

Writing Wikipedia Articles as a Classroom Assignment  
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In the fall of 2011, I taught a graduate seminar on theories of the state in which one of the core assignments was writing a Wikipedia article or contributing significant new material to an existing article. I saw this assignment as serving several interconnected purposes: First, the assignment provides students with the opportunity to actually publish something in the course of a semester's work. Second, it forces students to worry about the clarity, accessibility and conciseness of writing. Third, it fosters an important norm: Wikipedia is a global public good, part of the intellectual commons, and getting students to contribute to it reinforces the more general idea that users of a public good have a responsibility of contributing to it when they can. The ASA has recently launched a Wikipedia initiative for precisely this reason: Since people around the world (including most sociologists!) use Wikipedia, it is important that the entries relevant to sociology be as good as possible, and the only way this will happen is if sociologists write and edit Wikipedia articles.

The specific assignment was structured as follows: I assembled a list of about 25 dissertations on the state that had subsequently been published as books. Each student had to pick one of these books and do three things: 1. Pretend that they had written the book and prepare a 20 minute oral presentation as if this was a presentation on an ASA panel the year that they were on the job market; 2. Write a term paper which assesses the arguments of the book in light of publications since the book appeared. 3. Write a contribution to Wikipedia based on factual information assembled for the term paper. Wikipedia articles are not the same as term papers since they are supposed to adopt a "neutral point of view" (NPOV) rather than advance an argument, but in the course of doing the research for term papers there is generally enough descriptive material to make a contribution to Wikipedia.

The Wikimedia Foundation (the nonprofit organization that owns the servers and manages the behind-the-scenes logistics of Wikipedia) has a global education project to facilitate classroom writing assignments in Wikipedia. As part of their support services, they have recruited "campus ambassadors" who come to classes, conduct workshops on Wikipedia editing, and act as mentors for students in the course of the semester. What this means is that it is possible for a professor to organize a Wikipedia writing assignment without actually knowing anything about writing for Wikipedia.

The assignment was a great success. Here are a few comments students wrote afterwards:

It was exciting to finally contribute to Wikipedia after being merely a consumer for so long.

I really like the idea of the assignment, and it seems like a great way for graduate students who are spending so much time grappling with these texts to spend a little time giving back to the general public by adding to our collective knowledge and summarizing the basic contributions of these books.

The arduousness of the assignment made it quite rewarding and worth it. Besides the process itself being informative, it felt good to have written a (hopefully) helpful summary of an important book that was immediately available for reading and use by anyone with an internet connection. I also found myself considering edits to other pages, taking part in discussions on articles unrelated to my assignment, and in general being more enthusiastic about the Wikipedia project.

(From a student who rewrote and added to existing article) This article is one example of how Wikipedia can work well. A group of relative beginners initiates an article. Someone with more knowledge finds the page and builds on it, discarding some sections, adjusting others, and adding new material. Now a more developed article exists for perusal and editing by the general public.

Here are some links relevant to using Wikipedia writing assignments:

The ASA Wikipedia initiative: [http://www.asanet.org/about/wiki\\_Initiative.cfm](http://www.asanet.org/about/wiki_Initiative.cfm)

The Wikimedia U.S. Education Project: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:USEDU>

My course:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:United\\_States\\_Education\\_Program/Courses/Theories\\_of\\_the\\_State\\_%28Erik\\_Olin\\_Wright%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:United_States_Education_Program/Courses/Theories_of_the_State_%28Erik_Olin_Wright%29)