Teaching Wikipedia: Appalachian Rhetoric and the Encyclopedic Politics of Representation

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D espite its negative reception by a majority of academic institutions and programs in the early 2000s, a growing amount of research in rhetoric and composition (indeed, across disciplines) has identified numerous opportunities for writing pedagogy offered by Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia "anyone can edit." Among the most prevalent claims in scholarship within composition studies, the encyclopedia allows students to engage with public audiences, gain knowledge about writing processes, and experience writing as a social-collaborative act, all while contributing to a public knowledge project (Cummings, *Lazy Virtues*; Di Lauro and Shetler; Hood; Purdy, "When"; Sweeney; Vetter). Furthermore, the encyclopedia's public revision history offers composition students a chance to challenge the notion of the finished product (Hood; Purdy, "When") and to deconstruct authority in public and "published" texts (Purdy, "The Changing"). Finally, because the encyclopedia is built on the wiki platform, it can provide opportunities for collaboration and interaction with outside audiences and allows for a type of public writing wherein students encounter genuine rhetorical situations and audiences that "often write back" (Cummings, *Lazy Virtues* 5). While this research has led us to broader realizations about Wikipedia's capability to teach toward common learning outcomes in rhetoric and composition, especially those associated with first-year composition, less attention has been paid to the opportunities for teaching with Wikipedia from a cultural perspective, an approach that might be valued more across English studies.

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Wikipedia's open-access mission, evident in its policies and practices, is often praised as inclusive and democratic. The community's ambition to "collect the sum of all human knowledge and distribute it freely to every person on the planet," articulated by cofounder Jimmy Wales (Roblimo), further describes an ethic of accessibility and universality. The encyclopedia *is* incredibly successful by most metrics. As of 2017, the English edition contains more than five million articles ("Wikipedia: Size"). The entire encyclopedia, which includes 295 editions ("List of Wikipedias"), includes more than 30 million articles. Wikipedia is the sixth most popular website on the internet and receives "over 85 million monthly unique visitors from the US alone" ("History of Wikipedia"). The encyclopedia is arguably one of the most successful collaborative writing projects to date, one that has already come to occupy a permanent place in global public knowledge culture.

Despite such success, Wikipedia has also been the subject of a number of critiques in recent years about its ability to accomplish its ambitious goals of universal access and representation. It has come under fire, for instance, for its overwhelmingly male and homogenous editorship (Glott et al.), which has been linked to a lack of representation of women and subjects of more interest to women (Cohen; Gruwell). Critiques of content gaps go beyond gender, however. In "Wiki Space: Palimpsests and the Politics of Exclusion," Mark Graham acknowledges the exclusionary functions of Wikipedia as it represents, and fails to represent, global geographies. Recognizing the dominance of Wikipedia as "de facto global reference of dynamic knowledge," Graham argues that the site's construction of geographic knowledge, "has a potentially immense bearing on the ways that people interact with those same places culturally, economically, and politically" (269). Using the encyclopedia's own system of geotagging articles, Graham's analysis illustrates the massive disparities in representation between Western geographies and the Global South. Even more troubling, Graham's findings also show how, when non-Western locations are represented, they are often written about from an outsider perspective. In other words, a place's people have no voice in that place's representation.

Graham uses the term *uneven* to characterize the information politics of the encyclopedia and to challenge the accepted notion that it is unbiased, claiming: "Wikipedia is characterized by uneven geographies, uneven directions, and uneven politics influencing the palimpsests of place" (271). In this article, I suggest that the "unevenness" of geographical and cultural representation in Wikipedia is not confined to non-Western voices, cultures, and geographies, but that it is also found in already marginalized aspects of American culture and geography: specifically in its representation of the history, culture, and places of Appalachia. In what follows, I argue that Wikipedia writing projects offer English students

opportunities to engage in the cultural politics of representation and access to improve the encyclopedia's coverage of underrepresented topics. Evidence for these arguments emerges from descriptive research conducted during a course taught in the summer of 2014 that introduced students to Wikipedia's problematic politics while also using the encyclopedia to teach general composition outcomes. Students in this course, taught at a mid-sized public university in Appalachian Ohio, improved Wikipedia's coverage of Appalachian topics by editing existing articles and creating new ones. In doing so, they also worked toward an understanding of how Wikipedia influences public knowledge and how they can contribute to a project that improves awareness of their local culture. Ultimately, this pedagogical approach emphasizes both the value of Wikipedia for teaching writing and the ways academics can make meaningful changes to the encyclopedia by attending to gaps of representation. By examining three sets of classroom data, and working directly with students' experiences of a particular course design, this article asks that we consider Wikipedia as a venue for teaching the cultural politics of representation and access in digital spaces and demonstrates how that goal can be integrated into a pedagogy that pays attention to rhetoric, writing, and digital production. Involving students in the cultural politics of Wikipedia can teach much-needed digital critical skills. Furthermore, working with students in a project to attend to gaps of representation can help them understand the significance of community and regional engagement and how they can use writing and goal-directed research as a tool for social change.

Designing the Course; Designing the Study

Guided by qualitative methods, this research places significant emphasis on student experience, especially in regards to perceptions concerning learning. Above all, I seek to provide a rich set of qualitative data on how students perceive Wikipedia writing assignments and what they feel they can gain from such experiences. My methodological approach is also immersive and contextual. By describing day-to-day classroom activities and gathering firsthand, qualitative responses from students concerning their reactions to a specific pedagogical model, I employ a type of classroom research that is nondisruptive, that follows the course of the various writing assignments undertaken by students, that enriches students' writing processes instead of diverting them, and, finally, that values student experience and brings their voices into the scholarly narrative.

This research was conducted in a junior level general education course, Writing and Rhetoric II, made up of 18- to 24-year-old students. Of the students enrolled, 35 percent identified as male and 65 percent as female. The majority of students were white/Caucasian, with only 1 percent identifying as outside that

demographic (0.5 percent African American, 0.5 percent Asian). The course sought to engage Wikipedia as a central topic, and the assignment sequence and course outcomes were built around this topic. The course also participated in the Wiki Education Classroom Program, which "supports university instructors who incorporate Wikipedia assignments into their courses" ("What We Do"). The program provides sample course designs and assignment ideas, as well as support for students in the form of "help" chat channels and content experts who are available to answer questions and solve issues. The design of this course, subtitled Writing in Wikipedia, was also influenced by the research questions from the classroom study, questions that move away from issues regarding learning outcomes toward a project of defining and describing how a critical-cultural agenda might be mapped onto a Wikipedia assignment sequence. How might Wikipedia be used for critical goals of cultural studies projects that deal with identity politics and cultural representation? What can students learn from a project that asks them to engage with local (Appalachian) issues in order to update and expand Wikipedia's coverage on these topics? How do students perceive, understand (or misunderstand) the problems of cultural representation in Wikipedia after working on a Wikipedia writing project? How would such a pedagogical project meet the aims of social-epistemic rhetoric and the general education goals of the course? Finally, how might Wikipedia itself be improved by academics and students intent on dealing with problems of representation of marginalized cultural groups?

To address these questions, this course featured a sequence of four assignments. First, students wrote a short essay in which they employed rhetorical analysis and personal reflection to examine representations of Appalachia in mainstream media and to connect those representations to their own experience. Next, students worked in groups to perform genre analyses on sample Wikipedia articles in order to identify major conventions of the genre and the underlying values and goals those conventions reflect in the Wikipedia community. Groups then presented their findings to the class in order to arrive at a mutual understanding of the types of writing undertaken in Wikipedia.

In the third project, the central research component of the course, students identified a Wikipedia article on Appalachian culture, history, or place that was in need of development. To begin, students wrote a proposal in which they identified gaps and made suggestions for development. Students then performed research on their article topics and, finally, published their edits to the Wikipedia article.

In the final project of the course, students wrote a reflection essay in which they examined their own learning in the course. Students were especially encouraged to reflect on the critical-cultural goals of projects one and three, which,

combined, allowed them to uncover the production of stereotypes surrounding Appalachia in mainstream media and to help produce a more nuanced and realistic representation of this marginalized culture in Wikipedia.

These assignments were designed explicitly to lead students to more mature understandings of cultural representation and production. As they examined the often negative stereotypes about Appalachia in mainstream media, students began to understand how regional identifications are both constructed and distorted in media discourse. In later assignments, they were given the opportunity to participate in the reconstruction of such narratives by editing and improving representations of Appalachia in Wikipedia.

In addition to the collection of these assignments—projects one and three—I also collected three other sets of data. Students wrote "process logs" by responding to open-ended prompts at two intervals in the assignment sequence. The first, which was collected before students began work on project three, asked them to describe their developing understanding of the cultural politics at work in representations of Appalachia in mainstream media and to use their growing understanding of writing and rhetoric to discuss those representations. In the second process log, collected after students had completed their Wikipedia article edits, they were asked to reflect on how their understanding of Wikipedia, especially its politics of access and representation, had changed since they began work on the project. As with all data collection for this study, students were given ample time to complete logs, while the instructor (myself) left the room. As stipulated by IRB, students were given the option of refusing to participate in this study at the beginning of the course and were informed that their responses would be collected anonymously and would in no way affect their grade or standing in the course. Overall, 17 students participated in the study.

In the following sections, I employ thematic analysis (Boyatzis) from both process logs to demonstrate how students came to understand the ways in which rhetoric operates in mainstream media to misrepresent Appalachia, how a similar marginalization has occurred in Wikipedia, and how they can use writing as a tool to work toward increased understanding and representation. My use of this method of thematic analysis entailed the creation of common themes that emerged in student responses to process log prompts. In responses that generated multiple possible themes, as in previous chapters, all themes were counted. For example, if a student wrote about coming to a new understanding of the goals and values of Wikipedia *and* described their new understanding of Appalachia in a single response, both themes were tallied. My inclusion of student quotes from process logs is meant to further illustrate common responses among specific themes. While I have attempted to give voice to multiple students, I do not claim these quotes to be wholly inclusive of every student response. However,

I do view them as representative of the most common responses within given themes. Between reports of these process logs, I describe the major contributions students made to Wikipedia and explain how those contributions improved the encyclopedia's representation of Appalachia. Before moving into this discussion, I provide a review of recent research on teaching with Wikipedia as well as a brief review of Appalachian rhetoric.

Teaching with Wikipedia

Research on Wikipedia-based writing assignments has uncovered a number of opportunities for teaching writing concepts and skills related to process, research, social collaboration, and digital rhetoric (Cummings, *Lazy Virtues*; Kill; Kuhne and Creel; Patch; Purdy, "When"; Reilly; Sweeney; Tardy; Vetter). In the following review, I focus explicitly on research that engages students in Wikipedia editing as opposed to research on Wikipedia writing practices and digital rhetoric outside a pedagogical context (Bridgewater; Jones; Purdy, "The Changing"; Purdy, "When") or research on the use of wikis in composition pedagogy (Barton; Cummings and Barton; Lundin; Sura). I limit my review of the literature in this way in an effort to demonstrate how the pedagogical approach discussed in this article contributes to ongoing scholarship that specifically focuses on the Wikipedia-based assignment, from both theoretical and strictly pedagogical perspectives.

Theoretical research in composition on Wikipedia-based assignments that involve direct editing and analysis (Cummings, *Lazy Virtues*; Kill; Vetter; Reilly) demonstrates how this model of pedagogy provides opportunities for public engagement and works toward specific learning outcomes in rhetorical understanding, writing, and research. While such research plays a significant role in identifying learning outcomes common to composition and English-studies education, there remain significant opportunities for exploring Wikipedia-based assignments that specifically engage in cultural critique, a guiding motivator for the current study.

Wikipedia-based pedagogies are powerful because they provide students access to authentic audiences and rhetorical situations through collaborative engagements. In his book-length project, *Lazy Virtues: Teaching Writing in the Age of Wikipedia*, Robert Cummings theorizes the collaborative knowledge production systems of Wikipedia by applying key concepts related to Commons-Based Peer Production (CBPP) (Benkler) to describe the economics of large-scale collaboration. For Cummings, the application of CBPP to the composition classroom "means maximizing the value added to collaborative projects and maximizing student autonomy...by allowing writers to select projects or topics based on

their interests" (5). The value of such collaborative projects is further maximized because of the "authenticity" of the writing situations Wikipedia affords.

Cummings's attention to the opportunities for self-motivated learning and "authentic" writing Wikipedia provides has had a good deal of influence on research literature that followed. My own previous research follows up on issues of motivation and audience through the theorization of Wikipedia-based writing assignments as a type of community engagement or service-learning pedagogy. Community-engaged pedagogies allow for an increased sense of civic responsibility, motivation, and extra-academic engagement (Adler-Kassner et al.; Deans; Feldman; Herzberg; Weisser). The same could be said for Wikipedia-based writing assignments, I have argued, especially when such assignments are situated within a rich and supportive environment that engages and collaborates with local faculty as well as other Wikipedians (Vetter). Supporting such theorizing with qualitative data, I ultimately argue that the exposure to multiple authorities and audiences in a community-engaged Wikipedia writing project allows students to make gains in rhetorical knowledge (43).

The collaborative and public potential of Wikipedia assignments has led other scholars to focus on this type of pedagogy's capability to engender creative consciousness and public engagement in students of writing and rhetoric (Kill; Reilly). Through such engagement, students immersed in production of knowledge in Wikipedia can become "generative producers and critical consumers of cultural products," as Melanie Kill argues, and can learn to make "meaningful interventions in the world and lasting connections between their humanist training and public engagement" (390). Colleen Reilly, writing a few years earlier in an article published in *First Monday*, made similar conclusions about how asking students to edit Wikipedia "transforms the resource for students from a consumptive space into a productive community" and helps students become the producers in that community.

In addition to this theoretical research, scholars have also addressed Wikipedia-based assignments from a strictly pedagogical point of view, sharing models for specific assignments and speculating about the ways in which the encyclopedia can assist compositionists in the teaching of academic writing skills, critical thinking, rhetoric (especially audience awareness), and information literacy (Patch; Kuhne and Creele; Sweeney; Tardy). Christine Tardy introduces Wikipedia as a tool to develop the academic writing skills of second-language writers and provides an assignment model that includes opportunities for students to practice academic and bilingual literacy skills. Paula Patch, while not providing a model for direct student editing, showcases a model for rhetorical analysis of Wikipedia articles in order for students to think critically about issues of reliability in a source they already frequently use. In an article appearing in a special

issue of the same journal, *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* (*TETYC*), Meghan Sweeney responds to Patch by asking composition instructors to go beyond rhetorical analysis to have students directly contribute to Wikipedia, and in the process, "switch from consumers to producers and subsequently change their relationship with [the encyclopedia], thereby increasing their information literacy and enhancing their multimedia composing process" (256). Both Sweeney and Patch speculate about the ways in which students (and instructors) need to rethink their approach to Wikipedia and adopt a stance that is both critical and generative. In a final contribution to the *TETYC* special issue, Michael Kuhne and Gill Creele demonstrate the opportunities Wikipedia provides for helping students gain a rhetorical understanding of and experience with a genuine audience, in many ways echoing the work of Cummings.

The majority of research on teaching writing with Wikipedia thus far has been focused on the ways in which the encyclopedia enables teaching general-education writing outcomes related to rhetoric, research, public writing, social collaboration, and process. While some scholars have begun to think about how the encyclopedia opens up opportunities for asking students to become producers rather than consumers of culture (Cummings; Kill; Sweeney; Reilly; Vetter), this line of research should be expanded to recognize the opportunities for more critical engagement with Wikipedia's representation of marginalized cultures and identities. This article offers one example of such engagement, by directing our scholarly gaze towards Appalachia.

The (Rhetorical) Invention of Appalachia

Appalachia, as a social invention, remains a cultural other. It exists on the fringes of cultural hegemonies of power, politics, and language. It is the unknown wild; the natural world; the horrifying; the uneducated, uncultured, and unrefined. Research in English and cultural studies on Appalachian rhetoric, identity, and literacy offers a number of insights and opportunities that help begin to define a critical pedagogical approach. In the following, I emphasize Appalachia's contested cultural presence as both a social invention (Batteau) and material reality (Snyder), review divergent approaches to understanding Appalachian students' lived experience and literacies (Sohn; Webb-Sunderhaus; Donehower), and draw connections between critical pedagogy approaches to Appalachian rhetoric (Beech) and the pedagogical model discussed in this article. I ultimately argue for an approach that enables both critical deconstruction of symbolic constructions of Appalachia and the active rewriting of Appalachian representation in Wikipedia.

Allen W. Batteau's *The Invention of Appalachia* forwards a primarily symbolic understanding of this region as a signifier that has come to accrue a number

of political, social, and cultural meanings over the last two hundred years. Through "process[es] of invention and media presentation" (Batteau 56), such cultural meanings remain as apparent markers of a region that continues to be represented from those typically outside the region. Yet, as useful as the idea of invention is for acknowledging how symbolism works to construct Appalachia as a social invention, it has also led to the neglect of the material realities of the region itself, as well as its people. "Labeling Appalachia as a fictive invention does limit our ability to accurately account for the persistent economic, political, and social problems found in the region," argues Todd Snyder in *The Rhetoric of Appalachian Identity*. These material issues are, in part, a function of the rhetorical construction of the region by various cultural forces. "The Appalachian Hillbilly," Snyder acknowledges, "did not write his way into the American imagination. The Hillbilly was given a collection of histories, each with its own rhetorical agenda" (23–4). Snyder's theoretical model—"Hillbilly Learnin'"—furthers his critique of Batteau by describing a co-constitutive model that works to construct the cultural assumptions of individuals both outside and inside Appalachia.

The emphasis of the material experiences of Appalachians, which serves as a counterpoint to Batteau's theorization in Snyder's work, recurs across other research in English studies, especially as it pertains to literacy and pedagogy. Scholarship on Appalachian students from a literacy studies perspective has played a role in shifting the focus to the particular needs and experiences of Appalachian individuals. A majority of these scholars agree on the need to recognize rural and working-class identification categories as multicultural subjects worthy of study (Beech; Donehower; Sohn; Webb-Sunderhaus). These authors diverge, however, when considering local groups of individual students. Katherine Keller Sohn's *Whistlin' and 'Crowin' Women of Appalachia*, for instance, focuses on the narratives of eight women, former Appalachian and working-class students, whose acquisition of literacy allows each to find a productive voice in their communities. In Sohn's study, the Appalachian subject is able to return to her Appalachian community having been empowered through her literacy acquisition while also retaining Appalachian values and identities, especially those related to community and family (159–60).

In other scholarship, Appalachian identity is somewhat more contested. Sarah Webb-Sunderhaus's "A Family Affair: Competing Sponsors of Literacy in Appalachian Students Lives" demonstrates the difficulty in trying to locate a stable Appalachian subject whose literacy habits can be studied. Webb-Sunderhaus shows how many individuals who subscribe to Appalachian identity do not accept some of the most commonly attributed identity markers, for example, the strong connection to family or "familism" (22). In both Webb-Sunderhaus's and Sohn's work, academic spaces are often presented as solutions to issues of illit-

eracy. Such a perspective is challenged by Kim Donehower, who asserts that we need to acknowledge different types of rural literacies. Moreover, Donehower's argument that academia is at least partly to blame for many of the stereotypes of illiteracy challenges some of the optimistic narratives of literacy acquisition presented by other scholars.

Literacy scholarship (Sohn; Webb-Sunderhaus; Donehower) has expanded our understanding of regional and working class identities, provided alternate methods of working with students that represent those backgrounds, revealed academia's complicity with cultural representations of illiteracy, and, finally, suggested ways we might consider nonacademic Appalachian literacies. This research also begins the deconstructive work required to strip cultural stereotypes of their power, especially within educational contexts. However, focusing on literacy alone significantly limits the scope of what can be accomplished in terms of rewriting cultural assumptions of Appalachia. In "Redneck and Hillbilly Discourse in the Writing Classroom," Jennifer Beech describes a model that asks working-class students to deconstruct popular stereotypes in order to understand their implications and influences on their own lived experiences. Beech suggests having students confront popular texts like Jeff Foxworthy jokes (e.g., "You might be a redneck") and juxtapose them with more critical-cultural scholarship to "denaturalize and historicize language" while also "gain[ing] valuable research and reading skills" (176). Beech's model shows how productive engaging students with this type of work can be for both academic literacy and cultural-critical goals.

The pedagogical approach described in this article aligns with Beech's work in that students begin the class by working with contemporary and popular examples of Appalachian stereotypes in mainstream media, to deconstruct those representations and start thinking about how they are formed rhetorically through language. However, the assignment sequence tested here also goes beyond this initial denaturalization phase toward a method of critical praxis that contributes to the reshaping of cultural narratives of Appalachia through public writing in Wikipedia. Because the course took place in a public university in a portion of southeast Ohio considered Appalachian, a good portion of students—but by no means a majority—claimed this identity. In a follow-up survey, 36 percent of students answered yes, that they would "identify themselves with the label/identity category 'Appalachian'; 14 percent, that they "somewhat" identified with the label/identity category; and 50 percent identified "not at all." Furthermore, when asked whether or not their "hometown" fell within the Appalachian region as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission, approximately 43 percent answered yes, 43 percent no, and 14 percent chose, "Bordering." Accordingly, while I cannot claim that I was working with only Appalachian students in this

study, Appalachian students did make up a significant portion of the class. At the same time, in many of their responses to process logs and other in-class writing assignments, students often referred to Appalachians using the third person *they*, rather than first person pronouns *we* or *us*. This would suggest that even while students identified as Appalachian, they still distanced themselves from Appalachian identity. My main motivation, however, was not for students to investigate their own identities, but rather to become more engaged with the region they have lived in during their undergraduate career, to make realizations about how rhetoric plays a role in the construction of stereotypes, and to rewrite those cultural narratives in a public venue.

Our discussions in class, accordingly, centered on the stereotypical representations of Appalachia in film, TV, and print journalism. We read, watched, and talked about the ways identities especially are produced in these different venues and what bearing those identities have on our understanding of the region's social construction (Batteau). Alongside these discussions, students in this course were asked to write a short essay in which they combined rhetorical analysis of media representations with personal observation and reflection to examine their own socially constructed understandings of Appalachia.

This assignment was designed within the larger sequence to prompt students to begin thinking about the unrealistic ways in which Appalachia continues to be marginalized in mainstream media culture. The follow-up assignment, project three, asked them to "rewrite" such negative representations by contributing to Wikipedia and building a more complex and positive representation of the region by editing and revising articles. Between these projects, immediately after the first reflection and observation essay, students wrote the first of two process logs by responding to the following open-ended prompt: So far, what is your understanding of the problems of representation of Appalachia in mainstream media? How might those problems be understood or explained using concepts you've learned about writing and rhetoric?

Because the format encouraged open-ended writing, students' responses were diverse and varied in terms of length and content. However, analysis allows for the identification of at least four common themes in student responses, described more fully in the following sections: "Stereotypes and Negative Representations," "Rhetoric as Epistemic," and "Geographical or Cultural Isolation." These themes are represented quantitatively in Table 1. The common themes found in these initial process logs, I argue, provide support for the pedagogical efficacy of this curricular model for teaching cultural rhetoric; they also help illustrate the ways in which students come to understand cultural processes of language in the representation of Appalachia. Finally, when paired with other descriptive data from the second set of process logs, these responses

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Table 1: Problems of Representation, Appalachia in Mainstream Media

n (N)	Percent	**Problems of Representation**
17 (17)	100 percent	Stereotypes & Negative Representations
15 (17)	88 percent	Rhetoric as Epistemic
6 (17)	35 percent	Geographical/Cultural Isolation

also demonstrate what can be gained from a critical pedagogy that *begins* with deconstruction of cultural stereotypes in order to move toward productive praxis in the culminating Wikipedia project.

Stereotypes and Negative Representations

The most frequent theme in process log responses involved students positively identifying stereotypes and other negative representations as common problems of representation in mainstream media. Students understand these stereotypes as largely misleading and unrepresentative. "The main problem," writes one student,

> is that most of the time Appalachians are generalized into false stereotypes that give a misunderstanding to them and often negative view—such as being uneducated. The problems they face are also misunderstood in news, which also relates to these stereotypes such as drug problems and bad graduation rates, which are not true for all Appalachians.

While this student realizes that the negative representations are sometimes rooted in statistical data, they also acknowledge how even news outlets misrepresent Appalachia by applying a stereotype to the whole region.

Another student's log details the recognition of how horror films often forward violent portrayals of Appalachian people:

> Appalachians are framed as uneducated, poverty stricken, violent, backwards, and homogeneously white "hillbillies." This course has introduced me to many examples within the media that magnify these stereotypes including the popular subgenre of horror films known as "hillbilly horror" which hyperbolizes the inhabitants as deranged mountain men thirsty for the blood of outsiders.

This student employs especially sophisticated diction as they discuss the processes of media representation. First, Appalachians are "framed," not represented, which implies a conscious skewing. Second, this student recognizes the "hyperbolic"

nature of these representations, the exaggerated and dramatic presentation of Appalachian identities as feared other. In another response, a student further investigates the role of fear in the perpetuation of these stereotypes:

> Appalachians are poor, white, and uneducated: these are the stereotypes that have perpetuated throughout society. At the core of this issue is fear. Pop culture depicts Appalachians in an inhuman manner, which allows many to fear Appalachians and avoid the area at all costs. By doing so, people never really learn who Appalachians are or what the Appalachian region is all about.

The fear of the Appalachian, alluded to by this student, serves a dual function. It provides a response for the media consumer, who may not know how to approach the "unknown" of the Appalachian other. It also perpetuates and strengthens the cultural barriers set up between Appalachia and mainstream culture. The stereotype creates fear, and the fear strengthens the stereotypes because it prohibits more nuanced understandings. What was most remarkable about these student responses, and there were many that were similar in content, was the focus on people, on identities. These students quickly realized how damaging negative representations can be to the people who inhabit the region, beyond the negative opinions of the region as a whole.

In a final example of this theme, a student turns their attention to Wikipedia as a form of media and, somewhat incredibly, describes the way the encyclopedia itself further reflects misrepresentation of the region through absence:

> Examples of the misrepresentation of Appalachia are seen on Wikipedia. There are few pages dedicated to Appalachia and many of those are marked as incomplete or low importance. Perhaps this is a visual manifestation of stereotyping: Appalachia is not significant or worth discussing.

This student had already grasped the significance of the third project before we began and had also come to understand how absence—how silence on a particular subject—can be seen as negative representation in Wikipedia.

Rhetoric as Epistemic

One of my major goals for this course was that students begin to understand the social-epistemic functions of writing and rhetoric. I engage here with James Berlin's concept of rhetoric as a "political act involving a dialectical interaction engaging the material, the social, and the individual writer, with language as the agency of mediation" (488). I wanted students to see texts and writing as tools that mediate social-material realities and to understand how texts and other media contribute to our experience with and understanding of the region and culture of Appalachia.

Appalachian rhetoric becomes a powerful influence on how the region is socially constituted through a range of discourses across media. Yet the "invention" of Appalachia through media presentation is only part of this complex process (Batteau). It is a process that also involves the economic, social, and political realities of those living within the region, those identifying with the Appalachian label, and their own actions and reactions among the "culture industries." Snyder's "Hillbilly Learnin,'" as a co-constitutive model that identifies the "writing" of culture both among and beyond the Appalachian subject, moves us beyond Batteau's conception and allows for both the recognition of the production of cultural stereotypes and their imaginative rewriting.

Furthermore, Snyder's articulation of the ideological function of writing in the construction of the social *and* the individual serves as a productive theoretical basis for the way I hoped students would begin to see the representation of Appalachia in mainstream media. A large majority (88 percent) of students *did* write about rhetoric as a social-epistemic force acting on identity, behaviors, and attitudes. Many of these students focused specifically on rhetoric's influence in the construction of Appalachian identities. One student, for example, recognizes how both textual and visual rhetoric can combine to create the "identity of the 'hillbilly' as a sort of empty signifier for a variety of political, cultural, and environmental factors to which we associate with each and every resident [of] the expansive area of Appalachia." In a similar vein, another student discusses how the "power of the media to spread these ideas of what the people are like in Appalachia shows the power of rhetoric and its influence on everything we do." Others did not limit their analysis to identity production, recognizing that the way we experience stereotypes, and even reality, is contingent on language:

> Rhetoric plays a large role in developing a stereotype. Through the use of images, the media is able to provide a very narrow view of Appalachia. By seeing these images time and time again (and often through notable media outlets), the public begins to believe that these stereotypes are a reality, a reality that is socially constructed and in fact, not real at all.

Such a reality includes both the people of a particular region as well as the entire culture, as noticed by another student who discusses how "reliance on stereotypical representations of Appalachia by the media shows an ignorance of the true complexity of a culture and furthermore shows how rhetoric can control how people view subjects, even entire areas."

While many of these students identified the negative influence of rhetoric in the media on Appalachian culture, others identified how rhetoric can be taken up by the individual to improve representations of a subject, a task the class would work on in the Wikipedia assignment. One student, for example, identifies the

positive agency that can be gained once writers understand how powerful rhetoric can be in rewriting cultural representations and, ultimately, reality:

> It is very seldom that we hear about the accomplishments or success of Appalachia in the media. We can use rhetoric as writers to disprove former ideas that are not true about the Appalachian culture or area. The media and sources like Wikipedia can be used to explain the area better…The more positive information written about Appalachia and its culture, the better chance we have for making a change in the way it is viewed. Writers use rhetoric as a way of building information using former ideas.

Similarly, another student identifies the need for individual writers who have firsthand experience with the region to play a role in its rhetorical construction. The problematic representations of Appalachia

> can be fixed by incorporating voices from the Appalachian regions into discussions and by having people go into the Appalachian region [to] learn more about their culture of life…That is the only way they will be able to truly see how these people live and why they do the things the way they do.

Geographical and Cultural Isolation

A final theme in students' understandings of Appalachian representation cites geographical and cultural isolation as a major factor in the production of stereotypes. More than a third of students (35 percent) wrote about Appalachia's isolation in their logs, noting how such isolation allows audiences to accept misleading rhetoric:

> Because Appalachia is made up primarily of isolated communities with minimal outside contact, most people living in the world are not familiar with the region or the people who live there. Outsiders can be prone to believing misleading stereotypes…Because the consumer of this media has minimal firsthand contact with the people of Appalachia the stereotypes portrayed are often taken as truth.

These students identify a significant disconnect between how a place is represented and experienced by outsiders and how people who are more familiar with the region understand Appalachia. Because they attend a college in Appalachia, these students had some experience with this. They were able to realize, for instance, that the unfamiliarity of audiences with Appalachian stereotypes and realities "creates a sort of fish bowl out of Appalachia in which the rest of America is looking into from the media's perspective."

Examining student perceptions in the first process log, written before students worked on the major Wikipedia project but after they had reflected on representations of Appalachia in mainstream media, provides significant insight into how students understand and process a social-epistemic notion of rhetoric

that engages with the cultural politics of representation. Interestingly, only one student admitted being completely unfamiliar with Appalachia as a cultural marker; all others, we can assume, were at least somewhat familiar with the term. Finally, the common themes found in these process logs also demonstrate this pedagogical model's capability for teaching rhetoric's influence on everyday life and the discursive production of Appalachia in the media. In the next section, I examine the specific contributions students made to Wikipedia and follow up with descriptions of themes found in the final process log, which asks students to reflect on their own learning experience, especially as it pertained to Wikipedia's cultural politics.

Appalachia in Wikipedia

The Wikipedia community is not unaware of problems of coverage and representation, and many initiatives have emerged to address specific content gaps. Wikiprojects, for instance, serve as dedicated task forces, groups of "contributors who want to work together as a team to improve Wikipedia" and that often "focus on a specific topic area (for example, women's history)." There are more than 2,000 Wikiprojects in the English edition of Wikipedia. These projects serve members with common interests and motivations by providing "resources to help coordinate and organize the group's efforts at creating and improving articles" within the project's scope ("Wikipedia: Wikiproject").

One such project—Wikiproject Appalachia—is dedicated to the goal of "creat[ing], improv[ing], and/or maintain[ing]" articles related to the region. Examining Wikiproject Appalachia, one learns a great deal about the current lack of representation of Appalachian subjects in the encyclopedia. The "Articles in Need of Attention" section, for instance, lists more than 40 articles in need of development or major reorganization. Additionally, the project links to more than 400 Appalachian county articles in need of "basic copyediting and clean-up." Most striking about these "articles in need," however, are those listed that would seem notable or recognizable enough to have already been well-represented. While some of the topics are obscure, more mainstream topics like "Appalachia," "Hillbilly," and "Appalachian Music" are also listed as needing development ("Wikipedia: Wikiproject Appalachia"). The existence of Wikiproject Appalachia itself demonstrates the encyclopedia's misrepresentation of the region. But the articles the Wikiproject has identified as needing work also show that this misrepresentation cuts across notable and non-notable article topics.

For students working to improve the encyclopedia's coverage of this region, Wikiproject Appalachia proved to be tremendously useful. Not only did students

explore the "Articles in Need" list to help guide their selection of articles to work on, they were also able to post questions and comments in the Wikiproject's "talk" page to ask others for help. Centering a classroom assignment around a Wikiproject is an excellent way to encourage more interaction between students and other editors and to ensure they have the most resources available to help them choose a suitable article to work on. In fact, many of the articles students eventually chose to work on were pulled from Wikiproject Appalachia. These articles represented a diversity of topics relating to the geography, culture, and history of Appalachia.

While a few students struggled to have their edits accepted by other editors, the majority were able to make significant contributions to these articles. Measuring those contributions is more difficult. Rather than count words or pages, which we tend to do in academia, Wikipedia counts edits and bytes. An edit could range from something as minor as the insertion of a comma to the addition of a 500-word section within an article. In my assignments, I typically ask students to complete the equivalent of 500 to 1000 words in a Wikipedia article or articles. This number might seem low, but it is actually difficult to attain. Wikipedia strives for brevity and clarity and, of course, wants the majority of content sourced. This can lead to students having difficulty meeting a length requirement. In this particular course, I encouraged students to consider revision and reorganization of existing content in their word counts as well, which further complicated the task of measuring their contributions. In my own formal assessments, I used Wikipedia's "Compare Revisions" feature, which allows for side-by-side comparison of an article before and after students' work. This feature allowed me to see the level of their contributions and how they improved representation of Appalachia. But I also take into consideration students' use of sources, formatting and organization, and interaction with the Wikipedia community. In other words, I wanted students to take a holistic approach that went beyond word count to really improve articles among different factors.

For instance, in my assessment of a student working on the "Hillbilly" article, I summarized the major work they had done on the article in the following points:

- Expanded the lead section to better define the term and "preview" the article's information
- Added content and revised the History section
- Added a section on popular culture, which now includes an interesting analysis of the term in popular media (TV and film)
- Made revisions to the Music section
- Added a section on cultural implications with new content

- Added wikilinks
- Added references to support claims
- Rewrote/revised a lot of the original content to be consistent with Wikipedia style

As is evident from a review of these changes, this student was able to make substantive and significant content changes to the article in question. And while not all students were as successful, the majority of them did change the representation of Appalachia on Wikipedia by editing and revising these articles on its people, places, and culture. In addition to making these contributions, of course, students also learned about the cultural politics of Wikipedia, which the next section details more thoroughly.

Teaching Wikipedia's Politics of Access and Representation

After writing the first process log, students completed a group project in which they employed genre analysis to come to a clearer understanding of Wikipedia article genre features and the community goals and values those features reflect. This group project was meant to familiarize students with typical writing conventions in Wikipedia, to prepare them for writing in the encyclopedia, and to teach them the function and advantage of using genre analysis to be better prepared for a variety of writing tasks. In the third project, students chose to either create a new Wikipedia article or revise and develop an existing one. The course's focus on Appalachian rhetoric meant that students were asked to choose from topics that were representative of Appalachian place, history, or culture. Such a constraint did not prove to be limiting, however, and students still had a great deal of choice. After completing this project, students wrote the second of two process logs, answering the following prompt: How has your understanding of Wikipedia (especially its politics of access and representation) changed since you've worked on this project?

In an analysis of their responses, I have identified four major themes. As Table 2 demonstrates, two majority responses emerged in the data. Students overwhelmingly reported increased knowledge about Wikipedia and increased understanding of Wikipedia's cultural politics. Smaller clusters of responses reiterated how unprepared other instructors are to help students understand and use Wikipedia effectively. Finally, a much smaller number commented on the difficulty they felt in accessing and writing in the Wikipedia community. As in the analysis of process log 1, themes were identified through extensive review of process log data and the identification of common patterns according to recurring

Table 2: Developed Understanding of Wikipedia and Cultural/Information Politics

n (N)	Percent	Student Understanding
17 (17)	100 percent	*Increased* Knowledge About Wikipedia
15 (17)	88 percent	*Increased* Understanding of Cultural Politics
6 (17)	35 percent	Other (Previous) Academic Approaches
3 (17)	18 percent	Difficulty of Access

textual cues. What these data demonstrate, ultimately, is that Wikipedia-based assignments can do more than teach traditional learning outcomes related to composition and rhetoric; they can also help teach digital cultural politics of representation, and engage students in active praxis that works to refigure and re-represent Appalachia.

Wikipedia as Writing and Research Resource

While not by any means a majority response, a significant number of students framed their discussions of how their understanding of Wikipedia has changed by reflecting back on other instructors' approaches to using it. Furthermore, all of these students commented on how previous academic authorities misunderstood Wikipedia as a resource and often banned it outright.

> Before this class, I was always told that Wikipedia is not a "reliable source" and was never able to use it for class assignments so I would just cruise right by it in a search engine unless I was looking for brief useless information regarding something within pop culture. But now I feel it has gotten a bad reputation and is more useful that my previous professors were aware of. I plan to use Wikipedia a lot more in my research process.

Such outright bans on Wikipedia serve to limit students' research processes, especially when they can be taught to use Wikipedia as a preliminary research venue to find search terms, other sources, and related topics.

Perhaps because students are so commonly told to avoid Wikipedia in their academic pursuits, a majority chose to respond to the prompt by discussing their increased knowledge about Wikipedia. One student wrote about how the community element of the site enforces accuracy and relevancy, saying, "Now I realize that Wikipedia is a community of people working together to share knowledge. Because it is a community of people, it's not a total free for all of posts that would lead to a lot of inaccurate information." Others recognized how much the community members do to create a useful reference source: "I also had no idea

how much work people put into writing the different articles. I think that I just assumed that the articles appear on the website and not really the background of it." A number of students also discussed how Wikipedia can be a great venue for preliminary research if you know how to use it correctly. "Now that I have taken this class," writes one student, "there is so much more that I know I can do with Wikipedia, and it can really help me in future writing." Beyond coming to a more nuanced understanding of the Wikipedia community, how it works to construct and share knowledge, and how it can be helpful in their own research and writing, an overwhelming majority of students also reported positive gains in their understanding of information and cultural politics of representation and access in the encyclopedia, one of the central goals of the assignment sequence.

Politics of Access and Representation in Wikipedia

Students wrote about their new understanding of Wikipedia's cultural politics by referencing a number of issues related to access and representation. First, they began to understand how the encyclopedia's homogenous demographic could negatively impact its mission to provide neutral, unbiased information:

> The bias of the population (being that 85 percent are male) is a blatant violation of the premise behind the site. The purpose is an open-access encyclopedia with knowledge from EVERY one. There are significant areas of Wikipedia that are lacking and would benefit immensely if those editing it would become more diverse (emphasis in original).

Other students took a more optimistic outlook while still acknowledging the lack of diversity:

> Although the site may not have the most diverse contributor base, it is still the best compendium of information ever compiled. I believe that with more classes like this, on more college campuses around the world, we can all look forward to a future of Wikipedia that includes a vast and diverse contributor base sharing their knowledge and experience with the collective mind of the world.

This student, in particular, echoed the positive spirit of Wikipedia's open-access ethic while commenting on how the participation by colleges and universities could ultimately help the encyclopedia solve some of its demographic problems.

Other students took up the implications and effects of the problems of diversity, noting especially how the encyclopedia becomes less representative and accurate because of its editor-base. Wikipedia, the student argues,

> can be unreliable: gaps in gender, race, class, and age. I don't think this class was designed to make the students question the stereotypes of Appalachia but a more meta-knowledge approach, to question all stereotypes and question everything. At the beginning of this process log I mentioned that my understanding of Wikipedia

> was what was told to me throughout my life, this right here is an example of what this class represents: our basic understandings of people, life, and pretty much everything is based on what people believe and perceive. So not only has this class changed my perspective on Wikipedia, but also the way I look at everything.

Significantly, this student was also able to gain a broader awareness of how the misrepresentation of Appalachia is just one example of the ways social hegemonies dictate our everyday thoughts, behaviors, lives.

The discussion of what students were told about Wikipedia by teachers in the past serves as a striking illustration of how the assignment sequence challenged their ways of thinking. In other responses, students highlighted the importance of engaging in local research and working to disrupt stereotypes, as well as the basic opportunities for understanding and engaging in their environment, and translating that knowledge in a global platform:

> After furthering my understanding of Wikipedia, I began to realize why this project is so relevant. As a class, we've lived in Appalachia for at least the past few years. We know this area and we know the people. By revising articles related to the Appalachian region, we are (in a sense) fighting the Wikipedia political cycle. As "rookies" we may lack some of the experience the top contributors have in terms of really knowing the Wikipedia genre. However, what we lack in experience, we make up for in knowledge. We were able to research our topics individually, while keeping in mind how we are representing Appalachia. We fought the stereotypes by engaging with them and Wikipedia was the perfect platform to do so.

This theme is furthered by another student, who felt personally engaged with their article topic because it was on a subject relevant to their home community. "One reason I wanted to work on my article so much," they write,

> was because it was very short to begin with. It was the largest mining disaster in [Appalachian] Ohio and there was barely any coverage. It made it seem unimportant in the grand scheme of things to me. That was hard for me to accept because it has such a large impact on my community.

This student's recognition of how the shortness of the article makes the subject seem insignificant demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of information politics in Wikipedia. Marginalization often occurs through absence or limited coverage.

Many of these students have recognized how important it is that they, as individuals who have more experience with and access to the Appalachian region, contribute to Wikipedia and work to improve representation of their local culture. In a final example, a student discusses how Wikipedia, as a global resource, still needs to value contributions on topics from individuals who are more connected with those topics:

> In order to really understand the intricacies of a particular people, culture, event, etc., however, the coverage needs to be from within, not an outsider-looking-in approach. That's where the Appalachian misrepresentation we have focused on in class is tied in—distasteful portrayals of Appalachian people and their customs serve only to perpetuate stereotypes which exist because the area is little covered and understood.

While a quantitative analysis of process logs shows that a larger majority of students wrote about gaining a familiarity with Wikipedia in general (as a research and writing resource), there were also a significant number of responses that demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the cultural politics of representation in Wikipedia and the causes and effects of those politics. Furthermore, these examples demonstrate how students perceive these issues and how they can gain a larger awareness of the identity politics involved in writing and rhetoric. Finally, these responses also support the argument that Wikipedia can be used effectively to teach cultural studies projects and to make a positive impact on a global information source.

Student Access

The majority of students in this study learned about Wikipedia's cultural politics through a successful engagement with the encyclopedia—noticing gaps in coverage and working to fill those gaps through their own research and writing. However, highlighting only those stories would misrepresent other students, whose planned edits weren't as successful: 18 percent (3 of 17) of students reported some level of access difficulty, noting their own struggles to enter and contribute to the Wikipedia community. Such access problems were rooted in a few different conditions. First, other (more experienced) Wikipedians often adhere too strictly to policy guidelines governing research and editing. For the novice editor, such adherence can be especially discouraging. As one student notes, "Browsing different talk sections of pages made it seem as if other editors in Wikipedia are perfectionists to a fault. I believe their intentions are pure but this can be a deterrent to some novice editors." Another student questions the "open-access" narrative of Wikipedia through realizations of the difficulty they encountered in editing:

> I've learned that while Wikipedia is available to anyone to edit, that's actually a really misleading fact. Wikipedia was actually a lot harder to edit correctly than what I thought it was going to be. It's also very hard to edit something that is popular due to other editors essentially blocking you out and it's hard to edit something that isn't popular because it's hard to find good source material. I felt like an outsider sometimes during this project because I was told that I couldn't edit certain things and when I finally found something to edit, I couldn't find source material that was sufficient.

This student's analysis of their experience provides an alternate narrative about the possibilities for individual rhetorical agency in Wikipedia, one that challenges rather than celebrates the encyclopedia. Yet it also represents a particularly insightful critique of Wikipedia's "open-access" ethos. This student has learned how "misleading" Wikipedia's democratic mantra can be to an uninitiated, novice editor who has difficulty editing both popular and marginalized content. The student's identification of the specific difficulties involved also echoes my own struggle as an instructor to provide opportunities for students to both interact with other editors and be able to make meaningful (and lasting) contributions to the encyclopedia. Finally, this response demonstrates some of the epistemological functions that make editing local marginalized topics more difficult. As a tertiary source, Wikipedia's dependence on published and verifiable sources will always limit its capability to represent topics that are already underrepresented.

Making the Global Local

Much of the "success" of Wikipedia—its fairly quick rise to a place of prominence and reliability, its rapid growth, and breadth of coverage—has been due to its adaptation of an efficient model of Commons-Based Peer Production (Benkler), in which volunteers from all over the world (though, admittedly, mostly in the United States) have come together to collaboratively and incrementally build a global knowledge source. The wiki platform has allowed a form of collaboration that can be dispersed in both time and space. Editors don't need to meet face-to-face to work on Wikipedia; they can contribute in small pieces from all over the world, at any time. This model has been incredibly productive and has also played a significant part in a larger movement toward crowdsourcing, "wikinomics," and peer production.

At the same time, however, this distributed model has also served to de-emphasize and devalue the place of local knowledge production. As the students in this course came to realize, many of the problems of representation (of Appalachia, but also of other marginalized identities and cultures) can be traced back to problems of geographical and cultural isolation. The barriers between Appalachian and mainstream culture, both physical and discursive, because they prohibit mutual experience and understanding, also function to perpetuate stereotypes. Stereotypes explain the unknown, the unexplored, the other. These same types of social hierarchies are reproduced in Wikipedia, as the mainstream editor base can sometimes fail to engage with the region and represent it. Ultimately, a distributed, commons-based peer-production model is less effective when it comes to reporting on subjects that require local knowledge and experience.

In working to improve Wikipedia's representation of Appalachia via this project, I argue, students realize the importance of local engagement, research, and knowledge production in a global-information economy. Such local engagement allowed them to accomplish the critical-cultural goal of rewriting Appalachian stereotypes in a public venue. Through this process, I further assert, they were also able to come to a broader understanding of the problems of cultural representation in Wikipedia and to improve the encyclopedia itself. Finally, students' learning processes paralleled my own recognition of a very central epistemological problem of the encyclopedia. If Wikipedia is to be a truly global, multivocal resource that "gathers the sum of all human knowledge," it will need to find a way to accommodate local knowledge practices and procedures in conjunction with dispersed peer production.

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