A wiki for class notes

Students were asked to write collective lecture notes as a way of encouraging them to work together to master the material of the course.

Although the course’s main website is open to the world, student work is not open. Smith has a closed course platform, Moodle, but its wiki is hard to use and not suited to displaying images.

Reviews of wiki farms turned up Peanut Butter Wiki (pbwiki.com), which provides free sites, convenient naming of the wiki, no advertising, an excellent full-page editor with good WYSIWYG tools, and easy uploading and insertion of images.

Our new pbwiki was named bio300.pbwiki.com after our course number. Access is controlled by a shared password.

The class assignment:

A few days before the semester started, I emailed students in the class asking them to log in to the new wiki site and sign up to be the Main Author for one class, and an Editor for two other classes. About half the students did this before our first class meeting. On the wiki’s “FrontPage,” they found a table with the dates and topics of the lectures, and spaces for their names. Since we had more students than spaces, a few doubled up or took on other tasks.

Students were told that the wiki was their project; that it was intended to be helpful to them; that their work would be ungraded but participation was part of being a citizen in the course; and that I hoped peer pressure would motivate good work. In general, those expectations were fulfilled.

Main Authors were required to post class notes within 24 hours of the class. Editors had to make revisions by the evening before the next class, so that students could review the previous class before the next one took place.
In writing class notes, students often chose an outline style, with important figures (from the lecture handouts) inserted to illustrate their points.

PBWiki’s WYSIWYG editor was easy for them to use, with simple tools for font choices, insertion of images, and other essential features.

Images were scaled and uploaded by two students who shared the work. PBWiki allows five images to be uploaded in one step.

Images can be listed by filename or displayed as thumbnails. We used a naming convention to group images from each lecture together.