SINGAPORE — As a university student, Avnish Desai was advised by his professors to never rely on Wikipedia content alone for his research. “In fact some discourage us from even using the Web site as a source of basic research,” he said. Now, as a fourth-year student in finance and corporate communications at the Singapore Management University, Mr. Desai, 24, has been asked as part of a class assignment to help create his own wiki page on digital media in India.

Although wikis, with their collaborative approach and vast reach online, have been around for at least 15 years, their use as a general teaching tool in higher education is still relatively recent. But an increasing number of universities are now adopting them as a teaching tool.

As part of that trend, a handful of Singapore universities are using the wiki platform as a way to engage students.

Michael Netzley, assistant professor of corporate communication in the business school at the Singapore Management University, said students' learning improved when they embarked on wiki projects.

“Rather than trying to read a textbook and regurgitate it for an exam, in order to write coherent segments, you have to actually intellectually understand it and be able to craft your own words, and that is a higher level of learning challenge,” he said. “All the research on learning theory suggests this is in fact a better way to learn.”

Mr. Netzley, whose students include Mr. Desai, started using wikis as a teaching tool in 2007. This semester, he asked the students in his Digital Media in Asia class to document the digital communication landscape of a given country, build a wiki page, and then conduct a one-week public relations campaign to promote it.

“I am trying to simulate exactly what would happen if a P.R. agency takes on a new client in a new market and must start from scratch,” he said.

Working collaboratively, editing each other's work publicly and getting feedback, sometimes from outside the classroom, can make many students uncomfortable at first.
“It’s not something that we’re used to,” said Stuart Lee, an undergraduate who took Mr. Netzley’s class and helped create a wiki page on digital media in Japan. “We usually see the professor as the gatekeeper of information.”

Mr. Netzley acknowledged that during the past three years he had had to change the way he taught with wikis to accommodate his students’ concerns about sharing their incomplete work with others.

“The notion of saving face really complicates the learning process,” he said, “because how do you learn if you’re not able to make mistakes and get feedback?”

To deal with that reluctance, he has let students keep their work on their own computers until they are confident in its quality and ready to publish it online.

“When I started with this project, I did it from the point of view that the world is our stage,” Mr. Netzley said. “Students were publishing their wiki on the Web and immediately getting feedback. But it really didn’t work. The students’ feedback was quite clear; my teaching evaluation went down!”

Mr. Netzley’s new approach, where the wikis are published for the marketing campaign only after being completed, seems to have pleased the students.

Mr. Lee said: “The open wiki can be scary because you face the opportunity to be criticized by a lot more people. But it’s also exhilarating. In this culture of instant gratification, it’s amazing to be able to receive feedback on the spot by experts in the field.”

Misha Petrovic, an assistant professor of sociology at the National University of Singapore who has been using wiki tools for five semesters, said he believed that using the wiki format made the learning experience more dynamic. The approach encourages peer-to-peer learning, rather than passive waiting for the instructor’s feedback, he said.

Mr. Petrovic, who has also taught in the United States and Europe, notes that in the context of Asian culture, wikis can help students who tend to be less outspoken.

“Many here are often uncomfortable speaking in front of the class,” he said, “so dividing them into wiki teams and allowing them to contribute from home and at their own pace works great.”

Mr. Desai agreed, saying that the decentralization of the work was one of the advantages of using wikis. Rather than have an entire study group meet up to work on a project, he said, “all we needed to do was to go on to the wiki and edit the information ourselves.”