

From Public Pedagogy to Critical Digital Praxis: Learning/Writing as Reflective Action

Matthew Vetter

Abstract

Wikipedia writing projects provide accessible opportunities for teaching procedural, social, and rhetorical writing knowledge, and for practicing specific skills related to research and digital literacy, all while working to improve a public knowledge resource. In this talk, I review some of my early research to explain how teaching with Wikipedia can help students understand and practice writing, and discuss how this approach might be understood from a service learning or community-engagement model. I then problematize this model by asserting the need for a writing pedagogy that moves beyond engagement, towards reflective action. Description of a specific case study detailing a learning project to remediate Wikipedia's gender gap helps to articulate the need for a pedagogy that allows for what I call *critical digital praxis*. Following Freire's notion of praxis as "reflection and action directed at the structures to be reformed," I define critical digital praxis as a mode of action for teaching and scholarship that allows for writing interventions in public digital cultures in order to both better understand the writing activities of those cultures and make meaningful impressions with/in them. The talk concludes with speculation about future directions and questions for this research.

Presentation Outline

Teaching writing with/in Wikipedia allows learning gains in the following domains:

- ▣ Procedural knowledge – especially as students understand Wikipedia's "History" pages
- ▣ Social knowledge – as students observe "Talk" pages and participate in collaborative article production
- ▣ Rhetorical Knowledge – an understanding of a rhetorical, constructivist model of knowledge production and the role of personal subjectivity in that process, as students participate in a public writing project and interact with other writers

Such an approach seems to fit into service or community-engaged learning models; however, these models don't fully account for the implications of action and effect participatory pedagogies allow.

My experiences teaching with Wikipedia, as they have taught me more about the politics of access and representation in the encyclopedia, have pushed me towards a realization of the need for a pedagogy focused on reflective action, or critical digital praxis. It is this notion of critical digital praxis that I attempt to define and describe more clearly in a learning project that sought to remediate Wikipedia's gender gap.

The gender gap is caused primarily by the fact that only 1/10 editors are women.

- ❑ This translates into uneven representation of articles on topics that might matter more to women readers. But it also means that women's perspectives are missing from all kinds of content.

Edit the Gender Gap: A Case Study of Critical Digital Praxis in Wikipedia. This section of the talk details a specific case study of critical digital praxis – a learning project that sought to remediate Wikipedia's gender gap by asking students to actively intervene and edit the encyclopedia.

- ❑ Critical digital praxis - A model for making writing interventions in public digital cultures in order to both better understand the writing activities of those cultures and make meaningful impressions with/in them.
- ❑ Assignment Motivations: Theoretical questions: Why the gender gap manifests? What caused or causes the gap? How does the gender gap influence content and representation? Practical work: Let's improve representation by working on content. Let's diversify editor base by becoming editors (at least for the course of the academic term).

What we learned about Wikipedia's epistemological practices by intervening to improve the gender gap:

- ❑ Verifiability ensures that Wikipedia will typically represent the dominant texts, sources, and authorities in our culture, those that are mainstream, published and most readily available.
- ❑ If we accept that we live in a culture that already marginalizes women and LGBTQ identities, we can also expect Wikipedia to reflect those social hierarchies.
- ❑ Wikipedia often functions as a mirror of existing social hierarchies.

Critical Digital Praxis also allows for public engagement. Brief overview of engagement with Wiki Education and sustaining relationships with the *Digital Rhetoric Collaborative*. Collaborations between Wiki Ed and Digital Humanities demonstrate how we can address these biases.

- ❑ By working to enlarge representation and diversifying editorial populations
- ❑ Beginning conversations among academics, Wikipedia communities, and the general public
- ❑ And by giving students opportunities to engage in public writing projects

Future questions and directions for this type of research

- ❑ Articulating and defining a theory of critical digital praxis for rhetoric and composition
- ❑ Locating a historical and disciplinary lineage for such a theory
- ❑ Further application of critical digital praxis to other digital communities and new media interfaces
- ❑ Additional study of the pedagogical benefits of praxis
- ❑ Encourage emphasis on writing as action