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The Wikiblitz

A Wikipedia Editing Assignment in a First-Year Undergraduate Class

Shawn Graham

In this essay, I describe an experiment conducted in the 2010 academic year at Carleton University, in my first-year seminar class on digital history. This experiment was designed to explore how knowledge is created and represented on *Wikipedia*, by working to improve a single article. The overall objective of the class was to give students an understanding of how historians can create “signal” in the “noise” of the Internet and how historians create knowledge using digital media tools. Given that doing “research” online often involves selecting a resource suggested by Google (generally one within the first three to five results),¹ this class had larger media literacy goals as well. The students were drawn from all areas of the university, with the only stipulation being that they had to be in their first year.

The positive feedback loops inherent in the World Wide Web’s structure greatly influence the way history is consumed, disseminated, and created online. Google’s algorithms will retrieve an article from *Wikipedia*, typically displaying it as one of the first links on the results page. Someone somewhere will decide that the information is “wrong,” and he (it is typically a *he*)² will “fix” the information, clicking on the “edit” button to make the change. To Google’s algorithms, this is one of many signals that the web page featuring this article is more valuable, more relevant, and thus worth a higher ranking. In this way, *Wikipedia* and Google feed one another, and the loop is strengthened.³

We as historians need to teach our students to understand how all this works and how it creates historical knowledge. Digital media make all history public history (whether we like it or not),⁴ and we need to get our research into that positive feedback loop. While Google is a closed service, its workings only dimly perceived through its effects, we can at least engage with the other part of that positive feedback loop, *Wikipedia*.

Using *Wikipedia* in teaching is not a new idea; Roy Rosenzweig made that argument in 2006.⁵ *Wikipedia* itself now has a page for “School and University Projects” that lists over 50 formal collaborations with *Wikipedia*.⁶ This experiment was my first foray into using *Wikipedia* editing as a formative assessment exercise. While it was by and large a successful experiment, it did have one unexpected element: push back and resistance from one significant element in the class, my declared history majors.

FYSM1405a, Digital History

We took some time to get to *Wikipedia* in this course. The first section of the course looked at the sheer mass of historical materials available on the Internet, asking: How do we find our way through all of this? How do we identify what is important? The structured readings during this module were reflections by the seminal author Roy Rosenzweig (founder of the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University).

We also looked at how the “doing” of history was itself an “unnatural act,” in Sam Wineburg’s felicitous phrase.⁷ This led to a second module where the students explored the idea that we never observe the past directly; we must build models to fit what we “know” into a system of explanation. In digital work, these models are explicitly written in computer code. Understanding how the code forces a particular worldview on the user is a key portion of becoming a “digital historian.” Computer games are another kind of model of the world; historical computer games are some of the best-selling games on the market today. A consideration of gaming and “playing” with history led to a module focused on crowdsourcing history and to the Wikiblit assignment. *Wikipedia* can be thought of as a kind of game where competing visions of common knowledge vie for dominance.⁸ I introduced the related idea that since *Wikipedia* involved complex interactions between hundreds of thousands of autonomous individuals who interacted according to a small set of rules, it could be considered a kind of complex system. In this way, a coherent *Wikipedia* entry is an emergent property of decentralized, undirected cooperation and competition.⁹ Before the Wikiblit, we spent two sessions looking at crowdsourcing and

ways that small changes/additions can add up to substantial revisions.¹⁰ We discussed *Wikipedia's* “neutral point of view” (NPOV) provisions by looking at political blogs and contrasting them with other resources.¹¹ We looked at the history of wikis more generally and that of *Wikipedia* itself specifically.¹²

The assignment prompt follows:

At your computer, examine the article at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottawa_Valley (the *Wikipedia* entry for Ottawa Valley).¹³ Identify areas that are logically weak or poorly written, or areas (especially related to its history) that are otherwise incomplete. Using a pseudonym, log into *Wikipedia* and make a substantial improvement to the article. Email me with your pseudonym and a brief description of the changes you made. All changes are to be made within class time.¹⁴

During a subsequent class, you will review how the article evolved during your blitzing of it, and the subsequent changes made by the wider *Wikipedia* community. You will be asked to reflect on how much of your contribution survived the interval. Why did those parts survive? Why did some parts get reverted or deleted? How does the *Wikipedia* community deal with citations and points of view? Your reflection will be written before the class, taking the form of a short paragraph, and will form the starting point for the class discussion.

Part 1 of this assignment, the Wikiblitz itself, was conducted on November 26, 2010. Part 2, the reflection and discussion, took place on December 1, 2010. On December 1, the students were shown a time-lapsed video illustrating how the *Wikipedia* page changed over the course of the blitz and the subsequent week. They shared their observations with their classmates to either side, before sharing with the class as a whole. Their written reflections were taken in for grading per the rubric in table 1 (noting that the majority of the points concerned their actual engagement with the *Wikipedia* page).

My desired outcome was that the students should see how knowledge creation on *Wikipedia* is as much about style as it is about substance. I wanted them to see that writing for *Wikipedia* constitutes a kind of peer review. Finally, I hoped that they would perceive how the NPOV provisions could lead to particular kinds of rhetoric and judgments regarding knowledge credibility and suitability (and could thus situate this kind of writing firmly within the continuum of historiographic writing).¹⁵ In preparing for this exercise, I did not engage in any explicit debate over whether wiki writ-

TABLE 1. Rubric for the Wikiblitz Exercise

	Criterion	3	2	1
Blitz	Editing	Major contribution made	Minor contribution with several corrections made throughout the text	Minor edits only
	Wiki Style	Observed <i>Wikipedia's</i> house style	English is generally correct, but NPOV is not observed	English is problematic
	Sources	Cited appropriately	Citations problematic	No citations
Reflection	Knowledge creation	Reflection shows deep thought on how knowledge is negotiated in a wiki	Reflection shows some awareness of how knowledge is created	Reflection shows little awareness beyond the student's own point of view

Total points: 1/2

ing was an appropriate activity for a historian. Given the trajectory of the class content and conversation, I assumed that the rationale encapsulated in the opening to this essay was by this point self-evident. In hindsight, making that assumption was perhaps an error.

Resistance and Surprise

I had made it clear to my students that I felt that *Wikipedia* was a valuable resource, when students understood how it worked and used it appropriately. Curiously, however, there was push back from an unexpected quarter: my actual history students. As a first-year seminar at my institution, the majority of the students come from other majors. My history students themselves were actually in the minority. In conversation, it became apparent that these students already had quite clear ideas about authority, authorship, and intellectual property, ideas that fit in quite well with established ways of writing history.¹⁶ They had internalized the main strength of a wiki, that it may be edited by anyone, as a challenge to “their” work and thus something to be avoided: “I did the work. I don’t want somebody screwing it up.” Others have noted this phenomenon.¹⁷

Clay Shirky wrote in 2003,

And this [the speed with which changes can be reverted], *mirabile dictu*, is why wikis can have so little protective armor and yet be so resistant to

damage. It takes longer to set fire to the building than put it out, it takes longer to graffiti the wall than clean it, it takes longer to damage the page than restore it. If nearly two hours of work spent trying to subtly undermine a site can be erased in minutes, that's a lousy place to hang out, if your goal is to get people's goat.¹⁸

The idea that one has to *monitor* a site also produced push back in my core group of history students. It seems to me that trained by years of launch and forget—according to which a paper or assignment is written, graded, and then never revisited—has made it difficult for students to entertain the idea that scholarship is conversation, that what you write can have an impact and that you should respond to that impact.¹⁹

We discussed these issues in class, and I felt that I was making progress. However, when the day arrived to do the *Wikipedia* assignment in class, a large proportion of that minority of students were “sick.”

The Day of the Wikiblitz

While the students were making their edits to the page, I observed the edits page and commented on what I was seeing via instant messaging to the class as a whole.²⁰ The class period was 1 hour and 15 minutes. Many of my comments concerned the intricacies of editing and formatting the page and guiding the secondary research going on in the background (or at least trying to guide it). Below are certain key observations:

Great to see some changes being made already. But a question for you—many of the recent changes are focusing on the City of Ottawa itself: is that appropriate for an article on “the Ottawa Valley”? Shouldn't the focus be elsewhere? Perhaps this is a change that needs [to] be made . . . ? (n.b. You can of course make edits to somebody else's edits, from this class!)

[some time later:] Folks, this is an article about the Ottawa Valley, not the city of Ottawa!

[some time later again:] Seems to be a lot of energy focused on the tourism aspect . . . has anybody corrected any obvious errors in the text yet? What about the fact that a valley has two sides . . . ? where's the info on the Quebec side?

Perhaps one of the hardest lessons for the students to absorb was that *Wikipedia* articles are “spare” in the sense that they contain no fat. If an

article loses its focus, other users will either delete that fat or remove it to its own wiki page. In the subsequent discussion of the exercise, the students were evenly split on whether or not I should have intervened during the exercise to remind them about scope. Was a paragraph on the Ottawa Valley's largest city warranted? By and large, the class ultimately decided that it was not, since the city is now culturally (at least in the students' point of view) and legally distinct from the other jurisdictions in the region. We explored the pattern of links that did or did not connect these two articles, noting that a person who landed on the "Ottawa (City of)" page or even the "Ottawa (disambiguation)" page would not be directed to the "Ottawa Valley" page, nor would a visitor to the "Ottawa Valley" page be directed to the "Ottawa (City of)" page.²¹ As in life, so in art: the two concepts were distinct, and their treatment reflected and reinforced that distinction. It is important to remember and to make clear to students that what matters in *Wikipedia* is not just the content of a given page but also the network structure of links that connect pages together.²² (Perhaps a few rounds of Six Degrees of Wikipedia could be useful to make that point.)²³

The energy that the students expended on the tourism industry was interesting. In the discussion, it transpired that this was because it was the "easiest" subject. Aside from the *Wikipedia* link, a basic Google search for "Ottawa Valley" returns nearly nine million results, the first few pages of which are tourism related. We were on campus and had full access to library resources while we did this blitz, and we had already had numerous discussions about best practices in research. That it became apparent quite quickly and was publicly demonstrable that the students were not even approaching basic expectations for research was an important outcome.²⁴

One event was a great surprise to the entire class, me included. I observed,

[A student] has just made some edits to the site . . . but a wikipedia automated vandalism 'bot has reverted them!

We did not realize that these bots even existed. *Wikipedia* has a page explaining how wiki bots work.²⁵ Much of the tedious work of editing *Wikipedia* pages (correcting link formatting for instance) can be automated within the wiki framework. Currently, there are well over 1,000 distinct tasks that are approved for bots. Some of the earliest bots were created to upload massive amounts of material into *Wikipedia* quickly (apparently, this is how major portions of the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica* on the Project Gutenberg site were uploaded into *Wikipedia*).²⁶

As we discussed this incident, we surmised that our small class's activities, a concentrated stream of edits, all from more or less the same place at the same time, must have triggered the bot to revert our changes. The student whose edit finally triggered the bot was greatly upset by this. How could a bot decide that *her* work was somehow malicious? It was a prime teachable moment on the way humans and computers interact.

My final comment during the Wikiblast follows:

Hi everyone—in the space of a class, we've made 30 substantial edits to the page (and many minor ones); increasing its size from 13.8 kb to 23.4 kb—that's the equivalent of about four pages of text. Now—until Wednesday [the following week's class], keep an eye on the page. Let's see how long this version lasts; don't make any more edits.

A year after this class ended in 2010, there have been about 40 edits to the page. Clearly, this page is not one that attracts a lot of attention from the contributors to *Wikipedia*. But our burst of activity did attract others to the site, and some changes and reversions were made by other users. *Wikipedia* users and editors might often operate under pseudonyms, but activity draws attention. Many of the students were quite surprised by this, since it undermined the idea of the anonymous troll making malicious changes undetected.

The following week, I put together a time-lapsed video of the edits to the page from its one-line birth in 2005 to the end of November 2010, following the example of Jon Udell's "Heavy Metal Umlaut" video.²⁷ Visualizing the evolution of a *Wikipedia* page is very instructive. The interests and early structure that emerged in the article's first few months seem to set the skeleton for all subsequent revisions. Once a structure emerges, it seems that it takes a lot of energy to overrule it or otherwise make substantial changes. For instance, the political history of the Ottawa Valley was quickly expunged, but a section on First Nations land claims in the area resisted all efforts to remove it (by other *Wikipedia* authors that were not part of my class).

The exercise was mostly successful. In the students' written feedback, I was particularly heartened to read the following:

The fact that many of the changes made by the class were reverted [by other Wikipedians] means that even an "any one can edit" site like Wikipedia is in fact conservative and resistant to change. Why is that? Perhaps it's because people take ownership of particular pages . . . I also thought it was quite amazing how the anti-vandalism bot reversed some

TABLE 2. Summary of Student Feedback on Wikiblitz Exercise

Gist of Comment	Number of Mentions by Students
Ease of use	1
The way <i>Wikipedia</i> “self heals”	3
Lack of professionalism	3
Content is contested by other Wikipedians	5
Fact that it is “in public” compels professionalism	1
Authority lacking—these people could be just like us!	2
Futility of trying to improve articles	2
Where do Wikipedians get their sources?	1

of our changes . . . this feature[,] designed to preserve the presentation of fact[,] has the effect of preserving misinformation as well . . .

The fact that the people writing and editing Wikipedia pages could in fact be just like us—first years with little in-depth knowledge—is actually rather frightening.

I tabulated the content of my students’ feedback in table 2.

That students need to understand how knowledge can be crowdsourced, produced, and disseminated on the web is, I think, not a radical conclusion. What this small exercise demonstrates for writing history in the digital age is one small way of confronting the more important issue: that our history students can be reluctant to engage with this mode, this way of writing. There will be push back, and we need to explore it, understand where it comes from, and think carefully about how to address it. If we want to raise the quality of public discourse about history, we have to begin with our students and show them how what they do can have immediate impact, given the feedback loop that exists between Google and *Wikipedia*. My experiment failed in some ways, in that I did not achieve the buy-in of all of my “official” history students; but it succeeded in other ways, in that I reached my other students who did not normally (as a part of their regular course of study) have to confront the ways in which knowledge is socially constructed. For one brief moment, they were digital humanists.

Acknowledgments: The Wikiblitz was part of the course work for FYSM1405a (Digital History), and a brief reflection on this assignment was first posted on Graham’s blog *Electric Archaeology: Digital Media for Learning and Research* (<http://electricarchaeologist.wordpress.com>).

Notes

1. This is a generalized pattern; see, for instance, Bernard Jansen and Amanda Spink, “How Are We Searching the World Wide Web? A Comparison of Nine Search Engine Transaction Logs,” *Information Processing and Management* 42, no. 1 (2006): 248–63. Google currently has around two-thirds of the U.S. search market, according to comScore, a digital marketing research firm (comScore, “comScore Releases May 2011 U.S. Search Engine Rankings,” company press release, June 10, 2011, http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2011/6/). This pattern of shallow searching is also evident for more traditional sources; see Barbara Rockenbach, comment on Shawn Graham, “The Wikiblitz,” in *Writing History in the Digital Age*, web-book ed., Fall 2011 version.

2. Ruediger Glott and Rishab Ghosh, *Analysis of Wikipedia Survey Data: Topic: Age and Gender Differences*, Collaborative Creativity Group, Wikimedia Foundation, United Nations University MERIT, Maastricht University, March 2010, 6, http://www.wikipediaurvey.org/docs/Wikipedia_Age_Gender_30March2010-FINAL-3.pdf.

3. Shawn Graham, “Signal versus Noise: Why Academic Blogging Matters; A Structural Argument,” *Electric Archaeology*, April 2, 2011, <http://electricarchaeologist.wordpress.com/2011/04/02/signal-versus-noise-why-academic-blogging-matters-a-structural-argument-saa-2011/>; Roy Rosenzweig, “Can History Be Open Source? *Wikipedia* and the Future of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 93, no. 1 (2006): 117–46. Google+ is a recent facet to this feedback loop. It is too early to say what its impact will be, but it seems designed to keep users in thrall to Google’s services. See Stephen Levy, “Inside Google+—How the Search Giant Plans to Go Social,” *Wired*, June 28, 2011, <http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2011/06/inside-google-plus-social/>. For how Google Scholar is affecting knowledge creation, see Jose van Dijck, “Search Engines and the Production of Academic Knowledge,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13 (2010): 574–92.

4. Neither paywalls nor logins ultimately keep materials hidden. See, for instance, on the Swartz affair, Ben Goldacre, “Academic Publishers Run a Guarded Knowledge Economy,” *Guardian*, 2 September 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/sep/02/bad-science-academic-publishing>; see also <http://youropenbook.org>, on the porosity of Facebook. (This site was shut down for legal reasons in July 2012, “Openbook,” *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Openbook_%28website%29.)

5. Rosenzweig, “Can History Be Open Source?”

6. “School and University Projects,” *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:School_and_university_projects.

7. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

8. Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Change the World* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 228–31.

9. Cf. Melanie Mitchell, *Complexity: A Guided Tour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 215–20.

10. A useful source for this was Robert E. Cummings and Matt Barton, eds., *Wiki Writing: Collaborative Learning in the College Classroom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), <http://www.digitalculture.org/books/wiki-writing>. See also, Jon Udell, "Heavy Metal Umlaut," January 21, 2005, <http://jonudell.net/udell/gems/umlaut/umlaut.html>.

11. See Robert Wolff, "The Historian's Craft, Popular Memory, and *Wikipedia*," in this volume.

12. Cummings and Barton, *Wiki Writing*; Rosenzweig, "Can History Be Open Source?"

13. Carleton University is based in Ottawa, in the heart of the Ottawa Valley, so I chose this particular article to connect the exercise with the students' personal backgrounds.

14. The time frame is why I named the assignment "The Wikiblitz."

15. Amanda Seligman deals explicitly with these issues in her essay in this volume, "Teaching *Wikipedia* without Apologies."

16. Cf. Stephanie Vie and Jennifer de Winter, "Disrupting Intellectual Property: Collaboration and Resistance in Wikis," in Cummings and Barton, *Wiki Writing*, 109–10, on the challenge wikis present to established patterns.

17. Brian Lamb, "Wide Open Spaces: Wikis, Ready or Not," *Educause Review*, 39, no. 5 (2004): 37–48, <http://www.educause.edu/EDUCAUSE+Review/EDUCAUSEReviewMagazineVolume39/WideOpenSpacesWikisReadyorNot/157925>; Cathlena Martin and Lisa Dusenberry, "Wiki Lore and Politics in the Classroom," in Cummings and Barton, *Wiki Writing*, 213–14. Blau and Caspi noted a similar mood in collaborative writing spaces like Google Docs, where students reported that their own edits improved the draft but that edits by others made it worse: see Ina Blau and Avner Caspi, "Sharing and Collaborating with Google Docs: The Influence of Psychological Ownership, Responsibility, and Student's Attitudes on Outcome Quality," in *Proceedings of the E-Learn 2009 World Conference on E-Learning in Corporate, Government, Healthcare, & Higher Education*, Vancouver, Canada (Chesapeake, VA: AACE, 2009), 3329–35, http://www.openac.il/research_center/download/Sharing_collaborating_Google_Docs.pdf.

18. Clay Shirkey, "Wikis, Graffiti, and Process," *Corante*, August 26, 2003, <http://many.corante.com/20030801.shtml>.

19. Cf. Martha Saxton, "*Wikipedia* and Women's History: A Classroom Experience," in this volume.

20. For the page history, see "Ottawa Valley: Revision History," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ottawa_Valley&action=history.

21. While true at the time of the exercise, this was no longer the case in 2011, see "Ottawa," *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottawa>.

22. A. Capocci et al., "Preferential Attachment in the Growth of Social Networks: The Internet Encyclopedia Wikipedia," *Physical Review E* 74.3 036116, accessed January 13, 2012, www.inf.ufgrs.br/~buriol/papers/Physical_Review_E_06.pdf. The network structure to the patterning of author collaboration on *Wikipedia* should also be scrutinized. See Ulrik Brandes et al., "Network Analysis of Collaboration Structure in Wikipedia," in *Proceedings of the 18th International Conference on World Wide Web, Madrid, Spain*, ed. Juan Quemada et al. (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2009), 731–40.

23. *Wikipedia* can also serve as a platform for casual games of “racing” to find the shortest paths between random articles. See Alex Clemesha, *The Wikigame*, <http://thewikigame.com/>.

24. It is an outcome that Gabriel Bodard noted when using *Wikipedia* in classics courses (“Wikipedia as Teaching Tool,” March 25, 2007, <http://www.stoa.org/archives/600>).

25. “Bots,” *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Bots>.

26. “History of Wikipedia,” *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:History_of_Wikipedia_bots.

27. Udell, “Heavy Metal Umlaut.”