

Can Anyone Edit?

Digital Capital and Student Writing on Wikipedia

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Abstract

Using Ragnedda's (2018) idea of digital capital, the essay discusses the ways in which Wikipedia-based research projects can help students build their own digital capital as well as bring the university's capital to bear on the part of an underrepresented community. In this assignment, students work with community members to research and write updates to the Camden, New Jersey, Wikipedia article and associated articles. Far from being "the encyclopedia anyone can edit," the challenges of writing for Wikipedia lead to rich conversations about power and representation on the largest encyclopedia ever created.

The course and assignment

This writing assignment is a response to my institution's focus on civic engagement and experiential learning. Rutgers University—Camden is located in Camden, New Jersey and has a total student population of about 6,000, 92% of whom are New Jersey natives (Rutgers University, n.d.). It is a designated minority-serving institution (Leong, 2022), and it carries a Community Engagement Classification from the Carnegie Foundation, denoting it as an institution that collaborates with its community "for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d.). The campus's most recent general education criteria, which were instituted in 2017, require students to take at least one course designated as "Engaged Civic Learning" or "Experiential Learning" in order to graduate. To incentivize the creation of courses fulfilling this requirement, the campus's Office of Civic Engagement created a fellows program, providing training for faculty in best practices in teaching civically-engaged courses. The Office of Civic Engagement also serves as a facilitator, connecting faculty to community stakeholders their courses can serve.

The course I proposed, titled Writing Wikipedia, is an upper-division course centered on our institution's home city of Camden and its representation to the world on Wikipedia. Writing Wikipedia has been taught twice, most recently in Spring 2019. The assignment sheet accompanying this essay is drawn from that iteration of the course. In addition to being designated as a Civic Engagement course, Writing Wikipedia meets our general education requirement for a writing intensive course, so the course draws in a diverse population of students looking to meet multiple general education requirements with one course. The first half of the semester juxtaposes two conversations that are eventually intertwined in the performance of the final assignment. Our first conversation is about the history and culture of Camden, primarily explored through reading the history text *Camden After the Fall* (Gillette, 2006). Our second conversation begins with an exploration of the "digital divide," the scholarly conversation examining individuals' differing levels of access to and ability to use digital technologies (van Dijk, 2005) and moves toward a critical examination of Wikipedia, its claims about itself, and issues of representation on it. Students also undertake training, facilitated by the WikiEdu Foundation, in the practicalities of editing Wikipedia and the demands of selecting and evaluating sources.

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The character of the course fundamentally shifts with the introduction of the Wikipedia editing assignment accompanying this essay. This shift is signaled by a meeting with local community activists and stakeholders who have examined Camden’s Wikipedia presence and attend the meeting prepared to identify deficits for the students in the course. After this meeting, students must submit proposals, detailing the projects they would like to undertake: they can propose many small changes or a larger undertaking, such as a whole new page on a notable figure who is unrepresented. Students are encouraged to collaborate and, after reading their proposals, I make connections among those who are interested in similar topics; while the assignment is never a true “group project,” I stress the virtues of collaboration and mutual aid in our classroom conversations and as students are proposing their projects. Students can also choose to devote a small part of their projects to media creation or page maintenance by doing things like taking photographs or cleaning up broken hyperlinks. After a first round of library research and in-class workshops, students review and comment on one another’s work in a round of peer review. The second time the course was taught we made a connection with the Camden County Historical Society, who invited us to work in their archives for a day, a rewarding experience that gave students much-needed material for their final projects. After a second round of peer review, students are tasked with moving their final submissions to Wikipedia mainspace, though it is made clear to them that they will not lose credit if their edits are “reverted” or changed in some way by other editors or one of Wikipedia’s many bots. Students’ contributions are counted in characters, rather than words, in keeping with Wikipedia’s own tracking practices.

There is a rich literature on the efficacy of teaching with Wikipedia in writing classrooms. Multiple authors (Cummings, 2009; Kuhne & Creel, 2012) note that working on Wikipedia solves one of the toughest problems in the assignment design literature: getting students to think about audience, with Cummings singling out Wikipedia’s “authenticity” as compared to typical school genres (p. 5). Though the professor can never truly be removed from students’ audience considerations given institutional pressures regarding grading, the assignment teaches students to be savvy in navigating multiple audiences at once: the Wikipedia editors who police the pages for perceived infractions, the readers who come to the page for basic information, and even Wikipedia’s many bots charged with keeping the site in order. To this complex rhetorical situation, my assignment adds yet another audience: the community on whose behalf students are writing. Teaching with Wikipedia also provides an opportunity to answer bell hooks’ (1994) famous call to cede some classroom authority, since both the stylistic and research requirements for the assignment are set by an outside entity; even the professor must accede to these standards if students’ work is going to be accepted by Wikipedia.

The rhetorical situation Wikipedia provides has a demonstrable effect on student learning, as a pair of recent studies demonstrates. Vetter and Moroz (2019) report that students responded to the structure that Wikipedia provided for the course and helped in the development of transferable skills, while noting some initial resistance from students to working on Wikipedia, similar to Cummings’ findings ten years earlier, discussed below. Vetter et al. (2019) found that a majority of both students and instructors rated the use of Wikipedia as the same or more helpful in developing critical thinking and research skills when compared to “traditional” writing assignments (60). Their study concludes with five recommended best practices arising from their own research and the wider literature of teaching with Wikipedia: extended and substantial Wikipedia assignments, explicit library database training, critiquing existing Wikipedia articles, group work, and attention to diversification issues and content gaps (p. 62-3).

My civically-focused Wikipedia assignment has some illuminating precedents in the literature of assignment design. Goss (2021) takes a global approach, asking students to edit Wikipedia

articles related to the United Nations' Sustainable Development goals before remediating their research to an academic journal article. The goals of the assignment presented by Vetter (2018) are even more similar to those I present here. His work also focuses on a location and culture facing wide stigma—Appalachia—and uses Wikipedia as a means of educating students on the representation of communities and cultures. Drawing on Graham's (2011) discussion of the inequities engendered in Wikipedia's geographic biases, Vetter's Wikipedia project focuses on student media literacy and the politics of representation on the largest encyclopedia ever created. However, while my assignment addresses media literacy as a secondary goal, its primary target is another deficit. Asking students to draw their project from community input offers the opportunity to use the established virtues of teaching with Wikipedia while also addressing an aspect of civic engagement identified by Helsper (2021): the development of digital capital.

Digital capital

Ragnedda (2018) places digital capital alongside the more established “5Cs”—social, economic, personal, political, and cultural capitals—as a means of expanding the concept of the digital divide: “Digital capital is the accumulation of digital competencies (information, communication, safety, content-creation and problem-solving), and digital technology” (p. 2367). Positioning the difficulty of community self-representation on Wikipedia as the result of low capital—as opposed to a mere “divide”—gives particular insight into both the problems of representation Vetter (2018) addresses and their potential solutions. Communities that are underrepresented in digital spaces are often also low in the traditional 5Cs (see Brake, 2014; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008), and therefore they cannot invest their digital capital effectively into their representation on Wikipedia. In shifting the conversation from the digital divide to digital capital, Hargittai and Walejko's concept of “participation” is recast in a more urgent light: the means of digital production, on Wikipedia, amount to the opportunity to represent oneself and one's community to the world. Wikipedia, then, is a site where digital capital yields dividends of cultural and social capital.

Wikipedia's “talk pages”—spaces where Wikipedia editors discuss the state of the page—serve as both examples of the power of self-representation on Wikipedia and as launching points for student projects. A striking example of this dynamic can be seen in a comment posted to the Camden Wikipedia talk page (“Talk,” 2022) before my class began our work for the first time. In this comment, an editor responded to concerns that the Camden page's tone was too negative by saying they lived in a nearby community and that the bleak assessment of Camden was accurate. Several other editors concurred. My students, who had just spent several weeks steeped in Camden's history, found the comments misleading and distasteful: the Camden article and the commenters were all silent on the fact that the community in which the original commenter lives sends its garbage and sewage to Camden, creating significant environmental and health issues which Camden residents must face. In response, my students corrected this deficit by creating a new “Environment” section on Camden's page. The surrounding communities, where Camden's capital fled in the mid-20th century, could no longer both send their garbage to Camden and decide who says what about the city saddled with their trash. Graham et al. (2019) examines geographical self-representation on a global scale and note that the Global North sets the digital conversation for much of the world, an essential function of its store of digital capital. This exchange by local Wikipedia editors and the response by student editors highlight the vastly uneven distribution of digital capital—and, therefore, self-representation—within the Global North itself.

One of the major barriers faced by communities like Camden is access to sources of quality digital information. While the Camden community has significant physical access to computers

and broadband (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.), potential Wikipedia editors still face a significant digital capital barrier: access to sources of information that Wikipedia will accept as a basis for additions. Wikipedia bills itself as a tertiary source and demands high-quality, reliable secondary sources, such as newspapers and academic journals, for additions to its articles (“Wikipedia,” n.d.). However, journals and newspapers remain largely paywalled, with peer-reviewed materials still primarily the province of large university libraries like ours. The assignment is then a way of bringing the university’s store of digital capital to bear on the part of the community.

Opportunities and challenges

Teaching this assignment is among the most meaningful pedagogical experiences of my career. In two semesters, students in the course have transformed Camden’s Wikipedia presence. Both initial versions of the “Environment” and “Culture” sections of the page were researched and written by Rutgers–Camden students. Students have also written two entirely new articles, one about a significant player in Camden’s civil rights history (“Ulysses Simpson Wiggins,” 2021) and another about an important firm in Camden’s economic history (“Camden Forge Company,” 2022), the latter of which won an award given by other Wikipedia editors for outstanding work on the site.

Though the assignment is rewarding, its challenges are significant. In his case studies, Cummings (2009) notes aspects of hesitancy among his participants, and this hesitancy was present in my own classes. Hesitancy among my students tended to take two forms: intimidation at the work required to do the research and frustration with the mechanics of editing Wikipedia. I learned quickly that this assignment requires frequent in-class workshops and the transformation of the classroom into an active working space for much of our meeting time. One of the most significant changes I made between the two versions of the course was a change of venue: the second time I taught the course, every meeting was held in a classroom where all students had access to their own computer. This change allowed students to work more collaboratively and gave me the ability to more easily assist with technical challenges as they arose. Working together in the same room also fostered a classroom community where everyone was bound together by the work: most students tended to wait until a workshop day in order to make their first live edit to Wikipedia’s mainspace, and students’ first contributions were always cause for celebration among the group.

The difficulties mentioned above are, however, also a learning opportunity that underscores our conversations about capital and power: in making their own contributions, students are led to a critical examination of how knowledge gets presented—and who gets to present it—on one of the biggest stages in the world, Wikipedia itself. The struggle to finish the assignment becomes part of the intellectual texture of the course. In class meetings, the question is constant: “How could most people do this work without the support you are receiving?” The amount of training that must be undertaken during the first half of the semester in order for students to complete the assignment only underscores the significant barriers to entry that are detailed above: even bright, dedicated college students, many of the age to be supposed “digital natives,” struggle to overcome the technical challenges and stylistic requirements of Wikipedia. This critical stance leads to the general media literacy Vetter (2018) is targeting: students see, as they work on their projects, there is always a person and perspective behind every piece of media, despite Wikipedia’s aspirations to neutrality.

In addition to the challenges of getting students to write for Wikipedia in the first place, the class must engage the community in a meaningful way. At our institution, we have the great fortune to be represented by a civic engagement office that cultivates ties to community organizations and works to connect us with partners we can assist. However, even given that

support, finding community partners who have the time to examine the Wikipedia page and offer guidance for our students is difficult. Community organizations are more accustomed to welcoming volunteers or facilitating student workers than with conducting critical analyses of Wikipedia articles. I had to be mindful that, in some sense, we were asking the community to do some work for us so we could do work for them. A particular breakthrough came when, during the second version of the course, a partnership with the Camden County Historical Society was formed and students were able to spend a day in the archives, gathering materials and learning directly from local historians. I encourage any instructor interested in teaching this assignment to seek out a similar partnership. Students gained practical research experience while giving the archives' materials wider currency.

Our offering to the community—though a valuable service—was somewhat abstract and required us to find folks who would be willing to sift the page and provide their perspectives on the gaps. We were fortunate during both iterations of the course to find just those people, but it required many preparatory conversations between me and our community partners before they met with our class, which points to yet another challenge: teaching this assignment is time-consuming and demanding on the instructor. I have found it a rich and rewarding experience both times I have taught it, but its demands are such that I cannot make it a part of my regular course rotation and must plan far in advance for its many moving parts. If someone is interested in the assignment, but engaging community partners is prohibitive, the Vetter (2018) article discussed above is an excellent guide for doing similar work without directly involving the community under discussion. Though the community is not providing direct guidance in that case, students are still putting the university's digital capital to work on projects that can benefit the community's Wikipedia representation.

An examination of the assignment's challenges would also be incomplete without an acknowledgment of my own store of digital capital: my appointment at the university is specifically focused on digital material. I was hired to create and direct a multiliteracy center, and all my courses are digitally-focused in some way. Though I had never attempted to edit Wikipedia on my own before teaching this course, I must acknowledge that, as someone who has been using digital technology from a young age and now does it professionally, I started planning the course and assignment with a confidence in my facility with digital writing generally and working on the web specifically that many instructors do not share. Nonetheless, those interested in the assignment have resources. The WikiEdu Foundation is extremely helpful in overcoming potential technical challenges. They provide support for initial assignment design, training materials, and, most crucially, a means of tracking student progress on their projects in a central location, something that makes my grading and assessment of students' projects possible. Even with my own technical facility, the course would be significantly more difficult without their logistical support. Konieczny (2012) also has an excellent step-by-step planning sequence for faculty looking to teach with Wikipedia, including advice on how to use Wikipedia's features to find articles in need of work or expansion, an extremely useful set of tools in order to guide students toward research topics.

Future Directions

As I reflect on the assignment in this essay and prepare to propose teaching the course again in the next academic year, there are changes I would consider making. In the years since I last taught it, I have moved my courses toward a standards-based “ungrading” model, and I think this assignment would benefit from the student reflection that framework encourages. Given that students can supplement their primary research projects in a variety of ways—the creation of new pages, page maintenance, media creation—assigning points for this assignment

can feel even more abstract and arbitrary than usual. Foregrounding student reflection and self-assessment as a basis for grading is an excellent fit for an assignment focused on community and collaboration.

Another smaller change I would like to build into the assignment's standards is a requirement that students employ a wider range of sources: many students often found a single useful source, which they used repeatedly as the basis for the bulk of their edits. The course text I assigned, *Camden After the Fall*, is cited 26 separate times as of February 2023 ("Camden, New Jersey," 2023), a number far higher than any other single source on the page. Students would benefit from finding and using a wider variety of sources, and it would be a benefit to the page as well.

I would also consider making the project more explicitly collaborative. Vetter et al. (2019) establish collaboration as a best practice, and I would like to cluster students around shared interests in order to have them undertake bigger projects, which will be necessary given the challenge created by the course's success: there are fewer obvious deficits on the Camden Wikipedia page than there were when I first taught the course in 2016. Students in my courses made significant additions that other Wikipedians have since expanded on, and in order for students to find places to contribute, the projects will have to be larger undertakings best tackled by groups rather than individuals.

Whether one accepts Wikipedia's utopian claims about itself, it is among the easiest means of learning many basic facts about the world, and it is the first place billions of people go for such knowledge. Given the uneven distribution of the digital capital required to represent one's community on Wikipedia, teaching community-based assignments using Wikipedia creates rich opportunities to extend an institution's digital capital to the community and promote student learning.

ASSIGNMENT

Community Wikipedia Project: Writing Wikipedia

For the second half of the semester, we'll be focusing on taking both what we've learned about Camden and what we've learned about editing Wikipedia and putting them into practice by actually editing Camden's page or creating other, related pages. Starting by working in sandboxes, we'll transform Camden's Wikipedia page bit by bit.

Milestones

Community Partner Meeting

Our primary community partner meeting will be held during week 1 of the project. Come to class ready to take notes on our partners' observations of the Wikipedia page and with questions to ask that might elicit potential avenues for research.

Proposals

After extensive conversations about both Wikipedia and the city of Camden, it's time to narrow down what you want to work on. This assignment is a concise proposal to work on an aspect of Camden's wiki page or to start a new page.

50 points, due week 2

Weekly Writing

Each week for the first portion of the project, you'll be asked to produce 1000 characters of writing in your sandbox. Note that this is not necessarily 1000 characters of *new writing*. Substantive

revisions will also count. Note that all of this writing must include proper citations as defined by Wikipedia's guidelines.

5 points each, due Week 3, Week 4

First Peer Review

The first formal chance for you and your peers to discuss one another's work and help one another improve. Note that the focus of this peer review is *on the quality of the comments you produce*. Note that all written comments and feedback will be given via the correct Talk page. You will receive a separate handout for this assignment.

Draft: 10 points, due Week 5 (class meeting 1)

Comments: 20 points, due Week 5 (class meeting 2)

Second Peer Review

Similar to the above review, this is a chance to discuss our edits as a class. Note that the focus has flipped: we are focusing on the quality of our work above the quality of our comments. There will, again, be another handout for this portion of the assignment.

Draft: 20 points, due Week 7 (class meeting 1)

Comments: 10 points, due Week 7 (class meeting 2)

"Final" Draft

I put final in quotes here because, of course, on Wikipedia nothing is ever really final. This is a polished product that integrates seamlessly with the rest of the Wikipedia page. A separate handout will be given with details.

Due Week 9 (during finals week)

Article Proposal: Writing Wikipedia

After extensive conversations about both Wikipedia and the city of Camden, it's time to narrow down what you want to work on. This assignment is a concise proposal to work on an aspect of Camden's wiki page or to start a new page.

Requirements

First, give an overview of what you want to work on and why you want to work on it. What general topic do you have in mind? What time period or subject in Camden's history? This overview should be 2-3 substantial paragraphs about the kinds of additions you hope to make.

Next, talk about the specific ways you hope to implement your changes: are you proposing an entirely new page or are you hoping to add to the main wiki page? What kinds of media do you want to add or statistics do you want to include? Note that this section is the one that will most benefit from conversations with your peers. And remember: be specific.

Finally, talk about research pathways. What kinds of sources do you hope to draw from? What kind of research do you need to do in order to make your proposal successful?

Advice

Collaborate. Writing for Wikipedia is tough, as we've seen. So talk about ways that you can form a community of editors in this class in order to best support the work you're going to be doing. Look for ways to share sources and help one another get the work done.

Also, carefully consider what you say in this proposal: though there is some wiggle room to allow for the discovery inherent in the research process, note that, largely, you are committing to

whatever topic you propose here. So think carefully and make sure your topic is both something that interests you and will benefit the project as a whole.

Peer Review 1

For this first peer review, I'm going to focus on the quality of your comments to one another. Though I will look at your work and give you feedback on your talk page, what I really want to do is encourage you to be critical readers of one another's work.

Requirements

Week 5 (class meeting 1) - 4,500 polished characters in your sandbox

Week 5 (class meeting 2) - A substantial response to your two assigned peers

For your submission, try to bring whatever work you've done as close to "mainspace ready" as you can: I'll be looking for the number and quality of citations as well as how closely you adhere to the style guide requirements we've discussed.

For your comments, revisit the trainings we've done: use the language of Wikipedia editors to give feedback. Talk about issues of neutrality and whether or not the article adheres to the criteria of noteworthiness established by Wikipedia. Look at other talk pages on Wikipedia. What kinds of things are discussed there? Note that these comments should be delivered via the talk page.

Final Submissions: Writing Wikipedia

For your final submission for this semester, you're going to have options: a baseline amount of words that you can reduce by engaging in other activities on Wikipedia.

Requirements

Baseline: 8,000 characters in Mainspace

Note that these contributions will be assessed according to how well they conform to Wikipedia's guidelines. So consider very carefully the following dimensions:

- **Style:** Does your contribution conform to Wikipedia's writing style and requirements for neutrality?
- **Noteworthiness:** This is something we're discussing a lot in class, but be sure all of your work has at least some degree of noteworthiness as defined by Wikipedia.
- **Citations:** Do you have sufficient numbers of reliable citations? Are you summarizing those sources in your own words or merely copying and pasting? Note that Wikipedia has rules against plagiarism, and all of the university guidelines about plagiarism apply even when writing on Wikipedia.
- **Organization:** Are your submissions logically organized? Do they fit within the scheme of the Wikipedia page as it currently stands?

Word Reduction Options

Media: You can reduce the number of words you need to contribute to mainspace by finding and adding media to the page. The following are the values for each kind of media:

- **Original Media:** if you create something yourself—a photo, an illustration, etc.—this is worth a reduction of **1000 characters**.
- **Media from elsewhere:** if you pull media from elsewhere on the web—a logo, a photo, etc.—this is worth a reduction of **500 characters**. Note that this media is

subject to restrictions and must be labeled in a particular way. Please discuss this with me if you're interested.

- **Media from elsewhere on Wikipedia:** if you find media that's already on Wikipedia that would work on the Camden page, this is worth **250 characters**.

Maintenance: There is a variety of maintenance that could be performed on a Wikipedia page: reorganizations, link-checking and other activities. Feel free to propose something to me and word reductions will be assigned on an ad hoc basis.

At a minimum, no matter how many other activities you perform, you must contribute 7,000 polished characters to Wikipedia mainspace.

Please send me an email during Week 9 showing how you're accounting for your work. As an example:

7000 characters in mainspace

1000 characters, two original pictures

9000 characters total.

Advice

You've already done much of the work for this submission. The trick now is just to put it all together into something that's presentable to the public. As always, remember that this isn't a paper for a class: this is Camden's public face to the world. You are, literally, writing for an audience of millions. Don't let this intimidate you: use it as motivation to say what needs to be said about Camden.

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit <https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v7i2.144>.

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