

Civic Engagement Meets Service Learning: Improving Wikipedia's Coverage of State Government Officials

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Political scientists broadly agree that various forms of civic engagement are necessary to a flourishing democracy. However, the extent to which we embed civic engagement in our undergraduate courses is mixed. Yet, how much average Americans understand about the functioning of their government (Annenberg Public Policy Center 2017) as well as trust in government has been declining consistently since the 1970s and 1980s (Hetherington 2005; Hetherington and Husser 2012). To what extent does our teaching bear responsibility for addressing this?

This study endorses the perspective that boosting civic engagement is our duty (Colby 2008). Looking at the citizenry, we know there is much room for improvement, even for those who are less sanguine about the consequences of declining political knowledge. Arthur Lupia, for example, argued that the somewhat dismal results of surveys measuring political knowledge are not necessarily cause for alarm (Lupia 2016, 9). Nevertheless, Lupia recognizes the value of improving civic knowledge—indeed, his entire book focuses on helping educators boost students' civic learning.

The American Political Science Association (APSA) agrees. Since Elinor Ostrom's presidency in 1996–1997, APSA has led the discipline with resources aimed at doing so. In *Teaching Civic Engagement*, APSA distinguishes between civic engagement and political engagement, as follows:

Civic engagement is a catch-all term that refers to an individual's activities, alone or as part of a group, that focus on developing knowledge about the community and its political system, identifying or seeking solutions to community problems, pursuing goals to benefit the community, and participating in constructive deliberation among community members about the community's political system and community issues, problems, or solutions. Political engagement refers to explicitly politically oriented activities that seek a direct impact on political issues, systems, relationships, and structures. (McCartney 2013, 14)

The scholarship on which pedagogical interventions can boost engagement is limited, but the *Journal of Political Science Education* is making inroads. For example, Claassen and Monson (2015, 418) used several novel efforts to improve students' level of political engagement and knowledge, finding

persistent (i.e., up to two years beyond the course) change in knowledge, interest, and partisan strength. Claes and Hooghe (2017, 42) found that civic education can and does improve outcomes on various citizenship-related measures; however, we must not overstate the extent to which this education can create fully engaged citizens. Furthermore, Unger (2021) forcefully argues that we urgently must seek partners to “embed community engagement into undergraduate curriculums.”

In designing the project described in this article, I decided to focus explicitly on *civic* engagement rather than *political* engagement. Given the increasingly politicized discourse around higher education in the United States today, requiring students to engage with specifically political issues seemed unwise. Civic engagement, however, is a value that we all recognize as necessary. As Dewey (1916) wrote, “Democracy needs to be born anew every generation, and education is the midwife.”

WIKIPEDIA EDITING AS SERVICE LEARNING

Service learning connects theory to real-world experience, followed by critical reflection. Inherently an active-learning pedagogy, service learning is a well-documented example of high-impact teaching practices (HIPs); these pedagogies boost student learning, engagement, and retention (Kuh 2008). HIPs center high expectations, collaboration, and public sharing of findings (Dicklitch 2003). Most service-learning assignments and projects focus on taking students out of the classroom and into nonacademic spaces; however, they need not. This project opted for a type of service learning that focused on creating and disseminating quality information.

The project required students to move from abstract ideas of government of the type they might encounter in a textbook to concrete research on those who govern. That research then was shared on Wikipedia. As Ackerly and Michelitch discuss in this symposium (2022), Wikipedia relies on volunteer editors and contributors to collect, verify, and share information of public interest and concern—a genuine service to the community.

It is important that Wikipedia maintains exacting standards for information shared on its site. That information must be “verifiable against a published reliable source. Editors' opinions and beliefs and unreviewed research will not remain” (Wikipedia 2021a). Contributions must align with academic

integrity and reliable sourcing—practices that many professors lament our students struggle to understand. In an era when misinformation on social media concerns everyone, including the president (Frenkel 2021), the fact that Wikipedia remains committed to providing nonpartisan factual information is a powerful reason to promote its use among political novices (The Economist 2021).

The most recent data suggest that Wikipedia is the fourth-most visited American website (Statista 2021), which begs the question: Why not focus on one of the top three (i.e., Google,

or semester. These assignments are powerful because students understand that their work “matters not only to them, but to the world at large” (Thomas, Jones, and Mattingly 2021, 181)—thereby boosting student motivation. Abundant research links real-world assignments to higher student interest, performance, and long-term learning (Bain 2021; Blum 2016).

PROJECT SCOPE AND DETAILS

In previous iterations of this project, students began by identifying their representatives at the local, state, and national

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YouTube, and Facebook)? A facile explanation lies in Wikipedia’s ease of publication and collaboration. Boosting visibility of information in Google searches would require search optimization (which is difficult for a third party); on YouTube, students would need to create new content and hope that it was easily searchable; and, on Facebook, students would need to master an opaque algorithm and embrace a platform that reinforces information silos. Wikipedia, however, provides a uniquely democratic platform. Wiki editors are constantly fact-checking and finessing one another’s contributions—something that no other popular website offers. Additionally, in 2012, Google introduced the knowledge panel, which pulls the first few paragraphs of text from Wikipedia when a page exists on a topic relevant to a user search, meaning that students’ work indeed can alter content on the world’s most-used website (Dewey 2016).

levels. For students who live in the mid-sized city where our main campus is located, this is a fairly straightforward task because of well-maintained local-government websites. However, for students who live in outlying areas—including those who take classes at our college’s two rural campus sites—information on local representatives is significantly more difficult to find. In watching students struggle with this most basic task—that is, identifying their representatives—the lack of quality information emerged as a clear barrier.

This is not an isolated issue. As Sullivan (2020) noted, the rapid decline of local media was evident even before the COVID-19 pandemic decimated most newsrooms. Not being able to access even basic biographical information about state and local officials leaves citizens with no effective means of holding their government accountable—without time-consuming individual efforts, that is.

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The benefits of Wikipedia as a target for this assignment go well beyond its ease of editing, however. Thomas, Jones, and Mattingly (2021) provide a robust review of the literature on the pedagogical value of Wikipedia editing assignments, highlighting how they boost students’ writing, information literacy, creativity, and critical-thinking skills (see also Wilfahrt and Michelitch 2022 in this symposium). Moreover, embedding Wikipedia contributions into a course aligns with open pedagogy, an approach that builds on open educational resources (OER) by moving students into active-participant and creator roles for open-access information (Fields and Harper 2020).

Finally, Wikipedia editing assignments also align with what Van Allen and Katz (2019) called “renewable assignments,” or those that contribute something meaningful and tangible to the public beyond the context of a single course

Rather than lamenting the challenges of finding information, students moved from being consumers to being producers of information through this project. Historically, “the information associated with political participation and many other forms of engagement was a costly and semiprecious commodity” (Bimber 2000). By taking advantage of the decentralized and democratic features of the internet, students can identify, evaluate, and publish civic-minded information firsthand. Although there are various upstart citizen journalists seeking to fill the local and state news voids, none offers the same coverage that Wikipedia can.¹

The context of our open-access institution also made Wikipedia an attractive target. The project needed to be feasible for students across a diverse geographic area and for a population that includes dual-enrollment students to retirees to

everything in between. Some students in this general-education course take classes on campus; others are fully online and never interact synchronously with an instructor.

In the pilot semester, students were asked to choose a state or local representative who lacked a substantial Wikipedia presence. They could either create a new entry or substantially update existing information to provide more robust coverage, similar to assignments described in this symposium by Baltz (2022) and Sengupta and Ackerly (2022). Students were not required to choose a page of their own officials because many shared the same representatives. This meant a wide range of officials was the subject of their Wikipedia edits. It also led to some disappointing challenges later.

Fortunately, WikiEdu—Wikipedia’s nonprofit organization—provides robust support for faculty who want to design and launch Wiki assignments. After a class is registered, students receive a mentor to assist with the assignment. There is a comprehensive self-paced training on how to edit Wikipedia pages, including tutorials on proper citations and avoiding plagiarism. This training can be assigned to students as part of their project, with progress tracked via an instructor dashboard. WikiEdu also provides training resources for instructors, along with opportunities to be paired with a peer mentor (i.e., who has used WikiEdu projects previously, often in the same discipline). In short, Wikipedia has invested significant resources to help faculty who design Wiki assignments (see Wilfahrt and Michelitch 2022 in this symposium).

Students worked to substantially improve a legislator’s entry, complete with citations of neutral, trustworthy sources. Wikipedia’s terms of use include explicit rules forbidding edits that represent a conflict of interest; under these terms, individuals are discouraged from writing information about themselves and/or their company—particularly company spokespersons and elected officials (Wikipedia 2021c). So strict is this guideline that national news media covered the unconfirmed rumor that during the 2020 presidential election Pete Buttigieg was editing his own Wikipedia page under a pseudonym (Feinberg 2019).

COMPLETING THE PROJECT

Teaching faculty often lament a decline in students’ media-literacy skills, particularly when it comes to engaging with

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news about political figures in an era of rampant misinformation and disinformation (e.g., Aspen Institute 2019). To equip students with the necessary skills to evaluate information before including it on Wikipedia, the project began with a library workshop on trustworthy sources for biographical and political information about elected officials. Our library liaison led these sessions; he also created online research guides for students to consult as they continued their work on the project (Hunter 2021).

For developing students’ technical skills, the WikiEdu platform trains students in the process of editing Wiki pages in a “sandbox” before moving their work to the main site. Once they complete the training on how to do this, they move into editing one or more pages. In the final weeks of the semester, students completed peer reviews of one another’s pages, offering suggestions for improvement and feedback on their progress or completing the edits themselves. Similarly, I evaluated the students’ work and made my own suggestions and edits. Ultimately, if students made a reasonable effort to achieve the project’s goals, they received full credit for their work.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

In the initial pilot of this project, which ran in the summer 2019 semester with approximately 30 students, students were given broad discretion in choosing subjects for their project. Many students made progress without achieving completion of the project (i.e., publishing it publicly on Wikipedia)²; ultimately, however, students contributed seven newly created articles and edited the contents of another 14 Wikipedia articles (see the statistics in the online appendix; Norell 2021).

In many ways, the pilot was successful: students added useful information to Wikipedia and improved access to information about local and state representatives. However, the students and I were disappointed about one important lesson: Wikipedia’s guidelines on “notability” resulted in multiple pages that they had contributed ultimately being deleted from the site. In searching the site guidelines, we found this language: “Just being an elected local official, or an unelected candidate for political office, does not guarantee notability.” Unfortunately, for local government officials who do not otherwise attract what Wikipedia considers “significant press coverage,” inclusion on the site is not guaranteed (Wikipedia 2021b).

Lesson learned. In the fall 2019 semester, all students taking this course were required to edit a Wikipedia page for a grade, specifically focusing on a state legislator, in any state, who had a limited Wikipedia presence. The impact statistics for this semester were of similar magnitude as the pilot semester’s contributions (see the online appendix; Norell 2021). In the spring 2020 semester, students had the option

to complete a Wikipedia project or an alternative, but the COVID-19 pandemic in March hampered completion.

After completing the project, students wrote in-depth reflections on what they learned. Following are two poignant reflections:

I personally did not expect to end up enjoying creating the article as much as I did....Websites like Wikipedia are a civic necessity around the time of an election, especially in elections like the midterms, when a variety of candidates are running for

overlooked or underreported offices. Civic engagement in a democracy is one of the most powerful instruments to change things for the betterment of the collective in the world. Speaking truth to power is impossible if you've isolated yourself or are living in an echo chamber....Reflecting on it in its totality, I not only thoroughly enjoyed the Wikipedia project, it also made me feel extremely connected to do so. Our small class has gone to great strides to bring an added presence of our local and state legislators to a broader platform and larger discourse. (Zack, 2019)

I learned valuable skills that I will carry with me for the rest of my life, and I will continue to contribute on Wikipedia as a result of this project. I learned how to do something I originally thought was incredibly daunting and even a little scary. This is a great project to force students to step out of their comfort zones and to keep people involved in local politics, which are arguably the most important elections we have. (Emma, 2019)

Emma became an active member in the community of Wikipedia editors, engaging in debates with other volunteers about what to include on the site. She also contacted the state legislator whose page she created, Yusuf Hakeem (D-Chattanooga); they remain in contact today. His page has since been updated multiple times by other Wikipedia editors.³

The mechanisms by which this project impacts students' civic engagement are manifold. According to APSA's definition of civic engagement, this project helps students in "developing knowledge about the community and its political system" along with "pursuing goals to benefit the community" (McCartney 2013, 14). By engaging in a HIP that centers public dissemination of information, students participated in an open-pedagogy-aligned, OER-enabled, renewable assignment that helps them to move from the abstract to the tangible. In much the same way that ordinary Americans broadly disapprove of Congress as a whole but trust their own representative (Mendes 2013), students who completed this project personalized politics in a meaningful way. Small-N surveys revealed that students left the course better able to understand government, more attentive to government actions, more likely to discuss government, and more confident that their vote matters (see the online appendix; Norell 2021).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The events of recent years have motivated our students to better understand the political world. The groundswell of political engagement in the United States affects students, and we have a unique opportunity to capitalize by creating high-impact service-learning experiences. This study demonstrates one such opportunity by enhancing available information about state legislators that is available on Wikipedia.

The design and execution of an assignment such as this Wikipedia project requires careful planning, a willingness to persist in the face of disappointments and technical challenges, and a commitment to helping students master tasks that are sometimes challenging. However, the benefits to the students and our communities at large are clear. In their reflections, students who completed this project reported

higher levels of interest, efficacy, and confidence in systems of government. Additionally, they gained experience in editing Wikipedia pages, learning firsthand about the importance of current and reliable information about elected officials.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/WAC2VE>.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit APSA Educate at <https://educate.apsanet.org/resource/01-12-2022/civic-engagement-meets-service-learning-improving-wikipedias-coverage-of-state-government-officials>. ■

NOTES

1. Future project innovations may seek to partner with a local news outlet to create this information on a local media website.
2. Students who did not successfully launch their edits often fell victim to the lack of sufficient, verifiable source material—ironically underscoring the very need for this project.
3. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yusuf_Hakeem.

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