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Teaching Wikipedia: A Model for Critical Engagement with Open Information

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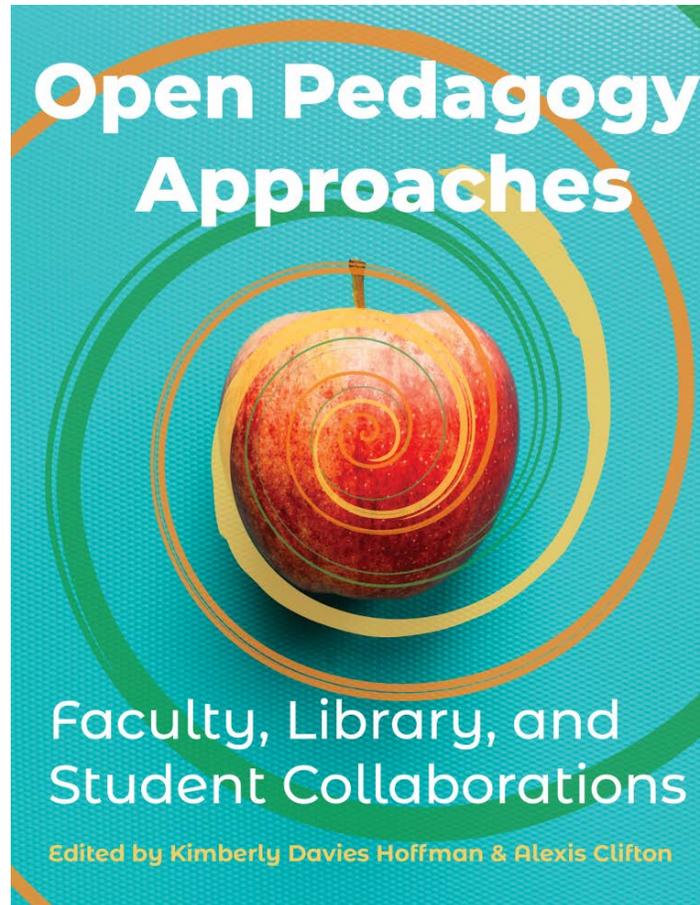
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TEACHING WIKIPEDIA: A MODEL FOR CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH OPEN INFORMATION

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Project Overview

Institution: [Case Western Reserve University](#)

Institution Type: private, research, undergraduate, postgraduate

Project Discipline: STEM

Project Outcome: Wikipedia content creation

Tools Used: Wikipedia, LibGuides

Resources Included in Chapter:

- Lesson Plans
- Grading Rubric

Introduction

In this chapter, the authors describe the learning experience and goals of a class assignment to write content for Wikipedia about women in science and technology fields. The authors, a university professor and two librarians, collaboratively developed this assignment to allow students to engage in rigorous research and contribute to the visibility of women scientists by writing content for the web. The authors chose the Wikipedia platform as the means to make the students' work openly available because of its ubiquity and the potential for student work to make an important impact. The assignment, used in two iterations of the course, was designed to provide students not only with a hands-on experience on working on the open web, but also with tools to assess critically the uses and abuses of open access platforms.

Over multiple class sessions with librarians spread throughout the semester, students engaged with questions such as the power and bias of authorship, the meaning of authority, the role of critical consumers/producers of information, how to evaluate and use archival documents on open platforms, as well as ethical questions deriving from producing content for the open web. The chapter examines both the challenges and successes in designing and engaging students with the assignment, offering a model of collaboration between faculty, librarians, and archivists in the promotion of open pedagogy that can be replicated at other institutions and disciplines.

Why Wikipedia?

The Wikipedia assignment was developed as a final assignment in a course on Gender and Technology that was offered as part of the Seminar Approach to General Education and Scholarship (SAGES) Program at Case Western Reserve University. SAGES seminars are usually capped at 17 students, and are comprised of a mixture of first-year and sophomore students. In these seminars, students engage with critical thinking, learning analytical and research skills, as well as gaining experience with multiple forms of academic writing. As the university is a STEM focused institution, where the majority of undergraduate students major in engineering and the hard sciences, the class topic of Gender and Technology was selected by the professor to appeal to students' interests. The course especially targeted students who seek to engage with questions on how gender and technology define and redefine each other, the role of women in science and technology, and on issues of gender (in)equality in the STEM fields that many will encounter informally throughout their studies.

Both the topic of the course and the pedagogical rationale of the SAGES seminar made Wikipedia a useful tool to promote students' writing and research skills and engage with the course topic. Women, and especially women who made notable achievements in the STEM fields, are underrepresented on Wikipedia (Harrison, 2019). In fact, as of February 2020, only 18.25% of English Wikipedia's biographies were about women (WikiProject Women in Red). The content of entries about women are also skewed to have more information about family and relationships, and speak more negatively about their subjects than entries about men (Wagner et al., 2016). Thus, the assignment was a perfect opportunity to not only provide students with experience in public writing, but also to tackle hands-on the questions of gender inequality that the course addressed. By contributing to the visibility of women on Wikipedia, and the internet at large, the assignment demonstrated to students how writing can move beyond the confines of the classroom and become a political act.

In addition, the Wikipedia assignment offered a fresh approach to the "traditional" academic paper, something that often does not generate much excitement from students. The thought behind using Wikipedia as a publishing platform was to empower students to think of themselves as authors and contributors to the information landscape, as well as to raise the stakes of producing valuable work. The fact that their work could be visible to a public audience beyond the professor or the university community was intended to propel them to think more critically, and engage in more revisions on their own writing. The students were also given the option to decide whether to publish their work publicly or not, which added to their self-reflection as writers.

Another pedagogical motivation to use the Wikipedia assignment in class was to get students to think critically about the encyclopedia and open access sources at large. As students engaged in writing content for public consumption, they encountered first hand the challenges of accountability and accuracy. They needed to think about how, and if, they could even "trust" the information presented on Wikipedia, and how they could evaluate information online. This shift from being consumers of information/Wikipedia to producers offered students a way to reevaluate Wikipedia as a credible source, with the hope that they would take these conclusions into the future of their academic careers.

Developing lesson plans

While the instructor was in the process of developing the course, the research librarian that works with the instructor's department reached out regarding course support opportunities. The instructor responded with some details about the Wikipedia assignment she was developing and scheduled a meeting to discuss how the library could support it. During the course of the meeting, it became clear that the assignment was uniquely positioned to benefit from the expertise of members of the library's research services, digital scholarship, and archives teams. It was agreed that the librarians would lead three sessions (with the addition of a fourth working session in the second iteration of the course). These sessions would prepare students to engage with critical information literacy, research, digital literacy, and the technical aspects of the project. In other words, the sessions the librarians led would be essential to teach students the critical thinking and technical skills needed to successfully complete the assignment.

All three collaborators approached the project with an open mind and enthusiasm to experiment and take some risks. The instructor was willing to hand over parts of the planning of her course to the librarians, and the librarians were willing to learn all about how to teach students to edit Wikipedia responsibly, which was new to them as well. It became clear in the first meeting that one session alone would not be enough time to cover the social and ethical conversations around Wikipedia, the research and content aspects of the project, as well as the technical editing side. Those three components formed the basis of the first three class sessions. The research and digital scholarship librarians developed the lesson plans collaboratively, consulting the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education and integrating the frames most applicable to the objectives of the assignment (see [Appendix](#)). The first session on ethics was led by both librarians, the second session on finding sources and citing in Wikipedia was led by the research librarian, and the third was led by the digital scholarship librarian to teach students editing techniques in a hands-on work session.

Each of the sessions was scaffolded into the syllabus to ensure that they were timed appropriately for the course, and the instructor communicated to students what they were expected to do before each class. A critical component in the success of the assignment was the continual communication between the librarians and faculty, allowing them to remain agile as questions arose from students, as well as the trust placed in each other to fulfil their roles as related to the course. The instructor's trust also was apparent to the students; the librarians were not simply guests in the class, but were integral to their success in the course and their learning.

What happened in class

The first class session was designed to be an introduction to the social issues surrounding Wikipedia. After a brief introduction to the assignment, the class was broken into small groups and each group was given an article about Wikipedia to read and discuss. These articles (listed in the [Appendix](#)) touched on a variety of topics, including hoaxes, bias in authorship, trustworthiness of information, and coverage of controversial issues in a public forum. Each group was asked to report back to the class on the topics raised in the articles and this ignited a discussion that allowed students to engage with these issues.

Afterwards, the students were asked to think about what principles they would want to imbue in Wikipedia if they were building it from scratch. How would they balance openness with reliability? Would they have limits on who could author articles? How would they address bias not only in the articles present but also in what is deemed worthy of an article in the first place? What guidelines and principles would they put into place to help make Wikipedia the best it can be? In the end, they came up with a list of principles that mirrored Wikipedia's own five pillars, while also recognizing that such pillars are not a foolproof way of addressing the concerns of bias, misinformation, and reliability.

A secondary objective, and one that at least anecdotally appeared to be achieved, was that this session introduced the librarians to the class and helped to establish a rapport with them. This interaction allowed the students to both feel comfortable reaching out to the librarians for help and established the librarians as experts

working in concert with their professor. By beginning with a discussion of the ethical considerations of the platform their assignment was based on, the librarians positioned themselves as open to questions, considerate of concerns, and knowledgeable on the topic at hand while simultaneously laying the foundation for future class sessions.

The second session led by librarians focused on locating and vetting sources to use in their biographical entries. An archivist was brought in to speak about the unique structure and access requirements related to archival material, which students who chose subjects that were affiliated with the university might find useful. In the second iteration of the class, the scholarly communications librarian also visited to address copyright concerns for both written and visual material.

The third session was devoted to learning to use the Wikipedia platform and creating and editing biographical entries. Students were asked to create an account prior to the session and were welcome to use their laptops to follow along as the librarian demonstrated how to access, edit, and properly format the sandbox area where students would draft their biographical entries. For the remaining class time students worked on their entries and were able to ask questions of both the professor and librarians. A fourth session, added in the second iteration of the course, was a working session designed to provide students another opportunity to work on their entries while being able to get one-on-one assistance from the librarians. The need for an open work session was demonstrated both semesters by the many technical and content related questions students asked the professor and the librarians after they got started with the work.

By the end of the sessions, all students had explored ethical and social justice concerns related to Wikipedia, acquired the information literacy skills necessary to do the required research for their selected subjects, and practiced crafting and formatting a biographical entry that would meet Wikipedia's guidelines.

Results of the assignment

Surprisingly, although many of the students were quite tech savvy and literate in using media online, using the Wikipedia sandbox platform was not self-evident to all. Some encountered technical issues in formatting their articles, and some did not really understand the format and presented a version of a “traditional” paper. Moreover, some were confused regarding how they would be evaluated, and seemed uncomfortable working outside of their comfort zone of writing a traditional essay. This concern was met by circulating a grading rubric (see [Appendix](#)) that set clear expectations, and eased many of the initial worries regarding the assignment.

Despite these difficulties, all students submitted article drafts and revised them according to comments. While there was not a required page minimum, as information about the individual subject varied greatly, the expectation was that students would have enough sources to create a substantial content article. Articles ranged from being very short (3-4 printed pages) to very long (8-9 pages), but the average article, including citations and notes, was 6 printed pages. Without question, all articles, regardless of length, demonstrated well-done and accurately cited research, using a plethora of sources that indicated that students read credible documents.

Overall, students went to great lengths to locate relevant sources even beyond the University's library, going so far as to seek copyright permissions for images where free alternatives were not available, and bringing an added value to their articles. Even when information for some of the topics was more difficult to find, students showed resilience in consulting various databases and research tools beyond what they would have consulted for a traditional essay.

Some students who were writing about alumni at our institution were able to use the University Archives for research. However, they had to be careful about what items they were able to cite due to Wikipedia's restrictions on using primary source material. They were able to use everything that had been published, such as yearbooks and student newspapers, as those met the criteria to be considered secondary sources. For students who utilized the University Archives, the experience was overall positive and interesting. "I...loved the Wikipedia project. I felt involved in my research and got to go to the archives," wrote one of the students. They commented on the helpfulness of the staff and mentioned that the experience of going through archival sources was a new but welcomed experience.

Overall, it seemed that even the students who found the assignment challenging appreciated the experience. "I really enjoyed the Wikipedia project. It is a valuable life skill to know how to operate Wikipedia. And the articles we created brought attention to underrepresented women in the STEM fields," one of the students wrote in the evaluation. This is in line with what recent research into Wikipedia-based assignments has revealed about student learning and engagement (Vetter et al., 2019).

Students appreciated the opportunity to make their writing public and felt they made a real contribution. "I...felt like my writing had a real-life impact," another student commented. Although only about half of the students ended up publishing their articles, they understood how the assignment engaged with the course's topic and appreciated the experience. During the sessions, students were made aware of the possibility that their work could be deleted or modified after publication, as part of the open nature of Wikipedia. Yet, even if their entries went through some revisions and editing by other Wikipedia users after the initial publication, one student expressed that they felt proud that it was because of their initial work that the woman they wrote about got an entry in the first place. This student did not seem to mind later edits and changes, but instead viewed the entire process as empowering.

What was learned

While the assignment overall proved to be successful and the students gained valuable skills and ethical engagement from the experience, there were some challenges that had to be worked through. Students were offered the opportunity to do either biographical entries or write about organizations related to the topic, but students gravitated strongly toward doing biographical entries. One possible reason for this is that the idea of writing about an entire organization may seem more daunting than writing about an individual, even if the amount of research involved is similar. Spending some time showing this could help reduce the anxiety around choosing an organizational topic as opposed to a biographical one. Encouraging some students to choose this

path would be helpful as the “pool” of possible biographical topics is limited, and expanding the topic base could be helpful in future iterations of this assignment. Some students had difficulty choosing subjects, and to aid with this, links to lists of needed entries on Wikipedia were provided. Students were also given the option of selecting people that had entries that were insubstantial and needed to be expanded, referred to as a “stub” entry on Wikipedia.

There were also occasions when a student would select a subject to write about and then discover later there was not enough published material about them to write a full entry, even after receiving assistance from a librarian or archivist. This forced some students to pick an alternative subject. Another issue that arose was a student selecting a person to write about and then, during the course of the semester, someone else published a biographical entry about them on Wikipedia. These are difficult issues to work around and there is not an easy solution. Either students will need to change the person they are writing about or, if it is too late to change, be allowed to complete the assignment knowing they won’t be able to publish the entire article publicly. They could instead submit their sandbox entry to the professor for grading and add material to the already published article if they so desire.

Another issue that arose was the fact that the campus IP range was blocked from creating new Wikipedia accounts during the course of the semester. This can happen if there is suspicious or abusive behavior linked back to them. Considering the number of users that fall within an institution’s IP range is quite high, it’s not uncommon for colleges and universities to have their campus IP range blocked for a time. This only prohibits new accounts from being made without review; it will not keep those who had accounts prior to the block from being able to login and edit Wikipedia.

When an IP range is blocked, a form is posted on Wikipedia that allows people to request accounts from the blocked IP range. These requests are supposed to be reviewed and approved or denied within a few days. However, in our case the review did not happen for several months and account requests submitted through the form were not approved until well into the summer. To get around this, students were asked to go off-campus to a local coffee shop, public library, or other easily accessible venue that provided Wi-Fi and create their accounts there to avoid sending the request from the blocked IP range.

The librarians also learned from the first round of sessions and made a few changes to how they constructed their lessons in the second iteration of the class and assignment. While the overall structure remained the same, they adjusted the article list used in the first session to incorporate new material. They also demonstrated a live editing section to show the ease with which people can edit Wikipedia entries instead of asking the class to try it. Previously this had resulted in the class getting off track as they edited a Wikipedia page of interest to them with false information, and the information was quickly changed back.

The librarians also added a speaker who touched on copyright as it relates both to text and images. They were also introduced to places they could search for public domain and creative commons licensed images. While the content was useful, the speaker shared the session with a representative from the University Archives and a research librarian teaching them about finding and evaluating sources. Three speakers were too many and

in the future they would be separated out into different sessions or have the information posted for students to review as they work on the assignment.

This assignment is easily adaptable to courses in a broad range of subject areas across areas of humanities, social sciences, and science and technology. The project could work equally well with one librarian collaborator as it did with two librarians. The specific news articles that formed the basis of the conversation in the first class session could be replaced with different articles, either ones focused on discipline specific issues or more recent articles. Without a doubt, new scandals, hoaxes, or other misuses of Wikipedia will arise in the world; people will edit for political gain, manipulate reputations, write fake entries and write in ways that are intentionally or inadvertently non-neutral.

The challenge of identifying unwritten and stub articles for which sufficient information exists, and which meet Wikipedia's notability requirements, will always be a consideration in adapting this assignment. Instructors and librarians can take advantage of Wikipedia's page of new entries that have been requested by users, categorized by subject and sub-topic. The Gender and Technology class focused on biographical Wikipedia entries but that could also expand to include other types of topics.

Wikipedia requires the existence of multiple independent and reliable secondary sources in order to meet the notability criteria; students were required to adhere to this and use primary sources only to fill in information gaps. In some cases students changed topics after they struggled to find the requisite secondary sources. The problem with the notability criteria is that it becomes more difficult to justify adding representation of marginalized voices. The scholarly record itself is biased against women and minorities and Wikipedia's policy perpetuates that bias. A recent illustrative example of this is the physicist Donna Strickland, whose Wikipedia page was deleted based on notability criteria a few months before she won the Nobel Prize for Physics (Koren, 2018). While the authors don't have a suggested solution for this obstacle, it is an excellent basis for class discussion.

Conclusion

The process of developing the assignment, preparing the lesson plans to complement the assignment, and working with the students on it proved to be extremely rewarding for all involved. Wikipedia provided the perfect platform for students to engage with questions of open access, writing for the public, bias of all kinds, and critically work with information not just as a consumer but also a creator. It enabled a valuable collaboration between the professor and the librarians that allowed for a deep-dive into information literacy concepts that students were immediately able to put to practical use. Since this type of assignment is subject-agnostic, requires little technical skill, and has few barriers to entry for all involved, the authors highly recommend it for anyone interested in experimenting with content that lives at the intersection of ethics, information literacy, and open pedagogy.

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Appendix: Lesson Plans and Grading Rubric

Session one

Learning objectives

- Critique Wikipedia, paying particular attention to issues of bias
- Examine the benefits and challenges of user-created open information sources
- Construct a list of values upon which an open information resource should be based

Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) frames covered

- Authority is constructed and contextual
- Information creation as a process

Class outline

- Introduce the reason why this assignment has been chosen over a traditional paper.
- Lead initial critique of Wikipedia as a reliable information source.
- Divide the class into groups. Hand each group an article about different aspects of Wikipedia (i.e. hoaxes, bias, reliability, etc.) and have them read it. Then have each group report back on what the article was about and what that tells us about Wikipedia. Use this as a jumping off-point to further discuss the benefits and challenges of an open, easily-editable, internet-accessible information source. Issues such as bias, reliability, privilege, and access will likely arise.
- Ask the class: If you were developing Wikipedia, what would be your guidelines and principles? Take notes as the class discusses this.
- Show them the five pillars of Wikipedia and see how close they got.
- Demo how easy it is to edit an article, even without an account.
- Review the associated LibGuide with resources on editing Wikipedia and resources for their research. (Optional – can simply provide a link instead.)

Articles used in-class

Articles from the list below were used in each class. The librarians look for new material each time the class is held and adjust what is used accordingly.

Cieply, M. (2015, June 22). Wikipedia pages of star clients altered by P.R. firm. *The New York Times*.

Dewey, C. (2014, August 4). Men's rights activists think a "hateful" feminist conspiracy is ruining Wikipedia. *The Washington Post*.

Dewey, C. (2015, April 15). The story behind Jar'Edo Wens, the longest-running hoax in Wikipedia history. *The Washington Post*.

Ghose, T. (2015, August 24). Is Wikipedia trustworthy when it comes to science? *The Washington Post*.

Koren, M. (2018, October 2). One Wikipedia page is a metaphor for the Nobel Prize's record with women. *The Atlantic*.

Moran, L. (2017, February 15). Teen edits band's Wikipedia page to bluff his way into VIP section. *Huffington Post*.

Selk, A. & Cavna, M. (2017, March 1). Garfield's a boy ... right? How a cartoon cat's gender identity launched a Wikipedia war. *The Washington Post*.

Torres, N. (2016, June 2). Why do so few women edit Wikipedia?. *Harvard Business Review*.

A LibGuide, [Wikipedia Editing Project](#), was also introduced to the students and embedded in Canvas, a learning management system.

Session two

Learning objectives

- Describe neutral point of view, notability criteria, and verifiability on as defined on Wikipedia
- Use research tools effectively to find reliable sources of information
- Gain awareness of copyright and intellectual property issues as they apply to Wikipedia, particularly in terms of use of images
- Explain the purpose of an archive and the value for the project

Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) frames covered

- Information has value
- Authority is constructed and contextual
- Research as inquiry

Class outline

- Discuss the Five Pillars of Wikipedia
- Understand neutral point of view
- Look at examples of Wikipedia articles to understand how to integrate and cite sources effectively and accurately
- Guest speaker talked about copyright issues such as Fair Use, Creative Commons licenses, and use of images in Wikipedia pages

- Guest speaker from University Archives led exercise to analyze archival records, and explained how archives could assist students choosing local subjects to write about

Session three

Learning objectives

- Use the Wikipedia sandbox to draft articles
- Review all the pieces of a biographical Wikipedia entry
- Format biographical Wikipedia entries

Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) frames covered

- Information creation as a process

Class outline

- How to log in
- How to navigate to the sandbox
- How to switch between markup and the visual editor
- How to find and use different heading styles
- How to use the link feature
 - Link to Wikipedia articles
 - Link to external sources
- How to cite sources
 - Automatically (i.e. with a website or doi)
 - Manually (fill out a form)
- How to insert:
 - Infobox template for quick facts
 - Media
 - How to upload materials you own the copyright to
 - How to upload other materials using the Wikimedia Commons Upload Wizard
 - References list
 - Authority control template (use an orcid number as an example)
- How to save changes (click on publish changes)
- Give students time to start developing the template for their article in the sandbox and ask other questions

Session Four

- In-class workshop, no structured lesson plan
- Check in and coach each student one-on-one
- Troubleshoot technical questions about editing Wikipedia
- Answer questions about assignment criteria

Assignment grading rubric

Student Name						
Grade	Organization	Content	Sources	Citations	Logic and flow	Mechanics
A/A-	Clear organization of headings and subheadings; appropriate transitions	Comprehensive coverage of the topic; provides relevant information with links to relevant articles for background	Article uses the best available sources, and they are appropriate for the article; includes images that improve the reader's understanding of the topic with clear captions	Every statement can easily be associated with supporting references; most references include filled-out citations or are complete	Logical flow; body of article is divided into relevant sections and in hierarchical order that follows guidelines; novel contributions	Excellent grammar, punctuation and diction; minimal to no spelling errors, no run-on-sentences or comma splices
B+/B	Purposeful organization, but article does not always flow between sections	Coverage has some gaps; provides most of the relevant information, lacks links sometimes	Article uses mostly good sources, but not always appropriate; includes images with captions, sometimes too detailed	A few statements have unclear sourcing; most references are fairly complete but some missing information	Logical flow; body of article is divided into relevant sections but they don't always follow guidelines or hierarchical order	Strong grammar, punctuation, and diction, despite lapses; may have run-on sentences or comma splices
B-/C+	Unclear/confusing organization of sections; not enough information	Coverage has many important gaps that make it difficult to follow; provides some of the relevant information, lacks links to relevant articles	Article depends heavily on non-independent sources or uses low quality sources; no images or images with limited relevancy and no captions	Not enough citations or references to sources; references have enough information to track down sources but with difficulty	Weak logical flow; article sections duplicate one another	Weak grammar, punctuation, and diction; many run-on sentences or comma splices

C/C-	No sections	Article does not provide enough information or detail for the reader; no links	Article uses unreliable sources or does not use references to sources at all; no images or images that violate copyright regulations	Very few sources or references	Few examples; ideas do not flow at all; no sections	Problems with sentence structure, grammar, and diction
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