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### Using Wikipedia to Teach Audience, Genre and Collaboration

During a classroom exercise in which small groups were reviewing and summarizing Wikipedia policies, one student asked if it was true that making too many bad edits could get someone barred from Wikipedia. Yes, I answered, and then pointed out that if this class of thirty-three students made enough bad edits, theoretically, anyone using a University of Illinois IP address could be barred from editing. The class met this news with great gravity.

Writing instructors forever have been looking for ways to help students develop a concrete sense of audience. In the case of contributing to Wikipedia, auditors are not only real, but any reader can become a co-author. These highly engaged audience members will make themselves heard in very concrete ways--often rewriting or simply erasing (reverting) the contributions of other editors with amazing rapidity. Experiencing this can lead students to more than a concrete sense of audience. The pedagogical opportunities, arguably, are so great that they might even outweigh the concerns of those who doubt the credibility of an open-authored encyclopedia. It is worth noting that a number of studies have suggested that Wikipedia's accuracy and reliability are comparable to those of print encyclopedias. Most famously, a

comparison of Wikipedia and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* found similar levels of factual error (Giles 2005; see also Chesney 2006). More recently, additional studies have been conducted in specialized scientific and medical fields (Wikipedia, 2014a).

Even in the face of lingering doubts, however, an informed effort at making contributions that *persist* within a large community of readers, editors, and co-authors can be an experience at being answerable to a real audience.

This essay describes a sequence of assignments centering on Wikipedia, which I have used when teaching Social Aspects of Information Technology, and will suggest ways this set of exercises in social informatics may also serve a number of common goals in a variety of English language and literature courses.

Visiting, if not joining, the community of Wikipedians offers students essential experiences valued in several areas of English studies: analyzing and writing for explicit editorial guidelines (“standards” in information science; “house style” in editorial practice); understanding, conforming to, and even negotiating conventions of genres and subgenres; collaborating online; writing for an audience that is not only real but talks back; and developing deep understanding of revision and the writing, editorial, and publication processes. Educational projects in editing Wikipedia are by no means new; recently, for example, Kill (2012) suggests that editing Wikipedia can contribute to a pedagogy oriented toward social justice; for a list of examples of projects in a variety of disciplines, see Wikipedia (2014b). This article will detail some important practical steps for drawing out the full potential from such projects and offer examples from a set of student projects as demonstration of the potential benefits.

The assignment sequence described below aims at a relatively deep immersion in order to take students beyond the typical first hurdles. New editors of Wikipedia generally master the

interface relatively quickly (although some use of the online documentation may be necessary). When new Wikipedians experience confusion, the problem is usually not technological but social. Many people's first experiences editing Wikipedia follow a common pattern: After making a few additions to articles, they find (often within minutes or hours) that their edits have been reverted and, frustrated or confused, they stop trying to edit. If, however, an editor knows what to look for, the process is demystified and more of the editor's contributions will persist. As a student once reported to me, *I made a change, and then it changed back*. I felt I had to point out that *it* did not change back. *Someone* changed it back, probably for reasons we can eventually understand.

Before describing the assignment sequence, however, it will be useful to consider how the key information science concept of standards overlaps with English studies concepts, notably genre and house style.

#### Standards: Generic Conventions, Community Standards, House Style

Some scholars of writing have recognized the value of these records of collaborative writing. Two recent studies have used Wikipedia as the basis of study of revision (Jones 2008; Purdy 2009), and Brown (2009) demonstrates how study of Wikipedia could help us teach about ethos and theories of authorship.

Among the defining characteristics of a wiki are the accessible version histories and talk pages, and these elements are also key to the pedagogical potential of Wikipedia. Each page of Wikipedia has a version history that records all changes to the page. In addition to safe-guarding against editing mistakes, version histories allow any reader or editor to see and compare each change a text has gone through. Each page also has an associated talk page, a forum for

discussion of that article. Here, editors can post comments explaining their edits and sometimes more generally discussing the direction an article should take. Together, these two features amount to something like a variorum edition of each article. Wikipedia thus provides a wealth of opportunity for study and learning about the writing process, the editorial process, collaboration, and so on. Reading talk pages, one often finds serious, thoughtful, writerly feedback among writers who take their task and themselves very seriously. Also striking is the regularity with which editors invoke Wikipedia's policies when discussing their work. The importance of policies in the Wikipedian community allows for the teaching of key concepts in both information science and English.

I wanted my students to begin thinking of information and communication technologies working through the use of standards, but moreover, I wanted them to *experience* how standards function to allow for mutual intelligibility and cooperative work. Standards, both de facto and de jure, are a foundational concept in information science. The Internet and other machine-mediated communication and collaboration are only possible because of standards like HTML 5, CSS, RSS, etc. Standards allow people who hold nothing else in common to coordinate their actions all over the planet and accomplish a good deal with very little resources and without hierarchical organization.

Standards in information science overlap several concepts important to English studies. Genre is fundamental in literary studies, in composition and rhetoric including new media writing, and in creative writing. Like a standard, a genre describes common features of members of a class and, as recent genre theory has demonstrated (e.g. Frow 2006; Russell 2000), genre conditions readers' expectations, creating the context that determines possible meanings. Like standards, then, genre creates the conditions of mutual intelligibility. Moreover, typically,

generic characteristics have evolved out of practice: these are de facto standards. Another analog to standards may be found in the professional writing and editing concept of house style, the editorial guidelines of a particular publication or organization. Finally, when we think about audience (whether in literary reception studies or in guiding students in producing their own writing), we often have reference to the notion of community or communal standards and expectations, which may overlap with genre but may also deal with matters that extend well beyond a single genre.

Wikipedia offers a unique environment to explore standards through genre, house style, and the negotiation of community standards. Encyclopedia articles, of course, share a set of generic characteristics, and arguably Wikipedia articles constitute a distinct sub-genre. (Kill 2012 explores the political consequences of this idea. Unlike many genres, however, most characteristics that define a Wikipedia article are both explicitly spelled out and subject to revision through deliberation among community members. In fact, virtually every feature of a Wikipedia article has a corresponding “Policy” with its own Wikipedia page (and, in turn, its own version history and talk page). All Wikipedia policies have a short-form name. One of Wikipedia’s most fundamental policies, No Original Research, goes by the short name “NOR” and can be found by searching Wikipedia for “WP:NOR.” All policies share this special search designation. Other essential policies include notability (what is important enough to belong in an article), special guidelines for biographies of living people, and Wikipedia’s unique house editorial style. Likewise, civility and assuming good faith are not mere virtues, but explicit policies. Contributors are strongly encouraged to invoke policies to explain their contributions on talk pages, and on the talk pages experienced editors frequently use the short names of

policies to quickly explain their positions, creating a sense for new editors that if they aren't familiar with the policies, they ought to be.

While the following exercises were originally developed as an exploration of the concept of standards for the study of information science, they offer many opportunities for the study of writing, genre, and collaboration.

### Wikipedia Assignment Sequence

I came to teaching informatics with a background in rhetoric and composition. Moreover, having worked in information technology for some time, I know first-hand that technologists spend most of their time reading and writing, and intelligent use of the Web is part of the job. Therefore, although this course is not a writing course, or even designated as writing-intensive, I knew that I would rely on reading, writing, and collaborative work rather than lectures. Further, prior to beginning work with Wikipedia, I regularly posed in-class group tasks, and we used the school's installation of the Confluence Wiki for groups to compose and then share their reports. So the students were very comfortable writing on a wiki by the time we turned to Wikipedia. Depending on students' familiarity in a given class setting, some preliminary practice might be needed.

The first assignment of the Wikipedia sequence was for each student to find a Wikipedia article with at least one edit that did not persist (that is, changes that were made by one editor and then reverted by another editor), review the version history, and post to a class discussion thread explaining why the edits they examined were undone. (Finding such an article is as simple as finding the word *reverted* in the revision history.) I offered door prizes for the first student to find a Wikipedia policy cited on a talk page. There was a three-way tie; among the first policies

students found was WP:Sock, and momentum built as more students wanted to find policies with strange names.

Later, part of a class meeting was devoted to groups researching and summarizing policies. I sent them looking for key policies on topics such as images, verifiability, reliable sources, how to cite sources, and how to edit other's work (WP:Civility and WP:AGF). The goal was not just to find each policy, but to get at the spirit of the policy. For example, WP:NOR (no original research) means editors must cite published sources. The groups' reports on policies went on the class wiki for all students to see. At the next meeting, re-scrambled groupings of students edited the reports from the past meeting, with the goal of improving them and making comments explaining how they had been improved. This allowed them to practice collaborative revision and especially the crucial skill of explaining and justifying revisions.

Circulating among the groups allowed me to check on groups' and individuals' grasp of the subject matter. In this case, it also allowed for concrete discussion of the work on Wikipedia that was to be done in the major assignment. It also got groups thinking about that project long before the deadline.

The main group project for the semester asked groups to first find articles that could be improved by applying WP policies. The first deliverable was a proposal, including an analysis of the articles selected, a plan of edits to be made, and an explanation of relevant WP policies. This allowed me to gauge the amount of editing to be done and ensure that the groups were conceptually on the right track. Then they were to make their edits and monitor how the community responded to them. I told the groups that an "A" project would point to evidence that their edits would persist. This meant allowing enough time between their initial editing work and their final report to watch for edits or discussion on talk pages. Finally, each group was to

submit a short report narrating the work done, explaining how it improved Wikipedia, and showing evidence of the reception of their changes.

### Accomplishment, Acculturation

My students (who were almost all in the Informatics minor but came from a wide range of majors), chose an interestingly wide range of articles to work on, reflecting their diverse academic and personal interests. Even if they were simply choosing topics from coursework, the breadth of subjects represented in Wikipedia meant that they were able to drill down almost anywhere: women in video games, Hannah Webster Foster, the leaf-cutter ant, Lolita fashion, physical therapy, a favorite professor, the mayor of one small town, or an annual festival in another.

Students took a variety of approaches to the major project. Several groups worked hard to find citations for existing content that lacked documentation. A few added “citation needed” tags where they were unable to verify information.

One group started with an article on “Blended Learning” that had been left very short (a “stub”) in the wake of an edit war, in which much of the content had been rejected because of copyright violation and other reasons. Realizing that the sources that had been previously used were fine, the students used those sources to re-build the page, providing text that did not share the copyright problems of the original article.

One group’s contributions, which detailed history of some buildings in town and on the University of Illinois campus, were reverted because of the Notability policy: their edits were evaluated by other Wikipedians as providing more detail than appropriate for a general interest encyclopedia. They moved their information to the *U of I Wiki*, where the history of each large

apartment building is considered “notable,” an interesting strategy resulting in a real contribution.

All seven of the groups had made at least some of their edits early enough to allow sufficient time to pass so that they could look for signs that their contributions would persist, and most could point to evidence of some success. Four of the seven groups reported as evidence of their contributions’ persistence the fact that only minor edits were made to their articles after they had finished. This is a fairly sophisticated interpretive move to make—that absence of objection is evidence of consensus, and surface-level editing indicated the articles had in fact received editorial attention—and not one I had suggested beforehand.

Members of four groups were contacted by other Wikipedians. In some cases this resulted in substantial engagement on the talk pages and collaboration, as reported here by one student:

my edits caught the attention of a more senior editor, and together we cleaned up the mess that was the Gundam page. It was a fun experience, we talked to each other and he or she asked my reasoning for some of the changes. The other editor began relocating some of the information that I had deleted, and then began to clean up the page that I had begun revising. Even though the article was tagged as having excessive content, I was a little hesitant about how much I should clear away, but the other editor went ahead and deleted most of the article that we were working on.

A few students also engaged on the talk pages in order to justify their edits, and two used talk pages to thank editors who improved their contributions.

Not everyone was willing to engage in discussion on the talk pages. In some cases, other editors tried to start a discussion, and students did not respond. One student found that an

example in the article on Predictive Analytics was lacking a citation (thus violating WP:NOR). Previously, an editor had commented in the talk pages on this part of the article: “I removed it as an example and primary source that comes across as advertising. We need an independent and secondary/tertiary source instead.” The original editor or someone else added that example back in. My student added a different, better example—one with a citation. Another editor struck out the student’s new example, claiming a second example was prolix (“examplespam”). The student did not reenter the fray, but should have. The ideal member of this standards-based community would have gone back and *replaced* the weaker example with one backed by a citation, and posted that this change aligned with the NOR policy.

Although some students did argue on talk pages for justifiable edits they had made that were reverted, a number were reluctant to post to the talk pages and sign their names. In the future, I plan to spend some time after the group projects are turned in to see that students do follow up in the talk pages, perhaps making this final act of engagement a separate assignment in the sequence. This reluctance should not be surprising, even though the students almost uniformly showed a willingness to work hard and make a difference in the articles they contributed to. The talk pages were the situation where students would be addressing a real audience directly, and the reluctance would seem to indicate that students understood this and were reticent.

There were surprisingly few examples of poor editing, and some of these were of the nature of productive error. For example, a student deleted some very provocative quotes from Sandra Day O’Connor in an article on *Bush v. Gore*, claiming that the quotes violated the “Neutral Point Of View” policy. Although this was clearly a misunderstanding of the policy, since O’Connor’s comments are highly relevant to the history of *Bush v. Gore*, I would consider

this an excellent learning experience, and in its way a valuable contribution. The response to this edit was fascinating, as the discussion of why the student's edit was reverted sparked more deliberation and an occasion to restructure the whole article.

In another case, a student did not engage in the talk page—although another editor invited a discussion after reverting the student's edit, she did not engage, and reported that she “reverted the revert out of bitter justification.” She seemed quite aware that she was bucking the convention, meaning that she at least understood the convention.

Working with Wikipedia helps students learn how to apply standards. People working with a standard are not automatons, and working to build Wikipedia also provides practice in the social process of evolving consensus. In a blog posting discussing Wikipedia's Neutral Point of View policy, the late scholar and Wikipedian Adrienne Wadewitz admits that the heart of WP:NPOV, which ideally results in articles representing the accepted published expert opinion, has its limits. Minority perspectives can be underrepresented in published research, and therefore underrepresented in Wikipedia. Wadewitz sees room for optimism, pointing out that Wikipedia's contributors have already radically changed what it means to be an encyclopedia. She suggests:

There is nothing saying that an encyclopedia cannot decide to take progressive political positions as well, and indeed Wikipedia already has taken a step in that direction. It is up to those of us who edit to redefine the culture of Wikipedia and point out the flaws in its current system. (Wadewitz 2013)

In addition to the practical lessons editing Wikipedia offers, then, it offers an experience in democratic and social participation.

At the time I write this, I expect all readers to have an opinion about Wikipedia. We know our students are using it outside the classroom if not inside. More and more, it is the starting point of both casual and serious research, partly because a simple Web search tends to be an early step we take when answering a question. This starting point is the product of an ongoing conversation of readers and contributors, whether we and our students enter this conversation or not. Whatever we think of the quality of Wikipedia, when we and our students intervene, aside from the lessons to be learned, our efforts can improve on the quality of this omnipresent reference work.

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