Integrating Special Collections into the Composition Classroom: A Case Study of Collaborative Digital Curriculum

Matthew Vetter, Assistant Director of Composition and Graduate Teaching Associate, English Department, Ohio University

Sara Harrington, Head of Arts and Archives, Ohio University Libraries

In 2010, 73% of college students reported using the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* for course-related research.[1] As the encyclopedia becomes a given in student research processes, librarians and teachers are increasingly recognizing the importance of teaching students about this source. *Wikipedia* also offers a number of opportunities for librarians and academics interested in digital curriculum development. The following case study describes a collaborative project to embed *Wikipedia* and special collections into the student experience. The project was designed by authors Matt Vetter, PhD candidate and teaching associate in English, and Sara Harrington, head of arts and archives, at Ohio University. New to her position, Harrington wanted to collaborate with a teaching faculty member in a way in which "the boundaries separating the disciplines begin to blur, and the partners are in the space of collaboration or of listening together in this special way. The partners find a language and common goals."[2] The project was executed with significant contribution from Bill Kimok, Judith Connick, and Doug McCabe, staff at Ohio University Libraries' Robert E. and Jean R. Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections.

In Line with Strategic Directions

From the Ohio University Libraries' strategic perspective, the project modeled a programmatic direction for the use of special collections that addressed a number of goals. First, the project supported the integration of special collections and archival materials, alongside "regular" library collections, into departmental and course curricula. Because the project entailed direct partnership between the libraries and the composition program, it also promoted interdisciplinary collaboration and aligned with initiatives to "embed" librarians into the work of university departments and programs. Engaging directly with *Wikipedia* further allowed the utilization of digital technologies for mainstreaming activities. Mainstreaming special collections in the undergraduate classroom is increasingly part of information literacy efforts.[3] Knowledge creation by students is also an information literacy priority.

Organizational change within the Ohio University Libraries was foundational for the project. Enhanced collaboration with faculty and colleagues and fostering new uses for special collections were imperatives outlined for Harrington's position by the library administration based on current strategic directions. Additionally, the libraries used the balanced scorecard methodology to produce a living strategic document that guides the daily work of the organization. Building on the Ohio University Libraries' mission, vision, and values, the organization defined strategies and measures to assess work done towards achieving the mission of the libraries. The measure most pertinent to this project is the "number of classes where students are interacting with the Libraries' unique materials to produce a publicly visible product." This project thus served as a model for the libraries in both the nature of the collaboration and the product. Harrington hopes in the future to partner with subject librarians and faculty members to produce similar products using special collections materials.

Knowledge Production as Process

This project and related curricular efforts also promoted a conceptual notion of libraries and special collections as more open, democratic, and fluid spaces for information creation and dissemination. The article "The Museum: A Temple or the Forum" by Duncan Cameron[4] provided a conceptual framework for this project. Cameron sought to open up the museum world to new audiences. The article's precepts are particularly relevant for libraries today, especially for special collections, with its tradition of hushed halls and closed stacks. Cameron argued that "the forum is a **process**, the temple a **product**." The dialogue libraries increasingly seek with students and faculty is characteristic of a forum in its exchange of ideas and mirrors the increasingly open, democratic process of knowledge creation in the digital age.

For the English department, the project accomplished a number of learning outcomes. Writing in *Wikipedia* allowed students to study the social nature of knowledge production and to engage in writing for a rhetorically active discourse community with "real" publics and committed audiences. Students involved in this project were more motivated, more aware of an increased set of outside audiences for their writing, and more engaged in the research process, findings made apparent through Vetter's collection of data throughout.

Embedded into Curriculum Design

The project's design and implementation reflected both the goals of the libraries and the desired outcomes of the English department and was built directly into the course curriculum of a junior-level, general education composition course, Writing & Rhetoric II. In designing this curriculum, Vetter and Harrington paid particular attention to what roles the curators might play, given the potentially labor-intensive nature of the assignment. From the perspective of the libraries, a significant feature of the assignment was that students would work with special collections materials and with Mahn Center staff. Over the course of five weeks, students in this course engaged in a variety of processes with the ultimate goal of revising or publishing a new article in *Wikipedia* based on research performed in the Mahn Center. Because a large majority of the materials in the Mahn Center focus on regional and Ohio University–related topics, students were encouraged to formulate articles in these areas.

To learn more about special collections and archival materials, students attended a presentation led by Mahn Center staff. This presentation was held in the reading room and served two purposes: to highlight special collections and archival materials, especially those easily adapted to a *Wikipedia* article, and to become more familiar with the Mahn Center's procedures. Following the presentation, students also workshopped topic ideas for *Wikipedia* articles in groups and consulted with the instructor (Vetter) about their ideas. Students continued to brainstorm about topics outside of class and were instructed to study corresponding *Wikipedia* articles that existed on a given topic and think about how they might be improved. Students were directed especially to look for a "gap" in the article: What important information is missing? What might be added to the article? In some cases, students created new articles on topics that were not represented at all in *Wikipedia*.

Once they had completed these steps and had chosen a topic and corresponding article, students wrote a proposal letter to the Mahn Center staff member whose expertise related to their topic of study. The proposal letter outlined the students' interest in the topic, the identified "gap" in the *Wikipedia* article, and their plans for further research. Students were also directed to ask for staff member guidance about particular materials they might find useful in their writing process. Proposals were forwarded both to the instructor and the Mahn Center staff, and were followed up by an in-person interview between staff member and student. During these interviews, students were directly exposed to further research avenues and had the opportunity to discuss their research and writing plans with an engaged guide. In this way, all staff in the Mahn Center became partners in teaching the course and impacted each student's growth as a researcher in very direct ways.

Collaborative Knowledge Building

The Mahn Center staff were less prepared, however, to answer questions concerning *Wikipedia* policies and processes. For this, the project relied on *Wikipedia* "online ambassadors," individuals who volunteered their time to help students work on particular articles in the encyclopedia. Students submitted drafts of their articles through an automated system to these ambassadors. In return, they received feedback on article structure, style, and content. Students valued this feedback precisely because the ambassadors are experienced Wikipedians and have knowledge of article conventions such as the neutral tone of voice and specific article structure conventional in *Wikipedia*. In engaging with these more fluent members of the *Wikipedia* community, students also began to realize how significant genre and social norms are when it comes to writing as well as how acculturated members of a writing community can be great resources in any writing project. Mahn Center staff also became more fluent in *Wikipedia* policies and practices as they attempted to help students navigate these writing situations. One particular lesson staff learned was about the concept of "notability," which determines whether a topic is noteworthy enough to warrant the creation of an article. Gaining a better realization of how notability is assessed in the *Wikipedia* community better prepared the staff to help students make appropriate contributions to the encyclopedia and helped them to better understand *Wikipedia* as a resource and platform for exposing special collections.

In the final phase of the project, students were encouraged to "go live" with their articles, that is, publish their articles or edits officially on *Wikipedia*. A few of the students met with some difficulties in this phase of the project if their edits or articles were not deemed suitable by other editors. Yet many students were successful in publishing their articles and edits to *Wikipedia*. Their articles represented a diverse array of topics, including biographical articles on Vernon Alden, former president of Ohio University and namesake of Alden Library, which houses the Mahn Center, and George Kahler, a professional baseball player who once played for the university. The fact that students wrote or edited *Wikipedia* articles that focused largely on Ohio University or Southeast Ohio served to further connect students to the university community and exposed historical information about these regional topics to *Wikipedia* readers everywhere. All of the students, regardless of publication, learned a great deal from the experience, as became evident from data collected by Vetter through process logs and student surveys.

Engaged Students

Among the more significant findings, the data collected suggest that students were more motivated by this assignment than previous writing assignments. Fifteen out of sixteen students identified themselves as "more motivated" on a survey, citing a number of reasons: real public audiences, innovative pedagogies, personal connection to topics, and—perhaps most significantly—active research partners and situations. One student wrote the following assessment of the assignment:

> At first I was scared of the workload. How to balance between classes, but once I got into the library I knew this was something I was going to enjoy. The researching aspect was definitely my favorite. I had never before been in the University archives, so that experience was awesome. Not only did I research for my own topic, but also went in and researched my true passion: photography. The curators even let me scan an old photo and create a poster of it to hang in my room. They were amazing which pushed me to do my best. (Student Survey 1)

As is evident from this response, the relationships developed with staff proved to be a motivating factor for students, but they also appreciated the opportunity to gain knowledge of special collections and archives. The assessment research that Vetter undertook proved useful to Harrington and the libraries because it provided qualitative, concrete information about the meaning and impact of students' interaction with special collections. In short, the data demonstrated that the assignment helped build relationships between Mahn Center staff and undergraduate users in a curricular context.

Special Collections as Forum

Student gains like these reflect positively on the pedagogy and interdisciplinary engagement apparent in this collaborative project. Yet, on a broader scale, this kind of project echoes larger shifts happening with regard to knowledge production and dissemination. Web 2.0 technologies like the wiki, which enables effective collaborative writing and makes *Wikipedia* the most successful encyclopedia to date, are dramatically challenging traditional knowledge structures. Top-down, authoritarian structures, like traditional modes of bibliographic instruction or library engagement in the research process, are being surpassed and replaced, in many instances, by structures and processes that are more open and democratic. Libraries can find a place at the forefront of this movement by engaging more fully in interactive and collaborative knowledge building. This assignment provides a model for cross-disciplinary relationships between academic library special collections and writing programs and offers a framework for increasingly programmatic thinking about the broader engagement of special collections with the university community. Special collections and archives, especially, need to initiate more programs that move information out of the closed stacks and into the wider knowledge-producing forum.

Endnotes

1   Alison J. Head and Michael B. Eisenberg, *Truth Be Told: How College Students Evaluate and Use Information in the Digital Age*, Project Information Literacy Progress Report (Seattle: University of Washington Information School, 2010), 7, http://projectinfolit.org/publications/.

2   Dick Raspa and Dane Ward, *The Collaborative Imperative: Librarians and Faculty Working Together in the Information Universe* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000), 13.

3   Martin Aurand, "Teaching and Learning with Collections: The Library as a Site for Exploration and Inspiration," *Art Documentation* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 12–20.

4   Duncan Cameron, "The Museum: A Temple or the Forum?" *Curator* 40, no. 1 (1971): 21.

To cite this article: Matthew Vetter and Sara Harrington. "Integrating Special Collections into the Composition Classroom: A Case Study of Collaborative Digital Curriculum." *Research Library Issues: A Report from ARL, CNI, and SPARC*, no. 283 (2013): 16-20. http://publications.arl.org/rli283/.