Students as Wikipedia Teachers

Creating an Authentic Peer Learning Experience with a Wikipedia Edit-a-thon

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Introduction

Wikipedia has become a core part of the information landscape, and many librarians have added Wikipedia-related discussions and activities to their teaching. At the same time, gaps in Wikipedia coverage due to its largely White and male editorship has spawned a proliferation of edit-a-thons designed to add representative content to Wikipedia, notably the Art + Feminism editing community and events.[1] This chapter explores a first-year seminar course centered on Wikipedia where students not only authored an article, but also organized an edit-a-thon they publicized, managed, themed, and created training materials for.

Background

In spring 2017 and fall 2017, the University of Colorado Boulder began a first-year seminar pilot program. These small courses, centered on a wide variety of faculty-selected topics, were designed to introduce students to academic work and build community among

first-year students. The goal was to increase student retention by increasing engagement and identification with the university, especially for students who had not yet declared a major or had been accepted to the university but not their college of choice. First-year seminar faculty were expected to integrate several key aspects of course design into their classes: a learning experience that extended throughout the semester, peer collaboration and group work, and multiple modes of college-level communication. These requirements were created to build core academic competencies into the classes in order to prepare first-year students for successful college-level work.

The authors co-taught a fall 2017 first-year seminar called Wunderkammer to Wikipedia: Ways of Knowing, Collecting, and Categorizing the World. The class focused on histories of categorization and classification, bringing out the socially constructed nature of such schemata. The authors looked at how these historical systems extend into the present, as well as how they often encode biases and serve to conceal and naturalize those biases. The class also looked at how digital environments have often re-created the inequalities of the systems they replaced. Alongside this topical focus, in order to align with the goals of all first-year seminars, core academic competencies such as writing, collaboration, presentation skills, information literacy, and critical academic reading were interwoven. The course's learning objectives were that students would be able to

- describe historical precedents for current ways information is organized
- critically analyze the feedback loops between social structures, biases and conditions, and categorization of information
- identify ways and contexts in which particular voices are privileged or marginalized
- develop academic and persuasive writing and presenting skills
- recognize that information systems and structures are not inevitable and fixed but may be participatory and changeable
- reflect on information structures in daily life and work
- develop a personal strategy for success in managing the work and expectations of college-level coursework

Engagement with Wikipedia served as the extended learning activity required by the first-year seminar program. The course was designed to scaffold interactions with Wikipedia and participatory knowledge dissemination throughout the semester. Students discussed readings about Wikipedia, organized a Wikipedia edit-a-thon, wrote a new Wikipedia article selected from the list of stubs, and wrote a culminating reflection on their experience with Wikipedia.

This chapter focuses on the student-organized edit-a-thon that was designed to address the requirement for students to develop skills in multiple modes of college-level communication, while building capacity for peer collaboration in an authentic learning environment. The edit-a-thon required the class to work together and share responsibility for designing, promoting, and facilitating the event. Students worked in smaller groups responsible for specific aspects of the edit-a-thon, and as an entire class. This chapter explores the edit-a-thon project as a novel way to engage students in a sustained manner with information literacy, group work, and organizational and presentation skills, as well as the contemporary information landscape.

Literature Review

Wikipedia in the Information Literacy Literature

Relevant literature reveals a strong history of the use of Wikipedia to teach information literacy. Early discussions include Badke's "What to Do with Wikipedia," in which he suggests that Wikipedia is a useful source and that librarians ignore it at their own peril. Badke suggests several ways to engage with Wikipedia, including information literacy assignments that include evaluating and editing Wikipedia articles.[2] Badke's article created debate in library communities, which were divided between those that felt Wikipedia has little place in information literacy, and those that found it an important pedagogical tool and teaching platform.[3] Subsequent literature mostly focuses on Wikipedia as a pedagogical tool and is split between those articles that focus on Wikipedia as a source that provokes critical thinking around source evaluation and those that focus on editing Wikipedia as an activity that integrates information literacy components.

Using Wikipedia as a Source

Studies examining Wikipedia as an information source generally present it as a useful tool, often with an added element of critical thinking around sources. The literature describes Wikipedia articles as useful for the typical tasks asked of encyclopedic sources: topic development, generating search terms, and as an initial bibliography—with an added benefit of a much larger array of articles than any other encyclopedia.[4] Many authors also discuss the potential to use Wikipedia to generate discussion with learners about authority and evaluation of sources, as students discuss the pros and cons of a wiki platform compared with expert-created sources.[5] Jacobs criticizes the rote rules regarding sources like Wikipedia, which continue to be drilled into students during their education: blanket statements such as "no websites or Wikipedia" and "scholarly sources only" are often written into assignment descriptions. Jacobs contends that such simplistic rules are a missed opportunity for critical thinking around sources: they never ask students to think about why they should use certain sources or when certain types of sources are useful.[6] Several authors note that since Wikipedia is a familiar source to most students they are more comfortable analyzing and interrogating it; once they begin to ask questions of Wikipedia, they can then transfer these principles and ask the same questions of other sources.[7] Research has also found benefit to the relative transparency and visibility of process in Wikipedia articles as compared to academic sources: Wikipedia talk pages are a prime example of the scholarly writing process of back-and-forth, revisions, and fact-checking.[8] This is a unique and valuable affordance of Wikipedia, the ability to see the messy research process behind polished final products.

Wikipedia Editing for Information Literacy

Several case studies have reported positive results from assigning Wikipedia editing to develop information literacy skills. Most studies report on assignments that spanned the course of a semester, though some articles propose methods for integrating Wikipedia

editing into one-shot library instruction.[9] These studies have reported that the authentic audience of Wikipedia articles empowers and motivates students.[10] Wikipedia's focus on citations, as well as editors who look out for plagiarism, was found to improve student understanding of attribution and paraphrasing.[11] The requirement of writing in an encyclopedic style provides a useful model for students about how to adjust their style based on venue and audience while illustrating the difference between encyclopedic and persuasive academic writing.[12] Participating in the Wikipedia community that provides feedback, changes, and conversation is cited as both a benefit and a potential source of student frustration.[13]

Wikipedia Editing as Authentic Learning

Several scholars have identified authentic learning as a key benefit of integrating Wikipedia into courses. Authentic learning environments are created when the learning context replicates a nonclassroom situation, when a complex, ill-defined task must be completed using multiple perspectives, and when the activity results in an end product that effectively communicates complex ideas.[14] Ideally, the authentic learning environment allows students the chance to learn from watching experts perform, participating in collaborative knowledge building, and enacting meaningful reflection.[15] Ultimately this approach is useful because it fosters transferable skills such as recognizing and solving complex problems, articulating the solutions to those problems, and working with others—skills students will use in the academic context but also beyond.[16] Precisely how authentic a learning environment must be is a matter of debate; Blakeslee notes that students find case studies less engaging than working with clients,[17] while Wargo suggests that there exists a viable spectrum of authenticity, ranging from latent authenticity (students learn in a situation that replicates an outside-of-classroom situation and audience) to functional (students work directly on a problem addressing an actual audience).[18] Although it is not difficult to identify authentic learning as automatically positive—indeed, the connotation is baked into the name—it is important to apply it thoughtfully. As Weninger notes, students also have an expectation and a desire to learn to navigate academic practices and systems, as those skills are necessary for college success. The credentials they earn with this knowledge are required for the careers in which students eventually seek to apply their authentic learning.[19]

Writing for Authentic Audiences

One of the key practices for writing success in both academic and nonacademic contexts is writing for a defined audience. Students often arrive on campus with a firm notion of writing to a particular instructor's preferences yet struggle with the notion of an audience beyond the professor; writing to an authentic audience can help students transfer those skills.[20] Pope-Ruark suggests that "design[ing] courses that enable engagement with real audiences, require students to interact with those audiences and integrate audience feedback into final products, and provoke students (and faculty) to deal with the professional and sometimes emotional consequences of these interactions" leads to more transferable

learning.[21] As well as audiences, students must become familiar with genres beyond the academic; Wargo suggests that authentic writing assignments facilitate this understanding.[22] These notions of identifying an audience, determining contextually appropriate genres, formats, arguments, and sources, all align with principles that ground information literacy as well as writing and composition skills. Many case studies on authentic audience writing focus on projects where students serve as consultants to a client, but these conditions are not always attainable.[23] Van Hoeck investigates Wikipedia as a viable space for authentic learning and writing and concludes that it not only motivates students to pursue their topic more deeply but also increases engagement with sources, suggesting that it is a viable context for authentic writing and information literacy experiences.[24]

The Edit-a-thon Project

Course design and the edit-a-thon project were grounded in authentic learning and writing for authentic audiences.[25] The aim was for a class of first-year students to deeply and critically engage with commonly used information sources, while ensuring that students developed study and writing skills essential for college success.[26] Adding structure to the learning goals, the university had several requirements for first-year seminars: a project that extended over most of the semester, numerous opportunities for writing experience, and a focus on transferable skills for learning at the university level, such as peer collaboration and group work. The edit-a-thon was ideal for meeting these goals and requirements. In order to provide an extended learning experience, the edit-a-thon project was scaffolded over a substantial portion of the semester. Students were divided into teams responsible for different aspects of planning an edit-a-thon. Each team was responsible for a presentation and a technical writing assignment, which met the learning goal of practicing peer collaboration and effective group work. These edit-a-thon planning activities also exposed students to authentic audiences and fostered their writing and researching skills. By editing and crafting entries and teaching their peers how to be editors, students were empowered to be critical consumers and creators of information; ultimately, they created positive change in Wikipedia.

Students proposed possible edit-a-thon themes, which the class as a whole discussed to decide on an overall approach. Similar to many written assignments, students struggled with the purpose and scope of the edit-a-thon theme, which offered an opportunity to discuss scoping. For example, a suggested topic was the gender pay gap—far too narrow for an edit-a-thon, but simultaneously too broad and well-established for developing into students' own article. By working through the conversation about article-sized topics versus larger themes, the class practiced scoping with a positive framing. If a topic proved too extensive for an article, the class could discuss why it could fit as a theme, and vice versa. Setting aside a full class session, the instructors discussed the suggested topics and how to move them from their narrow scopes to overarching themes. Through the class discussion, the theme of Colorado history and culture emerged and served as a broad theme providing opportunities for subcategories that encompassed students' suggested areas.

A central part of the project consisted of producing deliverables that would support the edit-a-thon. The class was divided into four teams, each with a unique focus: marketing the edit-a-thon, how to edit Wikipedia, how to research for Wikipedia, and identifying and selecting appropriate articles for editing. The end product of the assignment was to produce materials that would support the edit-a-thon. Each group was asked to produce a piece of writing in which they presented and workshopped their drafts with the class before finalizing them. Each group also took a corresponding role during the edit-a-thon (see table 9.1). In completing this work, students explored IL concepts and adapted writing tone and style for different audiences.

Group & Deliverable	Presentation	At the Edit-a-thon	Rhetorical Objective	Information Literacy Objective
Marketing: Broadside or flier for public distribution	Share marketing plan & process of researching & developing it	Greet and direct attendees	Persuasive communication tailored to an audience	Searching is strategic (identifying interested parties & ways to reach them)
Learning to edit: Brief, user-friendly handout for new editors	Teach class technical aspects of editing; present and workshop plan for teaching attendees	Teach attendees how to edit Wikipedia	Technical communication	Scholarship as conversation (recognize technical barriers to entering the Wikipedia conversation)
Learning to research: Brief, user-friendly handout for those new to Wikipedia research	Teach class Wikipedia's standards for authoritative sources; present and workshop plan for teaching attendees	Teach attendees how to meet Wikipedia's research standards	Technical communication	Authority is contextual (recognize Wikipedia's determinants of authority); information has value (understanding Wikipedia's requirements for attribution & openness)
Suggested entries: Handout with list of suggested topics in defensible organizational schema	Provide list of possible entries for the edit-a-thon; articulate theme & fit	Help attendees select a topic and entry of interest	Technical & persuasive communication	Research as inquiry (students reviewed & identified information gaps, determined scope for reasonable edits)

Table 9.1

Mapping group roles and deliverables to rhetorical and information literacy objectives

Since each group had a specific type of writing to develop, the idea of different purposes and types of writing was introduced early in the assignment. Students were asked to think about how their writing style would change or adapt based on the audience and purpose of the writing. The marketing team, for example, was responsible for persuasive writing, creating posters and social media blurbs that might entice nonclass members to attend the edit-a-thon. The learning to edit and research groups explored technical writing. They were responsible for creating documentation that peers could quickly read and follow in order to learn the technical aspects of how to edit Wikipedia and the research standards requested by Wikipedia, respectively. The deliverables for both of these groups consisted of short handouts. The group that identified articles to edit was responsible for developing an organized handout of topics to edit and rationale for how they had grouped the topics.

As the students in the class came from a variety of disciplines, including engineering, computer science, history, business, and communication, the teams were designed to practice skills of use to different areas of study. Students were asked to rank their interest in joining a group, which was a way of building on the wide-ranging strengths and interests of the student group. For example, students hoping to major in business and advertising gravitated toward marketing, while computer science majors were often interested in technical writing about how to edit Wikipedia. Although it was impossible to accommodate everyone's first preference, all were able to be in at least their second-choice group.

Student teams spent several weeks working on their drafts, then presented their projects to the class and instructors, all of whom provided feedback to be incorporated into the drafts. This was an essential step, not only to normalize the notion of revisions and feedback, but also to improve the end products in order to make them more useful to their eventual audience—other students attending the edit-a-thon. After the presentations, groups had time to incorporate the feedback and produce their final drafts. These presentations took place on a rolling basis, with marketing first so that each group could implement its strategies in time to market the edit-a-thon.

On the day of the edit-a-thon, each group was assigned a responsibility aligned with its project. The marketing team welcomed and greeted attendees, the research and Wikipedia editing teams gave brief tutorials on Wikipedia research and writing, and the topic team assisted attendees in finding and selecting articles of interest to them. Students were offered a small extra credit incentive for convincing their peers to attend and edit articles, and the total of edited articles was tracked on a large whiteboard for added motivation.

The session itself was successful; there was a general sense of camaraderie and friendly competition to complete edits, and students did indeed bring friends, adding a new dynamic to the classroom. Students in and out of the class were motivated and enthusiastic to edit articles. The impact of the team projects was clear as students taught their peers to effectively edit Wikipedia articles. In order to add to entries, students had to teach each other how to identify information gaps in articles, locate a variety of sources to support their writing, paraphrase information resources, and follow Wikipedia conventions for citing this information. In this way, the edit-a-thon project enacted peer learning and brought the whole class together to create new knowledge. In the edit-a-thon environment,

the class moved from teacher/student dichotomy towards Paulo Freire's concepts of the "teacher–student" and "students–teachers."[27] For example, instead of receiving prescriptive information about quantity and types of sources they could use, students had to explain the concepts behind Wikipedia's criteria for reliable sources to their peers. They had to engage and negotiate communally with the notion of which sources would be acceptable for Wikipedia, rather than simply receiving an edict about acceptable source types, as they might have previously experienced with research paper writing assignments.

Students received immediate feedback in a vivid experience of the way Wikipedia works when they observed their changes being reverted in real time and then changing them back in the moment. Throughout the semester the class had discussed how Wikipedia's systems privileged particular voices, what the community valued, and what the standards for edits were. Students who did not meet the standards saw their changes quickly reversed—but so did students who simply made changes that did not satisfy Wikipedians. This experience provided a concrete demonstration of the challenges and barriers to participating in the knowledge creation process.

Reflection

Integrating a Wikipedia edit-a-thon as an assignment into the first-year seminar course encouraged students to shift their relationship with a popular information source from passive consumers to active creators and teachers. Engaging with Wikipedia on this level moved students from a simplistic view of Wikipedia to a more nuanced and critical understanding of its uses. Students were able to complicate the narrative that sources like Wikipedia are "neutral," instead recognizing bias in what entries exist and which entries are extensive and detailed. In addition, the students discovered connections between which entries are being challenged and who is in charge of policing Wikipedia standards, leading them to interrogate the very notion of neutrality itself.

Although this experience was overall positive, there are a few potential pitfalls that should be considered when incorporating an edit-a-thon into a semester-length course. First, students needed to be introduced to the assignment earlier in the semester and be assigned at least one reading that focuses on *how* to organize an edit-a-thon rather than what it means (e.g., supplementing the reading by Lavin with Wikipedia's how-to page or an article detailing an organizer's experience).[28] As many students were unfamiliar with the concept of an edit-a-thon, it would have been useful to take additional time to provide an overview of the purpose and logistics. Additionally, it would have been beneficial to spend more time on the overall process for determining a theme for the edit-a-thon. Students submitted ideas on a course discussion board that were workshopped into a theme during a class session, but struggled not only with finding the appropriate scope for an edit-a-thon theme but also with understanding how more narrowly defined topics would fit under that theme. As a result, it would be valuable to spend more time scaffolding this section of edit-a-thon planning; this could include spending time looking at other examples, discussing how narrow topics could be combined to create an overarching theme, and examining how the process of narrowing and broadening of ideas relates to other contexts. Since

students oftentimes struggle with scoping throughout their college research experiences, providing more support and exploration of topic scoping would help students build this important skill. Acknowledging students' very full lives, the edit-a-thon was held during class hours to make it easier for students to plan and attend. This might have made it more challenging to get others to attend, as it was a very limited time frame in the middle of a busy academic day, but all things considered, the trade-offs were worth it.

There are many ways that an edit-a-thon or portions of the assignment could be integrated into learning opportunities for librarians who are not able to offer semester-long courses. One possibility is to partner with an instructor; an edit-a-thon centered on the course topic could be woven into a semester-long course to effectively integrate research skills and information literacy concepts throughout.

For librarians situated in a one-shot instruction scenario, there are options to adapt portions of the overall edit-a-thon assignment to achieve specific learning objectives. Examples include having students look at a Wikipedia entry's editing history in order to examine changes made over time (e.g., number of editors, sources used, and any themes in edits accepted or rejected). A one-shot session could also take the format of an edit-a-thon where students register for Wikipedia accounts ahead of time, spend a portion of the session locating sources and crafting edits for the particular audience, and make edits to existing entries.

Conclusion

Edit-a-thons promote peer learning, group collaboration, and the development of communication skills. An edit-a-thon project has the potential to bring the whole class together around a shared objective, helping to build a classroom community. Additionally, by creating an event that is open to the community, students are able to share their knowledge and hard work with an audience of peers rather than their work only being viewed by their instructor. Since students have to teach their peers over the course of the edit-a-thon, they have to understand and internalize the skills and concepts more deeply than they would in a theory-driven assignment. Finally, in creating the resources that promote and facilitate the edit-a-thon (e.g., marketing), students learn about and practice different writing genres that are transferable to their intended careers. As a result, edit-a-thons are a powerful teaching tool, which belong alongside article writing as a useful pedagogical application of Wikipedia.

Notes

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