

"Making student Wikipedians: Encouraging disruptive scholarly communication"

"[A disruptive innovation offers] a product or service that actually is not as good as that which companies are already selling...[extending] benefits to people who, for one reason or another, are unable to consume the original product" (Christensen and Horn, 2008)

Objectives

- Offer theoretical perspectives for situating Wikipedia in the classroom
- Suggest practical teaching approaches and applications
- Report preliminary research findings

In a nutshell

Students' direct participation as Wikipedia contributors facilitates essential research and writing lessons, encourages critical thinking about information resources, and makes scholarly communication processes accessible and transparent.

Wikipedia as prompt for disruption

Wikipedia is an ideal platform for critical exploration and skill development in source evaluation, citation practices, and iterative and collaborative writing. In Wikipedia, students find what they are looking for, and they can usually understand and apply what they find there. It's an exciting and approachable resource that students can easily be prompted to contemplate and discuss. Asking students to edit Wikipedia entries takes this engagement even further and can help extend the Wikipedia conversation into more critical and more meaningful directions. Contrast this platform with resources more traditionally trustworthy but not so widely useful or accessible to students, such as peer-reviewed articles and academic books. These resources have been so thoroughly praised by teachers

and faculty that students often feel hesitant to be critical about them. Wikipedia therefore serves as an effective prompt for a variety of disruptive, critical, and experiential learning activities.

Theoretical perspectives

A "scaffolding" approach is useful in facilitating learners' understanding and development. One possible progression is to move gradually from introductory (lecture-type) lessons on Wikipedia fundamentals (e.g., the convention of "NPOV," or "Neutral Point of View"), to writing critiques about specific Wikipedia entries and then to actively editing articles and finally to writing reflection papers about the experience.

Wikipedia provides a profoundly social learning environment, and the community of practice of its editors is an engaging and approachable one for learners. This facilitates important lessons about knowledge creation, dissemination, and refinement: Students can experience parallels between traditional peer-reviewed scholarly communication and massively collaborative and iterative Wikipedia entries. While traditional scholarly media's printed pages (or online full text) by necessity hide the dynamic (and often discordant) processes that underpin their creation, Wikipedia lays bare that entire process. Every Wikipedia article has a "History" page that allows readers to see each and every edit ever done on an entry, and the site allows quick and easy comparisons of any two versions of a given entry. Every article also has a "Talk" page, where Wikipedia editors often explain their rationales for making additions, deletions, or revisions. Wikipedia gives students the opportunity to participate in a challenging process that's

comparable to the traditional scholarly publication cycle, and this can help demonstrate that scholarly communication is a (sometimes messy) process just as much as a tangible output. (For more on the editing process and the Wikipedia community, see "Resources for Instructors," over.)

Teaching approaches and applications

When designing Wikipedia assignments and activities, instructors might find it useful to think of students playing one or more of the following parts (in least- to most-disruptive order): Wikipedia columnist, critic/scientist, or editor.

- a. Columnist:
 - Essay(s) about some Wikipedia-related issue or controversy (e.g., gender gap of contributors, Kate Middleton's dress, universal information access).
- b. Critic/scientist:
 - Same-topic comparisons using multiple alternative resources (exploring each resource's accuracy, currency, usefulness, etc.)
- c. Editor, gradual ramp up:
 - Basics to critiquing to contributing to reflecting.
 - Most important suggestion: Leave plenty of time to work through the various stages, allowing the greatest amount of interaction with the community (which requires some time for repeated revisions and comments). Think months, not weeks. Hey, journal authors, reviewers, and editors: Sound familiar? ;-)
- d. Editor, rapid track:
 - Run an edit-a-thon—an in-person meetup to create and refine content about a specific topic.
 - Probably messy, but potentially very engaging.
 - Don't forget the potential lessons/discussions associated

with choosing the content target. Most choose an underrepresented topic/group (e.g., women in science) or a topic of local concern (e.g., items in a nearby museum or library, or supportive material for a local event).

Research findings

During a fall 2011 project that gradually trained students as Wikipedia editors, reflection papers suggested that students grappled with a variety of skills related to information literacy. As a rubric for analyzing library, research, and writing skills, the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000) works nicely.

Most prominently, these reflection papers provide examples of thinking related to Standard Four: "The information literate student...uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose." Reflecting on their Wikipedia-editing experiences, students repeatedly mentioned how writing for Wikipedia demanded that they consider elements such as audience, tone, needs of info seekers, and intent/purpose.

Students also demonstrated better understanding related to Standard Five: "...uses information ethically and legally." For example, while students added photos to their Wikipedia entries, Wikipedia conventions prompted them to grapple with image permissions and copyright issues.

Students also frequently demonstrated Standard One: "...defines and articulates the need for information." This sort of activity regularly plays out on Wikipedia's "Talk" pages, which call for thoughtful explanation of planned or completed edits.

Resources for instructors

As one might expect of the world's largest and most social encyclopedia, many resources are available for encouraging participation.

Wikipedia Education Program:

Its purpose is to “create an effective learning environment for students, while also strengthening the content and community of Wikipedia” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:United_States_Education_Program/MOU). This support includes Wikipedia Ambassadors, as well as resources for assignment design and management.

Good introductory overviews:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Simplified_ruleset

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual_of_Style

Guidelines (a few examples), covering content & editor behavior

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:BITE>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Assume_good_faith

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability>

Guidelines related to information literacy & research skills:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Citing_sources

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Identifying_reliable_sources

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral_point_of_view

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Credits

-Terrence Epperson. My collaborator on this project and other Wikipedia explorations. It was his seminar students who were our pilot test subjects and gave us an excuse to dive headlong into the world of Wikipedia. A social scientist and librarian colleague who recently left TCNJ and is now job-hunting in the Boston area.

-The freshman whose comment ("Wikipedia IS peer reviewed: MASSIVELY peer reviewed!") added fuel to our assumption-questioning fires.

-Heidi LM Jacobs. This presentation and my thinking about Wikipedia owe a debt of gratitude to her and her chapter, "Posing the Wikipedia 'Problem'" (See References above.)

Extending this presentation

On women in science:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2012/oct/19/wikipedia-edit-a-thon-women-scientists>

On the “notability” debate over Kate Middleton’s dress:

http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2012/07/13/kate_middleton_s_wedding_gown_and_wikipedia_s_gender_gap_.html