9 The First Twenty Years of Teaching with Wikipedia: From Faculty Enemy to Faculty Enabler

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Wikipedia jumbles the faculty roles of teaching, researching, and service by challenging traditional notions of faculty expertise, but a more integrated approach for these roles is also possible.

I have never been able to see Wikipedia without the lens of a faculty member. On the one hand, I subconsciously carry with me perpetual concerns about accuracy and reliability. I am often trying to prove to myself that Wikipedia is legitimate work: it is, after all, the world's largest encyclopedia. Writing to Wikipedia follows a set of complicated rules. So if it is a serious project with rules and enforcers and the world relies on its information, it ought to be universally accepted. And on the other hand? I want Wikipedia to be a lark. I also want Wikipedia to be a place where I wander freely and learn lots and lots of information. A guilty pleasure, not unlike pulling a book off a library shelf and simply reading it.

I suspect that these anxieties I experience might speak to inherent conflict in being a faculty member while engaging Wikipedia. Reading Wikipedia, contributing to Wikipedia, and certainly teaching with Wikipedia jumble and reconfigure the faculty identities of teacher and researcher because they recontextualize our relationships with expertise itself. And as our senses of worth as faculty members are heavily tied to our relationships with expertise, engaging with Wikipedia can be a challenge to our very identities. As an example, Dariusz Jemielniak, in chapter 10, can only make sense of his identities as an academic and a Wikipedian by thinking of editing Wikipedia as a role-playing game.

In this essay, I want to examine the traditional roles of faculty and how they define faculty engagement with Wikipedia. I will argue for a more integrated vision for how the faculty roles of teaching and researching are

also connected to the role of creating public knowledge. Wikipedia creates challenges for faculty based on these roles, but it also creates opportunities for growth.

Additionally, over these last twenty years, the roles of faculty have changed. And certainly Wikipedia has changed. These changes have important implications for the work of creating public knowledge. But the key insight I wish to offer is that throughout these twenty years of faculty engaging with Wikipedia, the relationship between faculty and their sense of their own expertise governs both successful and fraught interactions.

What are these faculty roles? Most faculty positions combine aspects of up to three functions: teaching, researching, and service. As a tenured faculty member at an American public research university, I am expected to do all three—teach students, research original knowledge, and provide service to university constituents. University constituents are students, my discipline, the university itself, and/or the public. Some faculty positions might only feature one function. For instance, in a prior position as an adjunct faculty member, I held a contract which only asked me to teach for a semester. No service and no research were expected. And at my campus, we have faculty who only conduct research for the university—no teaching and no service. But typically when we think of the roles of a faculty member, we are thinking of someone who balances teaching, researching, and service functions.

The faculty roles of teaching and researching might seem self-defined. As teachers, faculty are responsible for helping students reach particular learning outcomes which are appropriate for a course (and, depending upon the structure of the particular institution, faculty are also responsible for defining learning outcomes for the student). Faculty researching is defined as producing peer-reviewed knowledge from any field. In practice, the research of a bench scientist will look much different than the work of a poet, but the disciplines themselves define what counts as peer-reviewed research, and institutions assign responsibilities to different levels of research participation depending on how they have defined a faculty position.

In both the researching and teaching roles, the faculty's relationship to their expertise is more easily understood than in service roles. When researching, faculty engage their expertise directly by investigating, applying, and extending research. Regardless of the discipline, faculty research offers the purest connection to expertise by directly engaging with a

disciplinary understanding of the world—for example, a chemist talking with other chemists about how the world is defined by chemistry. And in teaching, the faculty relationship with expertise is also central—but never fixed and always redefined by the context of the classroom they are addressing. While teaching, faculty must connect novices with their sense of expertise. Memorable teachers seem to do this effortlessly by helping us understand how our view of the world is broken, and their disciplinary content can fix our brokenness.[1] Less inspiring teaching might overlook the needs of learners to contextualize the content of the classroom or fail to appreciate the fact that faculty experts have mental models built up over years of engaging a subject while novice learners approach the subject without those cognitive connections. But even teaching failures are evidence of the intense relationship faculty have with their expertise: in both of these cases, the perspective of the expert can deny the circumspection needed to introduce others to the discipline.

Definitions of faculty service are much more varied and complicated than either teaching or research. In general, the academy has defined faculty service work for the benefit of an academic discipline, institution, or public, which applies the expertise of the faculty member.[2] Most commonly, though, faculty service is for the institution. In practice this can include a raft of different tasks—from resolving student disciplinary conflicts to reviewing faculty tenure and promotion cases. But this category also includes faculty service for the good of the public.

And we faculty who edit Wikipedia in our discipline see our editing actions in this regard—we are applying our faculty expertise for the benefit of public knowledge. This engagement of experts with a public encyclopedia context provides lots of challenges. Some of those challenges include coming to terms with the prohibition on original knowledge; faculty (and student) editors often struggle with the fact that they cannot directly share their original insights on a topic but must instead report on knowledge from published sources. And at other times, we encounter the same challenges from the classroom when we fail to translate expert knowledge to introductory knowledge.

But engaging with Wikipedia can involve faculty writing to their disciplines or beyond. Engaging Wikipedia allows faculty to engage in these roles of researcher, teacher, and student, all at the same time. As researchers, we are experts in a particular area of knowledge which may or may not have

a direct connection to the public. As teachers, we use our connection to our expertise for helping to shape minds, and the world's free encyclopedia cannot help but play a role in knowledge formation at any location and on any topic. And when we read Wikipedia, like everyone else, we become students: we likely have no expertise in the particular topic we are reading.

Faculty have a range of reactions to this experience of setting aside their role as experts when engaging Wikipedia: at one end, we react with outrage, questioning the validity of a project which seems hostile to the very notion of expertise. And at the other end of that range we find engaging Wikipedia exhilarating. It allows us to be novices again or to be students in any field imaginable.

When faculty contribute to Wikipedia, we gain experience with a public facing of our specialized knowledge. We experience the knowledge of other fields, produced by other experts, as novices. And in the journey of resetting ourselves as novices, we are reminded of how different the experience of the novice and the experience of the expert can be when approaching a subject. I am not suggesting that we faculty are always vulnerable when walking in the shoes of the novice. After all, we are members of the public and spend the majority of our time struggling to understand aspects of the contemporary world just like any other citizen. Instead, what I am suggesting is that engaging with Wikipedia puts faculty in touch with the difference between novice and expert roles, an understanding of which is vital to our roles as successful teachers. Effective teaching requires the ability to see a subject through the eyes of a newcomer. And the framework of an encyclopedia, as well as the debates about what content belongs in that encyclopedia, helps faculty keep in touch with a beginner's perspective. In addition, reading and or writing to Wikipedia can call into question the value of the work we do as specialized researchers: even if specialized knowledge is created for different purposes and if Wikipedia is free and useful, what is the value of specialized knowledge? Reading Wikipedia puts faculty in touch with the role of being a student again by triggering our natural curiosity, and working or teaching on Wikipedia invites faculty into collaboration with other people who are not in our faculty community but who share a passion for our subjects. In short, experiencing Wikipedia reconfigures our fixed notions of what it means to be a researcher, a teacher, and a servant of the public good.

But we faculty didn't start our engagements with Wikipedia with a fair-minded and balanced approach. For many of the last twenty years,

Wikipedia was seen as the enemy of the faculty and their engagement with expertise. Many faculty first became aware of Wikipedia when students began citing it as a reference in their papers. Students' use of Wikipedia was often tied to plagiarism. Once faculty began to understand that Wikipedia in and of itself was not a plagiarism mill any more than *Encyclopædia Britannica*, they took aim at its open review policy. Faculty, whose relationship with expertise was defined by a peer-review community with qualified reviewers who were accepted on the basis of their established reputations, were not about to embrace a platform of knowledge produced by unqualified and anonymous editors. The very concept of Wikipedia's knowledge production system was an affront to the principles of peer-reviewed knowledge. So Wikipedia was banned from many classrooms because it seemed to violate the faculty's relationship with expertise: if you were teaching students the premises of information literacy and how to vet sources based on qualified peer review, Wikipedia stood as a clear example of what not to do. Popular reception of Wikipedia, which often characterized it as laughably inaccurate, seemed to back up this faculty rejection.[3]

And yet, gradually, faculty positions changed toward begrudging acceptance of Wikipedia. First, faculty recognized that everyone was using Wikipedia anyway. Many of the faculty who banned Wikipedia from their classrooms were also using it from their offices. As Yochai Benkler reminded us in the *Wealth of Networks*, "Different technologies make different kinds of human action and interaction easier or harder to perform. All other things being equal, things that are easier to do are more likely to be done, and things that are harder to do are less likely to be done. All other things are never equal."[4] As it turned out, we faculty were also willing to trade ease of access to Wikipedia for guaranteed accuracy to printed encyclopedias in many cases. It helped also that the founder of Wikipedia, Jimmy Wales, noted that he felt that as an encyclopedia, Wikipedia was an unacceptable source for student papers. To help document the shift from print to digital information, *Encyclopædia Britannica* ceased printing and shifted to an online version supported by banner ads.

All the while, a small but growing number of faculty were teaching with Wikipedia. These faculty saw Wikipedia not as threat to their sense of expertise but rather as an imperfect statement of knowledge which provided students with a unique opportunity to improve public knowledge. Many of these projects were successful, but just as many ran afoul of many

of the basic tenets of Wikipedia, including prohibitions against original research when students posted essays or violations of copyright when they posted plagiarized materials. The Wikimedia Foundation started to engage the higher education community directly when it created a specific team to work with educators. And later, this group was spun off to form Wiki Education, a foundation with the express purpose of connecting higher education and Wikipedia (see chapter 20).[5] As these structured classroom interactions with Wikipedia grow in terms of number and influence, they indicate an increasing shift with how faculty envision Wikipedia. Rather than existing as a threat to their expertise, Wikipedia is seen as a common public resource allied to the purposes of teaching and learning. Over these past twenty years, the faculty role of teacher has thus become more integrated with the purposes of Wikipedia.

During these past two decades faculty have also grown to see the value of Wikipedia as a public statement of their peer-reviewed knowledge. These disciplinary organizations have come to understand that Wikipedia is the "front door" for the knowledge they create, further integrating the faculty roles of research and service. Examples include partnerships established by Wiki Education between the Wikipedia community and the American Chemical Society, the American Sociological Association, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and the National Women's Studies Association.[6] But faculty are not only seeing Wikipedia as a way to translate their specialized knowledge to a larger public; they are also seeing Wikipedia as a way to translate public experience into data for their research. The monitoring of public access to the Wikipedia pages on influenza to track the spread of the disease serves as a good example of how researchers can utilize the open access principles of Wikipedia to create primary data.[7] In this manner, the integration of the faculty roles of teaching, research, and service on Wikipedia become complete: faculty can teach students by improving the Wikipedia pages on influenza, they can research the disease itself by tracking is spread via Wikipedia, and they can perform a public service by ensuring the accuracy of freely available information about influenza via Wikipedia. Roughly twenty years in, Wikipedia has moved from a perceived threat to higher education to an enabler.

Higher education has changed significantly as well in the past twenty years. These increased partnerships among faculty, their professional

organizations, and Wikipedia underscore how the platform mirrors shifts in the production of knowledge. Academic disciplines now see their connections to public knowledge as more central to their missions and have moved (often slowly or unevenly) to embrace the fundamentals of open electronic communication: broader participation in content creation, broader participation in content dissemination, and more transparency in content creation. Open access publishing, preprint circulation, Google Scholar, citation tracking, and even social media platforms for academic endeavors are indicative of how traditional higher education institutions have changed in this same period. And as newer faculty enter the academy, they bring a more current sense of expectations of Wikipedia and information exchange to their roles of teaching, researching, and service.

Where do we see the next twenty years taking Wikipedia and faculty? Though we now see Wikipedia as the "good grown-up of the internet" and perhaps a countermodel for the problems of disinformation perpetuated by social media, Wikipedia is also headed directly to a problem.[8] It might be the adult of the internet, but the children of the internet are about to bring down the tent. Regulation is coming for the social media giants in the United States and has already arrived in Europe. (And in societies with totalitarian governments, there never was anything other than regulation.)

Wikipedia and the children of the internet have thrived in the United States because of a fundamental paradigm shift in how we assign responsibility for publication of ideas. In a print age, presses, newspapers, and publishing houses served as intellectual and fiduciary underwriters for the accuracy and reliability of the content found in their publications. And generally, with some significant qualifications, publishers and authors could be held legally accountable for the impact of their content. With the widespread development of the "World Wide Web" in the 1990s, online publishers were able to shift responsibility for the content they published to the public who posted the content. Known as intermediary liability, the relevant section of US law reads: "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider."[9]

The Wikimedia Foundation's stake in intermediary liability was called into question early in its history during what became known as the "Seigenthaler incident." In 2005, journalist John Seigenthaler was the victim

of a hoax article posted anonymously on Wikipedia. The Foundation's response summed up the position of those who benefit from intermediary liability—though new policies were developed to improve how the site handles biographies of living persons, the Wikimedia Foundation was not a publisher but a platform for users who were publishing their ideas.[10] Those authors were responsible for their content—not the platform. That shift has served Wikipedia, Facebook, YouTube, and all of the other online content hosts quite well and has generally allowed them to escape responsibility for the content published on their sites. However, with widespread election interference in the 2016 US presidential campaign, it is clear to legislators of any political bent that continuing down a path of laissez-faire regulation for internet companies threatens their livelihoods. And while they have been comfortable giving the benefit of the doubt to internet platforms for decades to afford them space to grow, they are not comfortable once they might have to pay a professional price for the unaccountability of Facebook and its ilk. If the internet is regulated, it is likely to affect adults and children alike.

As long as we have knowledge, we will have tensions about how that knowledge is created. These include tensions about expertise and tensions about agenda. The academy is the home of tensions about knowledge creation; we are comfortable holding multiple perspectives at the same time. Now we are growing comfortable with incorporating Wikipedia and, consequently, allowing Wikipedia to hold a more visible role with shaping public knowledge into our teaching and research practices. Wikipedia has dramatically improved access for knowledge creation and opened up participation. But the real advantage of our partnership is the memory of Wikipedia. We can study how consensus is built. Wikipedia offers the academy and the public a profound opportunity to reflect how knowledge is made. Yes, we have a literature of peer-reviewed research available to us now. But over the next twenty years, as the Wikipedia editing community and higher education continue to work together to produce publicly accessible knowledge, talk pages will have the opportunity to record even more information about how that knowledge is produced. In the future, as this rhetorical record grows about who is shaping knowledge, it will be an even more valuable meta-resource, detailing who participates in knowledge-creation conversations and who is listened to. The record so far (largely male and Western) is not encouraging. But at least there is a record.

Notes

1. This is a rough restatement of Ken Bain's concept of expectation failure, put forth more eloquently in his book *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

2. The American Association of University Professors further divides service into categories of student-centered work, disciplinary work, and community-centered work. "What Do Faculty Do?" American Association of University Professors, accessed June 11, 2019, https://www.aaup.org/issues/faculty-work-workload/what-do-faculty-do.

3. Much of this popular reception is best summarized through Stephen Colbert's concept "Wikiality." Wikipedia, s.v. "Wikipedia: Wikiality and Other Tripling Elephants," accessed June 11, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikiality _and_Other_Tripling_Elephants.

4. Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 36.

5. The author currently serves on the board of directors for Wiki Education.

6. "Partnerships," Wiki Education, accessed June 11, 2019, https://wikiedu.org/partner ships/.

7. David J. McIver and John S. Brownstein, "Wikipedia Usage Estimates Prevalence of Influenza-Like Illness in the United States in Near Real-Time," *PLOS: Computational Biology*, April 17, 2014, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1003581.

8. Stephen Harrison, "Happy 18th Birthday, Wikipedia: Let's Celebrate the Internet's Good Grown-up," *Washington Post*, January 14, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost .com/opinions/happy-18th-birthday-wikipedia-lets-celebrate-the-internets-good -grown-up/2019/01/14/.

9. Wikipedia, s.v. "Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act," accessed June 11, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Section_230_of_the_Commu nications_Decency_Act&oldid=901115397.

10. Wikipedia, s.v. "Wikipedia Seigenthaler biography incident," accessed June 11, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia_Seigenthaler_biography _incident&oldid=901241527.