Engl 101: Writing in Wikipedia

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania's (IUP) course catalogue describes English 101: Composition I as a first-year writing course in which students use a variety of resources—including but not limited to memory, observation, critical reading and viewing, analysis, and reflection—and a focus on writing process to create projects in a variety of writing genres.[1] The course design presented here, Composition I - Writing in Wikipedia, takes an innovative approach to learning about writing, rhetoric, and research in that the large majority of work revolves around reading, evaluating, and writing in Wikipedia. To frame this engagement with Wikipedia, we rely on Anne Beaufort's writing knowledge domains, which allow students to become familiar with policies and practices for contributing to the encyclopedia.

Description of the Institutional Context

IUP is a mid-sized university, situated in rural Western Pennsylvania. Nearly 12,000 undergraduate and graduate students are enrolled in the university; in fall 2018, the undergraduate student body consisted of 9,215 students ("IUP at a Glance"). The majority of first-year student population is White (71,22%), followed by Black or African American (14,80%), and Hispanic (5,46%) students by ethnicity ("First-year Profile"). Among first-year students, the most popular majors are university college (undeclared), nursing, and criminology. In general, English 101 requires students to engage in different writing genres, create projects, and expand their literacy skills. In particular, students are usually required to submit several writing assignments, such as literacy autobiography, reflective and argumentative essays. This particular English 101: Composition I class met twice per week in a computer lab; with each class session lasting for 75 minutes. IUP's Composition I teaching handbook recommends a genre-based approach to teach for transfer of learning. In particular, students compose multiple diverse genres and adapt their writing to those genres' rhetorical situations, in terms of context, audience, convention, and purpose. The benefit of teaching composition through this approach is its highly contextual nature, which helps students to consider various aspects of a genre's purpose and setting. Moreover, the genre approach promotes learning transfer: students are able to transfer what they learn in Composition I to other courses and beyond the academic setting. Genre knowledge is described by Perkins and Salomon as a "mental gripper"

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1. You can find the syllabi and course calendars for each Course Design essay on the *Composition Studies* website at https://compstudiesjournal.com/.

(qtd. in Beaufort, *Writing* 5); it is a meaningful, contextual, and situated tool to move writing away from the boundaries of academic rules. This pedagogy enables students to use "resources that assist them in producing genres while also developing long-term rhetorical competence that transfers to other writing situations" (Bawarshi and Reiff 180).

Theoretical Rationale

An increasingly mature and diverse body of work in composition has demonstrated the efficacy of Wikipedia-based pedagogy for writing instruction geared toward both traditional FYC educational outcomes (Cummings; di Lauro and Shetler; Hood; Kuhne and Creel; Vetter, "Archive 2.0"; Vetter, McDowell, and Stewart) and more critical approaches to understanding writing, media, and culture (Kill; Vetter, "Teaching Wikipedia"; Vetter and Pettiway). Our focus here will be on demonstrating an accessible theoretical framing for Wikipedia-based FYC by drawing on the work of Anne Beaufort ("College Writing and Beyond"; *Writing in the Real World*). Beaufort identifies five "overlapping yet distinct domains of situated knowledge entailed in acts of writing: (1) discourse community knowledge; (2) subject matter knowledge; (3) genre knowledge; (4) rhetorical knowledge; and (5) writing process knowledge" (18, *College Writing*, numbers added). In particular, we see Beaufort's knowledge domains as a compelling model because of their influence on and easy integration with other mainstream movements in composition pedagogy and theory, especially, writing about writing (Downs and Wardle), transfer (Driscoll), and declarative and conceptual writing knowledge (Wardle and Adler-Kassner). While we recognize that Wikipedia-based education has been framed in many ways, we draw on Beaufort's scheme in this course design for the sake of accessibility, and with the hope that it will be easily taken up by other teacher-scholars interested in Wikipedia-based education. In the following sections, we work through four[2] of Beaufort's five writing knowledge domains to describe a Wikipedia-based version of FYC. As part of our critical reflection, we provide qualitative feedback from students collected in an IRB-approved focus group on the final day of class. Student experience and feedback, accordingly, contextualizes and extends our own critical reflection, as authors and co-teachers, regarding the course design's value and efficacy.

2. While we did not explicitly engage students with Beaufort's subject knowledge domain, we view this course design as enabling students to summarize content knowledge from other sources as they contribute to the encyclopedia. Our focus in this course design is on the remaining four knowledge domains.

Writing Knowledge in Four Domains

Discourse Community Knowledge in Wikipedia-based FYC

While we use a slightly different inflection, the term "social knowledge,"[3] the integration of discourse community knowledge is emphasized throughout the course design. Our inclusion of social and discourse community knowledge as a major knowledge domain is supported by a pedagogical tradition that emphasizes conceptual, declarative knowledge about writing, metacognition, and transfer (Beaufort, *College Writing*; Read and Michaud; Wardle). Social knowledge—including knowledge of discourse community theory (Beaufort; Swales) and an awareness of social contexts as major influences on texts and writing—accomplishes specific pedagogical goals in Composition I: Writing in Wikipedia.

Beaufort identifies four particular aspects of what we call social knowledge particularly useful for first-year writing students: (1) the "values and goals of the [discourse] community;" (2) the "communications process derived from those goals;" (3) the "overarching norms for written texts;" and (4) the "specific writing literacy tasks required to participate in the discourse community" (*College Writing* 186). The Wikipedia community might be understood as a discourse community practicing a type of radical transparency in which many of the processes, policies, and community values of the encyclopedia are visible to individuals who aren't actually involved in the community. Once students begin to dig beneath what is known as the article mainspace they gain access to a number of policies, guidelines, and even philosophies of the encyclopedia in order to learn more about the discourse community's values and goals. Wikipedia's "Five Pillars," introduced to students early in the course, are a great example of this. The fundamental principles of Wikipedia (from which multiple other guidelines and policies emerge) are as follows: (1) "Wikipedia is an encyclopedia; (2) "Wikipedia is written from a neutral point of view" (3) "Wikipedia is free content that anyone can use, edit, and distribute"; (4) "Wikipedia editors should treat each other with respect and civility"; and (5) "Wikipedia has no firm rules" ("Wikipedia: Five Pillars"). When students begin to understand the "neutral point of view" (NPOV) pillar, for example, they can make connections between neutrality and the informative and accessible objectives of an encyclopedia as a genre, and begin to understand how NPOV governs certain communications processes, textual norms, and literacy tasks.[4]

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3. Our use of the terminology *social knowledge* emerges from the first author's realization that *discourse community* may be less accessible to first-year college students.

4. Wikipedia's NPOV pillar and policy has been usefully critiqued from a feminist perspective as prohibiting the contribution of personal and/or embodied writing and knowledge (Gruwell; Vetter and Pettiway).

Genre Knowledge in Wikipedia-based FYC

In her retrospective article, Beaufort again argues for the importance of teaching genre awareness in FYC, though she does back away somewhat from the argument that students should be exposed to multiple genres—asserting instead the importance of deep engagement with fewer genres over shallow engagement with multiple ("Five Years Later"). Beaufort also stresses the need to help students move away from the rote understanding of "school genres or 'mutt genres'" (Wardle, "Mutt Genres"). "Students," she argues, "need to see these genres as particular to a given course—a temporary discourse community—or as 'owned' by a particular disciplinary discourse community and not as universal genres used in all academic subjects." In our course design, we view genre knowledge as both essential for students' success in writing Wikipedia articles; and helpful in aiding the transfer of knowledge across academic and non-academic texts. Students in this course read Kerry Dirk's "Navigating Genres" and practice genre analysis of specific Wikipedia articles in order to better understand features such as NPOV and the encyclopedic linguistic register, section headings to organize content, form and formatting of references, and lead (introductory) sections. Such formalistic knowledge is important to their own success in the course later on, when they draft new sections and new content to add to their chosen Wikipedia articles. But we also ask that they move beyond formalist understandings of the genre towards a type of genre awareness that will allow for transfer across contexts. For instance, we ask students to consider why certain features of the genre have emerged and how they further certain goals of the Wikipedia community. In this way, students engage social knowledge as we introduce genre and genre analysis. Additionally, as students complete an argumentative essay, required as the final writing project in this course, they are also provided the opportunity to reflect on differences between personal, academic, and encyclopedic genres.

Rhetorical Knowledge in Wikipedia-based FYC

Early on in this course, students are asked to complete a major assignment in which they critically evaluate a Wikipedia article according to quality standards set by the Wikipedia community (see: "Wikipedia: Content Assessment"). These are integrated into the Wiki Education Program and help students understand and engage the standards as criteria for evaluation. This is an especially important assignment in the sequence, because it allows students to begin to find gaps and problems with a Wikipedia article that they are then encouraged, later in the assignment sequence, to improve through further content development. In terms of the knowledge domains, we see the "Article Evaluation" assignment as a useful opportunity for students to practice and engage rhetorical knowledge. In addition to a set of questions de-

signed to engage students in the critical evaluation of an article according to Wikipedia standards for content quality, we also ask students to consider the following, "If the purpose of this article is to inform a general audience on the topic of X, how well has that purpose been accomplished?" Answering this question in a rhetorical, evaluative essay allows students to engage concepts related to purpose, audience, accessibility and style, evidence, and authorship, as well as help them become more familiar with a particular article they work to develop later in the course.

Writing Process Knowledge in Wikipedia-based FYC

A remarkable aspect of this course design is the move towards multiple, scaffolded assignments. Though this particular design feature became a barrier for a number of students—simply because they struggled to meet deadlines for each project—the choice to create multiple assignments, however, was one motivated by a concern for procedural knowledge. We wanted students to think about writing as "a series of problem-solving activities [that] will enable writers to approach unfamiliar genres and rhetorical contexts for composing with a greater confidence" (Beaufort, "Transferring Writing Knowledge" 183). The assignment sequence was also carefully crafted to guide students towards (successfully) publishing their work in Wikipedia. For instance, the "Evaluate Wikipedia" assignment helped students both better understand the basic features of a Wikipedia article and select an article to edit and develop later. The "Copyedit an Article" and "Add to an Article" assignments both allowed students to practice Wikipedia editing by making a small change or revision and writing about their experience. The "Wikipedia Article Proposal & Draft" gave students a chance to create a proposal for how they would improve a particular article in Wikipedia, as well as a bibliography of sources, and a draft of new or revised content to be added to the article. This entire assignment was completed in students' Wikipedia user sandboxes, a practice page that novice editors can use to draft content. Students completed a "Wikipedia Peer Review Response" by reviewing a peer's article draft, and a "Final Article" assignment which consisted of them moving their new or revised article content from their sandbox into the article mainspace. Finally, students completed an "In-class Presentation" on their Wikipedia editing experience, as well as a rough draft, peer review, and final draft of a reflective, argumentative essay which asked them to look back at the course to better understand their learning about Wikipedia and writing. It may be a simple lesson, but it is an important one: students in this course learned that they needed to follow through with all of the assignments in order to be successful. We view this as procedural knowledge: all of the sequential steps were important and significant in terms of the project outcomes, leading students to better understand the importance of process for complex writing tasks.

Critical Reflection

Although most critical reflections published in *Composition Studies* course designs are those of the teacher, we viewed this course as an opportunity to gather feedback from students as well. Accordingly, in order to gather qualitative description of student experience, we conducted an IRB-approved focus group with 8 student participants. The focus group was held on the final day of class, after students had completed all coursework except for a final reflective essay.[5] Moroz, who served as a Teaching Assistant for the course, presented students with four questions for discussion.[6] We present these findings in three categories below in order to provide other instructors with insight into common student experiences with a Wikipedia-based assignment. In particular we view their identification of challenges, benefits, and transferability of writing knowledge as especially valuable contributions alongside our own instructor reflections.

"Getting Over the Stigma" - Challenges Faced by Students

Students discussed several challenges they experienced that instructors should be aware of. First, students mentioned the difficulty they had accepting Wikipedia as a credible source, as many were told in high school not to use it as a reference. One of the participants stated that the major challenge was, "[to get] away from…the norm that Wikipedia is bad and that it's not a credible source." Therefore, at the beginning the majority of them were skeptical about a whole course designed around writing for Wikipedia. In addition, students expressed the feeling of fear of writing for the large community of Wikipedia. For example, one student mentioned, "I [have] never posted anything online for everybody to see." This fear was also fueled by their unfamiliarity with the style of Wikipedia writing that should be objective and factual.

"I Liked How Everything Was Sort of Chunked Up into Sections"—Benefits of the Course

In addition to their focus on the challenges associated with the course, students also expressed positive attitudes towards the course design. In particu-

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5. As per IRB stipulations, students were not required to participate in the focus group and were ensured that their participation would in no way influence their standing in the course. To further avoid conflict of interests and promote student anonymity, the instructor of record (Vetter) took no part in conducting the focus group and did not have access to the dataset yielded by the focus group until after grades had been submitted for the course.

6. These questions were as follows: How did working with Wikipedia help you understand writing as one of the knowledge domains? What is your overall experience with the class design? What worked well for you? What would you change if you were to teach this class? What sorts of skills and knowledges are transferable from this class to other writing contexts? What were some challenges you have experienced in this class?

lar, they benefited from the structure of the course where "everything was sort of chunked up into sections […and] it wasn't all just thrown at us as a big project." Students praised the agency they could exercise with the freedom to choose article topics. Several students also mentioned helpful training modules provided on the Wiki Education Dashboard. Another positive outcome of the course was gaining procedural knowledge by completing various tasks. One student commented, "you had to do the drafts, the edits, the peer reviews, get checked through the teacher, makes sure that Wikipedia is okay with it." In addition, a few students mentioned learning what citations are, what they are for, and how to properly use them. Students' interest in Wikipedia beyond the course assignments is a final positive outcome of the course, as evidenced by students' continuing work outside the requirements of the course: "this course did actually get me interested in [the] Wikipedia gender gap, and I have edited another article that was outside of this class."

"Thought Process It Takes to Edit Something" - Transferability of Gained Writing Knowledge

One of the course objectives was encouraging the transfer of learning. This aspect of the course was voiced by all students participating in the focus group. Some mentioned that the course expanded their view on writing and editing processes. Other students focused on specific skills they learned in this course that will help them to become better writers: "[c]itations, proper paraphrasing, plagiarism, all of that's going to be, you know, a necessity." Students in the class reported developing not only writing, but also research skills: "I got a lot of experience in looking for really hard to find research and or making sure that the very few sources I did find were credible."

In addition to students' reflections, we conclude this course design with individual reflections from each of the co-authors. For Vetter, two important lessons came from teaching this specific design. First, while the scaffolding of multiple assignments towards course products and goals was appreciated by some of the students (and referenced in the focus group discussion as a positive), I also witnessed a number of students struggle with multiple deadlines for these smaller assignments. In a future revision of this course, I would consider limiting the number of smaller assignments, and also doing more to emphasize why they are scaffolded to help students understand the process of writing in this unique composing space. Secondly, I am reminded that students struggle with the article selection process in a Wikipedia-based assignment. I encourage students to work on articles within the stub-class to C-class range, which are under-developed according to Wikipedia's internal assessment process. This helps ensure that students will be able to make a tangible contribution to an article in need of development. For some students who chose stub-class

Wikipedia articles to edit, however, this turned out to be a constraint. Stub-class articles are often underdeveloped because there aren't many secondary resources to draw from. This limited how much content students could actually add to a given article. In a future course, I will try to do more to anticipate this particular outcome.

For Moroz, as a novice teacher-scholar, the main takeaway is the fact that students come into a course with diverse expectations and background knowledge. It is difficult at the beginning to get them interested in an atypical writing course on Wikipedia editing. Students' disinterest was especially high when they had to complete numerous training modules provided by Wiki Education. Later, students experienced challenges adhering to various rules of editing, even with the support of training modules. Therefore, instructors engaging Wikipedia-based assignments should provide more explanation and practical tasks prior to the actual editing. One of the major positive outcomes is that students started to view Wikipedia as a credible source that can be referenced. Almost every student shared stereotypes about Wikipedia that were formed in a high-school environment but were positively changed due to the course. Moreover, they experienced what it takes to be an editor for a massive online platform. The course enhanced students understanding of writing as a rhetorical act and increased their experience with various forms of digital writing.

Ultimately, the Wikipedia-based FYC course design offered here represents an accessible curriculum that is consistent with current pedagogical approaches in composition. Furthermore, Wikipedia-based educational approaches offer a number of opportunities for students to engage genuine rhetorical situations and communities, while also improving a public knowledge archive. This course design demonstrates one version of what that might look like. It also provides an opportunity for other scholars to adapt and extend future course designs that are attentive to conceptual knowledge domains in writing pedagogy while engaging students in digital writing practice.

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