WIKIPEDIA AND WOMEN WRITERS:
CLOSING THE GENDER GAP THROUGH COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

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Abstract

Despite academic admonitions, Wikipedia continues to be one of the most trafficked websites, and studies show that students regularly use Wikipedia, often at the start of an assignment. In my Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers course, all of my students admitted to using Wikipedia frequently, yet not one of them had ever edited a Wikipedia page. This essay describes how these same students transformed from consumers to producers of the site and used discipline-specific research techniques to develop the Wikipedia presence of some of the writers we were studying. The course encouraged students to cultivate their collaborative skills, to promote more effective use of peer comments, and to guide students toward more nuanced understandings of the use of secondary criticism and the importance of documentation. By participating in web-based knowledge creation and drawing on their collaborative learning in an upper-level literature course, students dipped their toes into the burgeoning field known as the digital humanities.

Wikipedia. The online collaborative encyclopedia that aims to be the sum of human knowledge has become, in less than ten years, the most trafficked English reference work thanks to a global network of volunteers. Yet, only a fraction of these volunteers are like the students I predominantly teach in my Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers course: women. Indeed, when The New York Times ran a front-page business day article on the collaborative encyclopedia in 2011, the headline ran: “Define Gender Gap: Look up Wikipedia’s Contributor List.” The article reported that despite more than 3.5 million articles in English and hundreds of thousands of volunteer contributors, less than 15 percent of those writing and editing the wiki were women. What Wikipedia’s directors found was that the gender disparity of its contributors results in vast discrepancies in the topics and subjects the encyclopedia covers. For me, this article was confirmation of what I had already experienced when I piloted my Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers and Wikipedia course in the fall of 2010. When I asked my students, predominantly women, to look on Wikipedia for the names or works of some of the writers we would be reading in the course, they were surprised to find that many of the entries—from Harriet E. Wilson, long credited as the first black woman novelist in the United States, to canonical Harlem Renaissance writers like Zora Neal Hurston—were merely what Wikipedia calls “stubs”: the start of articles that require further expansion and references. They compared the results of these initial searches with other novels and novelists on Wikipedia, such as J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings (1954) and George R. R. Martin’s A Game of Thrones (1996), which have numerous meticulously cross-referenced pages. My students were dismayed to discover that Wilson’s Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black North (1859) did not even have its own page. With a mix of curiosity and skepticism, my students, starting in the fall of 2010 and each fall since, have worked together to correct these imbalances. As they

See also the new forum created by Wikipedia editor (and literary scholar) Adrienne Wadewitz for more on Wikipedia and women: https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/WikiWomen%27s_Collaborative, as well as, http://feministmagazine.org/2013/02/feb-12
embraced their roles as Wikipedians, these digital-age women would challenge the chronic gender gap and become more like their subjects: writers, editors, and producers of knowledge.

The gendering of information on Wikipedia continues to ignite controversy. When Amanda Filipacchi recently published an op-ed in *The New York Times* about her discovery that Wikipedia editors were removing women authors from Wikipedia’s list of American Writers and reassigning them to the subcategory American Women Writers it generated a firestorm of commentary. In an article titled “Wikipedia’s Shame,” Andrew Leonard of *Salon* asked “Is Wikipedia sexist? Or is it merely an unreliable mess of angry, ax-wielding psychos engaged in agenda-driven editing?” Sue Gardner, the Executive Director of the Wikimedia Foundation and a self-declared “feminist Wikipedian” responded to the frenzy with the observations that Wikipedia is a work in progress, it reflects the society that produces it, and the digital debate and edits/corrections that follow demonstrate that Wikipedia works. This latest tumult around Wikipedia is instructive. Although students in my course were not reading Wikipedia for the uncontroversial conventional wisdom that an encyclopedia entry supposedly offers, we were using the process of public collaboration, comment, and review (that I describe below) in order to critique and repair what has been underrepresented. This most recent debate about Wikipedia’s gendering of authorship suggests to me that as teachers and scholars we must continue to interrogate what it means to invoke gender as a category of analysis not only for authors and audiences but also for students.

Against the cry of the humanities’ irrelevance in the digital age, Wikipedia has also helped me to cultivate the literature classroom’s connection to what Internet theorist Clay Shirky has argued is the Web’s great strength: restoring “reading and writing as central activities of our culture.” As a teacher and scholar of nineteenth-century American literature, I have struggled with how to use technology to promote a sense in my classroom that what we were thinking, reading, and writing about nineteenth-century American literature mattered. Moreover, I questioned my own practices in the classroom, especially the kinds of work that I asked my students to produce in American literature courses for English majors: individual essays that occasionally offered unique insights but far more frequently were written in haste, revised or not, and almost always tossed in the back of a closet (or recycle bin) never to be read again. I took seriously the question that Cathy N. Davidson asks in her book *Now You See It* (2011): “How [could I] make over the twentieth-century classroom [and celebrate our nineteenth-century content] in order to take advantage of all the remarkable digital benefits of the twenty-first century”?

My Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers and Wikipedia course began with an ambitious plan: in addition to our discussion and analysis of literary texts—the conventional practice of the literature classroom—we would work together to build the Wikipedia pages of the writers we were reading based on the information we identified as missing. Invariably, every semester I learn that

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5. See Sue Gardner’s comments on the Wikimedia blog: [http://blog.wikimedia.org/2013/05/01/of-wikipedia-categories-and-sexism/](http://blog.wikimedia.org/2013/05/01/of-wikipedia-categories-and-sexism/)


7. Kathleen Fitzpatrick has recently argued “the greatest challenge we face today in our encounter with the digital future of literacy does not come from a media culture or a student population that refuses writing. Instead, it lies in the need for members of traditional literary culture to acknowledge that forms of reading that are done online today are reading and that the modes of writing that engage so many are writing. “Reading (and Writing) Online Rather on the Decline,” *Profession* 2012: 41-52: 46.

my students have used Wikipedia recently, repeatedly, and often at the start of an academic assignment. However, not one of my students has ever created an article or edited a page on Wikipedia, confirming The New York Times report on the Wikipedia gender gap.

What if these relatively uncritical consumers of the site became its producers? What if my students were asked to share their production of knowledge in the classroom with a larger reading public? How might their digital authorship in the twenty-first century influence their thinking about women’s authorship in the nineteenth? My goal for the course was to have students engage in discipline specific research and writing that would help us develop the Wikipedia Web presence of some of the writers we were studying. I also wanted to encourage students to cultivate their collaborative skills, to promote more effective use of peer comments, and to guide my students toward more nuanced understandings of the use of secondary criticism and the importance of documentation. We would model what Alan Liu has argued is the new direction in humanities practices: moving from “writing to authoring/collaborating,” from “peer reviewing to commenting,” and from “teaching to co-developing.”

Because Wikipedia is not user friendly in the way that many Web 2.0 consumers have come to expect, students also needed to learn some basic computer code in order to contribute to the site (one of the most terrifying aspects of the Wikipedia project for these English majors). By participating in web-based knowledge creation and drawing on their collaborative learning in an upper level literature course, they were also dipping their toes into the burgeoning field known as digital humanities, which, as Stephen Ramsay has argued, “involves moving from reading and critiquing to building and making.”

Although many academics consider Wikipedia anathema to the college classroom, the process of contributing to a popular website actually inspired many of my undergraduates to studiously cultivate many of the prized characteristics of literary study: depth of inquiry, thoughtful critique, and elegant prose argument, among others. Please note: this essay is not an argument for the use of Wikipedia as a scholarly resource for college-level academic work. In fact, Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, readily agrees. Responding to a well-publicized case at Middlebury College in which Wikipedia was banned, Wales declared to students, “For God’s sake, you’re in college; don’t cite the encyclopedia.”

Although many thousands of Wikipedians regularly oversee contributions on the site, which has fairly rigorous guidelines relating to the reliability, neutrality, and style of the articles, it is by now familiar to hear the skepticism about Wikipedia: it is written by anonymous amateur contributors, the information on the site is not verifiable, and so on. Despite academic admonitions, Wikipedia continues to be one of the most trafficked websites, and it is often the first place that Web browsers, non-academic and academic alike, visit for general information; therefore, it seems particularly important to teach students to use Wikipedia wisely and to encourage them to participate more fully in its production. J. Elizabeth Clark argues in “The Digital Imperative: Making a Case for 21st Century Pedagogy” that the future of writing is based on global, collaborative texts, “where all writing has the potential to become public.” Wikipedia offers a model of such authorship as well as an opportunity to reach a global audience.

First-Year Writing programs and Composition and Rhetoric classrooms have been among the first to embrace Wikipedia’s potential as a teaching tool. Robert E. Cummings writes in his book Lazy Virtues: Teaching Writing in the Age of Wikipedia (2010) that Wikipedians (contributors) often have an intense interest and passion about their topic that creates “an amazing marriage between expert knowledge and

coherent communication” and thus provides students a place “where their writing would be read and evaluated for its accuracy, its relevance, and its efficiency.” In fact, the challenge for students (first-year undergraduates and advanced graduate students alike) often isn’t the contribution of relevant content but rather the creation of writing that “sticks.” In fact, the challenge for students (first-year undergraduates and advanced graduate students alike) often isn’t the contribution of relevant content but rather the creation of writing that “sticks.” Although there is far less discussion of Wikipedia as a teaching resource in upper-level literature classes than as a tool in writing studies, one of my goals was to illuminate how the methods of production and consumption of nineteenth-century texts—the composition, syndication, and ownership of Fanny Fern’s work, for instance—spoke in relevant ways to our new digital and information age.

Originally, I designed the course with the idea that I would loosely orchestrate student assignments for constructing individual author and novel pages, with the aim of encouraging students to contribute content based on what most interested them; for example, I might ask some students to develop the character list for Ruth Hall (1854) while others focused on themes or plot summary. In truth, the possibilities for their contributions seemed limitless, as the pages of so many of the authors we were reading were woefully underdeveloped. It quickly became clear, however, what our collective classroom mission should be: to create and enhance the history, criticism, and theory sections on the novels we were reading. This recognition came after the first assignment for the course, which I referred to at the start of this essay: to assess the breadth of the encyclopedia by looking up several of the texts we would be reading in class. What were the entries on The Coquette (1797), Ruth Hall, Our Nig, and others like? What made a well-developed page? Students wrote short critiques on an entry they found incomplete and an entry or portion of an entry they found useful. Together we talked about what qualities comprised a good Wikipedia page. Students noted that the pages they found most helpful were well-documented and provided links to authors’ societies, scholarly articles, e-texts, and the like. Given their critiques, we reflected upon the kind of intellectual work we do in class that might be interesting to translate to Wikipedia’s format. This inspired a conversation about our classroom practices of reading and interpreting texts in a community, our collaboration on close analysis, and our work debating and dissecting literary history and criticism. We realized that even in the most well-developed articles this form of scholarly conversation was absent. Could we share our conversations about how literary critics have read these texts with a largely non-academic public in a way that made sense? Could we bring “expert knowledge” to Wikipedia in a way that was readable and relatable? This became our challenge.

I shared our class goals with the coordinator of the relatively new WikiNovels Project who, in turn, helped us to find Wikipedians to serve as ambassadors to the students as they worked on their contributions. Committed to the WikiProject Novels (a subgroup of Wikipedians and projects aimed to enhance coverage of literary works: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Novels), these Wikipedians helped students to clarify their research, to be rigorous in their citations, and to be “bold” in their edits. Ambassadors/mentors motivated students to contribute and embraced them as part of a virtual community. We were “learning to give and take feedback responsibly,” which as Cathy Davidson has argued, “should be a key component of our training as networked citizens of the world.” As one of

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14 Ibid., 103; Davidson, 100.
15 Ibid., 8.
18 Davidson, 107.
the early literature courses to work with Wikipedia’s mentor program, students were excited about this unique opportunity and ultimately emboldened to take ownership of their writing and research in a way that I was struggling to see happen in the conventional literary essay.

Once we refined our goal of enhancing the Wikipedia pages of American women writers in order to concentrate more intensely on those writers whose articles lacked sections on criticism and theory, bibliographic resources, and other relevant material, students contacted potential mentors with whom they could exchange ideas about their contributions. Students became networked citizens, reaching out to the Wikipedia community beyond the classroom, while at the same time we turned our attention more closely to learning the skills of secondary research. We discussed how scholars move beyond initial Google and Wikipedia searches and addressed the challenges and importance of accurately synthesizing the critical voices of others. After reading the primary text together, students worked in small groups of 4-5 students to choose a secondary article to read and summarize. Each group was responsible for one scholarly article on our primary text (and we coordinated our choices so that each group was working on a different article). As I guided students in their secondary research, the distinctions between specialized knowledge and more general web searches became clear, as most of the sources we found fruitful were through our library databases and were not available to a general readership on the Web (which students occasionally forget). Even though we were working within an encyclopedia format, students performed discipline-specific research on our library databases. Once each group settled on a recent article, each student in the group read it at home and summarized its most salient arguments. Students came to class with their written critiques in hand and worked together in their groups to come up with 4 or 5 sentences they could agree accurately represented the article’s contribution to the field. This proved particularly challenging for students, and we would often devote the better part of the class to this group collaboration. Laboring with the knowledge that the summaries would be “published online” and potentially read by the very scholars whose arguments they sought to represent made them especially careful about this work. Students wrote a reflection essay at the end of the semester in which they considered their Wikipedia experience. Regarding their collaborative research process, one student wrote that she had never thought about “research as a public forum” but rather always assumed it was something that “merely exists between me and my professor or in private.” Although we hadn’t even posted a word to Wikipedia, the very idea of sharing their writing and analysis in a public forum encouraged students to invest more energy into their readings of secondary research materials and to aim for clarity of prose in their contributions.

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19 Although a longer discussion of the WikiNovels project and the mentoring program is beyond the purview of this essay, I hope to study and to write about my student’s engagement with their mentors more fully in the future. The suggestion that students be “bold” in their editing and contributions is from the Ruth Hall talk page: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Ruth_Hall_(novel)]

20 I have since shared with my students my experience of presenting a version of this project at C19, the Society of Nineteenth Century Americanists conference, only to meet one such critic, Jennifer Harris, who told me that she was recently contacted by a colleague to let her know that her Ruth Hall scholarship was summarized on Wikipedia.

21 I guided students’ reflection essays with the following questions: What surprised you about this project? What do you think you may carry from this work into other school or “real world” reading/writing/research situations? What did this work help you to see about women’s literature? What did this work make you think about literature in the public sphere? What did this work make you think about writing on literature and/or criticism for the general reader? What did you learn about your own writing and literary scholarship from this work? What did you learn about Wikipedia? What did you learn about writing for a public audience? How was writing for Wikipedia different than writing in typical literature classroom?

Assessment of collaborative work is difficult. I grade several assignments separately for a cumulative grade: the individual article responses/critique, the group Wikipedia presentation, and the reflection essay. Students kept individual portfolios with all their work, and by reviewing their portfolio with all their Wikipedia work for the semester, I am able to assess their performance and assign a grade for the Wikipedia assignment. I should say that even in the Wikipedia course, I also typically include at least one research/argument essay. The timing of this essay in the course syllabus has varied, and it would be interesting to study whether the Wikipedia work enhances students’ abilities with the research/argument essay.
Training students as literary scholars and as Wikipedians meant that they were engaging not only in peer evaluation at several moments throughout the assignment but also gaining new perspectives on the review process. Even as self-proclaimed regular Wikipedia users, the majority of students were not aware that each Wikipedia page has a “talk” page devoted to collaborative discussion about an article’s content. We employed the talk page as our critical conversation forum, a “lower stakes” place to post without going live on the main page; students also used this page to communicate with each other and their mentors outside of class. Students began in class by talking through the secondary materials together in collaborative groups with other students who were familiar with both the primary and the secondary material. This gave them the opportunity to review their ideas with a small network of other educated readers. During these sessions, students became engaged in heated debates about the most important arguments, and they learned from each other as they worked to articulate their readings in clear and comprehensive ways. Engaging in peer-to-peer composition and editing, they struggled to come to a consensus on the articles’ arguments and then to co-write several sentences that reflected this consensus. Students then posted their contribution to the articles’ “talk page” where they debated edits, additions, and other queries about the articles. In addition to tracking the history of their conversation through the talk page, they also learned that they could follow the number of hits/reads of their pages, which emphasized for them the immediacy of feedback and, again, the public nature of their practice. At this point, each group shared their talk page contributions with the rest of the class, and each group contribution again underwent peer editing and comment. Finally, we invited one additional and important level of peer comment: we asked their Wikipedian mentors to read and remark on our contributions. Students were cautious, nervous, and ultimately even elated as they heeded advice, revised, and finally moved their work from the talk page to article “publication.”

The Wikipedia project gave students a sense of authority in their writing while it also encouraged a healthy dose of skepticism; after all, students like themselves might be the writers and editors of the articles they consult on Wikipedia. What I was struck by the most, however, was how the process of contributing to Wikipedia elicited far more enthusiasm than I conventionally see from my students in their deep thinking about the primary texts and their scholarly conversation about the secondary criticism. One student wrote in her reflection essay “the several sentences that were published to Wikipedia may have been the sentences that I have spent the most discussion and research on in my life” and another said that she “finally grasped just how invaluable sources are.” Students not only embraced their research and writing with new energy, sharing rigorous scholarship with a wider audience, they also went beyond what was assigned in the class. Clay Shirky calls this cognitive surplus: “the wiring of humanity lets us treat free time as a shared global resource, and lets us design new kinds of participation and sharing that take advantage of that home.” When our semester began, for example, my students were surprised to see that while Harriet E. Wilson had her own Wikipedia page, her novel *Our Nig* did not. Without its own page, the novel lacked the gravitas of Tolkien’s novels (to return to a prior example), despite its important place in American literary history, black history, and women’s history. One of my students quickly repaired this, even though this contribution was not part of the assignment, giving credence to Clay Shirky’s notion of cognitive surplus. By reading Wilson’s novel and feeling troubled by its absence from a well-trafficked website that they regularly consult, students were moved to action; in so doing, they made our work inside the classroom relevant beyond its walls. Although the primary assignment asked students to create sections of criticism and theory for several of the texts we were reading, a number of students were inspired to do more. *Our Nig*, for instance, now has a list of characters, themes, and its Wikipedia link

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The differences between collaboration in the face-to-face classroom and in digital environments deserves greater attention than space permits here; suffice it to say that our twentieth-century pedagogical model prizes individual efforts and thus collaboration, especially in the upper level English course, does not come easily. For more on the academy’s outdated classroom model, see Davidson, 61-104.

appears at the top of any Google search for the novel.24 Students have also initiated Zitkala-Sa’s *American Indian Stories* page, which continues to need contributors and collaborators: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Indian_Stories](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Indian_Stories). As my students have become producers and participants in knowledge production rather than merely consumers and recipients, they exemplify the power of cognitive surplus, behaving in “increasingly generous, public, and social ways.”25 “It took Zitkala-Sa a lifetime of experiences and activism to write her many stories, letters, and speeches, creating her legacy,” wrote one of these students. “It only took me a few hours to add to her new *American Indian Stories* Wikipedia page, educating the public on that legacy and effectively continuing it.” Several students commented in their reflection essays about how surprised they were that the work of so many American women writers was not more prominent on Wikipedia. This recognition gave them a renewed appreciation for a class dedicated to these authors and their ideas.

The American Women Writers Wikipedia project inspired students to invest in their research and to think more about themselves as digital consumers, producers, and curators of knowledge. This is especially important as the promise of what scholars have called the “infinite archive” increasingly becomes bound to private commercial enterprises. It may not be long, for example, before many institutions and its students won’t have access to the critical research tools we used in our work such as Project Muse, JSTOR, and full-text archives of pre-20th century primary texts (they are becoming prohibitively expensive). As much as Wikipedia helped to open my students’ eyes to the importance of scholarly conversations and the value of sharing their sub-disciplinary knowledge with a larger public, students also recognized through the process of contributing to Wikipedia that the search for information and collaborative learning must not start and end there. “As consumers of knowledge we are catching fishes,” wrote one of my students, “but when we learn to make the transition to producer of knowledge we are able to feed ourselves for a lifetime.” When the semester ended, several students were proud of their ability to nourish themselves, and they willingly shared what they produced with their peer networks on Facebook and other social media outlets, a far cry from the paper tossed in the back of a closet, indeed!

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25 Ibid., 63.
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