

Lessons from the classroom: Successful techniques for teaching wikis using Wikipedia

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ABSTRACT

In the fall of 2010, the Wikimedia Foundation partnered with faculty from several top universities to introduce wiki technology and Wikipedia into class assignments of public policy related subjects. Through assignments based in Wikipedia students improved skills in collaboration, critical thinking, expository writing, media literacy, and technology fluency. In video interviews, students describe their experience and the learning objectives emerged through the Wikipedia assignment. Many students also commented on the satisfaction in producing a research document that had value beyond a grade. Professor Max Klein explains the success of his classroom use of a WikiProject page as a springboard for class discussion and homework assignments. Workshop participants experience some of the Wikipedia training modules through activities. This interactive workshop discloses some successes and failures of the Initiative and details specifically what makes a successful Wikipedia-editing assignment.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.3.1 [Computers and Education]: Computer Uses in Education – Collaborative learning, Computer-assisted instruction (CAI), Computer-managed instruction (CMI), Distance learning

General Terms

Experimentation, Human Factors

Keywords

Wikipedia, Public Policy Initiative, University, Assignment, Student, Teaching Tool, Discussion Page, Coursework

1. INTRODUCTION

During the 2010-2011 academic year, Wikimedia Foundation conducted the Public Policy Initiative. The purpose of the Initiative is to improve Wikipedia content in articles related to public policy. Additionally, the project also seeks to increase the use of Wikipedia as a teaching tool in university classrooms. The Initiative model operates by coordinating with professors who are interested in using Wikipedia in a research paper assignment. The Initiative staff then recruit and train Campus Ambassadors to support the professor on campus; the Campus Ambassadors act as teaching assistants for the Wikipedia portion of the class. The Initiative team also coordinates Online Ambassadors who provide assistance to students 24/7. The students select an Online

Ambassador to act as their mentor; the mentor provides feedback on the student work and helps students learn to navigate Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation also provides support materials and sample syllabi to the professors.

In the fall of 2010, the Public Policy Initiative staff collaborated with faculty from top universities. Professors from George Mason, George Washington, Georgetown, Harvard, Indiana-Bloomington, James Madison, Lehigh, Siena College, Syracuse, and UC Berkeley, participated in the Initiative pilot.

One professor, Max Klein, of UC Berkeley, expanded his class use of Wikipedia beyond the assignment to make the wiki the organizational springboard for the class. He created a project page and directed homework and discussions to that space. Students technology skills increased at a faster pace than those in similar classes and wiki fluency improved before they started their Wikipedia assignment.

2. TRAINING MODULES

The Wikipedia Is/Is Not game is a great way for the workshop participants to move around and experience a part of the Campus Ambassador training, which then the Ambassadors take into the classrooms. The game makes participants wrestle with issues about Wikipedia and helps with the understanding of wikis.

The workshop will also present some of the editing activities that we use in training.

We ask workshop participants for input to address difficulties of using Wikipedia in the classroom in an open discussion.

3. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Our data come from professor interviews conducted by the non-profit educational research firm WestED, student survey data, a focus group at Harvard and student videos conducted by Georgetown's Center for New Designs in Teaching and Learning. In their own words, participants from fall 2010 explain what was different, harder, better and worse about a Wikipedia assignment. Also, students express a range of motivations for putting in extra effort on the Wikipedia assignment. The learning objectives for a Wikipedia assignment include:

- Expository writing skills - the ability to write summary style or encyclopedic documents from a neutral point of view
- Media literacy – the ability to identify credible information sources, especially with regards to Wikipedia

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- Critical thinking – the ability to synthesize information and present it for a different audience
- Collaboration – students experienced collaborative writing and the discussion around developing a Wikipedia article
- Community of practice - some students experienced a community of practice and realized that there are groups of people who are actively learning about the same things they are
- Technology fluency – this is a group of skills and students learned wiki markup and online etiquette
- Literature review – the ability to find appropriate sources for the research topic

4. LESSONS ON TEACHING WITH WIKIPIEDA

Over the course of the fall pilot, faculty and project staff learned several things about successfully using Wikipedia as a teaching tool. We also provide samples of the materials we used for training.

- Students need an online mentor designated to help them navigate Wikipedia policies and interact with the online community
- Selection of article topic is key. The topic must meet notability requirements and have an adequate number of primary and secondary sources.
- There must be sufficient time for the assignment. It works best with detailed milestones.
- The assignment is suitable for research paper or literature review type assignments; it does not fit well with original research or analytical papers

5. A PROFESSOR'S PERSPECTIVE

UC Berkeley Instructor of Politics and Piracy at the School of Information, Max Klein describes one technique that addresses some of the difficulties of using Wikipedia in the classroom. He talks about the pros and cons of migrating class discussion and homework onto a wiki.