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Engaging Learners Through Wikipedia

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Library instruction suffers when it is not well integrated into course assignments, and course assignments suffer when they do not engage students. While public sentiment in academia tends to run against use of Wikipedia, using the online encyclopedia can create engaging instructional opportunities beyond the usual term paper or portfolio assignments, and can involve the library far more than the traditional one-shot library session. Assigning students to create or significantly update articles in Wikipedia can:

- provide a joint teaching tool for both disciplinary instructors and librarians,

- foster connections amongst librarians, teaching faculty, and students,

- give students real world experience and results that are valued more than a 'busywork' assignment,

- contribute to a larger scholarly/topical community,

- expose unique library collections and materials to a wider audience, and

- challenge students to defend their work outside the classroom environment.

Students are often told not to use Wikipedia as a resource, but most never understand why. Its ease of use and freely available information tends to draw students in, but most never think of how the articles are created, or how easily they are changed. With this sort of assignment, students learn the reasons why Wikipedia can be suspect, and they learn how they can improve it and use it to their benefit.

The experience at University of Montana

In August 2010, a professor in the University of Montana School of Journalism approached the authors to draft a Wikipedia-based assignment for the course JOUR380: News Editing. Students chose topics from a selected list of topics created by the Catalog Librarian. Topics focused on local history, locations or people and were either stubs or not present in Wikipedia. Students were also given the opportunity to research their own topic. Students had an 80-minute instruction session covering the basics of Wikipedia from an authoring and editing perspective and a brief refresher on library resources. They then had four weeks to create and post an article. The professor and the librarians monitored the articles as they were being added to Wikipedia, but did not provide input

unless asked to do so by the students. The articles were reviewed by the professor and librarians and the students were given general advice and feedback during a final classroom session. After this session, students had an extra week to additionally revise their articles for a final grade.

Prior to this semester, the School of Journalism did not incorporate library instruction into their courses as a general rule, believing that by the time students were Juniors that they had received enough library instruction at the underclass level and needed to focus on the development of journalistic tools and techniques beyond basic background research. However, with this new assignment, the professor sought out a Wikipedia expert on the library faculty, the Catalog Librarian, to present a Wikipedia session to her class. The Catalog Librarian then invited the Social Science Librarian to co-teach the lesson. This assignment allowed for the connection between the School of Journalism and the library to be re-established, as well as a direct integration of the library into the classroom assignment.

The classroom assignment was more interesting to the students in some ways than a more traditional assignment to write a term paper or create a portfolio of articles would have been. The assignment provided students with a tangible end product: the article they added or improved in Wikipedia. In addition, the interaction students had with the worldwide community of Wikipedians proved far more valuable and informative than similar interactions with professors or librarians. For example, copyright of images was mentioned as a concern during the library instruction session, but it took comments from other Wikipedia users to get students to learn and understand the rules of copyright as applicable to images and the content of the images used online. Students also needed to defend the use of sources in their articles and in some cases the notability of their entry. Topics were selected by the Catalog Librarian with this in mind.

Wikipedia assignments at other institutions

A similar assignment and structure was discussed in two separate articles in *History Teacher* in February 2010. In the article "Sleeping with the enemy: Wikipedia in the college classroom," Chandler and Gregory discuss the application of this assignment and structure to their course, "History 232: The Rise of Islam" in Fall 2008 at Lycoming College. The authors noted that with the Wikipedia assignment they "saw a stronger

research base than [they] had seen with previous semesters' papers" (254) and that students became more savvy consumers of information, both in regard to information found on Wikipedia and information generally. "To succeed with the project," they write, "students had to decide what kinds of information they needed, find said information, then absorb and integrate it" (255).

The second article, "Wikipedia: How it works and how it can work for you," discussed a similar assignment at the University of Baltimore. One of the main accomplishments the author highlighted was the students' participation in the Wikipedian community and how the interactions with this community made the assignment far more consequential: "When [a] professor requires three sources for a paper, it seems arbitrary and the consequence for ignoring the instruction is a lower grade. When some Wikipedia editors notice that citations are missing, or language is sloppy, or notability is questionable, they become 'deletionists' and remove the article. The student is no longer participating in the construction of knowledge. The consequence is very real" (Nix 2010, 262).

Outcomes

In addition to providing a more integrated instructional experience and a more meaningful assignment, this assignment produced unique outcomes beyond the traditional term paper or article portfolio assignments used in the School of Journalism and in education generally.

Eighteen articles were created or improved about local topics related to the University of Montana or to the city of Missoula, which are now freely available on the open web. This adds to the scholarly community beyond our university's walls and provides an enduring resource that is open to all, and in some cases highlights collections in the University's Archives. As discussed above, writing these articles provided a wholly different experience and value than writing a paper for a professor. Local topics were used for the most part, and this gave the added incentive that local users and the campus community would likely read these articles and offer input.

In the process of creating the articles, students learned about writing for the Wikipedia audience. Writing a Wikipedia encyclopedia article is a very different type of writing than many students are exposed to and requires them to lean on outside, neutral

resources rather than their own thoughts and opinions. This style of writing is encouraged by the Journalism program and this assignment gave students a great opportunity to test out their skills.

Students learned about copyright and licensing of images, which is unfortunately rare in our educational environment. Students learned that they could not 'borrow' images even if it was for an educational purpose. In addition, in our group at the University of Montana, a photograph of a building with a statue in the foreground offered even more learning experiences regarding copyright and ownership of images, and the content within the images, as Wikipedians argued over whether the statue's creator needed to give permission for the photo to be published.

Students learned about citation of and for web resources, a notoriously confusing area of citation. Wikipedia provides for integrated footnotes and a bibliography but formatting is left up to the contributor. The Social Science Librarian engaged the students in a brief discussion about the importance of citation in an online resource and offered resources for citation development, which was informative for all parties. The Catalog Librarian discussed the visual importance of the footnotes and bibliographic section, as well as the references within the article with the students.

The Wikipedia assignment led several students to use the University's Archives and Special Collections, which was a new experience for most of them. Students became familiar with the wealth of resources available in libraries for local history topics and learned that there is more information available on topics than what they find online. They also learned that our Archives had a variety of photographs available online or that could be scanned, and they learned about copyright and licensing of this type of image. In addition, several students engaged with librarians outside the library session, to further research their topics for Wikipedia and even for some other assignments. Through this assignment, the Archives collections will now be exposed to users beyond the student who wrote the article. The material cited on Wikipedia is now more visible to others researching the topic, whereas before these materials would have remained hidden.

One of the most valuable outcomes was that librarians engaged with faculty and students in a discipline that has had limited library contact in recent years. As free online resources proliferated, the School of Journalism has felt that instruction in library

resources and research has become less important. In fact, the professor who approached the library initially had no intention of covering library research and resources in the Wikipedia session, only to cover Wikipedia editing and style. However, the review and refresher on library resources, especially concerning the Archives and Special Collections, proved invaluable to the completion of the assignment. It is hoped that this assignment laid the groundwork for faculty and staff in the School of Journalism to consider the library an ally in the current educational process, rather than a relic of the past.

Conclusion and further applications

The approach of the News Editing Wikipedia assignment created several opportunities for connection that do not exist with a more traditional assignment. Students and their professor connected with the library and Wikipedia community in a new way, which created engagement and an assignment that produced tangible, durable, and open results. Students learned critical thinking skills and how to apply knowledge and justify the results to an outside audience.

Part of the value of this assignment is to emphasize and maintain the connection to the external community. Nix suggests that the true learning experience of a Wikipedia assignment comes after the article's creation and proposes that students ought to discuss and write about what happens to their articles after they have been posted on the site (263).

From the library's perspective, the value of the assignment is in the fostering of a relationship with students as partners in academic pursuits. The library helps students engage critically with resources to help determine the usefulness and relevance of the materials they are using to assemble the article. The library also leads them to resources to use in their articles, helps them with citation, and clarifies copyright concerns.

This type of assignment can be used in many disciplines and at many levels, from secondary education up to graduate programs. Compared with static writing and grading of papers, there may be more of a time cost to this assignment but the increased outcomes justify it. Students learn about solid research and the scholarly community, through the creation of knowledge. They learn how the library is an ally in research and writing. Through the defense of their work to outsiders, they learn to strengthen their writing and

use of resources in a way that endures after the course ends. An added benefit to this assignment is that it helps to make Wikipedia a better source for future users. Sixteen of the articles created in this class did not exist before these students wrote them. Writing these new articles in a precise and measured way not only enhanced the students' knowledge of objective writing and research, but also increased the visibility of some unique library collections and historical sites in Montana.

Works Cited

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