



# **How FLAT is YOUR Homeschool World?**



**How to use new Internet  
research and collaboration  
tools in your homeschool**



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MotherboardBooks.com**

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## **Something new in education**

As we homeschool, we always need to keep tabs on what the public and private schools are doing. After all, our kids will be competing with schooled kids for college spots and jobs. And so I want to bring a major ongoing shift in school-based education to your attention.

Many public and private high schools across the nation are moving toward a new way of teaching: coaching kids in combing the Internet for relevant information, working together. This brings to the schoolroom a natural zest for the hunt. There are plenty of high school and college classes now where the *Internet* provides the information, not a textbook. Students are taught to go out and find info, evaluate it, and pull it together online with info located by their classmates. The teacher serves more as a coach posing questions than a provider of information. Testing becomes less and less about memorizing facts from a textbook, at least at the secondary and college level, and more and more about evaluating information.

In fact, there are classrooms on opposite sides of the globe that are linked in cyberspace, working together on projects.

This shift has several names: flat world (based on how “close” we are in cyberspace to others on the planet), flat classroom, elearning 2.0, and Web 2.0 in the classroom. (2.0 refers to the second version or edition.)

Should homeschoolers be flat-worlders too? More specifically, should you? This is the question I am posing to you.

### **An argument in favor**

The new model engages and inspires students. For example, Greene County, North Carolina, installed a system six years ago where every child in sixth grade and up had a laptop, teachers were trained in the project-based methods, and curriculum was based much more on technology.

Over the six years, the rate of graduates of that school system going to college went from 26 percent to 94 percent (Wall Street Journal, July 23, 2009, page D3). That's right, the percentage of kids going to college more than tripled. In other situations, dropout rates have fallen.

I attribute this to the project-based nature of the work. Kids are much more interested and willing if they are working on a project where they can get creative, and especially if they are working together on a project (in a system that doesn't let shirkers get by). For homeschoolers, it could be an opportunity to get away from fact-based learning found in some workbook-style curriculums. At the middle and high school level, our kids need to learn to compare and contrast facts and ideas. This type of learning can emphasize that.

### **An argument against**

If you give a boy a laptop, he will sooner or later run up against stuff he should not see. And of course, looking at porn is addictive. In fact, 64 percent of college men admit to using porn at least once a week, according to a survey of 26,000 college students by researcher Michael Leahy as quoted by OneNewsNow.com (<http://www.onenewsnw.com/Perspectives/Default.aspx?id=533912>). That is NOT where we want our kids to be headed.

Well, there are now sophisticated filters out there that can help you keep your kids safe. You can see reviews of some of what is available at

<http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/> . As far as filters go, I am happy with Covenant Eyes and have also used NetNanny. (For a free month on Covenant Eyes, use promo code “MBB”!)

*Giving* your kid freedom to do Internet research is risky. You can minimize the risk, though, by putting the computer the kids use where you can keep an eye on what they are doing, and by putting a login password on the computer that only the adults know. Of course, you need a good filter, too.

But *withholding* the same freedom to do Internet research is also risky. Your child will be competing in college and in the workplace with other kids who have gathered info and solved problems together, online. Your child will also be missing out on the added zest that the new method confers: that of going out and finding interesting stuff, and that of working together on a collaborated project.

Eventually your child will be an adult. Let’s say you’ve decided to foster good computer habits in him: searching for legitimate information, and being accountable to others for his behavior.

(You could plan for the day when your young adult could graduate to the Covenant Eyes Internet accountability systems. Here, the Internet user agrees to let his searching be electronically monitored and reported to a third party, an accountability partner, by email.)

Let’s say you have decided to use a good filter on your computers. As an added precaution, you’ve placed the computers front and center in your home (not hidden in a bedroom). Now you want to check out the new teaching method.

### **Where do you start?**

Part of the fun is working together with someone. Perhaps your child has peers who would love to work together on something, or perhaps your own children would like

to work together on a project. A homeschool co-op would be an ideal place to set this up. And maybe through a message board, blog, or Facebook you can reach out to homeschooling families far away, and find not pen pals, but project pals for your kids.

The model involves each person researching a portion of the topic and then posting the findings in a spot on the Internet where all writers can see them. Each person brings new ideas, giving more new ideas to the others. The more people involved, the more creative energy, says Michael Wesch, a Kansas State University anthropology professor who is one of those spearheading this new type of education.

### **Check out GoogleDocs**

Where to post? Using GoogleDocs, two or more can post findings on a private spreadsheet or Word document, hosted at Google and viewable only by those chosen by the originator. You can tell who added what, so shirkers can't hide. It's free. Upload documents or create them at GoogleDocs.

- Check it out and try it out at <http://docs.google.com>
- Here's a link to the quickstart guide: <http://www.google.com/google-d-s/docsQuickstartGuide.pdf>
- Here's a link to the Help page: <http://docs.google.com/support/?hl=en>

### **Consider a wiki**

Two or more can also post to a "wiki," or user-generated document, which is more blog-like. (Wiki is the Hawaiian word for "fast.") Wikis look like blogs but have multiple authors, and typically have only a few pages. Wikis can be public, viewed and edited by anyone, or they can be viewed and edited only by those chosen by the creator. Again, it's very clear who is doing the work (and who isn't) because each entry is dated and recorded. Like blogs, wikis also can carry "widgets," or code snippets, displaying information from news feeds, weather, and so on. Free wikis are available at Wetpaint, Pbwiki, Wikispaces, and Wikia, as well as other places.

Wikipedia is the most famous wiki; to learn how a bunch of regular people put it together, go to any subject page and click on the “discussion” tab to see the interaction record left by the contributors. This is the sort of trail you want to see left by your students.

Wikispaces.com has free wikis for education, so you might want to consider that. In Appendix A, I show you how to use it.

### **What project to work on?**

Now, what sort of project works well? Floydada High School in Texas assigned groups of students to conceive, write, and produce a short film incorporating research on the history of an assigned decade. This subject involved various teachers across disciplines, and is somewhat typical of what students are asked to do in these projects. The kids responded. Just one year into the Floydada technology program, reading scores rose 27 percent and math scores 15 percent, the superintendent told *The Wall Street Journal* (July 23, 2009, page D2).

Not wanting to get into video production? Think again; your kids may be happy to research video production and tell YOU how to do it. (Hint: video production is easy on a Mac. Filming videos is VERY easy with a Flip Video camera, costing around \$150.)

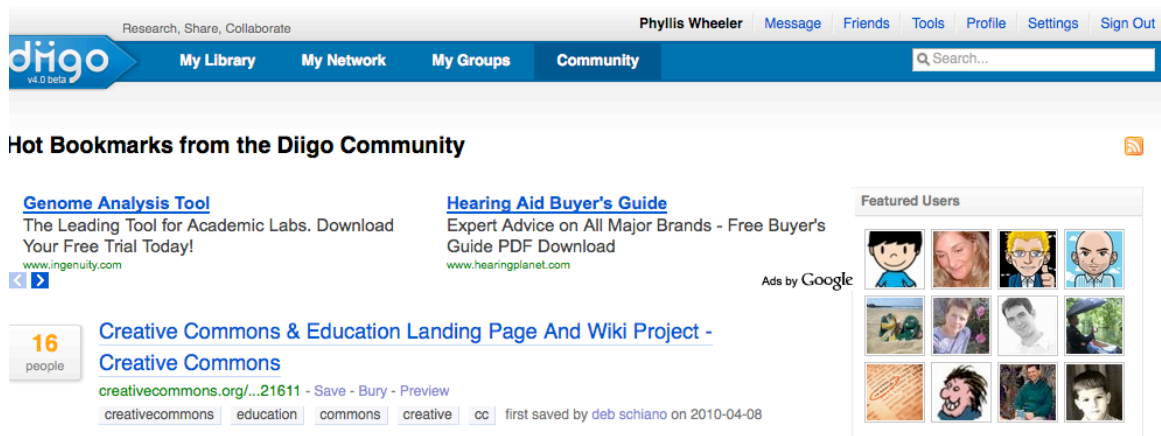
If videos aren't your idea of output, assign a collaborative research paper, created on GoogleDocs or a wiki, with plenty of links and non-copyrighted illustrations.

### **Find useful websites using social bookmarking**

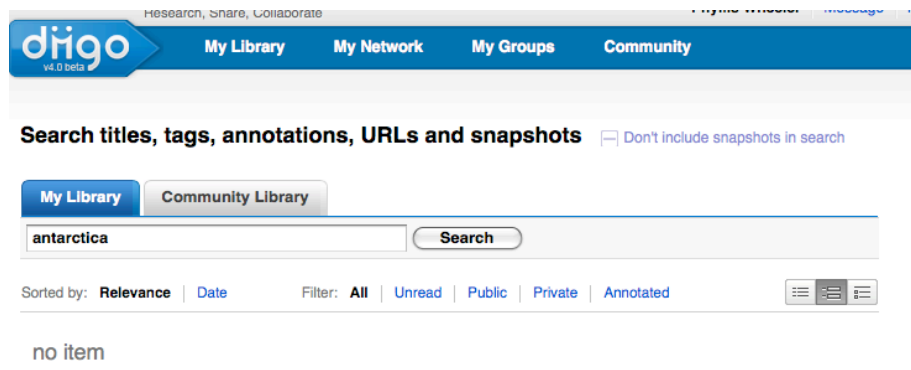
Social bookmarking is a phenomenon that can help our students. Social bookmarking involves individuals roving the Internet and recording sites they like (bookmarking) whether others can see. So friends can share sites they like, and people who don't know each other can identify popular sites.

Diigo.com is a site that has taken this idea and moved it quite a bit further. I recommend that you, the parent, join Diigo and allow your junior researchers to use your account. (Diigo's terms of service don't allow obscene sites, but they remain a possibility, so be sure you have an Internet filter in place.)

After you sign up, you can find a list of sites that others are bookmarking on your topic. Diigo calls this a "community." First, sign in. Then look under the "community" menu item.



Not very interesting yet! So put a topic into the search box at upper right. How about Antarctica?



Still not very interesting! So click on the tab near the top for Community Library.

My Library **Community Library**

antarctica

**Antarctica Cruise**

Discover the Land of Penguins and Shackleton! Icebreaker Cruises.  
[www.REI.com/Adventures](http://www.REI.com/Adventures)



- 45**  
people

**Discovering Antarctica - teaching and learning resources on Antarctica**  
[www.discoveringantarctica.org.uk/](http://www.discoveringantarctica.org.uk/) - Save - Bury  
 geography | antarctica | science | environment | resources | First saved by [lebarr](#) on 2007-06-30
- 3**  
people

**Web Quest Antarctica**  
[www.schools.ash.org.au/...antarctica.html](http://www.schools.ash.org.au/...antarctica.html) - Save - Bury  
 Antarctica | geography | webquest | First saved by [Debra Hicks](#) on 2009-01-28
- 4**  
people

**Free Technology for Teachers: Wired Antarctica - Life at the Poles**  
[freetech4teachers.blogspot.com/...-antarctica-life-at-poles.html](http://freetech4teachers.blogspot.com/...-antarctica-life-at-poles.html) - Save - Bury  
 antarctica | science | environment | climate | First saved by [Josh Allen](#) on 2008-12-01

We found the mother lode! Here are Web pages that a number of others have tagged as useful on this topic. These are great candidates for your students to look at carefully. Note that, to get to the website rather than the Diigo list of comments, you need to click on the smaller green link, not the larger blue link. Also note that, scrolling down to the bottom of the page, there are TWENTY pages of these great suggestions. (See lower right of illustration below.)

- 3**  
people

**Antarctica - FREE powerpoints, interactive activities games, lessons - pppst.com**  
[continents.pppst.com/antarctica.html](http://continents.pppst.com/antarctica.html) - Save - Bury  
 games | flash | HSIE | Antarctica | First saved by [Cathie Howe](#) on 2009-09-30
  - 4**  
people

**Antarctica pictures gallery**  
[www.coolantarctica.com/...Antarctica\\_gallery\\_home.htm](http://www.coolantarctica.com/...Antarctica_gallery_home.htm) - Save - Bury  
 photos | antarctica | 1st grade | antarctica - penguins | art | First saved by [beachschool student](#) on 2006-07-27
- Showing 20 items per page 1 - 20 [Next](#)

If my students are researching Antarctica, I can point them to this Diigo page for lots of ideas. My students can then post links on their wiki or GoogleDoc and discuss what's in the sites.

If we pose a question, it will get them thinking more. For instance, "How can we preserve the natural beauty of Antarctica?" The students can create an outline for their work and then post links to the outline. From the outline they can create an essay or research paper.

So, for your next step, add something to my wiki page at <http://www.flathomeschoolroom.wikispaces.com>. Tell me your reaction, how you think the Flat Classroom idea might fit into your homeschool, and more. Add some links to the wiki if you find more on the topic.

Here's the bottom line, according to Michael Wesch, the anthropology professor: The Internet in its earlier years made a huge difference in how we find out information. There was much more information available to individuals than previously. This was Web 1.0, the first generation.

But the Internet itself is changing. It's changing from a download environment to an upload environment. Now it's Web 2.0, the next generation. With wikis, blogs and video, users are supplying more and more what's available online. And that's a trend that will continue into the future. Are we ready?

**Some links for further research:**

<http://www.flatclassrooms.com/What+is+a+flat+classroom%3F> A wiki put up by collaborating teachers

[http://www.boston.com/business/technology/articles/2006/08/04/a\\_new\\_high\\_tech\\_take\\_on\\_school\\_group\\_project/](http://www.boston.com/business/technology/articles/2006/08/04/a_new_high_tech_take_on_school_group_project/) A Boston Globe article

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4yApagnr0s&feature=channel> Michael Wesch talks for one hour, well worth your time

An example of a teacher's wiki is at <http://westwood.wikispaces.com/>

Note: "Ning" means a blog or wiki for teachers not students

Examples of student wikis can be found at

<http://westwood.wikispaces.com/Wiki+Hall+of+Fame>

Wondering about using social bookmarks by others on your topic? Check out this

Diigo.com video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0RvAkTuL02A>

And don't forget to check this out:



Get your free copy of this Internet research adventure at

<http://www.MotherboardBooks.com>. Kids criss-cross the internet looking for

interesting and fun facts about animals and geography. Also at

MotherboardBooks.com, you can learn about MotherboardBooks.com's self-study courses in fun project programming and reasoning for your child: *Logo Adventures* for ages 8-12 and *Computer Science Pure and Simple* for ages 12 and up. **Don't let your kids fall behind in a wired world!**

## **Appendix A: Let's make a wiki**

If you want to look into this further, I invite you to look over my shoulder as I create a wiki for homeschool parents like you looking into the Flat Classroom idea. I'm going to call it the Flat Homeschool Room.

Now, where do we start? We have to choose a site that provides wiki services. I googled "compare wiki sites" and found a comparison of various companies that create wikis. It appears that at least Wetpaint.com, Wikia.com, and Wikispaces.com prohibit obscene content in their sites, which is what we definitely want to support.

In addition, we'd like a site that doesn't charge us and that doesn't run ads on our wiki. Wikispaces.com fills the bill, offering a limited number of free private wiki sites for K-12 education. If the offer runs out, it's \$5 per month to remove the ads, which isn't too bad, compared to a competitor which charges \$19.95 per month. Wikispaces also allows widgets (for adding news and weather feeds etc.), and allows us to see exactly who has been adding to the wiki (essential for giving grades). So I'm choosing Wikispaces.com.

**Wikispaces**   Features   Pricing   Tours   Private Label   Search Help

Already a member? [Sign in.](#)

## Wikis for Everyone

Our full-featured wikis offer **unlimited usage** and our **stellar visual editor**. Check out our [plans and pricing](#), and see why our customers call us the [best wiki out there](#).

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We have given away over 210,000 wikis for K-12 education. Learn more and [create your own classroom wiki today](#).

**Get Started**

PhyllisWheeler

.....

info@motherboardbooks.com

**Get Started**

**Private Label**  
Wiki Solutions for Organizations  
Powerful, reliable, secure.

**Business**   **Non-Profit**   **K-12**   **Higher Ed**

Here's the start page at [www.wikispaces.com](http://www.wikispaces.com) as it looks to me today. I'm adding in my info to the "get started" box.

Here's the next page:

## Your New Account

We have created your account on Wikispaces. You are logged in and ready to go! Create a wiki below, or go on to your [dashboard](#).

## Create a New Wiki

**Wiki Name**   http://  .wikispaces.com  
Choose a name between 3 and 32 characters long.

**Wiki Permissions**

Public (free)  
Everyone can view and edit your pages.

Protected (free)  
Everyone can view pages, only wiki members can edit them.

Private (first 30 days free)  
Only wiki members can view and edit pages.

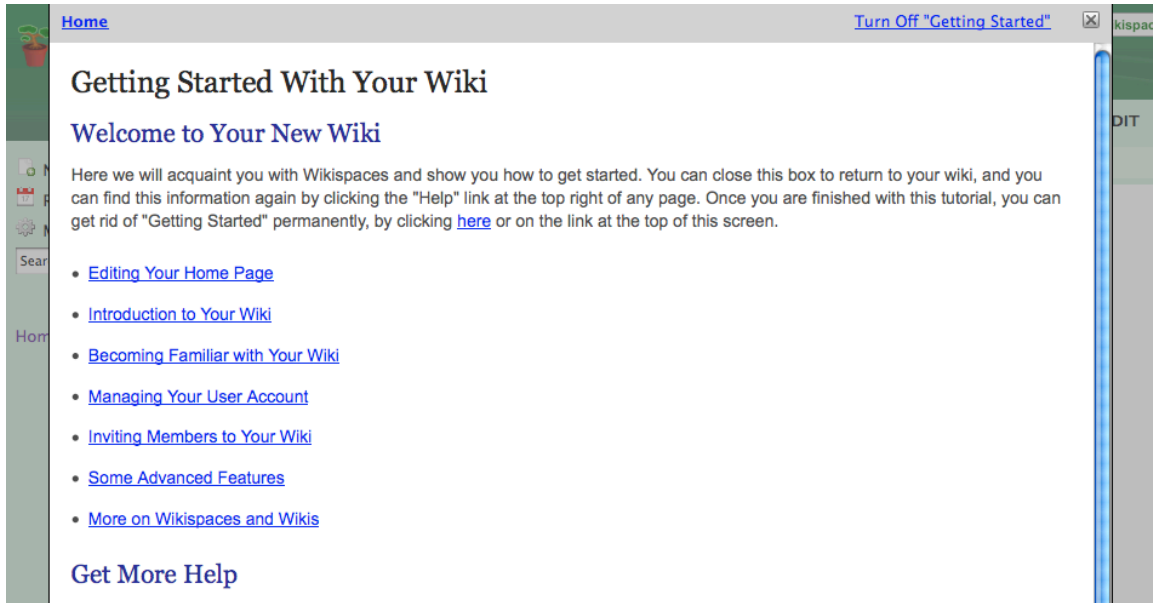
**Wiki Type**        
Optional: Help us understand how you use Wikispaces.

[Terms of Use](#)  

This is actually the way you want to set yours up, with the private option (no ads). After you set it up, you ask for a fee waiver based on the fact that it is for K-12 education. You should check out the terms of use too. You're not allowed to post

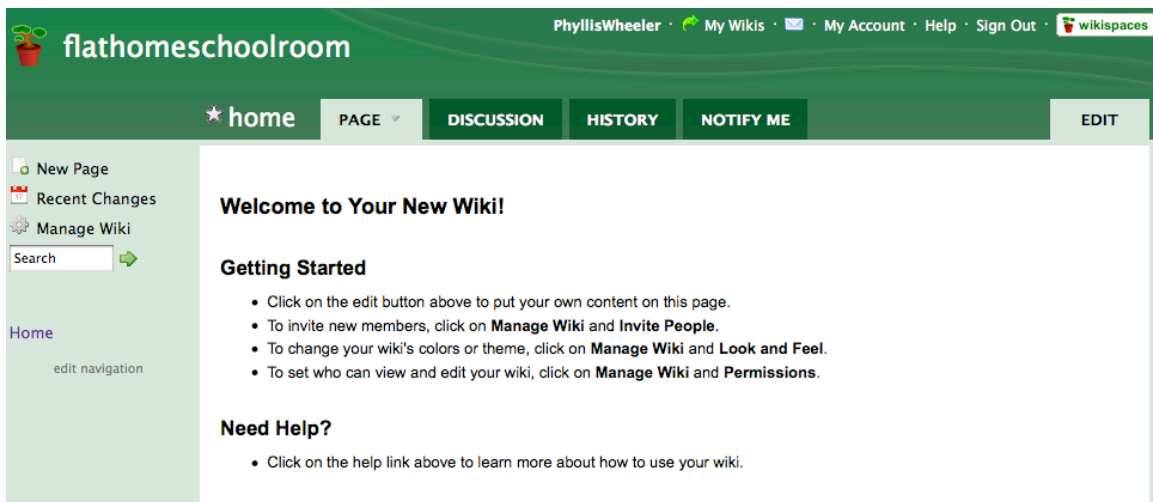
any obscene or defamatory stuff, or anything that violates copyright. (I'm actually setting mine up as public, so you can look at it. Mine will have some ads on it, so I hope we can live with that! Yours won't, since it will be for kids K-12.)

Next, there's a getting-started screen:

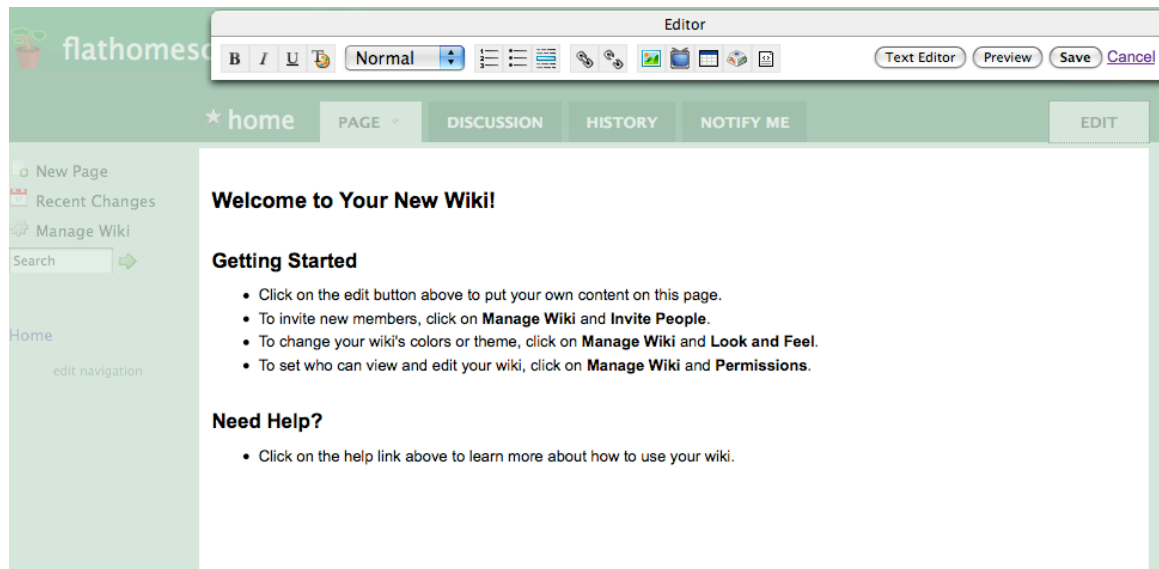


Actually, I am finding the video tutorials more helpful at this point. You can find them at <http://www.wikispaces.com/site/tour#introduction>

I'm canceling out the getting-started screen, and here is what I am looking at:

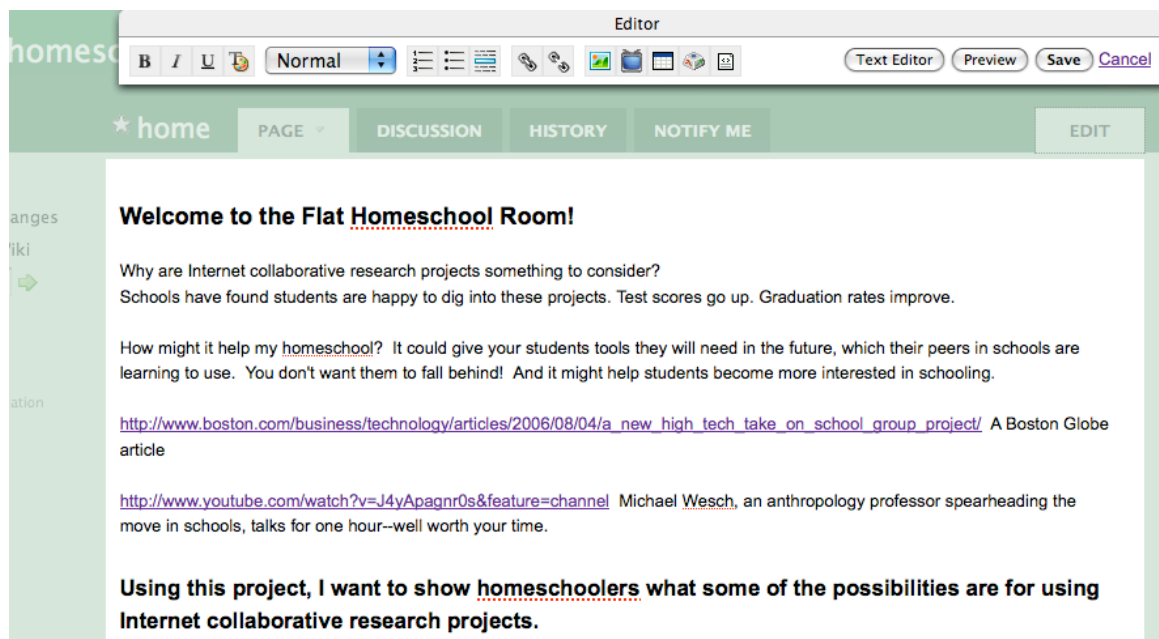


I click on the “edit” tab at the far right, and some editing tools pop up.



I can use these for formatting text as I add it to the page. The link button, image, and video buttons all help me add content of those types.

After I’ve worked on it for a few minutes, it looks like this:



I'll click "save" at upper right, and then take a look at the "history" tab.

The screenshot shows a MediaWiki page for 'flathomeschoolroom'. The header is green and contains the site name, a user profile for 'PhyllisWheeler', and navigation links for 'My Wikis', 'My Account', 'Help', 'Sign Out', and 'wikispaces'. Below the header is a navigation bar with tabs for 'home', 'PAGE', 'DISCUSSION', 'HISTORY', and 'NOTIFY ME'. The 'HISTORY' tab is active. On the left sidebar, there are links for 'New Page', 'Recent Changes', 'Manage Wiki', a search box, and 'Home' with 'edit navigation' below it. The main content area displays a table with the following data:

| Date                                | Compare | Author                         | Comment |
|-------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------|---------|
| <a href="#">Sep 1, 2009 1:15 pm</a> |         | <a href="#">PhyllisWheeler</a> |         |

Below the table, it says '1-1 of 1'. On the right side, there are several text advertisements, including one from Google for 'Don't Lose Another 35%' and another for 'Convert Word/DITA to Wiki'.

There's my entry, dated with author noted. Also note that there are ads at the right. I can't claim this wiki for K-12 education like you will be able to do, so that's how it will be. I am very happy to see these are text ads and not distracting images.

### How does it look?

Now I'm going to adjust the way it looks. I'm going to click on "manage wiki" at upper left, and then find the Settings icons, looking for "Look and Feel." It's at the bottom of this screen shot.

[New Page](#)  
[Recent Changes](#)  
[Manage Wiki](#)

[Home](#)  
 edit navigation

**your wiki type has been saved.**

## About

Created Sep 1, 2009 by [PhyllisWheeler](#)  
 Organizers [PhyllisWheeler](#)  
 Members no members  
 License [Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike 3.0 License](#)  
 Subscription This wiki is currently on our **Basic** plan. [Upgrade Here](#)

## Content

[Pages](#) [Files](#) [Templates](#) [Tags](#)

## People

[Members](#) [Permissions](#) [Invite People](#)

## Settings

[Look and Feel](#) [Subscription](#) [Domain Name](#) [Wiki Info](#)

Just for grins, I'll change the theme to one called "glass."

**Themes**

The theme has been updated.

[Manage Wiki](#) > [Look and Feel](#)

## Pre-Made Themes

To edit one of the pre-made themes, go to [Make a New Theme](#) below and select the theme as your starting point.

|   |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|
| <br>AquaFluid<br><a href="#">Apply</a><br><a href="#">Preview</a> | <br>Boxy<br><a href="#">Apply</a><br><a href="#">Preview</a> | <br>BoxyLeft<br><a href="#">Apply</a><br><a href="#">Preview</a> | <br>Bubble<br><a href="#">Apply</a><br><a href="#">Preview</a> |
| <br>Flex<br><a href="#">Apply</a>                                 | <br>FlexFluid<br><a href="#">Apply</a>                       | <br>Glass<br>current theme                                       | <br>Notebook<br><a href="#">Apply</a>                          |

[New Page](#)  
[Recent Changes](#)  
[Manage Wiki](#)

[Home](#)  
 edit navigation

This is a lot like playing with a blog! To get back where I was, I can click on Manage Wiki at the upper right where it says Manage Wiki > Look and Feel, telling me that I'm at Look and Feel, and the next level up is Manage Wiki. Or I can go there from the menu at far right.

If you are reading this and are ready to play around with new technology, I invite you to come to my wiki page at <http://www.flathomeschoolroom.wikispaces.com> and add something. Tell me your reaction, how you think it might fit into your homeschool, and more. Add some links if you find more on the topic.