

Review of *Lazy Virtues: Teaching Writing in the Age of Wikipedia*

by Henry W W Potts

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We are in a period of rapid technological change and much of society is endlessly playing catch-up, coming to terms with the implications of and uses for new developments. Each new development brings both enthusiasts and sceptics, and debate over Wikipedia has followed a familiar pattern. That same pattern has been played out in higher education, with the added contrast between a younger student body of "digital natives" and older lecturers who are "digital immigrants" (Prensky 2006).

While most are still responding to students' (and colleagues') use of Wikipedia, some in higher education have moved to teaching with Wikipedia (*e.g.* Callis, Christ, Resasco *et al.* 2009). However, as has been found in other areas of e-learning, there is a risk that we will replicate traditional patterns of teaching and learning without embracing the revolutionary nature of 'Web 2.0' approaches. If we are to fully grasp the potential of Wikipedia's use in higher education, we need a shared corpus of experience using it and to be able to make sense of those experiences within a theoretical structure. Robert Cummings' *Lazy Virtues* is a good beginning to satisfy that need.

Cummings puts forth a theoretical structure to understand Wikipedia and related projects as commons-based peer production (CBPP), an economic model from Benkler (2002). This he develops to apply to the teaching and learning of composition, with reference to rhetorical transaction theory and particularly James Berlin's (1987) taxonomy of composition theory. Central to Cummings' argument are two key features that CBPP environments like Wikipedia support. First, as reflected in the book's title, is "laziness", meant in the sense that individuals do more when their creativity is piqued in a context that allows them to self-determine their input. Second is the notion of other editors in Wikipedia providing an authentic audience for students rather than the instructor having always to pretend to be some hypothetical audience for differing writing exercises.

This use of a theory from economics may seem unusual, but Cummings devotes most of Chapter 1 to defending and explaining this choice. Chapters 2 and 3 are then more immediately practical and will be useful to lecturers wondering how to use Wikipedia activities in teaching, before further theoretical chapters to conclude the book.

While Cummings presents a strong case for his CBPP analysis, he largely does not comment on possible alternate theoretical approaches. Here, I think there was a missed opportunity, particularly around existing pedagogical theory. Approaches used in e-learning research like activity theory (Nardi 1996) or Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger 1991) would seem readily applicable to Wikipedia and its use in teaching.

Indeed, Lave and Wenger's notions of legitimate peripheral participation seem highly concordant with Cummings' own approach and the stress he puts on the authenticity of the audience in writing activities. In all, Cummings' approach would seem to fit what de Vaujany (2005) would describe as a determinist or causalist perspective: that is, where a change in the technology or the context for writing is expected to have predictable effects on behaviour. In contrast, much recent research conceptualises IT from an integrative perspective, as with actor-network theory or Wanda Orlikowski's technology structuration (Orlikowski 1992; 2000), where technology adapts to context and context adapts to technology.

Cummings notes in his final paragraph that Wikipedia is changing. An integrative socio-technical theory of Wikipedia would also help conceptualise how Wikipedia and the Wikipedia community are changing, and how society's attitudes towards Wikipedia are changing. As my fellow reviewers note, already parts of Cummings' case study of using Wikipedia in teaching seem dated: he had his students write or edit pages about films, and he describes two students who created the Wikipedia page for the film "The Color Purple" in late 2005. Three and a half years on and one would be surprised were such a successful film not already covered in depth on Wikipedia. Are we running out of easy article for such class assignments? Many of Cummings' students were sceptical about the value of Wikipedia back in 2005; few seemed familiar with it. In contrast, in a local survey of medical undergraduates in 2007/8, I found 83% (38/46) reported using the site as a learning resource, with 9% (4/49) having edited it.

One might also ask how such class exercises affect Wikipedia. Such exercises should be congruent with the goals of Wikipedia, and Cummings sees student understanding of those goals as being central to their experience, yet the implication of so many class exercises on Wikipedia is not addressed.

Lazy Virtues focuses on teaching writing in the composition classroom. With no criticism of Cummings, there is much more to be explored on using Wikipedia in teaching elsewhere in higher education. How do activities need to vary between low- and high-consensus subjects, for example? In particular, I can see how *Lazy Virtues* has immediate potential application to language teaching, particularly in less traditionally taught languages where the relevant language's Wikipedia represents a unique opportunity to encounter an authentic audience.

The research literature on Wikipedia and on using Wikipedia in higher education is growing rapidly. *Lazy Virtues* is a good start at developing a theoretical approach with some valuable practical examples.

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