In the 21st century, literacy means more than just being able to read and write. In the Information Age, literacy also includes computer and Internet proficiency, and being able to access and appropriately use a variety of resources and tools. Wikis are among those tools that can be used in the classroom to expand students’ literacy and competency.

Perhaps the most prominent example of a wiki is Wikipedia, the vast online encyclopedia with which most are familiar. When I was in high school, use of Wikipedia was highly discouraged. The argument was that anyone could theoretically log on to Wikipedia and publish any falsehood they wanted, and we would have no idea what was true and what wasn’t. The reality, however, is that Wikipedia pays close attention to the edits that are submitted to the pages of well-known subjects. If a topic isn’t grossly obscure, it is unlikely that students will encounter blatantly false information on Wikipedia. Using Wikipedia wisely in an academic setting is merely a matter of cross-referencing. To me, it is silly to discourage students from ever using Wikipedia when it is actually a valuable resource that they are likely using anyway. It can serve as a solid starting point for getting a basic understanding of a topic, and can also be a starting point for research. While students shouldn’t cite Wikipedia itself, they can check the sources that are referenced in any given article and go there for further information and to verify the validity of the article’s content.
The use of wikis in the classroom needn’t be limited to collecting information, they can also be used to actively compile information. As an English teacher, I could have students add to or submit original items to Wikibooks. This would make for engaging writing assignments that have the potential for a global audience, if they were published. I as a teacher could also create books in Wikipedia, collections of relevant articles, and give these to students as reference materials or create Webquest-style assignments based on them.