

Using Wikipedia to Re-envision the Term Paper

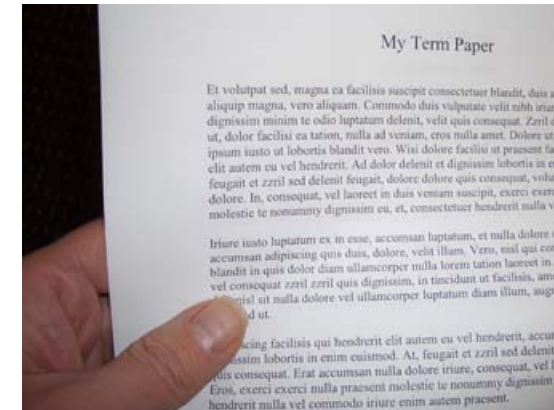
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[Term Paper Limitations]

- Traditional term paper qualities:
 - Audience of one
 - Time- and place-bound
 - Limited set of objectives
 - Limited impact outside of class



[Learning Issues]

- **How** to make a term paper a larger learning experience (rather than a limited academic exercise)
- **How** to provide authentic peer review
- **How** to connect and engage an external community
- **How** to make a term paper benefit a wider community

[Learning Issues]

- **How** to motivate students to do their best work
- **How** to have students think more deeply about the issue of creating knowledge
 - Go beyond just thinking about the paper topic

[Definitions]

- Wiki – online medium which can be edited by anyone with access to it*
 - Typically collaborative
- Wikipedia - "an effort to create and distribute a free encyclopedia of the highest possible quality to every single person on the planet in their own language".*
 - 7.5 million articles in approximately 250 languages
 - Over 2 million articles in English

[Why Wikipedia?]

- Anyone can write articles
 - Huge range of topics available
- Technology manageable
 - Could be accomplished within one quarter
- Instant publishing to a world-wide audience
- Collaborate with a large (anonymous) community



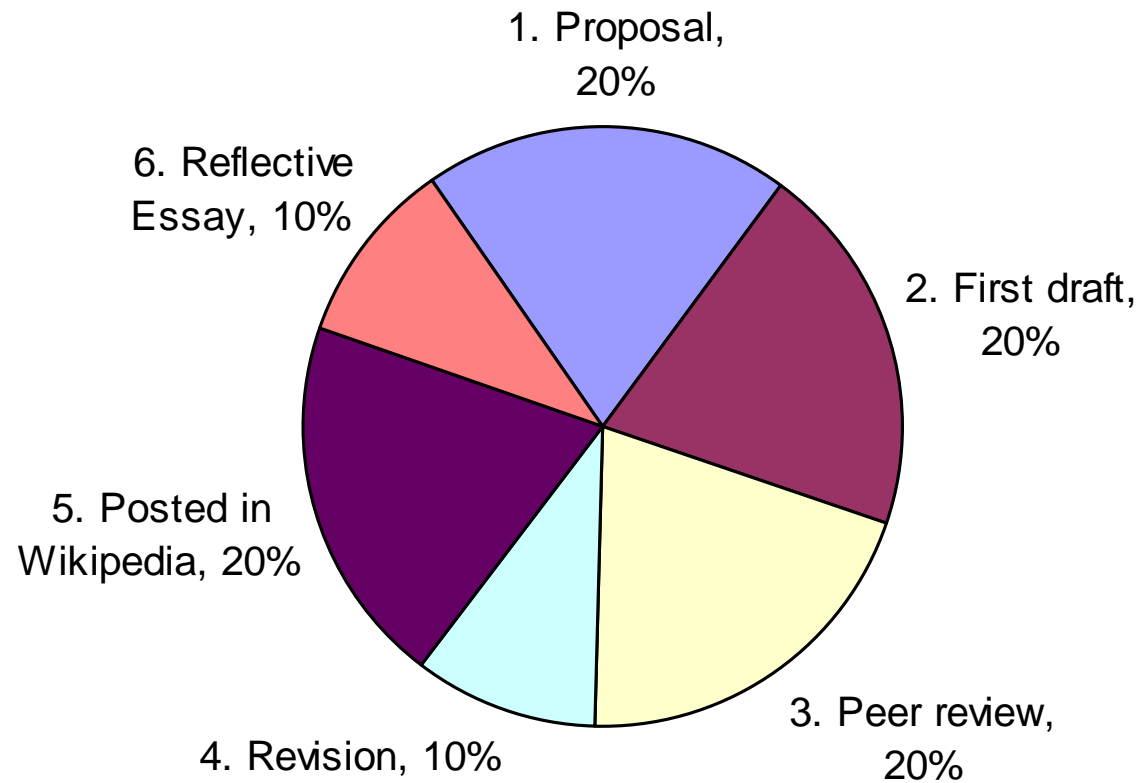
[Wikipedia Issues]

- Reliability
- Anonymity of contributors
 - Lack of accountability
- Vandalism
- Bias

Wikipedia Assignments

- Autumn 2006: Large edit or new Wikipedia article
 - BIS303 – (Environmental) History and Globalization
 - Minimum 1500 words
 - 60% course grade
- Spring 2007: Create a Wikipedia article or sub-article (Collaboration among students)
 - BIS 459 – Conservation and Sustainable Development
 - Minimum word count dependent on group size
 - 40% course grade

[Assignment Elements]



[Issues: Learning How to Wiki]

- Technology issues
 - Requires some wiki markup language
 - Understanding Wikipedia components
 - History
 - Revisions
 - Discussion forums
 - Creating accounts
 - Restrictions for new accounts

```
Insert: — ... ° ≈ ≠ ≤ ≥ ± − × ÷ ← → ·  
  
Wiki markup: {} | [] [[]] [[Category:]] #REDIF  
<references/> <includeonly></includeonly> <no  
(templates)  
Symbols: ~ | ¡ ¢ † ‡ ↔ ↑ ↓ • ¶ # ¹ º ¼ ½ ¾ ⅓ ⅔ ⅙ ⅚
```

[Issues: Learning How to Wiki]

- Technology solutions
 - Students had to complete tutorial at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Tutorial>
 - Sandbox provides practice spaces
 - In-class training session and handouts
 - One-on-one help

[Issues: How to write for Wikipedia]

- Wikipedia style

- 5 pillars



Encyclopedia – verifiable; not original; neutral



Free content



Builds consensus



Code of conduct – act in good faith



No firm rules – be bold

[Issues: How to write for Wikipedia]

- Copyright
- Referencing
- Linking to internal and external sources
- Finding topics to add to Wikipedia

[Assignment Outcomes]

- Autumn 2006: 34 students published to Wikipedia

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deforestation_during_the_Roman_period
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Americanization_%28of_Native_Americans%29
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1491:_New_Revelations_of_the_Americas_Before_Columbus

- Spring 2007: 14 group projects published to Wikipedia

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communal_Wildlife_Conservancies_in_Namibia
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akosombo_Dam
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renewable_energy_in_Africa

[Publishing issues]

- 1 article deleted within 24 hours of posting; 4 articles deleted after discussion, material merged into existing articles
- Intervention required for 1 article
- Some discussion comments from Wikipedia community were delivered rudely

- However, no persistent difficulties in navigating Wikipedia or in publication to Wikipedia for any student

[Student responses]

- *“This assignment felt so **Real!** I had not thought that anything I wrote was worth others reading before, but now I think what I contributed was useful, and I’m glad other people can gain from my research.”*
- *“Although I was really scared by this assignment, I really appreciate a chance to write something that might help someone else beyond myself.”*
- With one exception, students in both courses felt this was a valuable experience, superior to the typical term paper

[What worked well]

- Students gained perspective on the value of credible sources, and complete citations
- Peer review became a more purposeful effort; good critiques more highly valued
- Students invested more in their work, felt greater ownership, and experienced greater returns for their efforts
- Products were generally better written than typical term papers

[What didn't work as well]

- Too much choice led to some poor postings (which were deleted)
- Timing -- Publishing once at the end of course
 - May be better to publish in stages
 - Posting deadline with at least one week left to course
- Students needed extra guidance to create high quality articles in encyclopedia style
- More instructor time required to shepherd students through entire process

[Improving the Assignment]

- In Spring 2007, gave students more specific guidance and stricter oversight on selection of projects
- Required more collaborative projects that allowed greater student oversight
- However, still need to require earlier timing for posting of article
- Students need extra help shifting voice from “essay” to “encyclopedia entry”

[Final Assessment?]

- Writing a Wikipedia article can be a more sophisticated learning experience:
 - Enhances quality of research and writing
 - Enhances student understanding of the research process
 - Highlights importance of using verifiable and credible sources
 - Increases pride in work
 - Encourages collaborative model of knowledge creation