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Using Wikipedia to Teach Queer Politics

Introduction and Rationale

Wikipedia, the free, online, open-access encyclopedia, has a contentious relationship with academia. Many professors have admonished students for using the site; however, a majority of students report beginning research projects by searching Wikipedia (Kim and Sin, 2011). Since 2010, the Wikipedia Education Foundation (WEF) has partnered with college and university faculty to engage students in mutually-beneficial Wikipedia-based assignments (see Wikipedia Education Foundation, n.d.). Since then, Wikipedia-based assignments are proliferating across college and university curricula (see Chandler and Gregory, 2010; Garvoille and Buckner, 2009; Kennedy et al., 2015; Nix, 2010; Crovitz and Smoot, 2009; Reilly, 2011; Walker and Li, 2016; Pun, 2017; Kalaf-Hughes and Cravens, 2021). In this article, I explain how scaffolded Wikipedia-based assignments can teach students about queer politics, improve the amount and quality of information available to the general public about queer subjects, and provide students with technological and information literacy skills that will be of value in their future careers.

Studies show Wikipedia-based assignments improve students' technological, research methodology, and critical thinking skills (Chandler and Gregory, 2010; Garvoille and Buckner, 2009). Wikipedia-based assignments are also demonstrated to conditionally reduce the confidence gap in research abilities between male and female students (see Kalaf-Hughes and Cravens, 2021). In exchange, students participating in Wikipedia-based assignments improve the completeness and reliability of Wikipedia entries, making the encyclopedia a more trustworthy source of information and providing a public good to internet users.

The latter benefit, providing a more trustworthy source of information to the general internet public, is especially critical for queer politics. Wikipedia articles about queer people and subjects are relatively underdeveloped compared to other articles. For example, Wexelbaum, Herzog, and Rasberry (2015) note health articles about HIV/AIDS have excluded discussions of how LGBTQ people are specifically affected while queer themes, people, and events, are often missing from articles about art and artists, literature, philosophy, and history among others. Furthermore, the "LGBT Portal," which serves as a clearing house of information on Wikipedia about LGBTQ subjects, lists more than 700 Wikipedia pages classified as "stubs" or articles considered too short to provide "encyclopedic coverage of a subject" (see Wikipedia, 2014). In addition, of the 21734 articles associated with the "LGBT Portal," more than one-third (38%) are "marked for cleanup" or have been flagged as containing various issues that editors need to address (Wikipedia, 2021a).

I, therefore, recommend that queer studies instructors assign students to complete a Wikipedia-based assignment in which students assemble and evaluate reliable information about a self-selected research topic and communicate the information to the general internet public by editing a relevant Wikipedia article. By participating in a Wikipedia-based assignment, students share the content expertise they accumulate from their coursework, thereby improving the amount and quality of generally-accessible information about queer people and subjects on the internet.

However, to be effective, Wikipedia-based assignments must be purposefully structured (see Kalaf-Hughes and Cravens, 2021). Scaffolded Wikipedia-based assignments, grounded in a project-based learning (PBL) approach, allow students to pursue independently developed research questions organized around an instructor-facilitated project. Similar to other active learning approaches, PBL values praxis (Bell, 2010). By engaging in the methods and

mechanisms of knowledge development, rather than passively absorbing information, students will better learn and retain complex information (Bell, 2010). In the following, I describe the development, implementation, and assessment of a Wikipedia-based research and writing project focusing on queer politics.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the project period, students will:

- (1) Assemble scholarly sources of information about a self-selected research topic;
- (2) Evaluate the relationship between the research topic (e.g. person, event, concept, or theory) and queer politics; and,
- (3) Use Wikipedia to communicate information about the research topic to the general internet public.

Explanation

Prior to the beginning of the course, the instructor used the WEF Dashboard to generate an assignment calendar for an upper-division undergraduate course on queer politics and policy. The Dashboard is created and administered by Wikipedia, operates independently from the university learning management system (LMS) (i.e. students use the LMS to access their grades, but use the Dashboard to view assignment details) and serves as the hub for information about the Wikipedia assignment (see Wikipedia Education Foundation, n.d.). The Dashboard can be customized to accommodate variations in course length, include subfield-specific trainings (e.g. editing health and/or psychology topics), and different deliverables (e.g. a reflective essay, in-class presentation, or research paper). In addition to the Dashboard, each class is assigned a WEF consultant to answer student and instructor questions throughout the assignment period. At the beginning of the assignment period, students first register for a Wikipedia account, then enroll in the Wikipedia course Dashboard using the same credentials.

The project period for this assignment is ten weeks and includes eight graded components: completion of trainings (10 total), Wikipedia article selection and review, one peer review, original contribution to Wikipedia (guidelines suggest length of a short literature review), a first and second draft of a 10-page research paper, and a 5-minute presentation. Training modules open each week on the Dashboard and guide students through the details of editing Wikipedia including “How to edit: Wikicode vs Visual Editor,” “Adding Citations,” and “Drafting in the Sandbox” (i.e. a personal digital note page where edits can be drafted before they are posted to an article page). Because Wikipedia has specific guidelines for formatting, structuring, sourcing, linking text within article, and even identifying who posted each edit (see Wikipedia, 2021b), it is vital that students complete the trainings to learn the basic tenants of Wikipedia editing. Instructors, too, should complete the trainings to gain familiarity with the unique process of editing Wikipedia articles. Importantly, research shows engaging with these trainings as part of a Wikipedia-based project can improve student confidence in their own technical and research skills (see Kalaf-Hughes and Cravens, 2021).

Students were encouraged to brainstorm ideas in class and in one-on-one meetings with the instructor for topics to research, but were given until the end of the third week to finalize their choice. Before the deadline, students were required to research and evaluate at least three Wikipedia articles relevant to the subject. Students were encouraged to search Wikiprojects, i.e. pages built by Wikipedians (Wikipedia editors) to share and edit similar content, for LGBT studies, transgender studies and LGBT media (see Wikipedia, 2021c). Article evaluations were

guided by a Wikipedia-generated rubric that asked students to examine the completeness, sourcing, structure, balance, and tone of each article (see Wikipedia, 2021d).

Consistent with PBL (Bell, 2010), students were given the opportunity to research a topic of their choice relevant to queer politics. Student article selection varied widely. Some students chose articles on very specific events such as court cases (e.g. Wikipedia articles titled “Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission” and “Gavin Grimm v. Gloucester County School Board”). However, most students chose articles that represented broader concepts or debates in queer politics (e.g. Wikipedia articles titled “LGBT people in prison,” “Christianity and sexual orientation,” “Anti-LGBT rhetoric,” and “BDSM and the law”). This represents one of the strengths of a Wikipedia-based assignment because, consistent with PBL, students actively determine their research agenda (Bell, 2010).

Once students selected a Wikipedia article, they spent the remainder of the project period drafting and posting article edits. Article edits are intended to constitute a form of literature review for the research paper. In traditional literature reviews, students must evaluate and assimilate existing scholarly work into a cohesive summary of their chosen research topic while also describing what direction future research should take. However, because Wikipedia guidelines prevent editors from sharing “original research,” or material for which “no reliable sources exist” (see Wikipedia, 2021e), information they share on Wikipedia must be directly attributable to a scholarly source. The two processes, i.e. editing Wikipedia and constructing a literature review, differ in that editing Wikipedia will, more often than not, take the form of information summaries rather than detailing the theoretical basis for future work. Editing Wikipedia generally happens one sentence at a time as content is generated, in-text links to other pages are constructed, and citations are added, rather than adding entire pages of content at one time. Throughout this learner-centered process, students collaborate through in-class and online peer mentoring and review. Before submitting their first draft, students conduct a peer review of their Wikipedia contributions. Importantly, the reviews are posted to each student’s user page (i.e. a personalized landing page assigned to every Wikipedia user), which reinforces best practices and technological skills.

Students receive developmental feedback from classmates through peer review, but also feedback from other Wikipedians as they post edits and engage in conversation with the community of editors who monitor each article. “Talk” pages are administrative discussion pages attached to each article page which facilitate conversations about edits to the page. Students are encouraged to post potential edits to an article Talk page to get feedback from other editors and preempt any conflict. This exercise exposes students to online discussion forums; however, these places can be toxic for some LGBTQ people. Namely, heterocentrism and androcentrism can be replicated during the Wikipedia editing process when abusive comments on Talk pages or malicious edits target LGBTQ subjects or editors (see Wexelbaum, 2015; Gauthier & Sawchuk, 2015). If online confrontations occur, it is recommended that students inform the instructor and the instructor contact the WEF consultant to safely resolve the issue. Generally, however, students report there are relatively few users following their articles and confrontation is limited, as evidenced by the number of underdeveloped articles focusing on queer content.

The instructor provided students with feedback on their first draft, then students were required to post their literature review to Wikipedia in the form of article edits. Notably, a scaffolded Wikipedia-based assignment produces the most significant differences in learning outcomes for students (see Kalaf-Hughes and Cravens, 2021). Rather than working online independently throughout the assignment period, interspersed with online trainings and

assignments, the instructor guided students through discussions and conducted in-class activities that reinforced lessons from the Wikipedia trainings. For example, to complement the article evaluation assignment, an in-class activity was conducted. Students were randomly provided one of four mock Wikipedia articles at various stages of completion and a rubric that scored articles based on their completeness, sourcing, structure, balance, and tone (see Wikipedia, 2021d). Students were given time in class to read their assigned article and score it according to the rubric. During the ensuing discussion, students shared how they scored each article and their rationale. A similar rubric was used to grade students' final contributions.

The assignment period ended with the submission of a final draft of the research paper and a short, five-minute, pre-recorded presentation to the class that described the topic and reflected on the project. Consistent with PBL objectives, Wikipedia-based assignments encourage students to engage in knowledge development as they share their research with a global audience. While the final deliverables for this assignment included a research paper and a short presentation, the assignment can be adapted to the learning objectives and content specificity of almost any scientific discipline (Chandler and Gregory, 2010; Garvoille and Buckner, 2009; Kennedy et al., 2015; Nix, 2010; Crovitz and Smoot, 2009; Reilly, 2011; Walker and Li, 2016; Pun, 2017; Kalaf-Hughes and Cravens, 2021).

Debriefing & Discussion

Wikipedia-based assignments offer instructors flexibility because they can be adapted for either in-person or virtual instruction (both asynchronous and synchronous). Despite the flexibility, Wikipedia-based assignments have some idiosyncrasies instructors should be prepared to confront. First, the Dashboard is a necessary component of the assignment, but students often report difficulty managing course content across two platforms (i.e. the LMS and the Dashboard). Just because technology is ubiquitous in college classrooms, instructors should not assume students immediately know how to use a new learning tool. Instructors should demonstrate in class how to access and navigate the Dashboard (or provide a video tutorial) and design detailed assignment pages within the LMS that use hyperlinks to the Dashboard to reinforce students' use of the site. Similarly, instructors should take time to familiarize themselves with the Dashboard as well as the basics of Wikipedia editing by completing the same training modules as students. While WEF provides consultants, many student questions arise from their unfamiliarity with Wikipedia and/or the Dashboard, and the instructor can quickly resolve most issues if they are familiar with both sites.

Second, WEF provides suggested discussion topics that instructors should utilize when scaffolding the project. Because students are likely unfamiliar with the subject matter as well as the technology, each component of the project should reinforce the lessons learned during previous weeks. In addition to assigning weekly online training modules, instructors should be prepared to lead class discussions or online forums that address issues such as identifying a content gap, proper sourcing and style, using the Sandbox and Talk page of a Wikipedia article, what to do if your edits get "reversed," etc. This scaffolding is necessary to build student efficacy, reinforce lessons from the training modules, and ultimately ensure that students complete the project (see Kalaf-Hughes and Cravens, 2021).

Thirdly, instructors should set reasonable expectations for how much material students will ultimately contribute to Wikipedia. This project was designed to last ten weeks, with about two-thirds of the project period set aside for writing and review because the primary deliverable was a ten-page research paper. Shorter project periods may produce fewer edits. Furthermore,

students should be made aware that their literature review will likely not be copy-and-pasted directly into a Wikipedia article. Instead, depending upon the completeness of the article, the students' edits may involve adding fewer, but more detailed, sentences that address specific content gaps in the article (i.e. clarifying the article lead or points within article subsections as opposed to adding entirely new sections to the article). In these cases, the students may not use all of their literature review to edit their assigned Wikipedia article, but they must be deliberate in selecting the most important and relevant information to improve the article. Finally, because Wikipedia is open-access and editable by any user, students' contributions may be rewritten, changed, or even reversed (i.e. removed) by other Wikipedians throughout the project period. Students should be encouraged to draft article edits in cooperation with other users by frequently posting on article Talk pages and building community with Wikipedians to ensure their edits fully address the deficiencies of their specific article.

Assessment

The progression from 1) initial Wikipedia article evaluations to final contributions and 2) from the initial to final draft of the research paper demonstrate students' improved information literacy and understanding of queer political subjects. First, the broad array of topics suggests students gained a nuanced understanding of queer politics. Beyond political institutions or public policies, for example, students evaluated popular culture and music, social psychological concepts, and legal theories for connections to queer politics. Critical examinations of digital sexual and gender expression, masculinity in music, and the intersections of race, religion, and sexuality demonstrate students' queering of traditional political research. Anecdotally, students use of language related to queer people noticeably improved as students articulated distinctions between sexual and gender minority experiences and defined intersectional social and political cleavages.

The research students produced also demonstrated their information literacy. For example, students were consistently able to locate scholarly sources beyond material provided by the instructor. Students synthesized the material into cogent literature reviews spanning a variety of topics. Students also produced public scholarship by adding information to more than one dozen Wikipedia articles. The edited articles accumulated more than 340,000 pageviews on Wikipedia by the end of the project period, thus accomplishing the primary goal of the project: to improve the amount and quality of generally accessible information about queer people and subjects on the internet.

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