Murray State's Digital Commons

2022

Wikipedia as an Experiential Learning Activity in Media Courses

Melony Shemberger
mshemberger@murraystate.edu

Recommended Citation

Wikipedia as an Experiential Learning Activity in Media Courses

Melony Shemberger, Ed.D.
Murray State University

Abstract

Many internet users often consult Wikipedia to read a quick reference on a subject, but the source tends to be viewed as unreliable by the academic community. Nevertheless, journalism and public relations courses can help improve Wikipedia. Four undergraduate courses — News Editing, In-depth Reporting, Sports Media, and Research Methods in Public Relations — in a journalism and mass communications department at a regional, four-year university in the southeast of the United States incorporated Wikipedia. This article discusses the benefits, considerations, and challenges that an instructor might experience when using Wikipedia.

Introduction

Wikipedia, the crowd-sourced site used by many as a quick go-to source, historically is disregarded by the academic community as unreliable. However, the inclusion of Wikipedia in academic practices has grown in recent years (Meseguer Artola *et al.*, 2015). Journalism and public relations courses especially can help improve Wikipedia. Through the Wikipedia Education Program (wikiedu.org), designed by the Wikimedia Foundation to support instructors who use it as a teaching tool in their classrooms, students edit Wikipedia articles to enhance the credibility and accuracy of the material in Wikipedia. Plus, some students might write articles and submit them for peer review and possible publication in Wikipedia.

This essay offers guidance to instructors on incorporating Wikipedia as an experiential learning activity in journalism and mass communication courses. Four different upper-level, undergraduate courses in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communications at a regional, four-year university in the southeast of the United States participated in the Wikipedia Education Program starting in 2019. News Editing was the first course to participate, and it continued to do so over the next few semesters. A Wikipedia module created for News Editing was later modified for three other courses: In-depth Reporting, Sports Media, and Research Methods in Public Relations. Both the News Editing and In-depth Reporting courses are required in the department's journalism major and minor. The Sports Media course is an elective for majors in the department but required in the sports communication minor offered by the Department of Organizational Communication and Leadership. The Research Methods in Public Relations course is required in the public relations major.

Engaging with Wikipedia can lead to positive student outcomes, enhancing experiential learning through various pedagogical approaches. By analyzing Wikipedia articles and their reference sections, as well as contributing to them, students can observe that not all references are equal. Miller (2014), in a

Keywords: Experiential Learning, Wikipedia, Editing, Reporting, Sports, Research Methods

study of a group of students, found a measurable improvement in their research skills. Similarly, Freire and Li (2014) compared students who submitted a traditional writing assignment versus those carrying out a wiki one; in the case of the latter, they noticed significant improvements in students' ability to find and include references, as well as in their writing quality in general.

In addition, using Wikipedia for student engagement in the classroom is an example of service learning, which is part of the experiential learning paradigm. The service learning approach is community work that is structured and has academic attainment as its primary goal (Hollis, 2002). Since both academic and nonacademic environments use Wikipedia, its content is based on established sources — not original research — and the writing must be neutral and free of bias. By contributing to Wikipedia, students enhance the accuracy of Wikipedia content and can see their work being used, engaged with, and improved by others. Moreover, students find that they have the power to make a positive impact on a global and digital world.

Considerations for Instructors in Using Wikipedia in Courses

Integrating Wikipedia editing and writing into journalism and mass communication courses, where appropriate, can be a viable option for instructors — and enhance learning outcomes for students. Despite the positive results that students stand to gain from using Wikipedia in their coursework, instructors must (1) invest time in designing lessons that support learning objectives, (2) become knowledgeable and skilled with the inner workings of Wikipedia, and (3) monitor student engagement, all primary aspects for successful integration of Wikipedia into instruction.

First, instructors must align Wikipedia lessons with course learning objectives. Just as critical, the alignment must be clear to students. Otherwise, a student could perceive the work as meaningless or as "busy work." In the News Editing course, for instance, Wikipedia lessons and assignments supported one or more of the six course learning objectives, which were communicated to students in the assignments and activities:

1. Demonstrate mastery of grammar, punctuation, spelling and sentence syntax.
2. Verify sources of information.
3. Edit for accuracy.
4. Edit copy for the online platform.
5. Edit copy according to legal and ethical issues.
6. Demonstrate proficient application of rules in *The Associated Press Stylebook*.

Learning activities and assignments in the four courses that used Wikipedia included four main components: (1) class participation, (2) discussion board assignments that offered opportunities for reflection in the editing and writing process, (3) Wikipedia article development, and (4) presentation of their experience at the university's scholarly celebration. An instructor who chooses to incorporate Wikipedia in their coursework also will need to determine an assessment structure. Rubrics are encouraged to assess the editing, writing, and discussion assignments. Peer reviews also could be considered, particularly if students are assigned to write a Wikipedia article.

Second, an instructor must complete a tutorial required by the Wikipedia Education Program. This is critical because the instructor must be able to assist students if they experience difficulties when working on Wikipedia assignments. Further, instructors could weave the tutorials into the learning activities or low-stakes assignments to help students gain confidence in using Wikipedia.

Third, monitoring the analytics of student engagement with Wikipedia is helpful for the instructor. Students' Wikipedia accounts are created in a course page so that the instructor can monitor the activities of each student's contributions. Plus, tracking analytics of students' work will provide the total number of edits, number of articles, number of references, and other data points that all students in a course contribute. Further, the instructor can compare versions of a Wikipedia article between one that the student edits and an earlier version, since others in the public also are able to edit the articles.

Results and Challenges

In Spring 2019, 12 News Editing students made 321 total edits to 116 articles and added 81 references. Five students had articles published on Wikipedia, and students added seven photos to articles. Having an article accepted for publication in Wikipedia is not easy; however, students can include their Wikipedia editing history as part of their portfolio, qualifying this activity as an experiential learning artifact.

Given the contributions that the students in News Editing made to Wikipedia, the module con-

taining the Wikipedia lessons and assignments were modified for the three other journalism and mass communications courses identified earlier in this article. Since the News Editing course, the three other courses over the next several semesters starting in Fall 2019 made a combined 1,641 edits to 423 articles and added 735 references. In addition, students in one of the Sports Media courses created two articles and uploaded one photo to an article.

Despite the student acceptance of using Wikipedia in the classroom, instructors will face a few challenges. First, instructors who are not familiar with the nuances of Wikipedia should spend significant time progressing through the tutorials and training guides before implementing this instruction. An instructor also is encouraged to edit Wikipedia articles, perhaps even writing one, to experience what a student might encounter. Wikipedia's platform is more technical, making it cumbersome for new users.

Second, instructors should be prepared to handle issues, including student plagiarism and professional behavior. The Wikipedia Education Program staff and others associated with the program often monitor the contributions that students make and will alert both the instructor and the student if problems are severe. The instructor might want to have a plan in place to address these situations. Such a plan also should be communicated to students in the lesson.

Finally, while the Wikipedia lessons yielded successes in the four journalism and mass communication courses discussed in this article, researchers could study learning environments or assignments that might not benefit students and their use of Wikipedia (Konieczny, 2016). Educators who find Wikipedia helpful are more likely to publish reports of their successes than those who find it unhelpful and do not report their failed attempts. Learning more about what does not work is helpful in refining this teaching tool (Konieczny, 2016). Therefore, this article encourages a more critical discussion of the topic in subsequent studies.

Conclusion

Integrating Wikipedia into a course involves intentional instructional design. An instructor must become well versed in using and navigating Wikipedia before making it a part of the course. Tracking student activity in the Wikipedia course page can offer rich data to help guide the instructor on student performance. Having a plan to handle problems, such as plagiarism, should be created and shared with the student.

While Wikipedia should never be the only source consulted, the articles must be as accurate as possible. Journalism and media students are among the best to assist audiences, all the while enhancing their own writing and editing skills through guided instruction. Wikipedia can be the journalism instructor's tool to highlight the need for accuracy in language, punctuation, content and other written elements. Because the focus is on writing for the reader, Wikipedia assignments reflect service learning. Further, Wikipedia assignments are experiential learning opportunities, providing students with tangible learning outcomes that can be showcased in their portfolios. Just as important, students who improve the accuracy of Wikipedia articles make a positive impact, helping them to see their future as professional journalists and communicators.

References

Freire, T., & Li, J. (2016). Using Wikipedia to enhance student learning: A case study in economics. *Education and Information Technologies*, *21*(5), 1169-1181.

Hollis, S.A. (2002). Capturing experience: Transforming community service into service learning. *Teaching Sociology, 30*, 200-213.

Konieczny, P. (2016). Teaching with Wikipedia in a 21st-century classroom: Perceptions of Wikipedia and its educational benefits. *Journal of the Association for Information Science & Technology*, *67*(7), 1523–1534. https://doi-org.ezproxy.waterfield.murraystate.edu/10.1002/asi.23616

Meseguer Artola, A., Aibar Puentes, E., Lladós Masllorens, J., Minguillón Alfonso, J., & Lerga Felip, M. (2015). Factors that influence the teaching use of Wikipedia in higher education. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology, 67*(5), 1224-1232. doi:10.1002/asi.23488

Miller, J. (2014). Building academic literacy and research skills by contributing to Wikipedia: A case study at an Australian university. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning, 8*(2), 72-86.

Wikipedia Education Program (nd). https://wikiedu.org/

Dr. Melony Shemberger is associate professor of mass communication and undergraduate assessment coordinator in her department at Murray State University in Murray, KY. Her primary research interests include journalism history and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Before entering academia, Shemberger had successful, award-winning careers as an education and business journalist and later in university public relations. mshemberger@murraystate.edu