the world.

Google Sites offers a range of useful features. For example, it is possible to create full copies of sites, which can be very useful in an educational setting. It is also possible to subscribe to changes in individual pages or an entire site, using email or RSS-feeds. This makes it easy to monitor activity, even in situations where a large number of people are contributing to a site. An added advantage for teachers is the fact that the administration interface in Google

Sites can be shown in different languages, including Norwegian. In addition, the pages can be sorted by the site owner, simply by dragging and dropping the pages to their desired position in the hierarchy. The functionality is quite similar to Wikispaces, but the teachers considered Google Sites to be somewhat easier to administer.

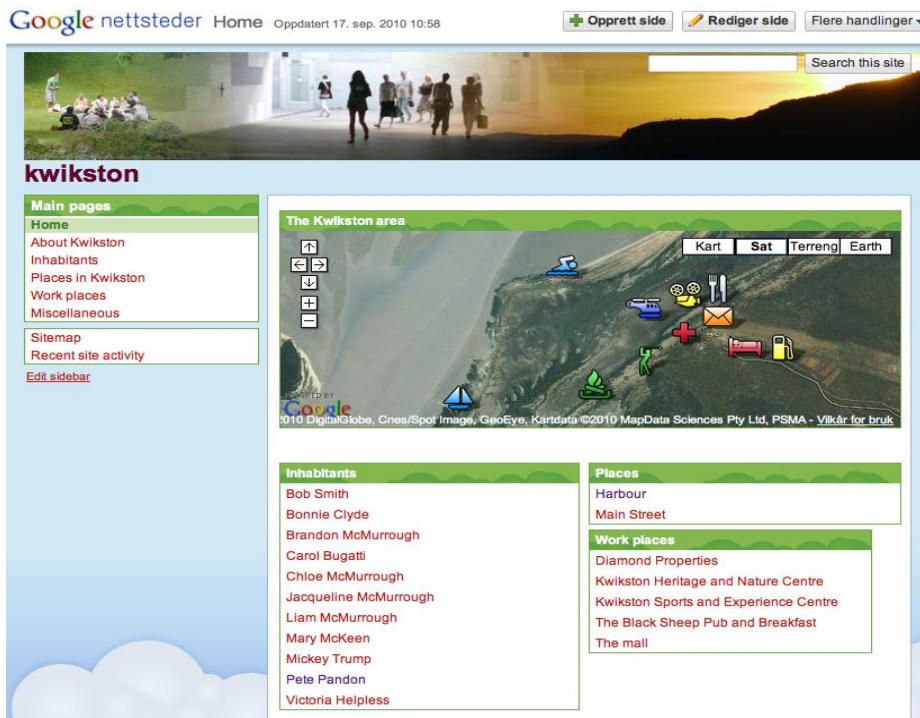


Figure 6: The main page of Kwikston, made with Google Site.

When editing individual pages in Google Sites, the toolbar at the top of the pages has similar functions to those provided in Wikispaces. However, in Google Sites the user has the possibility to change the layout of the text area (fig. 7), a process that is more difficult in Wikispaces. Note the link to Typewithme that is provided, a solution based on Etherpad, discussed below.



Figure 7: Layout possibilities.

## Simultaneous co-writing

Both Wikispaces and Google Sites allow the users to collaborate, and the individual contributions can be shown in the page history. Nevertheless, real-time collaboration is rather awkward using the wikis. Problems occur if several users try to edit the same page simultaneously, and information can easily be lost. When the participants were to create the pages containing the biographies of their individual characters, this was an individual task which went smoothly. However, the participants were also asked to collaborate on texts describing their community and workplaces. This was to be done within a short timeframe, and neither the wikis nor collaborative tools like Google documents could facilitate this kind of simultaneous writing.

The solution we chose was Etherpad<sup>v</sup> (fig. 7), in which it is possible to see the different contributors' texts in real time. There are many tools based on the source code from Etherpad and all of the solutions have similar functionality.

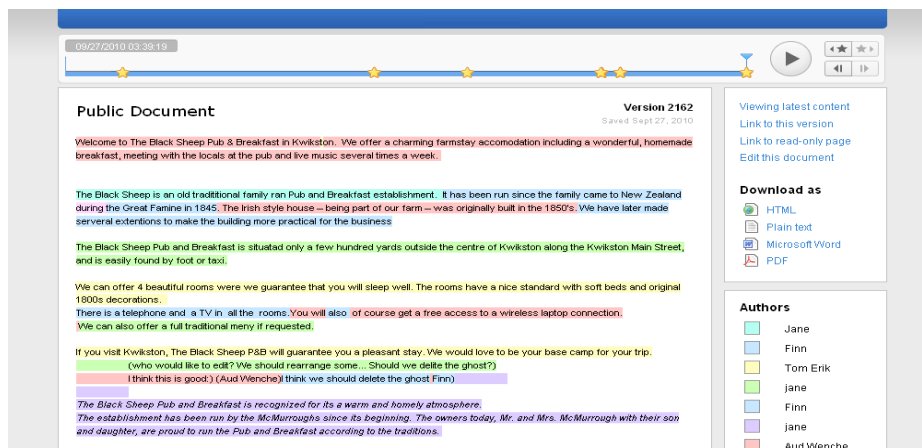


Figure 8: Contributions by different writers in Etherpad.

In this extract, each contributor typed their character's name and chose a color to identify their contributions. Several users were writing simultaneously, and every user was constantly aware of what the others were doing. A useful feature of this service is the "playback" button, which shows how the text has evolved over time. Each individual's contribution to the text becomes visible, even the passages that are not included in the final text.

When the participants were satisfied with the text they had composed in Etherpad, they copied the end product and pasted it into the Wiki. A variety of illustrations and typefaces could then be added to the text, as in Figure 6. The text information can, of course, still be edited within the wiki, but this becomes a slower process compared to working in Etherpad.

## Blogger.com

Blogger, a free blogging service provided by Google, was used in the project both years. The service is easy to use, and users can choose whether they want a blog to be personal or whether they want multiple users to contribute to a single blog. The latter option was chosen for the project, in order to encourage authentic written communication, so the blog became a writing space shared by all the participants. One of the teachers created the blog and invited all the other participants to join the discussion.

The blog had a specific function in this project, supplementing the wiki. Since all the texts in the wiki related to the fictional universe, the blog was where the

staff and the participants were able to express their non-fictional thoughts; they could reflect upon the learning processes, ask questions, express opinions, etc. Each post in the blog is signed with the writer's name, so the blog becomes a collection of individual texts, which the users can comment upon.

By using the wiki and the blog for different purposes, the learning environment reflected the different stages of learning. In the wiki, the focus was solely on the collaborative task of building the fictional universe. That was where the participants carried out the tasks related to the Storyline. In the blog, on the other hand, both teachers and participants were free to communicate in ways that could have destroyed some of the story qualities evident in the texts in the wiki.

### **Reflections regarding the various technical solutions**

Several theories of hypertext make a point of the blurred boundary between readers and writers, emphasizing the "readers" contribution to the text through the choices that construct individual readings of a given text (Landow). Roland Barthes claims that "the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. "Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader" (Barthes, 1974:4). Barthes did not have hypertext in mind, and one can argue that the first hypertexts hardly fulfilled his "goal of a literary work". Users of traditional hypertexts were limited to predefined choices, and it was not until the introduction of wikis that the distinction between consumers and producers really seemed to disappear. Then a user is considered a reader, and a writer is no longer dependent on qualities of the medium itself but rather on whether the user chooses to edit a page or not. In a wiki, the same opportunities are available to most of the users, with the exception of the administrator's exclusive rights, including the right to exclude destructive users.

Our experiences were gathered in two semesters working with these services and are not extensive enough to allow us to draw specific conclusions. Nevertheless, some tendencies are evident with regard to the administration, text production and evaluation capacity of the services used.

With regard to administration, Google Sites seems to be a more up-to-date solution than Wikispaces. Tools that facilitate the integration of external media also seem to be somewhat better implemented in Google Sites. However, ultimately these differences are a matter of individual preference. Where the two solutions really differ is in their capacity to produce more complex site designs, both in matters of site appearance and in the layout of individual pages. Of the two, the participants who worked with Google Sites seemed to appreciate this potential more than those who worked with Wikispaces. From the teachers' point of view, the fact that users are able to use the same login to Google Sites and Blogger and Google documents makes administration easier. However, this would not be a strong argument if one chose another blog-service, such as Wordpress, or had no blog at all.

With regard to the production of written texts, we did not experience any significant differences between Wikispaces and Google Sites. The main difference was between the wikis and Etherpad. One can argue that the various versions of Etherpad also have wiki functionality, as long as any user is able to revise the text. Etherpad differs from the other services in its capacity for instant text editing, a function it fulfills admirably. Nevertheless, Etherpad could not have served as the only tool in this course since the various solutions meet different needs.

When using wikis, a central principle is that a given text is not considered to be the final mediation of the learner's knowledge. The content and meaning of individual texts are meant to change over time, reflecting a development in which the content produced by one person may be revised by several others. This introduces some problems in the matter of assessing individual learning: How can one assess each individual's contribution to a collective text? Both Wikispaces and Google Sites have similar solutions in that they store the different versions of individual pages. Nevertheless, it can be quite tedious to follow the different revisions, especially if they are done by a number of contributors. In order to monitor individual contributions to a collaborative text, one of the Etherpad clones would be a better solution. It is also possible to use the external blog for this purpose, giving the participants tasks in which they are required to reflect upon their own writing processes, with links to specific versions of the collaborative text.

## **Concluding remarks**

Both the texts and the general comments of participants on the wiki storyline project indicated a very positive response. The fact that several of the participants have already used wiki storyline in their own classes indicates that they found the project engaging and motivating and that it had affected their teaching practices. While they all felt more confident and willing to use technology in their teaching, not all felt completely competent to establish a site themselves. There were also those who did not feel that they had enough time to carry out such a project properly. Nevertheless, the overall response to the project was very positive.

With regard to their own language development, they indicated that they took the tasks more seriously when they were to be published. It would be interesting to investigate a number of features of the project more closely; for example, the possibility of more formal peer feedback during the process and the interaction between oral and written activities. In addition, there are a variety of other technological options that the participants might like to add to their site. One of the group suggested that voice mail could be added, thereby linking another facet of language use to ICT competence.

The wiki Storyline provided an opportunity to include all the basic language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking in English language learning through using ICT. The motivating factors of Storyline and the innovative use of digital media tools caught the imagination of the participants and created enthusiasm.

With regard to the technical solutions, the staff were satisfied with the way in which these functioned. Both Wikispaces and Google Sites are free for schools and both provide wiki-functionality that most participants find easy to use. The choice of service did not influence the didactical parameters for implementing the Storyline. The main negative factor was the fact that the free version of Wikispaces includes advertisements when used in higher education.

With regard to text production, educators should consider using some form of simultaneous writing as a supplement to the standard wiki. This tool makes it possible to collaborate on documents in real-time, which is not possible in all wikis.

Finally, we would also recommend using a blog for meta-level communication among teachers and participants outside the fictional world of the wiki. Depending on the tasks, blogs can serve as a forum for individual reflection or for group/class discussion. We have chosen Blogger.com, but there are several other free services.

To sum up, we concluded that the wiki storyline provided an opportunity for both language skills practice and for increasing familiarity with ICT solutions that could be introduced into the classroom. It allows for a combination of method and technology that utilizes the full potential of both. Most importantly, it is very versatile and can be used at virtually all levels and in a wide variety of subject areas.

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[viewed 1 October 2010].

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<sup>i</sup> All references in this paper are to Kwikston, but also apply to Golgwera.

<sup>ii</sup> Etherpad is a web-based word processor real time collaborative text editing.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.wikispaces.com/site/pricing>

<sup>iv</sup> Google acquired the company JotSpot in 2006, and relaunched the service as Google Sites two years later.

<sup>v</sup> <http://etherpad.org/>