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The slow, necessary death of the research paper

By Guest Contributor on May 17, 2016

Timothy Henningsen is an Assistant Professor of English at the College of DuPage. He's run Wikipedia assignments in about a dozen courses, and has talked about the experience [elsewhere](#). In this post, "The Slow, Necessary Death of the Research Paper (And How Wikipedia Can Revive Composition Instruction)" he discusses the benefit of Wikipedia writing assignments compared to traditional term papers.

In March, the Wiki Education Foundation posted a blog that articulates "[5 reasons a Wikipedia assignment is better than a term paper](#)." In it, Wiki Ed's Eryk Salvaggio addresses common misconceptions about Wikipedia, and argues why it affords students and teachers an energetic alternative to the traditional research paper. In conclusion, he asks academics to take up his call.

For the last 4 semesters, I have.

Before this, however, I was among a large contingent of writing instructors that would've harrumphed at Wiki Ed's post. After all, the research paper has been the uncontested pedagogical paragon in the college composition classroom for nearly a century. The research paper offers student writers an opportunity to practice deeply engaged, sustained writing; it teaches research skills, source evaluation, critical analysis,

argumentation, revision, referencing, and, perhaps the most important of all: discourse engagement.

And it would seem that — despite debate over the value of this genre — given the sales figures of books like Gerald Graff & Cathy Birkenstein’s *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, the research paper might remain a staple in academia for another 100 years.

Graff’s little book, which I’ve used in my own writing classrooms for the last decade, does an impeccable job at showing writing students how to crack the code that is academicspeak. Graff’s method is genius in its simplicity, its stated goal to “demystify academic writing” by helping students become “active participants in the important conversations of the academic world and the wider public sphere” (xviii-xix).

Graff is one in a long line of academics who have touted the research paper as a means of teaching students how to engage in discourse communities. Writing is inherently conversational, and the research paper thereby allows students to participate in academic debate.

Only that it doesn’t.

The research paper does have its redeeming qualities, but writing instructors are kidding themselves if they believe the traditional research paper is the best method of getting students actively engaged in the various discourse communities that constitute scholarship.

Ask any undergraduate who produces a research paper to what extent their paper will actually affect discourse and they’ll likely look at you cross-eyed. Students are smart enough to know that while the paper itself might invoke the discourse, they themselves don’t engage with it.

Sure, students consult sources and respond to a variety of arguments and ideas related to their topic, but those responses rarely go beyond the margins of paper. Instead, students are keen enough to know that when they hand their paper to their professor upon completion, that paper is likely on a one-way street to the recycling bin. Read only by one reader, the sole consequence being a letter grade.

The prospects of audience theory challenges this problem in requiring students write term papers which will have a real, tangible audience beyond the instructor. But even still, this doesn't address [the slog](#) that students feel when told they have to write a research paper. In my experience, students immediately go into 'zombie-mode': they at first groan, then mundanely begin the process of collecting a bunch of sources, then pull sleepless nights, writing about those sources in a way they think their professor wants to hear. As soon as those students hit 'print' on their computer, that paper becomes dead to them.

Which is why, I believe, that [teaching with Wikipedia](#) addresses these problems by offering the same outcomes that a research paper assignment does, with added benefits. If one of the main motives of assigning a research paper is to have students engage a discourse and speak to an audience, then unless that audience is real and tangible, the activity is inherently counterfeit. It might be good practice, but it's nothing like playing a real game. Which is where Wikipedia comes in.

Much thanks to the Wiki Education Foundation, its staff, and the resources they've produced, I have replaced the traditional research paper assignment with one that asks students to enhance or create a Wikipedia article of their choice. Not only has it injected a new lifeblood into my composition classes, but I believe it's turned my students into better writers and researchers.

From the outset, students are intrigued by the prospect of this assignment, having been told throughout their academic lives that Wikipedia — in academic contexts — is taboo.

And yet those students are also somewhat intimidated, knowing that their audience for an assignment like this potentially grows from one (i.e., me), to hundreds, if not thousands, or more.

Like the research paper, working on a Wikipedia article allows students to develop their writing (but publicly). It teaches research skills, source evaluation, and referencing (as all Wikipedia contributions require documented evidence). It requires critical analysis, forcing students to evaluate an article, and determine whether the information on a given subject is comprehensive, faulty, or perhaps incomplete. And unlike the research paper, contributing to Wikipedia offers real discourse engagement.

My students are often quite astonished when they study the various [talk pages](#) on Wikipedia (they usually begin with the presumption that any internet discussion inevitably dissolves into pedantic name-calling). In seeing the collegial, engaged discussions that often take place, students quickly realize that the dissemination of knowledge is not only passionate, but collaborative.

Since instituting this assignment, I've had students contribute to a plethora of Wikipedia articles. Instead of rigidly requiring students to limit their research to academic databases, they must employ critical research methods to be able determine where the best place to go to find credible, substantial information on whatever their topic might be (my students have investigated everything from the [wanted poster](#) to [historic villages in Afghanistan](#); [rock and roll side projects](#) to [globe-trotting basketball players](#); [local, historic places](#) to [groundbreaking athletes](#)).

Beyond that, academic traditionalists might assume that student contributions to Wikipedia lack the argumentative aspects offered by the research paper. And on the surface, it would seem so: Wikipedia requires all articles to be written in a neutral point of view. Students thus cannot flex their persuasive muscles.

But they can.

The challenge for students completing a Wikipedia assignment is persuading their Wikipedia audience that the information they've added to an article is topically-relevant and noteworthy enough to be included in that article's subject matter. For example, when in 2011 it was reported that [Apple software was regularly tracking the whereabouts of its iPhone customers](#), the news quickly made its way to the Wikipedia article on the [iPhone](#). But a student of mine evaluated the "secret tracking" section of the article last semester and felt that while the news was noteworthy, it didn't provide users with the actual means of turning off this tracking feature. At risk of turning an encyclopedia article into a tutorial, this student had to determine how to craft text that would not only fit with the overall tone of the article, but also provide readers an immediate means of fixing this issue on their own phones if they were reading about this tracking feature for the very first time.

The student thus decoded the discourse of the iPhone article, shaped his own text to fit that discourse, and thus contributed to the discourse. That student surely wouldn't have gotten this experience with the traditional research paper.

Ultimately, this is where the Wikipedia project goes far beyond the confines of the traditional research paper: students realize that they can personally participate in the dissemination of knowledge. Whereas students often feel like outsiders to academic discourse (this is the whole premise of Graff's aforementioned text), students quickly realize that scholars are not the sole arbiters of knowledge production; adding content to Wikipedia gives developing writers agency in their own research and writing. For example, Jeffrey Ringbloom, a second-year student in my Fall 2015 composition class, reported the following:

"... my perception of authority in an academic sense has changed after working within Wikipedia. I now realize that publications of academic work [are] not relegated to

those holding doctorate degrees. Obviously, this [might] be needed for an article in a ... peer-reviewed journal, but in something like Wikipedia it is different. On Wikipedia, anyone who is passionate about a subject and willing to put in the time and effort, can publish ... credible and substantial work ... Content is developed in a collaborative effort with other users. Then the information is available ... all over the Internet.”

Another student, Naveet Sandhu, who began the project with a certain skepticism, learned to embrace the “communal vibe” that went along with collaborating with other Wikipedia users:

“I went into this assignment with the negative mindset and the notion that all Wikipedia articles have no place in the world of academia, and am coming out with a newfound respect and reverence for those who go through and take the time to research, and prepare, and edit, and create the Wikipedia that we know today; the up to date and constantly evolving sum of human experience. In conclusion Wikipedia is responsible for the democratization of knowledge and the handing it back to the people it belongs to by the people who create it, and although people will disagree and harrumph in contempt, Wikipedia represents what academia should be: unbiased and uninhibited knowledge given to all who ask for it (and it’s free too).”

As that very writing instructor who once used to arrogantly harrumph in contempt at the thought of promoting Wikipedia in the classroom, my entire pedagogical worldview has since changed thanks to this assignment.

If you happen to teach writing or research, you should give it a thought. [You’re more than welcome to join us.](#)

WORKS CITED

Graff, Gerald, Cathy Birkenstein, & Russel Durst. They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing, 3rd Edition w/ Readings. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2015.

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