

Application for an OFD Innovation in Teaching Award, AY 09-10

Writing for Wikipedia: Integrating Production and Dissemination of Knowledge in the Undergraduate and Graduate Curriculum

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Description

Graduate students enrolled in POR 640/740, a seminar on Lusophone African literatures and cultures, in Fall 09 and undergraduate students taking POR 335, an introductory survey of the same subject area, in Spring 10, were required to contribute to Wikipedia content related to authors and works studied in the courses. In both cases, it was a formal, graded assignment worth from 25 to 30% of the final grade. The idea for this project arose from a discussion that took place in early 2009 on an email discussion list for scholars of Lusophone Africa, in which poor quality of Wikipedia articles in this area was denounced and a call for prospective contributors and for integrating such projects into course syllabi was issued. I first chose to respond to this call in the context of a graduate course, but following successful implementation of the assignment in POR 640/740, I decided to redesign it also for an undergraduate-level class I was scheduled to teach the following semester.

In both courses, I created a dedicated wiki (in Wikispaces) for this project, as a “safe” and protected environment in which students would develop the articles to be transferred to Wikipedia toward the end of the semester. I also supplied suggested article templates based on a survey of a number of comparable high-quality Wikipedia pages. Each student had his/her own page on which to draft the entry (in both English and Portuguese) on the author or work of his/her choice. At various points throughout the semester, peer review and assessment of the articles-in-progress was actively solicited. Students were also encouraged to enter into informal partnerships aimed at a complementary exchange of relevant skills (e.g., a native speaker of Portuguese could pair up with a native speaker of English to help edit each other’s articles in their non-native language). In the last weeks of the semester, following a basic training in the practical and substantive principles of Wikipedia editing, students transferred their work to the site and worked directly there on finalizing their projects (adding and refining content, troubleshooting technical glitches, supplying further references, adding hyperlinks to and on related Wikipedia pages, etc.).

Although the primary intended outcome of both the graduate and the undergraduate version of the project was the same in both courses—significant substantive improvement of existing Wikipedia content on important yet neglected or marginalized cultural agents and products—I structured and developed the two versions of this assignment quite differently in POR 640/740 and POR 335. The graduate-level project allowed for greater freedom and initiative, requiring students to be proactive and independent in locating sources (often difficult to obtain) and in designing their contributions. At the undergraduate level, students were given structured weekly or bi-weekly assignments, which guided them successively through the processes of 1) locating, describing and assessing existing relevant Wikipedia content; 2) identifying and obtaining available sources (from article databases and library holdings; I supplied photocopies of sources unavailable through those channels); 3) researching a broad spectrum of comparable Wikipedia articles and identifying best practices in Wikipedia editing; 4) researching and understanding the online guide to “Editing Wikipedia” in both English and Portuguese; 5) drafting, peer-reviewing, and revising the article on the chosen topic in both English and Portuguese.

Student Learning Outcomes

At the undergraduate level, the “Wikipedia Project” satisfies three of the five learning outcomes for the BA in Portuguese (POR 335 is one of core courses for the major):

- Students will acquire listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in Portuguese at the advanced level and consistent with national standards for foreign language education.
- Students will acquire critical reading and analytical skills applicable to a wide variety of literary and non-literary discourses.
- Students will learn to convey, develop and document ideas in writing in a clear and effective manner.

At both undergraduate and graduate levels, students gain insight into the mechanisms of the production and transmission of knowledge in their specialized field; learn to refine their expository skills by producing objective and evidence-based discourse in both English and Portuguese; learn to observe and negotiate formal and substantive differences in referential discourse in English and Portuguese; exercise their research skills by determining and extracting relevant information from a variety of sources.

Results

As of this writing, students in POR 335 are still working on their Wikipedia articles, but feedback obtained throughout the semester has been largely positive. The slow and gradual progression of the assignment, with discreet tasks assigned at regular intervals, seems to have alleviated the anxiety I expected this assignment to generate (although all students are intimately familiar with Wikipedia and aware that its content is user-generated, some initially reacted with shock to the idea they would themselves become Wikipedia contributors). Constant oversight and regular communication with the instructor via the course wiki have assured regular progress and steady improvement in most cases.

In the graduate course I taught in Fall 09, most Wikipedia contributions produced by the students markedly improved the available information on a number of important Lusophone African authors and works (it is crucial to stress here that in many of these cases there are no alternative online sources of information readily available to interested readers worldwide). Students gained relevant experience in producing sophisticated referential discourse (reporting and summarizing existing knowledge), a skill they are generally not required to hone in their writing assignments in graduate seminars (which put a premium on analytic skills and expression of original ideas), but that is highly useful in a variety of academic and non-academic contexts. They acquired a critical insight into the internal workings of the world's most popular and accessible source of information and an awareness of both their own role as future producers of publicly disseminated knowledge and of the process of knowledge-production itself. While I have not yet had access to my student evaluations from Fall 09, the myCourses survey I conducted in mid-semester to gain an idea of the students' attitudes toward this assignment yielded very positive feedback (although at that time there was still quite a bit of anxiety about the mechanics of Wikipedia editing, which students had yet to face hands-on).

Sustainability

At this point, I have sustained the "writing for Wikipedia" project over two semesters, and I intend to return to it the next time I teach the POR 640/740 seminar. Since the course topic and readings will have to change from the Fall 09 offering of the course, in order to allow continuing graduate students to retake it for credit, we will have a few new authors and works whose entries on Wikipedia are yet to be created or improved; I will also consider assigning more challenging literary-historical subject articles or article sections (i.e., articles dealing with topics rather than with individual authors or works). In future offerings of POR 335, I also plan to repeat the Wikipedia project, since not all authors and works present on the syllabus have been tackled by my students this semester (and some articles that are being written now will likely benefit from further improvement).

Since there are other areas of my teaching and/or research expertise in which Wikipedia content is likewise seriously wanting (such as Portuguese women writers or the history of Portuguese feminism), I will consider expanding the reach of this project beyond Lusophone Africa if I teach a suitable graduate seminar in the future. I am somewhat more wary of replicating the project at the undergraduate level beyond POR 335, except possibly in a 400-level seminar, given that methods required to produce positive student learning outcomes and satisfactory overall results are quite labor-intensive.

Potential for Replication

In recent years, writing for Wikipedia has become an increasingly popular form of assignment in both content- and skills-oriented courses, graduate and undergraduate alike (see, for example, MacLeod, Tardy, or Cummings). While debates over the general merits or harmfulness of Wikipedia for college-level education continue to rage (as evidenced, for instance, by online readers' comments to Cummings), many instructors have found that guiding students to become actively and critically aware of the user-generated processes of knowledge production can be—aside from other benefits of such writing assignments—an effective way to educate them away from naive and uninformed reliance on Wikipedia content in their college-level work and beyond. The potential for replication of this kind of assignment in courses across the curriculum is, of course, as vast as Wikipedia itself, although it does depend on a number of preconditions, such as the instructor's familiarity with Wikipedia editing (or willingness to acquire such familiarity), small-enrollment sections (to allow for necessary one-on-one guidance and oversight), and matching of course content with gaps or weaknesses of Wikipedia coverage of a given subject area.

References

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MacLeod, Donald. "Students marked on writing in Wikipedia." *Education Guardian*. 7 March 2007. Web.

Tardy, Christine M. "Writing for the World: Wikipedia as an Introduction to Academic Writing." *English Teaching Forum* 1 (2010). 12-27. Web.