Collaborative Teaching to Impact: Embedding Wikipedia Editing in an Asian Studies Curriculum

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Teaching to Impact: Embedding Wikipedia Editing in an Asian Studies Curriculum

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Most college students have been trained since high school or earlier to believe that Wikipedia is not a reliable source, but the everyday impact of Wikipedia on the research process is undeniable. As the website consistently pops up at the top of online search results, the tool ends up being a user’s first stop with nearly any topic. However, as recent experiments with AI such as ChatGPT have demonstrated, the amount of searchable data available online is highly skewed and biased.¹ This article shares our experiences of collaborating as an instructor-librarian team to embed Wikipedia editing in an undergraduate core course at the University of Victoria from two perspectives, both to share some of the challenges we face in the context of the Asian studies field and in our respective academic roles, as well as to show specific ways in which Wikipedia editing can be a productive and engaging project for students.

An instructor’s perspective—Dr. Angie Chau

In spring 2022, while exploring assignment alternatives to student-produced short films for my Chinese film course that was moved online during the pandemic, I came across Wiki Education’s program for university instructors.² Given my frustration with the lack of reliable information about Chinese-language films on Wikipedia, I hoped that my students could make a meaningful contribution to increase accessibility and expand knowledge about the marginalized field of Chinese films. That academic term, students worked in pairs and selected article topics related to the course, either a film from our syllabus, or an actor or director associated with the assigned movies. Partly due to the class being taught synchronously on Zoom and the large class size, final projects ended up ranging wildly in quality, from well-researched in-depth revisions on existing articles, to entirely newly created articles, and even incomplete assignments.

One of the biggest challenges that semester was working around the lack of access to Wikipedia for my international students, many of whom were still physically located in China (where Wikipedia is banned) and therefore needed to use a VPN to get on the website. Because Wikipedia does not allow users to edit articles using a VPN, a site administrator had to manually grant override access to each user account. Since it was also my first time working with the Wiki Education Dashboard, the website that allows instructors and students to monitor their learning and contributions, I had to figure out how to manage my course workload and track my students’ progress, then determine the best way to coordinate activities and scheduling on the external Dashboard with our CMS. After encountering these obstacles, I was unsure whether to assign the editing Wikipedia project again in the future,

especially since I would go back to teaching in person the following fall term. However, I had the good fortune that summer to meet up with my colleague, the University of Victoria Asian studies librarian, who shared my interest in using Wikipedia as a teaching tool. The librarian informed me that with the support of UVic Libraries’ “Coming out of COVID Strategic Directions Impact Fund,” we could potentially work together and hire a research assistant to try running the Wikipedia assignment one more time as a team.

In Fall 2022, with the assistance of the librarian and our research assistant, I re-designed a core sequence class that I was teaching for the fourth time, taking into account student feedback from the spring term, namely that it was difficult to navigate two course websites simultaneously (our main class website on the CMS platform Brightspace, plus the additional Wiki Course Dashboard) while juggling course readings and content-related writing assignments with the Wikipedia editing project. The second iteration of the Wikipedia editing assignment confirmed my belief in the value of collaboration, both in terms of the instructor-librarian-graduate student partnership I participated in, as well as the mentorship program offered through Wiki Education, and the collaboration of students with their peers in the classroom setting and the peer review process online in the broader Wikipedia community.

“Literary and Cultural Theory in Pacific and Asian Studies” was a required upper-level course for majors in the Department of Pacific and Asian Studies at the University of Victoria, where I am a faculty member. As a literary comparatist by training, I designed the syllabus with the aim of getting students to explore how shifts in cultural beliefs and media practices shape ways of learning and thinking about Asia. The class was organized around theoretical texts related to global prestige, translation, and genre. To complement the academic readings, students were also assigned three longer works of translated contemporary literature throughout the term: Fang Fang’s Wuhan Diary (2020; 2020 English translation by Michael Berry), Yoko Tawada’s The Emissary (2014; 2018 English translation by Margaret Mitsutani), and Han Kang’s The Vegetarian (2007; 2015 English translation by Deborah Smith).

Holding collaborative planning sessions before the start of the term, we were able to strategize, as a team, on how to embed the new Wikipedia editing assignment so that students would not view the project as extra work, but rather as a relevant and integral part of the course content. For example, since group presentations and online discussion boards were already designated as graded components, the librarian suggested that groups could present one or two Wikipedia articles related to that week’s assigned readings, and then compare the Wikipedia articles with a few other sources on the same topic, to train students to evaluate sources based on the Wikipedia criteria of structure, neutrality, and reliability. In one week, a group shared the Wikipedia entry on “Sinophone” and compared it to Shu-mei Shih’s “Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production,” identifying the key distinctions between Wikipedia’s neutral point of view and argumentative or persuasive academic writing. Similarly, the writing prompts that the research assistant and I created for the online discussion boards encouraged students to draw connections between the weekly course readings and the training modules provided on the Wiki Education Course Dashboard. The first week’s discussion question asked students to respond to the following:

The Sixth Tone article about Zhemao’s “fake Russian” history on Chinese Wikipedia states that “While some Wikipedia editors warned that the incident had ‘shaken the credibility of
the current Chinese Wikipedia as a whole,' most netizens praised Zhemao’s talent and persistence, encouraging her to publish a novel in future” (Wu 2022). According to Wiki Education, good sources “have a reputation for fact checking. That means books published by academic presses, peer-reviewed academic journals, and international newspapers” (Editing Wikipedia, p. 5). What is your experience with Wikipedia as a credible source, either as a student or outside of the classroom? Why do you think some individuals supported Zhemao’s creative (fictional) accounts of Russian history?

This writing prompt emphasizes the popular perception of Wikipedia as an unreliable resource, bringing particular attention to skepticism of its Chinese-language version, but furthermore encourages students to reflect critically on the contentious relationship between history and fiction.

Additional highlights of our instructor-librarian-graduate student partnership included the librarian and the RA’s presence in the classroom, in the form of guest lectures on topics like “Why Wikipedia Matters,” and Q&A sessions related to the online research process and technical aspects of Wikipedia editing—but the element of collaboration was also fruitful from the student perspective. Since most majors in my department are familiar with at least one Asian language, either as a heritage speaker or by way of language studies in university, the Wikipedia project was a productive way of taking advantage of my diverse classroom demographic and showing students how domestic and international students can work together to make use of their varied language abilities. Group members could help each other access a wider range of sources, as well as work together to summarize and translate existing materials.

The peer review process was an important step for students to gain exposure to the digital literacy skill of effective communication, which means being able to read and think critically, then effectively conveying that criticism and, conversely, being able to take in feedback and make improvements. The Peer review training module provided by Wiki Education facilitates the process, making it easy for instructors to assign students articles to review, and teaching students how to evaluate their peers’ work. While some students were frustrated that their edits were not accepted for publication by Wikipedia editors, we reminded them that this is a normal part of the research and publication process. Ironically, other students felt anxious that their work would be published for everyone to read online, but again, this is an expected pressure shared by all scholars in the face of publication. Returning to the issue of censorship, by having access to materials in more languages than just English, students drew on their unique language skills and experiences, to both appreciate the advantages and recognize the limitations of a site like Wikipedia that relies on the work of many individuals working together to increase knowledge. For instance, one student used his travel experiences in mainland China during the COVID-19 pandemic to

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collect data on the different health QR codes adopted by government entities, capturing
detailed information about quickly changing systems that could easily be overlooked or
forgotten.

Finally, the collaborative effort has proven to have a lasting impact. All too often, after a
class is taught, there is too little time for reflection in the aftermath of grading final exams
and submitting grades. Not only were the librarian and the research assistant able to solicit
feedback on the class and the Wikipedia editing assignment from students who volunteered
to take part in a focus group, but we used their constructive feedback, combined with our
own newly gained expertise, to compile a toolkit for embedding Wikipedia editing in Asian
studies curriculum for instructors to adapt to their own purposes. The toolkit includes tips
for instructors on course design and assessment, and the appendices provide a sample
course syllabus, weekly course plan, as well as a survey for students. We hope that the toolkit
can be a helpful starting point for anyone interested in integrating Wikipedia editing into
their Asian studies curriculum.

**A librarian’s perspective—Ying Liu**

As the liaison librarian for the Pacific & Asian Studies department, I normally teach one-shot
library research skills workshops for students. While there is generally a consensus among
librarians that the one-shot library instruction model is “not sufficient to convey the depth
and breadth of information literacy concepts to students,” it remains in use “in part because
of the sheer practicum of the model.”

On the other side, the realm of information literacy is undergoing rapid transformation,
driven by the continuous evolution of our online environment, encompassing aspects such
as open access, open pedagogy, and AI. Librarians are actively exploring an array of library
instruction models and tools to effectively educate students about the emerging information
literacy content such as media literacy and algorithmic literacy, which necessitates
pedagogical approaches that extend beyond the limitations of one-shot workshops.

Hence, my enthusiasm to initiate the project “Embedding Wikipedia Editing in Asian
Studies Curriculum” was sparked upon learning of the instructor’s pioneering efforts in
adopting Wikipedia editing as an alternative assignment in 2022. After the COVID pandemic,
online synchronous and asynchronous teaching was widely tested with the integration of
new education tools. This evolution has now enabled one librarian to provide students with
multiple engagement avenues within a single course. Supported by the “Coming out of COVID
Strategic Directions Impact Fund,” the project team used the instructor’s Contemporary
Asian Literature course as a case study to examine how librarians and instructors collaborate
in curriculum design and learn about the challenges, barriers, and possible solutions in using
Wikipedia for experiential learning assignments in Asian studies courses.

My preliminary search online showed very limited Wikipedia edit-a-thon events and
curriculum design content related to Asian Canadian studies, or broadly, studies on Asian
cultures. Considering the increase of anti-Asian sentiment and violence during and after
COVID, and findings like the recent report from Pew Research Center indicating that

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“Ignorance and misinformation about Asian identity can lead to contentious encounters,” we agree that contributing quality content about Asian cultures on Wikipedia is a significant step towards promoting anti-racism and enhancing social justice. The toolkit’s content is based on the students’ actual learning experiences and feedback, making it informative for any instructor, librarian, or anyone else interested in providing quality online content to combat anti-Asian racism and considering a similar course design in Asian studies.

The whole toolkit, along with its appendices, is readily accessible to all, offered under the Creative Commons license, and downloadable in both Word and PDF formats. It includes the challenges we observed in course planning, the teaching/learning process, and the final assessment. For instance, it delves into inquiries such as: How can the instructor effectively align Wikipedia content with the focal points of the course? How might the instructor help students deal with the anxiety of publishing online and communicating with other external Wikipedia editors? To what extent should instructors permit students to select Wikipedia topics aligned with their interests, while concurrently ensuring relevance to the course focus? The toolkit not only provides suggestions on possible solutions but also shares the practical course documents for users to adopt and adapt including the action plan by weeks, the initial survey on students’ experience with Wikipedia, and the presentation slides of the librarian’s workshops. For the lesson plan of teaching Wikipedia editing and citing, a flip-classroom approach was used to engage students by combining a pre-class survey, brief presentations, and two in-class exercises.

Through the cooperation with the faculty in teaching the course, I had the privilege of observing students organically raise questions like these while working on their assignments: “Is what I found a reliable source?” “What is the correct way to cite it within Wikipedia?” “What accounts for the disparities between the English and Chinese Wikipedia articles covering the same topic?” “How can I critically evaluate my own opinions to stay neutral in writing?” and “Why are many academic and education sources not open access as Wikipedia is?” The engagement was more instinctive and inquisitive in the active learning process compared with my previous experience of lecturing in a one-shot library workshop, trying to bring up students’ interest in these key concepts of information literacy and cramming them into a mere 50-minute talk.

I hope that more Asian studies librarians and instructors might consider Wikipedia editing as an experiential learning opportunity for their students, showing them how to conduct online academic communication properly and how what they learned in the classrooms could impact the world through Wikipedia. This toolkit we have developed will help to streamline the arduous process of curriculum design and class preparation, ultimately empowering educators to deliver a richer and more dynamic education experience to students.

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