

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF A WIKI TO SUPPORT CATHOLIC AND JESUIT IDENTITY

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Introduction

The Society of Jesus sponsors one of the largest education networks in the world with over 1,000 schools operating in more than 60 countries. Within the United States, there are over 45,000 students enrolled in 49 Jesuit high schools, over 200,000 students enrolled in 28 Jesuit colleges and universities, and over 1.7 million living alumni of Jesuit schools. This paper explores the potential of using a wiki to help support the Catholic and Jesuit identity of these schools. The Ignatian Wiki (www.IgnatianWiki.org) is a free, on-line encyclopedia begun in January 2006 that uses the software that supports Wikipedia and over the past two years has grown to over 4,000 articles and attracted visitors from over 93 different countries. The site seeks to develop freely licensed content that can help students, faculty, staff, administrators, volunteers, alumni, and others interested in Jesuit institutions understand and further the Catholic and Jesuit identity of these institutions.

Evolution of the Ignatian Wiki

‘Wiki’ comes from the Hawaiian phrase ‘wiki wiki’ which means quick and was first used by Ward Cunningham in 1994. The first wiki to gain wide attention is Wikipedia, which was founded in early 2001. Wikipedia now has over two million articles on the English version, over ten million articles across all language versions, and is the eighth most visited website in the world with over 50 million unique visitors per month. Some of the advantages of using the wiki approach is that content can be changed quickly, it provides a ‘grass roots’ vs top-down approach to content development, and it facilitates the development of a sense of community among the volunteers who develop the content. Some of the negatives of the wiki approach are that material may not be accurate, vandals can create problems, and many organizations are not comfortable with content and messages they cannot control.

I am a lay Catholic and started the “Jesuit Wiki” (since renamed) on January 4, 2006 while I was on sabbatical at the Jesuit Institute at Boston College. While it was not the main focus of the sabbatical, I recognized the possibility of using a wiki to create a ‘commons’ of freely licensed content to support Jesuit schools. Prior to my sabbatical, I had been chair of the undergraduate program committee in Creighton’s business school and had led the development of goals for the program, with implications for curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. The accrediting bodies for business (AACSB) and the university (the North Central Association) have shifted from quantitative metrics towards accreditation based on alignment between mission, goals, curriculum, and outcomes. I had also been on the board of *Colleagues in Jesuit Business Education* for several years and was the co-founder of the Faculty Mission and Identity Group at Creighton. While most Jesuit schools have developed websites and materials to help students, faculty, and staff understand the mission and distinctiveness of Jesuit education, the wiki came about partly out of frustration that much of the material was contradictory, almost all was copyrighted, and people seemed to constantly be ‘reinventing the wheel’.

Since I recognized the wiki approach raised fundamental issues of authority and the role of the laity, I requested a meeting in January 2006 with Father Joseph Appleyard, VP for University Mission and Ministry at Boston College. Over the next two months I made a presentation about the concept at the Jesuit Institute and met with Father William Leahy, President of Boston

College to discuss the specific wiki concept as well as the more general topic of the role of laity within a Catholic university (a chapter in his doctoral dissertation). Fathers Appleyard and Leahy saw potential in the concept but were concerned about Wikipedia's general reputation and were hesitant to have Boston College officially sponsor the site, partly since I was just there on sabbatical. Father Leahy referred me to Father Tom Smolich, the incoming President of the Jesuit Conference (the governing body of the Society of Jesus in the United States) and I have had numerous interactions with him over the past two years. In October 2006 the Communications sub-committee of the Jesuit Conference discussed whether the Society of Jesus should sponsor the Jesuit Wiki. Given concerns about the 'anyone can edit' model of a wiki, potential vandalism, and potential confusion with official communications of the Society of Jesus, the decision was made to not directly sponsor the site. The Jesuit Conference also requested use of a name other than "Jesuit Wiki" since the Jesuits were not directly sponsoring the site. Father Smolich indicated that there were a number of other lay-led groups using Ignatian as part of their names and encouraged use of this adjective. The site was renamed the Ignatian Wiki and the Ignatian Commons Initiative was the name given to the governing body.

Over the past two years, the Ignatian Wiki has grown to over 4,000 articles and has had over 2,300 visitors from 850 cities in 93 countries around the world. There are articles for all of the Jesuit educational institutions and provinces around the world and for many parishes, retreat centers, and residences. The category index structures the content on the site into Jesuit ministries (e.g., education, parishes, retreat centers, social ministries), Jesuits and Ignatian Spirituality (e.g., History and Organization of the Society, General Congregations, Ignatian Spirituality), Catholicism (e.g., Church history, Catholic intellectual tradition, Catholic social teaching), and Other (e.g., Publications, Lay organizations, former Jesuit ministries).

Opportunities

Since the late 1960s and the Land 'O Lakes Conference and Statement, Jesuit sponsored colleges have transitioned to organizational entities that are independent of the Society of Jesus. This pattern of legal separation between the religious order or diocese and the educational institution has been followed by most Catholic schools in the United States. Today, less than 2% of faculty members at U.S. Jesuit colleges are Jesuits and vocational and demographic trends indicate there will be a decrease in the number of Jesuits in the schools over the next fifteen years. There is thus a long term challenge of preserving the distinctiveness of Jesuit education when there are relatively few Jesuits directly involved in providing this education.

The single greatest opportunity for the Ignatian Wiki is to develop a set of free online resources that can be shared among Jesuit schools worldwide to reinforce the essence of Catholic and Jesuit identity. While most Jesuit schools have developed such materials and much of it is present on websites, almost all of this material uses an 'all rights reserved' approach that requires explicit permission be granted for reuse. Since 1992 in the U.S., creative work is considered copyrighted with all rights reserved (even if the author does not place © on the content), unless the author explicitly releases it to the public domain or licenses it. To allow free use and editing of documents created by others, the Gnu Free Document License (GFDL) and/or Creative Commons licenses are used by wikis to allow collaborative development and reuse on other sites. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to get into the details of these licenses and intellectual property law, the point is that few people outside the software world before the late

1990s foresaw the need for copyright licenses that allowed reuse and collaborative development, while still preserving some legal restrictions on how the content is reused. The “free” in “free encyclopedia” (Wikipedia) and “free online resources” (Ignatian Wiki) refers to these freedoms for reuse rather than users not paying money for site access. The implication of having free content on the Ignatian Wiki is that people who want to use text or an image from the site in a presentation, report, article, or church bulletin can use this content without having to request permission as long as they comply with the terms of the license chosen by the contributor (typically, attribution and retain the content under a free license).

A second opportunity is development of a community of contributors who develop this free online content. While there has been much discussion of partnership and collaboration with the laity in mission over the past 15 years, a wiki provides a very tangible and specific avenue within which Jesuits, laity, and other partners can contribute to development of resources related to the mission and identify of Jesuit sponsored institutions. There has been increased recognition of the contributions of the laity throughout the Catholic Church since Vatican II and a wiki site provides a very specific forum for such collaboration. At its core, a wiki is a massively decentralized, democratized, grass roots approach for developing content. While the process of reaching consensus can be messy and the content should not be relied upon as the only source of information, Wikipedia’s growth to be the eighth most visited site in the world is a result of the improvement of content as the community of contributors grew. As more people become involved and contribute their specialized and local knowledge, the content on the site evolves to incorporate subtleties and new insights. Potentially more importantly for Catholic and Jesuit identity, people start to themselves as being part of a shared, worldwide collective enterprise rather than simply an employee of a local private university.

A third opportunity is to incorporate wikis into the educational process. In the Spring semester of 2008, 27 students in a business class at Creighton University and 25 students in a theology class at Boston College contributed to the Ignatian Wiki. The course at Creighton was titled “Catholic and Jesuit Perspectives on Work/Life Balance” and students were required to make a least four edits per week. Students made a wide range of contributions from adding names, addresses and phone numbers for schools to creation of articles on each of the Superior Generals of the Society to creation of articles on core principles of Ignatian Spirituality and Catholic Social Teaching. The course at Boston College was titled “Ignatian Spirituality” and each student in this theology course developed one article along the lines of a typical term paper.

An additional opportunity is creation of Ignatian Wikis in languages other than English. A Spanish version was formally created in February 2008 and has thus far attracted visitors from over 35 countries (see Exhibit 1). Since Jesuits are present in such a wide range of countries, plans are being made to create additional language wikis over the next year. It is noteworthy that over 75% of the articles in the various language Wikipedias are in languages other than English.

Challenges

The most significant challenges with the Ignatian Wiki over the past two years have been organizational, not technical or development of content. In the United States, each Jesuit school is an independent legal entity and the Ignatian Wiki represents an attempt to virtually link these schools, the ten Jesuit provinces, many independent associations (e.g., Association of Jesuit Colleges and University, Jesuit Secondary Education Association), and dozens of sub-groups

(e.g., Admissions Directors, Library Deans, Campus Ministry Directors, Finance Administrators). The organizational complexity increases as the site attracts an increasing number of visitors and content from outside the United States. Tim Muldoon, former Director of Boston College's Church in the 21st Century (a Boston College center formed in the wake of the abuse scandal in Boston) has been on the advisory board of the Ignatian Commons Initiative (the governing board) for the past two years and has encouraged a lay-led model of collaboration. The Ignatian Wiki aspires to a position of neutrality and reasoned debate in collaboration with Jesuits, in contrast to advocacy approaches of lay led Catholic initiatives such as Voice of the Faithful and Call to Action. Father Tom Smolich, President of the Jesuit Conference, has also encouraged this collaborative lay-led model and serves on the advisory board, providing an important liaison between the Ignatian Wiki and the Society of Jesus. The founding document opens: "The Ignatian Commons Initiative is a lay-led initiative that has the goal of developing a community of people who work collaboratively with Jesuits to develop free online content to support Catholic and Jesuit identity." The community-collaboration-content sequence is important -- content will follow if the first two are in place.

A second challenge has been developing a financial model to support development of the site. The current hosting and bandwidth costs are minor (under \$100 per year) and the current shared hosting site can handle an increase of about 100 times the storage and bandwidth without an increase in hosting fees. In October 2007, the Jesuit Conference considered a funding request but declined funding, primarily because they want the site and initiative to be led-led and independent of the Society of Jesus. While significant funding is currently not needed, if the Ignatian Wiki experiences the type of exponential growth that Wikipedia has had over the past seven years, the hosting costs could become substantial (about 60% of Wikipedia's planned spending for 2007-2008 of \$4.6 million is for technical costs). Possible funding approaches are to use Wikipedia's individual donation approach (although it recently received a \$3 million grant from the Sloan Foundation), to request donations from colleges, high schools, and parishes, to request funding from existing associations, and/or to use a non-profit sponsorship model.

A third challenge is developing accurate content and keeping the site free of vandalism. The wiki model will always be subject to people contributing inaccurate content and it should never be relied on as a sole and authoritative source. However, I have seen a very significant change in the attitude toward Wikipedia within academia since early 2006, with academics being less able to dismiss it as the quality of the articles has increased and as Wikipedia increasingly shows up in the Top 10 results for most searches on Google. The best defense against vandalism and inaccuracy is the creation of a community of contributors who create and monitor content, who help develop policies and guidelines for the community, and who develop software and human monitoring tools to catch and quickly remove vandalism. The Ignatian Wiki requires users to create an account and have a valid e-mail address before they can edit (in contrast to Wikipedia, which allows anonymous editing). While the potential for vandalism is always present, there have been not yet been any discovered incidents of vandalism on the Ignatian Wiki.

In summary, the Ignatian Wiki demonstrates the potential of a wiki to develop free online resources to support Catholic and Jesuit identity. The challenge now is to grow the community of contributors and to expand and improve the quality of the content.

Exhibit 1: Growth of English and Spanish Ignatian Wikis

