

Raising the Stakes: Writing about Witchcraft on Wikipedia

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WIKIALITY, Wikimania, WikiGnomes, WikiTrolls, Wikibots, Wikipediaholism... all these neologisms have been coined in recent years to talk about Wikipedia, the online, open-source encyclopedia.¹ Comedy Central's Steven Colbert, in a recent interview with Wikipedia's founder Jimmy Wales, quipped, "Wikipedia is the first place I go for knowledge, or when I want to create it."² As professors, we have all encountered this resource, either in student footnotes or as the first hit in our own "googling." While the knee-jerk reaction among many educators is to discourage sharply student use of Wikipedia, the goal of the project described in this article was to craft a pedagogical approach that incorporated student-contribution to Wikipedia in order to teach History methods students how to be historians. In this project, History 400W students contributed to or created new Wikipedia entries on witchcraft and magic accusations from the Greco-Roman period through Colonial America.³ Student learning goals included researching and writing about a specific historical topic, recognizing the relative value of various resources for historical research (including Wikipedia), contributing to high-stakes historical discourse, understanding and constructing historiography, and sharing the process of that discourse with peers. My rubric-based assessment and student survey responses demonstrated that supervised student participation on

Wikipedia fulfills these goals, while preparing life-long learners equipped with skills valuable to the historical profession and beyond.

This article reviews the relationship of academia with Wikipedia and how it led to the aforementioned assignment, describes the assignment the students completed, explains the methods and rationale for my assessment approach (both rubric-based and student survey-based), and discusses the problems I anticipated as well as those that the students and I actually encountered. This article concludes by evaluating how this assignment helped students become better historians and provided them with twenty-first-century learning skills such as digital-age literacy, inventive thinking, effective communication, and high productivity.⁴

Background on Wikipedia and Professional Academia

A review of some of the recent thinking among academics on the topic of Wikipedia lays the groundwork for the challenges to this pedagogical innovation as well as its real potential for success in teaching students what it means to be historians. There has been much discussion among scholars about Wikipedia's contribution to "democratizing knowledge" versus its challenge to the "hierarch[ies] of knowledge" usually controlled by those with PhDs.⁵ Indeed, it is no wonder that academics would be so touchy about Wikipedia, despite its origins as Nupedia, an on-line encyclopedia to be written and peer-reviewed by academics. Nupedia's founders, Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, were discouraged by the glacial pace of the academic contributors and so employed wiki technology to open the posting and peer-reviewing process to anyone.⁶

This open-source encyclopedia and its new presence in the "read-only culture" of academia have certainly created a buzz.⁷ In 2006, no fewer than fifteen articles addressing Wikipedia appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Covering everything from the degree of accuracy of the entries—including discussion of fall-out after the much-heralded *Nature* study comparing errors in Wikipedia against those in *Encyclopedia Britannica*⁸—to debates over the creation of a Wikiversity, theorized as "an electronic institution of learning that would be just as open."⁹ Several articles posted to the on-line *Society of Biblical Literature Forum* (January 2007) debated the range of positives and negatives of Wikipedia use among students and academics alike, especially those in the discipline of Religious Studies. Arguing the negative side, Janet M. Giddings is highly dubious of student use of Wikipedia, doubting students' ability to recognize errors on the site, especially when students are themselves still in the process of "learning discernment and mastering critical analysis."¹⁰ On the more positive side, Holger Szesnat notes the standard litany

of concerns with Wikipedia—presentism, the widely varied quality of articles and their references, the tendency towards “listmania,” and the shortfalls of relying on community control as a check against bias and misinformation—but nevertheless promotes developing creative ways to incorporate it into responsible pedagogy.¹¹ Along similarly optimistic lines, Lawrence J. Mykytiuk posits that “for academic research, Wikipedia is an unreliable source but a frequently useful heuristic tool,” which can set students and scholars alike onto potential research leads, even if the data is doubtful.¹² Taylor David Halverson, while humorously noting the ability to track textual variants on Wikipedia in much the same way as is done with Biblical scholarship, commends the potential for wiki-use to promote student thinking and reading skills.¹³ Halverson, like Szesnat, off-handedly suggests that professors should encourage students to improve Wikipedia entries. The student project described in this article goes well beyond that suggestion and addresses many of these stated concerns.

But what about Wikipedia’s specific relevance to historians? Roy Rosenzweig’s article, “Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past,” discusses some of the fundamental distinctions and similarities between Wikipedia and the scholarship of History. Rosenzweig contrasts professional historians’ tendency toward single authorship, “possessive individualism,” the valuing of original research, and the need for subjective interpretation of evidence against Wikipedia’s aversion to “experts” and its corporately authored entries, which eschew original research and are required by the site to have a neutral point of view (NPOV). The problems with Wikipedia, according to Rosenzweig, are not necessarily grounded in its wikiality, but rather in the problems any encyclopedia faces: it “summarizes and reports the conventional and accepted wisdom on a topic but does not break new ground.”¹⁴ Rosenzweig’s findings are based in part on his own comparison of twenty-five Wikipedia biographies against their counterparts in *Encarta* and the *American National Biography Online*. He found factual errors—minor errors, at that—in only four of the Wikipedia entries. The primary problem with the entries was their coverage, shaped by “geek priorities” which result from a select group of users submitting the most contributions to the site,¹⁵ and the entries’ lack of what “good historical writing requires... a command of the scholarly literature, persuasive analysis and interpretations, and clear and engaging prose.”¹⁶ One of the advantages of Wikipedia entries, Rosenzweig notes, is the accompanying “discussion page” feature in which contributors justify their additions and modifications. Rosenzweig rightly posits that what transpires on those pages “can only be called historiographic debate.”¹⁷ From Rosenzweig’s perspective, the prognosis is good for historians’ thoughtful use of, and contribution to, Wikipedia.

Apart from Rosenzweig's specifically historical study, Cass Sunstein's book, *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge*, studies how deliberation affects groups, shedding some light on the concerns and the promise of using Wikipedia with History students. While the hope is that group deliberation allows the skill and knowledge of the best contributors to be incorporated in decisions, Sunstein outlines the problems that hinder this ideal: namely, that deliberating groups do not always take advantage of what individuals know; they might amplify the errors of their members; they are subject to cascade effects; and they tend to polarize to extremes.¹⁸ Wikis like Wikipedia work, however, perhaps because their anonymity can encourage low-status individuals to share what they know or perhaps because of the large pool of potential contributors. What makes Wikipedia successful as a deliberative space, according to Sunstein, is that "those who know the truth, or something close to it, are usually more numerous and more committed than those who know a falsehood."¹⁹ The activity of contributors supplies a check against error, cascade, and polarization. Again with Sunstein, as with Rosenzweig, the admission is that as long as the problems with deliberating groups are addressed, Wikipedia can be a useful tool.

So how can we take these problems and turn them into a significant teaching moment for History students and, in my case, students specifically investigating historical witchcraft accusations in a History methods class? To do so, we must embrace the historiographical potential of Wikipedia and face the obstacles identified by Rosenzweig's comments about the "summary nature" of the articles, the influence of "geek priorities," and the need for more synthesized research. Additionally, we must address Sunstein's concerns about both the errors and the promise of deliberative groups.

Witchcraft-related topics are particularly susceptible to non-historical, biased, and even faith-based treatments on Wikipedia. The NPOV and encyclopedic form of Wikipedia is precisely what these entries need. Wikipedia's population of primarily male techno-geeks is apt to neglect witchcraft-related topics that are not of the massively-popular multi-player role-playing games, *Dungeons and Dragons*, and *Lord of the Rings* variety. Hence, witchcraft-related entries are a vast open field for contribution by serious students of History. As far as "synthesized research and writing" is concerned, these largely neglected entries allow students to start from scratch and offer a synthetic treatment. The "discussion" feature of Wikipedia then gives students a place to share their thinking about the construction of the entry and to defend any edits. In other words, it is a place to engage in ongoing historiographical discourse on specific topics with a high-stakes audience much larger than their in-class peer group.

To understand how this works, take for instance Wikipedia's short entry (known as a "wikistub") for "curse tablet" (Figure 1). While there is a basic description with minimal references and external links, there is significant room for improvement of the entry itself and the related historiographical justification under the "discussion" tab (Figure 2). With respect to the entry, there is little to no representation of existing scholarly debate about the curse tablets and very limited references. Since the scholarship on this topic is extensive, a student has substantial room for synthesizing the existing scholarship, discovering trends, and attempting to explain them. The entry is unbalanced in its coverage, since curse tablets are found throughout the Greco-Roman Mediterranean basin, and not just in Britain and Athens. The entry could also take advantage of its electronic format with examples of curse tablets within the entry (including text and images) and external links to the range of museum web-pages with on-line exhibitions of these materials.

Just how reliable can such an entry be once multiple contributors begin to shape it? Sunstein points out that "a deliberating group will converge on the truth... *if* the truth has some initial support within the group *and* when the task has a demonstrably correct answer according to a framework that group members share."²⁰ Students whose in-class research has focused on the historical treatment of their topic will provide that initial support for "truth" or at least historical accuracy to the extent that it can be determined. On Sunstein's second point, there may not be a "demonstrably correct answer" for high-end academic topics and/or controversial ones, such as witchcraft in history, where the number of people who know "truth," or at least the academic consensus, is limited. But again, the discussion page of Wikipedia offers an opportunity for students to demonstrate through historiographic discussion that they have sifted through the relevant scholarship in order to offer the closest "truth" possible.

The Assignment

As mentioned at the start of this article, the desired learning outcomes of this assignment were researching and writing about a specific historical topic, recognizing the relative value of various resources for research (including Wikipedia), contributing to high-stakes historical discourse, getting a real sense of what historiography is and participating in its construction, and sharing the process of that discourse with peers. This assignment replaced a previous assignment in which the students shared PowerPoint presentations with the class about their ongoing research for their final historiography papers on a particular subset of witchcraft-related scholarship.²¹ The main problem with the existing assignment was

The screenshot shows the Wikipedia article for "Curse tablet". The page layout includes a top navigation bar with "article", "discussion", "edit this page", and "history" tabs. A sidebar on the left contains the Wikipedia logo, navigation links (Main Page, Community Portal, etc.), a search box, and a toolbox. The main content area features the title "Curse tablet" and a sub-header "From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia". The article text defines a binding spell and mentions its discovery at Aqueae Sulis. Below the text are sections for "References" and "External links". A notice at the bottom states: "This Ancient Greece-related article is a stub. You can help Wikipedia by expanding it."

Figure 1: August 2006 screenshot of the Wikipedia entry on “curse tablet.” Because of the dynamic nature of Wikipedia, this entry has changed dramatically since this screenshot was originally taken.

The screenshot shows the "Talk:Curse tablet" discussion page. The layout is similar to the article page, but the main content area contains a single paragraph of discussion. The text reads: "The following paragraph was added on 19 Oct 2005 by an anonymous user from an IP address with a history of vandalism to Wikipedia. While I have no evidence that this information is untrue, I was not able to personally verify it in the time I have available. Given the concerns over the source, I thought it best to pull from the article for now. Please cite your sources before adding it back. Thanks. Rossami (talk) 22:08, 28 November 2005 (UTC)". Below this is a paragraph of text: "Over three hundred curse tablets have been recovered in Great Britain alone, especially at religious sites such as Aqueae Sulis. The name of the offender, if it was known, was inscribed on a thin sheet of lead or pewter and dedicated to gods of the underworld. These gods were called on to punish the accused. Some curses were written backwards or padded with nonsense words to add to the mystery. Finally, the tablet was rolled or folded up and placed as an offering. About ninety curse tablets were found at Aqueae Sulis."

Figure 2: August 2006 screenshot of the related “discussion” page for the curse tablet entry. Note the lack of historiographical discussion and justification.

that the end product did not match the desired student learning outcome, namely student participation in high-stakes historical discourse using the skills in research, reading, writing, and historiographical analysis learned in History 400W.²² In-class PowerPoint presentations before the professor and peers were not high-stakes enough for students to get a real sense of what it is to be a professional historian.

The steps of the Wikipedia assignment were relatively simple: target a problematic entry, undertake research in scholarly articles and book-length treatments, determine points of scholarly conflict and consensus, write a NPOV treatment reflecting the arguments and citing their proponents, include references and perhaps even a snippet from a related primary source and/or an image, if possible, and provide internal links to related Wikipedia entries and external links to reliable treatments on the web.

The assignment was scaffolded into the class from about mid-way through the semester. During weeks seven through ten (of a fifteen-week semester), while in-class readings and discussion were focused on the general historiography of witchcraft accusation in the Greco-Roman, Medieval, Early Modern, and Colonial American periods, the students were encouraged to look for problematic entries and gaps on Wikipedia. During week eleven, when the class readings and discussions focused on varied types of history writing (from encyclopedic, to article-length, to monograph), students were encouraged to create their own account on Wikipedia. In order for me to track their contributions to the site, they were asked to create recognizable usernames. Students were instructed to review the “Getting Started” information on Wikipedia, which includes the policies and guidelines, the “Five Pillars of Wikipedia,” the list of editing guidelines, and the general “help” section.²³ Students then composed at least one significant Wikipedia contribution reflecting both the depth of their research and the conflicting historical opinion on the topic. Apart from posting their formal contributions to Wikipedia, students were urged to participate actively in the “discussion” feature related to their contribution in order to explain and justify to other Wikipedians the rationale behind what was included and how it was organized—in other words, to participate in historiography. In week fourteen, students shared their Wikipedia entries with the class, by means of a PowerPoint presentation, that illustrated their contributions to Wikipedia (for both the entry and the associated “discussion”) and how those related to their ongoing historiography paper, which was the capstone assignment of the class.

While the students’ role in this process was clear, I should emphasize that my role in this assignment was primarily that of a facilitator. I taught the necessary background historical content and method, including historical research and historiography. I surfed and experimented with Wikipedia

along with the students. Students met with me individually during week twelve to discuss their Wikipedia entries and their ongoing historiographical research. Additionally, when needed, I helped the students troubleshoot Wikipedia on content- and tech-related matters.

Assessment Approach and Findings

From the design stages of this assignment, I wanted to gauge its effectiveness in a systematic, if necessarily subjective, fashion. Rather than offering opinions and impressionistic generalizations from my perspective of whether or not the assignment worked, I wanted *real data*. To guide me in this assessment process, I adopted Joni Spurlin's model for assessing the effectiveness of a technological innovation in pedagogy. Spurlin's model emphasizes "a focus on student learning; the collection, analysis, and interpretation of information; and application [of that information] for the purpose of improvement."²⁴

Consequently, my assessment approach for this assignment was two-fold, based on 1) my rubric-based assessment of work that students posted to Wikipedia and of their presentation of the ongoing process to the class and 2) student survey-based feedback gained from a questionnaire about their completion of the project. The rationale for the rubric-based assessment of student work was that it would give me an opportunity to evaluate how well students were engaging with the basic historical concept that the assignment sought to address (historiography). The rationale for the student survey was that it allowed me to explore the students' experience of the innovation.

Since students were required to report their usernames to me, I was able to track their involvement on the site. The "History" tab associated with each entry on Wikipedia allows a user to compare multiple versions of the entry, enabling me to examine an entry before and after a student's contribution, as well as at various stages during the editing process—including the instances when students interacted with those who adjusted their entries (Figure 3). The rubric evaluating the student work as trackable by this "History" feature addressed the following items: significance of the original targeted gap or problematic coverage, the quality of the contribution in terms of content, the quality of participation in Wikipedia discussion, adherence to encyclopedic form and stylistic conventions (spelling, punctuation, and grammar, etc.) in their Wikipedia entry, clarity of ideas in classroom oral presentation, the relationship of the entry to the student's ongoing historiography project, and the thoroughness of research as evidenced by a working bibliography and references posted to the Wikipedia entry. The student survey-based evaluation asked questions

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Witch-hunt

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia
(Difference between revisions)

Revision as of 15:31, 29 November 2006 (edit)
 WelshMatt (Talk | contribs)
(rv vandalism)
 ← Older edit

Revision as of 20:11, 3 December 2006 (edit) (undo)
 BlantonC (Talk | contribs)

Newer edit →

(6 intermediate revisions not shown.)

Line 9:

As shown by the scholar [[Max Dashu]], the medieval concept of a witch began to develop already in pre-Christian times, as its elements can be found in the Roman cult of [[Bacchanalia]]s, especially when led by [[Paculla Annia]], and in the Roman mythological creature of [[strix (mythology)|strix]]. Many suspects were women who lived in towns, villages or rural areas and who may have been practitioners of herbalism, natural healing or [[midwife|midwifery]], but often it was simply poor, uneducated women who did not have influential friends, or who were mentally imbalanced and who would today be considered schizophrenic. Early Modern Christian authorities in Europe (both Catholic and Protestant) strongly condemned any such expression of non-Christian spirituality. This was in accord with literal readings of the [[Old Testament]], which contains strong denunciations against the [[polytheism]] of non-[[Hebrews|Hebrew]] peoples.

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+ == Early Modern Europe Germany==

In modern Europe witch trials became the new approach for witch-hunting for the period. The most significant area of witch-hunting in modern Europe is often looked at as southwestern Germany. In Germany the number trials compared to other regions of Europe is viewed as a relatively late starter. Witch-hunts first showed to have appeared in large numbers in southern France and Switzerland during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The peak years of witch-hunts + in southwest Germany occurred between the years of 1561-1670.<ref>H.C. Erik Midelfort, Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany 1562-1684,1972,71</ref> The first major persecution in Europe is recorded in 1563 in a pamphlet called "True and Horrifying Deeds of 63 Witches" that caught, tried, convicted, and burned witches in the imperial lordship of Wiesensteig in southwestern Germany.<ref>Wolfgang Behringer, Witches and Witch-Hunts,2004,83</ref>

Figure 3: December 2006 screenshot of “witch-hunt” entry showing version before and after a student’s edit. The pre-existing entry is on the left and the first part of the student’s revision is on the right.

such as: what did you like best about the assignment; what did you dislike; what was your biggest challenge; what was the most exciting aspect; what did you learn; how does this use of technology in teaching compare with your previous experience in other courses; how did you feel about the “stakes” of the assignment; how do you now feel about Wikipedia; and what improvements would you suggest for the assignment and process?

I had anticipated some logistical problems with this assignment, including vandalism of student entries by mischievous users (often referred to as “WikiTrolls”) and the students’ lack of familiarity with on-line media. As far as vandalism is concerned, Wikipedia is not quite the free-for-all that many fear, given its complex system of administrators (admins, bureaucrats, and checkusers), its “3R” rule (limiting individuals to perform no more than three reverts within in a 24-hour period), its arbitration and mediation committees, and its automated Wikibots that scan the site for “obvious vandalism... obscenities and evidence of mass deletions.”²⁵ A Communications professor’s experiment as a WikiTroll, in which he inserted thirteen errors into articles on Wikipedia, has illustrated just how effective this system is. All of his intentional errors were removed in less than three hours.²⁶ With these checks in mind, then, it should be little surprise that no student work was irreparably vandalized, although there was the occasional WikiTroll whose damage was quickly repaired by other Wikipedians and by Wikibots.

Although vandalism was not a problem, students did elicit some healthy wiki-debate on their topics which only added to the pedagogical benefits of, and student investment in, the assignment. One example should suffice to illustrate this. The student who decided to contribute to the massive “witch hunt” entry was indignant when, within a day of his own posting, another Wikipedian added what the student thought, based on his own research, was a dubious theory explaining the witch hunts in early modern Germany. What the student soon realized—with a little encouragement from me—was that this was an opportunity to engage in historiographical debate using the discussion feature. He revised the new entry, including research that pointed to the debatable nature of the questionable theory. It was essentially his first experience responding to open peer-review, as opposed to the overly-congratulatory feedback students who know one another tend to offer. He realized that others were reading his work and that it had to stand up to challenge. His experience was not unique among the students completing the assignment.

Interestingly, student start-up effort with the technology of Wikipedia was much higher than I had anticipated. I had assumed—wrongly—that the MySpace/YouTube generation would have no trouble picking up the basics of posting to Wikipedia. On the free-response survey, some students

offered suggestions asking for more “in-class demonstration as to how you go about making all of the changes” and “just a little more explanation of how to and what to do.” When asked what the students disliked about the assignment, one student responded, “the extra time it took to figure out how to add footnotes.” We, as evidence-based historians, should be pleased with this particular frustration! Students’ trouble with the basic ins-and-outs of posting to the site, however, only illustrates what Diana G. Oblinger and Brian L. Hawkins have noted, namely that there is a distinction between student confidence in their use of technology and their competence in information literacy: “Having no fear is not the same as having knowledge or skill.”²⁷

It was clear from the student survey responses that the perceived stakes of the discourse on Wikipedia were definitely higher than that of traditional peer review. Students described feeling that the project was “intimidating” and that they “disliked the idea that [they] might have to erase or change another person’s Wiki offering. Scary.” Students mentioned not wanting to choose “something that would be attacked right away” and they expressed concern about “not upsetting others who had written on the same topic.” They recognized that what they were doing was a “public piece of information” and experienced the thrill that comes with that exposure. One wrote that the Wikipedia contribution “made [him/her] feel like my work paid off to someone more than just my professor.” Another student perhaps summed up the stakes of the historical profession best, writing, “it is exciting to see if your addition survives.”

In my rubric-based observations of student work, I noted that students who targeted a significant gap pertinent to their own historiography projects did a much better job with their Wikipedia contribution than students who had a hard time settling in on a topic. Student survey-based feedback similarly suggested that some students had trouble identifying a gap to which they might contribute. Students nonetheless achieved posting on topics such as the Peruvian Inquisition, the Heresy of the Free Spirit, familiars, Kaballah, curse tablets, witch trial, Tituba, and witch hunt. Although there were a few exceptions, students who built up an entry from a wikistub tended to do a better job than those who attempted to carve out a portion of a longer, previously-existing entry.

Research quality on all projects tended to be high. In fact, in the free-response survey, students noted the research skills they gained as one of the most significant benefits. Representative of the student response when asked what was learned from the assignment, one student wrote, “[a]side from learning how to navigate and add information to Wiki, this assignment reinforced in me the importance of thorough research. I definitely did not want to put info on Wiki that I was not sure about.” Students did

appear to learn about different types of historical writing. One commented that his/her biggest challenge was “what to include and exclude, because this is an encyclopedia, not a micro history.” Additionally, students appeared to appreciate more the importance of voice in historical writing when challenged by the NPOV doctrine of Wikipedia to excise it from their own work.

Some students who performed at the “average” level on customary assignments such as book reviews and the traditional research paper, excelled beyond all expectation with the Wikipedia assignment. This is to be expected, given studies on different learning styles and multiple intelligences. A student who does well with active experimentation and concrete experience will thrive with such an assignment.²⁸ Conversely, a few students who had mastered traditional history assignments had a very hard time with the free-form, self-directed nature of this assignment.

When I next use this assignment, I will incorporate the following changes: 1) the creation of some sort of Wikipedia tutorial, perhaps performed in-class by me or a campus Instruction Technology Services expert, or a downloadable video on-line to save class-time; 2) more in-class, hands-on experimentation with the Wikipedia process; 3) clearer integration through teaching and instructor-modeling of how this assignment relates to historians’ historiographical processes; and 4) more guidance to students in targeting problematic entries. I have also considered inviting, or encouraging the students to invite, published experts on their topic to visit their entry. The stakes at that point would be quite high indeed; in fact, quite similar to the discourse of professional historians.

Results—Twenty-First-Century Learners?

Whereas past student discourse in the class was relatively low-stakes—limited to the professor and in-class peers—contributing to Wikipedia raised the stakes and put students in the midst of a world-wide community including users of, and contributors to, this heavily-trafficked on-line reference source. An assignment like this one definitely pushes beyond what educators are usually talking about when they discuss computer-assisted instruction, namely the use of PowerPoint, learning management systems like BlackBoard, and now iPods.²⁹ This Wikipedia project employs a technological innovation in an integrated way to make students into better historians. The technology is not an “add-on,” but rather a fundamental means to address the skills I have always tried to teach in a History methods class: research, writing, and historiographical thinking.

The North Central Regional Technology in Education Consortium (NCRTEC) has developed a rubric for what it calls the skills of twenty-

first-century learners.³⁰ These skills include digital-age literacy, inventive thinking, effective communication, and high productivity. This Wikipedia project fundamentally addresses the majority of components within these skills. With respect to digital-age literacy, the project develops what NCRTEC describes as technological, visual, and information literacy. In other words, this Wikipedia project teaches students to recognize wiki technology and use it effectively to achieve a history-related goal. It teaches them to use visual media to the extent that they add images to the Wikipedia entry. And finally, it also teaches them to synthesize data effectively by means of technology. In terms of inventive thinking, the project touches on all the elements outlined by NCRTEC: adaptability/managing complexity, self-direction, curiosity, creativity, risk-taking, higher-order thinking, and sound reasoning. When it comes to what NCRTEC describes as effective communication, the Wikipedia assignment encourages students to collaborate with the wider Wikiworld, to develop interpersonal skills as they communicate interactively with others to create an entry, and to take responsibility for the impact of the entry they create. Finally, students completing this task achieve what NCRTEC describes as high productivity. The students learn “prioritizing, planning, and managing for results” in that they must manage a great deal of research in order to create a final product. They learn the “ability to produce relevant, high-quality products” in their production of a valuable on-line reference tool. Finally, students learn “effective use of real-world tools,” since wikis are becoming a regular feature of the corporate world.³¹

While witchcraft-related topics worked particularly well in my course, any historical topic could provide fertile ground for students to engage in this kind of high-stakes discourse. The results are definitely worth the minimal additional effort on the part of the instructor. The proof is in student response to this project. All students surveyed in my course commented on the benefits of the assignment and encouraged me to continue to use it in other courses. From the student survey, it became clear that the most significant benefit of the innovation was the sense of personal achievement and on-going engagement in the learning process. One student stated, “*I felt like I had contributed to the scholarship of history,*” while another wrote that it was the most “*personally rewarding*” assignment they had ever completed in school. Students loved the “*new-ness*” of the innovation, one writing “*who has ever done that before in a class?*” From the perspective of creating life-long learners, the most significant outcome was the ongoing engagement with the process, with many students noting they will continue to update and check on their entry and even add new entries as they learn more about other topics in other classes. Overall, I was pleased that my rubric-based assessment and their student survey-based response

indicated that students really got something out of this assignment and that not only were the desired student learning goals met, but also that there were unexpected benefits—most especially, the students’ pride in their own contribution and their desire for continuing engagement with the learning process beyond the classroom and semester.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Cathie Atkins and Suzanne Aurilio, the Director and Assistant Director of the *People Information and Communication Technologies (pICT)* Initiative at San Diego State University, for their support of this project (see <http://pict.sdsu.edu>). The idea for this project first came from my participation as a fellow at the *pICT*-sponsored “Emerging Trends Summer Symposium” in 2006. Thanks are also due to James Frazee, Jim Julius, and Jon Rizzo, all of whom have been supportive of my research in instructional technology by making available to me whatever technology resources I needed and by answering questions when things went awry. I would also like to thank Bob Kraft (and the CCAT project), Jim O’Donnell (and the on-line Apuleius Project), and Peshe Kuriloff (and the Mellon Writing Groups) for offering me the opportunity to get involved in computer-assisted research and pedagogy while I was still a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania.

2. Steven Colbert, interview with Jimmy Wales, *Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, May 24, 2007.

3. History 400W is a course that students take upon their matriculation as History majors, usually as juniors. The course teaches basic History methods and approaches, culminating in writing assignments that usually include a book review and a historiography essay.

4. For a discussion of “twenty-first-century skills,” see “enGauge 21st Century Skills for 21st Century Learners” <http://www.ncrel.org/engage>.

5. Brock Read, “‘Wikimania’ Participants Give the On-line Encyclopedia Mixed Reviews,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53, no. 2, 1 September 2006, A62.

6. Brock Read, “Building an Encyclopedia, With or Without Scholars,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53, no. 10, 27 October 2006, A33. For an even more in-depth discussion of how Wikipedia came to be, see Stacy Schiff, “Know It All: Can Wikipedia Conquer Expertise,” *The New Yorker* 31 July 2006, 36-43 and Roy Rosenzweig, “Can History be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 93, no. 1 (2006): 117-46 (also available on-line at <http://chnm.gmu.edu/resources/essays/d/42>).

7. Lawrence Lessig, a Stanford University law professor has coined the terms “read-only culture” and “read/write culture” in describing how, “over the course of the 20th century,... corporate tactics and legal developments [have] discouraged individuals from creative endeavors.” Read, A62.

8. On the accuracy of Wikipedia, see Dan Carnevale, “Journal Gives Wikipedia High Marks for Accuracy but not for Readability,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 19, 13 January 2006, A35; Richard Monastersky, “‘Encyclopedia Britannica’ Assails Article that Puts It on a Par with Wikipedia,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 31,

7 April 2006, A30; and Schiff, 42. These articles discuss the 2005 article in *Nature* that found a 4:3 ratio of errors, when comparing Wikipedia articles with *Encyclopedia Britannica* entries on scientific topics.

9. Andrea L. Foster, "An Online Encyclopedia that Anyone Can Edit Ponders Creating a University," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 18, 6 January 2006, A46.

10. Janet M. Giddings, "Ethical Issues in Pedagogy," *SBL Forum*, January 2007.

11. Holger Szesnat, "Who Knows? Wikipedia, Teaching and Research," *SBL Forum*, January 2007. Szesnat even suggests having students contribute to Wikipedia as a "part of a learning exercise."

12. Lawrence J. Mykytiuk, "Wikipedia: Unreliable Source, Useful Heuristic Tool," *SBL Forum*, January 2007.

13. Taylor David Halverson, "Wikipedia or Wackipedia? On the Reasoned Use of New Technology," *SBL Forum*, January 2007.

14. Rosenzweig, 121.

15. Cass Sunstein has calculated that .7% of English-version Wikipedians (ca. 524 people) have completed more than half the edits and the most active 2% (<1500 people) have done approximately 75% of the edits. *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 152.

16. Rosenzweig, 129.

17. Rosenzweig, 139.

18. Sunstein, 75-102.

19. Sunstein, 154.

20. Sunstein, 63.

21. Michelle DenBeste explored the relative merits and drawbacks of instructor and student use of PowerPoint in the classroom in "Power Point, Technology and the Web: More Than Just an Overhead Projector for the New Century," *The History Teacher* 36, no. 4 (2003): 491-504.

22. Deborah Vess discussed ways to create online courses that "create effective online learning environments" by stimulating interactivity in a way that ensures the technology allows users to meet the learning goals that are important to historians. "History in the Digital Age: A Study of the Impact of Interactive Resources on Student Learning," *The History Teacher* 37, no. 3 (2004): 386.

23. See Wikipedia for its features on policies and guidelines (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Policies_and_guidelines), the "Five Pillars of Wikipedia" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Five_pillars), the list of editing guidelines (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List_of_guidelines#Editing), and the general "help" section (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:Contents>).

24. Joni Spurlin, "Technology and Learning: Defining What You Want to Assess," *Educause* (July 2006): 3.

25. For a discussion of all the checks on Wikipedia's content and editorial process, see Schiff, 41.

26. Alexander Halavais' experiment as a WikiTroll is described in Brock Read's article, "Can Wikipedia Ever Make the Grade," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53, no. 10, 27 October 27 2006, A31.

27. Diana G. Oblinger and Brian L. Hawkins, "The Myth about Student Competency," *Educause* (March/April 2006): 12.

28. Active experimentation and concrete experience are two of the stages of the experiential learning cycle on the Kolb Learning Styles Inventory, just one of the many rubrics available for describing the learning process. For more on Kolb, see L. Boulder, "Understanding Learning Styles: The Key to Unlocking Deep Learning and In-Depth

Teaching,” *Thriving in Academe* 24, no. 5 (April 2007): 5-7.

29. For other discussions of technology and history pedagogy, see D. M. Ringrose, “Beyond Amusement: Reflections on Multimedia, Pedagogy, and Digital Literacy in the History Seminar,” *The History Teacher* 34, no. 2 (2001): 209-228; K. Schrum, “Making History on the Web Matter in your Classroom,” *The History Teacher* 34, no. 3 (2001): 327-337; L. Pomerantz, “Bridging the Digital Divide: Reflections on ‘Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age,’” *The History Teacher* 34, no. 4 (2001): 509-22; H. M. Wach, “How I Arrived on the Web: A History Teacher’s Tale,” *The History Teacher* 36, no. 1 (2002): 75-88; and the essays in D. A. Cantu and W. J. Warren, eds. *Teaching History in the Digital Classroom* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003) and D. A. Trinkle and S. A. Merriman, eds., *History.edu Essays in Teaching with Technology* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001).

30. This discussion relies heavily on the terms and rubric developed by NCRTEC and published in the article, “enGauge 21st Century Skills for 21st Century Learners,” available at <http://www.ncrel.org/engage>.

31. Philip Evans, “The Wiki Factor,” *BizEd* (January/February 2006), 28-32 discusses the burgeoning use of wikis in business environments.



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