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DEVELOPING ACADEMIC LITERACY BY WRITING FOR WIKIPEDIA

Abstract: Many teachers of academic writing want to help students bridge the gap between writing for personal purposes and writing for academic purposes. The latter seems considerably more challenging, and decidedly less familiar. One way of facilitating students' initiation as academic writers is to ask them to write a Wikipedia article, which requires several academic writing sub-skills, such as summarizing or paraphrasing. Students need to be able to demonstrate critical thinking while choosing a suitable topic, and assessing the reliability of their sources. Then, they must show their familiarity with the genre conventions of Wikipedia.

This article focuses on a project done with a group of archaeology students of the Jagiellonian University. The students were asked to choose and research a topic, and later write a short Wikipedia article, based on what they had found out about their respective topics. The article presents the benefits and potential difficulties of this project, and I will share my students' perspectives as well.

Keywords: academic literacy, academic writing, Wikipedia, critical thinking

ROZWIJANIE KOMPETENCJI AKADEMICKICH PRZEZ PISANIE ARTYKUŁÓW DO WIKIPEDII

Streszczenie: Wielu lektorów, prowadzących zajęcia z pisania akademickiego stara się pomóc studentom w pokonaniu bariery między pisaniem podejmowanym, aby osiągnąć cele zwane osobistymi lub prywatnymi, i tak zwanym pisaniem o charakterze akademickim. To ostatnie wydaje się stanowić o wiele większe wyzwanie. Aby ułatwić studentom postawienie pierwszych kroków w roli autorów tekstów akademickich, można zaproponować im zredagowanie krótkiego artykułu do Wikipedii, co będzie od nich wymagało zademonstrowania kilku umiejętności związanych z pisaniem akademickim, takich jak streszczanie i parafrazowanie. Wybierając artykuł i oceniając wiarygodność źródeł, będą musieli wykazać się umiejętnością krytycznego myślenia, a podczas tworzenia artykułu – znajomością konwencji dotyczących wybranego gatunku, czyli tekstów z Wikipedii.

W moim artykule opisuję projekt, który zrobiłam wspólnie z grupą studentów archeologii Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Poprosiłam studentów o wybranie tematów i zebranie literatury dotyczącej tych zagadnień. Następnie studenci mieli napisać krótkie artykuły poruszające wybrane przez siebie kwestie. Wskażę potencjalne korzyści i trudności związane z tym projektem, a także przedstawię opinie studentów, którzy wzięli w nim udział.

Słowa kluczowe: kompetencje akademickie, pisanie akademickie, Wikipedia, krytyczne myślenie

1. Introduction

In recent years, increasingly higher numbers of Polish students participate in various study abroad projects, and more subject-specific courses are offered in English at Polish universities than in the past. Consequently, helping students develop their academic language skills has also become more important. This trend is reflected in English language syllabi at many university language centres, including the language centre at the Jagiellonian University, where I teach an English language course with an academic writing component to postgraduate students, most of whom major in Archaeology (and, some – in History or History of Art).

I have always been interested in adapting (or developing my own) activities which could give students an opportunity to develop their writing and research skills, as well as their ability to think critically. Researching a topic for a Wikipedia article, and subsequently writing up the results of one's research in the form of a Wikipedia entry seems to offer just such an opportunity. What is more, in my experience, most students find writing for a wide circle of recipients more motivating than simply writing for their teacher – in the latter case, they often perceive writing assignments as a chore that has to be done. It might be a potentially useful chore, but a chore nonetheless. If, however, their audience is wider, many students tend to feel more challenged and more engaged with the activity. Later, if successfully completed, it also helps to build their confidence as writers. Potentially, therefore writing a Wikipedia article could be a suitable activity for an English language course with an academic writing component.

In this article, I will describe how my students wrote their Wikipedia articles, and I will present some benefits of having students write for Wikipedia, and the difficulties that my students have encountered.

2. Academic literacy

According to Theresa Lillis and Mary Scott (2007), academic literacy (or, academic literacies) as a concept has a long tradition – particularly, in the context of higher education in Britain. The authors mainly focus on its epistemological (or, ideological) use, but they also point out that it can be used differently – namely, 'referentially: that is as referring to reading/writing texts in academic contexts, rather than as indexing a critical field of inquiry with specific theoretical and historical roots and interests' (Lillis, Scott, 2007: 7). It is in this referential (or, instrumental) sense, rather than the epistemological (or, ideological) one, that I want to use it in the context of my article – that is, I would like to limit the concept of academic literacy to mean one's familiarity with practices and conventions needed to successfully cope with various academic assignments. Academically literate students are capable of finding relevant sources, and critically evaluating their usefulness for their assignments. Needless to say, being academically literate also

entails familiarity with the conventions of specific genres. I will show how writing a Wikipedia article requires similar literacy – students need to research a topic, to understand the practices of Wikipedia writers, and to write coherently and cohesively about their topic.

3. Wikipedia does not require an introduction

When Christine M. Tardy (2010) published her article, describing how she used Wikipedia to raise her students' awareness of issues involved in academic writing, she needed a whole section to explain what is a wiki, and how Wikipedia works. Back then, Wikipedia comprised 12 million articles in 262 different languages – it now has 40 million in 301 languages (Wikipedia, 2018). Even though, using Wikipedia for referencing in academic settings is considered a somewhat contentious practice, and the website has been criticized both for the accuracy of its content (Pertilli, 2008; cited in Wikipedia, 2018), and for its readability (e.g., Rosenzweig, 2006; cited in Wikipedia, 2018), today it is possibly 'the largest and most popular general reference work on the Internet' (Wikipedia, 2018). Its editing process has always been open, and no formal qualifications are needed to become Wikipedia writer. Any registered user can create an article, which will then be subject to editorial changes. These changes, in turn, will undergo reviews, and these reviews of changes might be reviewed again – nothing is set in stone:

> (…) the software that powers Wikipedia provides certain tools allowing anyone to review changes made by others. The 'History' page of each article links to each revision. On most articles, anyone can undo others' changes by clicking a link on the article's history page
>
> Editing articles is then essentially an open, collaborative process which is happening over a (sometimes) considerably long period of time – although some checks are in place, protecting some of Wikipedia content (particularly, if an article or its parts were vandalized in the past). (Wikipedia, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia)

Technically, editing is not complicated, but it is necessary to spend some time to become familiar with it – a useful set of technical guidelines can be found on Wikipedia (*The* Wikipedia: Tutorial, 2018). In addition, for novices, Wikipedia offers what they call *a sandbox*, where one can try out all the functionalities involved in uploading or editing the content, and/or images. Novice writers of Wikipedia articles can learn about the specific characteristics of the genre (e.g., its typical summary style or the features of the so-called lead section of a Wikipedia article) from several articles provided to guide both novice and somewhat more seasoned Wikipedia writers (Wikipedia: Summary style, 2018; Wikipedia: Your first article,

2018; Wikipedia: Writing better articles, 2018). However, these are long and detailed articles – and, students could well find them overwhelming. I therefore decided on a different, more pedagogically justifiable, approach – that is, 'a process genre approach' (Badger, White, 2000), which I will describe in more detail below.

4. A genre process approach to teaching writing

Richard Badger and Goodith White (2000) argue for a synthetic approach to teaching writing by combining the strengths of two approaches – a process and a genre approach.[1] Reconciling these, often seen as antagonistic, approaches, they consider writing as an ability (involving both declarative and procedural knowledge, and the knowledge of context in which it is performed). But, according to them, it also involves the process of learning itself (i.e., 'drawing out the learners' potential') as in the following two quotes:

> (1) (…) writing involves knowledge about language (as in product and genre approaches), knowledge of the context in which writing happens and especially the purpose for the writing (as in genre approaches), and skills in using language (as in process approaches)

> (2) writing development happens by drawing out the learners' potential (as in process approaches) and by providing input to which the learners respond (as in product and genre approaches) (Badger, White, 2000: 157-158).

Badger and White's (2000) approach sounds attractive – particularly, for someone who teaches Polish students, who have often not been taught writing as a process. Or, even if they have, they still fail to appreciate the need to engage in it. Consequently, what they write is often of lower quality than it could have been if they spent more time redrafting their article or essay. To write a Wikipedia article, however, one needs to spend some time considering potential topics, researching the one (or, the ones) which seem suitable – and, only then start writing. To satisfy the requirements of Wikipedia editors, few writers can submit their first drafts – most students will have to go over several drafts, gradually developing their final, ready for submission, version. This is what Badger and White (2000: 158) mean by 'drawing out learners' potential' in a process approach to teaching writing.

Equally important is that students become familiar with Wikipedia articles as a genre – that is, they will learn what the features of Wikipedia articles are, and

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[1]   Badger and White (2000) consider genre approaches to be an extension of product approaches. Observing similarities between the two, they argue that both treat writing in terms of linguistic knowledge (i.e., vocabulary, syntax and cohesive devices). Genre approaches, however, put more emphasis on the social context in which writing occurs than product approaches do.

they will understand how these features depend on the purpose of Wikipedia articles. Hopefully, understanding the principles of such basic genre analysis will help students in the future – when they come across unfamiliar genres.

5. What did we do?

The assignment itself was quite straightforward – and, my intention was simply to adapt to my teaching context an activity which has already been attempted by other teachers, and I cannot (or, indeed do not) claim any originality. In any case, achieving various learning outcomes with the help of Wikipedia has been known for a long time. Georgios Fessakis and Maria Zoumpatianou (2012) offer a whole taxonomy of such evidence-based educational activities – and, it goes well beyond teaching English as a foreign language or teaching academic writing.[2] The potential learning outcomes of these activities, as presented by Fessakis and Zoumpatianou (2012: 100), comprise the following categories:
   – familiarization with wikis and development of digital literacy in general,
   – development of information literacy,
   – concept exploration and understanding,
   – learning of research methodology,
   – scientific communication skills development,
   – understanding of the historical research methodology,
   – foreign language learning,
   – critical thinking learning,
   – collaboration competency development.
   On my part, while I was designing this activity for my students, I drew inspiration from two sources (Tardy, 2010; Schmidt, 2016). There was, however, one important difference. While both Tardy and Schmidt had their students write Wikipedia articles at the beginning of their respective courses (to help their students understand the nature of academic writing), I introduced it at the end of my course – to help my students consolidate their writing skills, such as summarizing, paraphrasing or writing from sources. Initially, I must admit I was focussed on consolidating writing skills, and I was not even considering other beneficial aspects of this activity – i.e., how it could in fact help students with their research or critical thinking skills. It was a little later, as my students began researching their topics, that it offered these benefits as well.
   In short, I followed Tardy's (2010) approach, who suggested engaging students in the writing process involving several successive stages, such as becoming familiar

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[2]   For example, according to Fessakis and Zoumpatianou (2012), Wikipedia has been ideal for exploring concepts because of the sheer volume of its articles on different concepts, and the fact that they often involve many writers collaborating on an analysis of a given concept from several points of view (e.g., Moy et al., 2010; cited in Fessakis, Zoumpatianou, 2012).

with the conventions of Wikipedia articles, creating outlines of their articles, drafting and revising their drafts, formatting the sources – and finally, polishing and publishing the finished product. Having less time, I compressed the eight stages originally proposed by Tardy (2010) into five – or, in practice into five weeks.

Week 1

In Week 1, students were given the assignment (Figure 1), and were asked to consider the topic of their article in a preliminary way, and to find several (five or six) model articles, which belonged to the same category as their chosen topic (i.e., they could be articles about concepts, people, places or events). In class, in pairs or small groups, students analysed the model articles they found, and then shared their observations with the whole class. To provide some scaffolding for them, I used the following questions suggested by Tardy (2010: 14), who rightly emphasizes that such questions can help students uncover 'genre-based patterns among [Wikipedia] entries':

- What kind of information is included in the article?
- What kind of information is excluded?
- Using several sample articles in your category, look for any patterns in the organization of the articles. What information is typically included first? Next? If there are headings in the articles, do you notice any that are commonly used?
- How much background knowledge of the topic do readers need to understand the article?
- Is any specialized language or jargon used? If so, how is it defined?
- What kind of information includes a footnote? (Tardy, 2010: 14)

It is at this stage that a teacher can help students understand how texts are shaped by the purposes for which they are written, and by readers' expectations – as Hoey puts it:

> Reader and writer are like dancers following in each other's steps, and the reader's chances of guessing correctly what is going to happen next in a text are greatly enhanced if the writer takes the trouble to anticipate what the reader might be expecting: that is one of the reasons for regularity of patterning in genres (Hoey, 2006: 43).

In the case of Wikipedia, the so-called lead section, often the only part of an entry which is read by a person accessing a given article, is of particular importance. To be useful for such a reader, it summarises the contents of the whole article. The use of jargon, or specialist terminology must also be avoided if an article is aimed at a general audience. With my students, we discussed the possibility of simply translating an article already written in Polish – and, the differences in

terms of content between articles written for Polish readers, and those written for English-speaking readers.

At this stage, it is also worth pointing out to students that Wikipedia articles summarises existing knowledge – unlike, academic writing whose aim is often to create new knowledge. As a result, Wikipedia articles are more concise than academic articles, and they do not need as much detailed support or extensive referencing (Tardy, 2010).

At this stage, it is also important to insist that students take notes, and that some trace of their efforts be left afterwards (e.g., on the LMS[3]) – where every student can access and review the notes if they need to do so while beginning to write up their own articles. This is what I did not insist on, and this led to some problems for some of my students – notably, those who failed to write a suitable lead section for their articles.

Assignment
Choose a concept, person, place or event to describe in a Wikipedia article. You must write about something that does not appear in the English version of Wikipedia. Use your knowledge of the subject to identify a topic that may be of interest to general English-language readers.
Your article should follow the typical style and tone of Wikipedia articles, be well researched, and include citations where needed. You must also include Wikilinks (hyperlinks to other Wikipedia entries) within your text where appropriate.

Length
Your article should be about 350-500 words in length.

Topic
Any topic is acceptable as long as it meets Wikipedia's guidelines for contributions and does not currently exist in the English edition of Wikipedia. However, it might be a good idea to write about something related to your field of expertise (e.g., history, history of art or archaeology).

Figure 1. The assignment

Source: own elaboration.

Weeks 2-3

In Weeks 2 and 3, students were refining and researching their topics (they still could change the topic at this stage if they wanted to). To ensure that students did not treat it as time off, and that they produced something tangible, which they could

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[3]   A learning management system (LMS) is a software application or Web-based technology used, among others, to deliver content to students (or, by students). Ours is a Moodle-based platform, where students can upload their homework, do some interactive activities (e.g., quizzes), engage in interaction with their classmates on discussion forums, or download additional learning materials prepared by teachers.

later fall back on while writing their articles, I used the chart designed by Tardy (2010), asking students to fill it in, depending on the topics they had chosen, and the relevant sources they had found (Figure 2).

Fact Sheet Assignment

Name: ……………………………………………………………

Use this form to gather information about your Wikipedia article and to record the sources from which the information was taken.

Topic:	
Fact/information (use quotations around any words taken from the original source)	Source (assign a letter to each separate source)
	a)
	b)

Figure 2. Fact sheet used by students in Weeks 2-3

Source: own elaboration based on Tardy (2010).

Week 3

A the end of Week 3, students were given an opportunity to discuss and critique each other's topics. At this stage, some still did not have a topic and, as some of them pointed out after the class, they found it helpful to listen to what others were planning to write. In addition, it was an opportunity for students to revise their preliminary ideas as they were receiving feedback about their own ideas from other students, listening to what other students were planning, and evaluating/critiquing these plans. Some topics, as it turned out in the course of this class, could be jointly developed. Observing my students, I felt it was well worth conducting this stage in class – with their subject-specific knowledge, students could give each other plenty of advice and, I would say, more specific advice than what I as a language teacher could have offered them. Without any prompting from me, they raised the

questions of using illustrations (including, intellectual property rights to photos or maps), and the question of correctly referencing such sources as digitized museum collections or unpublished doctoral and MA dissertations. Interestingly, they more often chose to reference books, rather than other sources such as Internet sites or research papers, whose reliability might have been more difficult for them to establish. Some of the sources were published in languages other than English (the language of their Wikipedia articles), or Polish (i.e., their L1). Some of the sources they wanted to cite were in Czech or German, which shows how this activity might encourage the development of multilingual linguistic resources – as pointed out by Gentil (in Tardy, 2010: 13):

> Encouraging students to draw on their multiple linguistic resources in such tasks can position them as multilingual and transnational writers who have valuable insight to share with English-language readers, while helping them to develop valuable biliteracy skills.

In addition, I could also give students some useful tips for doing a literature review with the help of Google Scholar. As it turned out, some had no experience of using Google Scholar at all – and, were unaware of some of its functions, ones possibly useful for researching the subject literature.

Week 4

In Week 4, at home, students were developing drafts of their articles – using the outlines they had created earlier (Fig. 2), paraphrasing the sources they had found, and mainly focussing on how they wanted to organize their article's content. Later, in class, they were asked to revise each other's articles, giving each other feedback on two aspects in particular – content, and clarity. To scaffold their work, I gave them the following questions:

1. Is the article complete? Does it answer basic factual questions about the topic? Are any important questions left unanswered?
2. Is the organization easy to follow? Are headings appropriate?
3. Is the writing clear and readable for a general audience? (Tardy, 2010: 17).

To increase the amount of peer feedback, I asked students to bring three copies of their drafts – and then distribute them among different students. Knowing that their language skills, in some cases, might be insufficient, I was also participating in this activity – answering questions, or editing some of their work. However, I was deliberately limiting my feedback to posing questions, rather than offering ready solutions. The aim was to help students build their confidence as writers – and, to see that, if given enough feedback from their peers, and enough time to

work over multiple drafts, they would be able to produce a piece of writing which would of a sufficiently good quality be uploaded (and to survive) on Wikipedia.

It was interesting to see that students themselves devised a method of working on the drafts – with two or three students discussing one draft at a time. Mostly, since my students constituted a monolingual group (with Polish as their L1), what I noticed was that most of these pairs or groups of three 'slipped' into their L1 at this point, which I did not interfere with – after all, this was first and foremost meant to help them with their writing process.

After class, several students stayed on to discuss their drafts with me and several others left their drafts to obtain some more comments from me. In my experience, no other writing activity has engaged students as much as this one.

At home, students revised their articles, taking into consideration the feedback they had received, and brought the revised drafts to their next class.

Week 5

In Week 5, students were revising their drafts once more – this time focusing on the language (grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation). This class was organized in the same way as in Week 4, with students bringing three copies of their revised drafts, and distributing them to receive and give as much feedback from their peers as they could. I joined in this activity as well. Afterwards, students were asked to finish the proofreading at home, and upload their articles – both to the university's learning platform[4] and to Wikipedia.

Most of my students met the deadline by uploading their articles to the learning platform – however, only some of them decided to eventually upload their articles to the Wikipedia website, with this only happening after I prompted them to do so during the next class. The reasons why they were so hesitant remain unclear. I did not put any pressure on those reluctant to submit their articles to Wikipedia, nor did I ask them to explain why they did not upload their articles. Possibly, they felt that their work was not sufficiently well researched (or, well written?) to be uploaded to Wikipedia. Some might have tried, but given up because of some technical problem. In fact, later, in the questionnaire, some students mentioned technical difficulties they had while trying to upload photos. So, these difficulties might have also played a role – discouraging some students from even attempting to upload their work.

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[4]   This allowed me to have access for the purpose of assessing my students' articles before they were modified by Wikipedia editors.

4. Students' perceptions of the activity

To find out what were students' perceptions of writing Wikipedia articles, a short questionnaire, consisting of four open questions (Schmidt, 2016), was conducted. Overall, students (n = 14) responded positively to all of the questions. Several interesting observations emerge from the thematic analysis of their responses. First, writing for Wikipedia evoked a sense of accomplishment, and led to an increase in students' confidence as writers in English, which can be illustrated by the following comments – which are cited in the original, and therefore some language errors can be observed[5]:

> (…) I am kind of proud about this article. I had some information and access to publication and I could share with other people. It feels great.

> (…) it was great idea because now I see results of my work in the internet.

> (…) I get to know that using English is easier that I previously thought.

Of great importance for them was also the fact that students were writing for a wide audience, not simply for the teacher, and that they could share their subject knowledge so widely, as indicated by these comments:

> I had some information and access to publication and I could share with other people. It feels great.

> Yesterday somebody edited my article by adding photos and linked to the other article. It feels great to create something, to be part of creating access to the knowledge.

They also felt that it was a learning experience, which was not only useful but enjoyable as well:

> I learnt a lot from this project. For example, how to write something in English to people who don't know much about archaeology, which words used, how to present it and everything and it was also fun to do.

The above comments also show that this activity seems to increase students' awareness of who they are writing for (audience awareness). Two of the students mentioned that this activity helped them to acquire new vocabulary, which is not surprising as they needed to do a considerable amount of reading related to their chosen topics, and then integrate what they had read into their Wikipedia articles.

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[5]   These are unedited responses, written in students' L2 – and, that is why there are some language mistakes.

Finally, students also highlighted some soft skills that this activity helped them to develop, as is shown by the following comment:

It is a great form of work (…) which teaches us both self-reliance and teamwork.

The collaborative nature of the activity seemed to be greatly appreciated by students as well:

Despite writing my own article, the great idea was comparing the article in groups.

They also considered choosing a topic and deciding about the content of their articles to be particularly challenging – as illustrated by these two responses to the questionnaire:

The most difficult was finding an interesting and not using[6] topic.

(…) I did my best to present years of research. It was hard to choose what is important to say about this [archaeological] site and what isn't.

Finally, there were students who encountered some problems while uploading their photos or illustrations, as evidenced by these comments:

I am satisfied, but my article could be better. In my article are no photos, and no "see also". I had problem with this part of article.

I spend 2 hours trying to upload a photo (link) from Wikipedia commons. I don't know how to do this, because my link doesn't work. I think that will be great to make a lesson about uploading (…).

If any future iterations of this activity are to be done, the resolving of any technical problems has to be planned for in advance – for instance, by having a class in a computer lab where all students could upload their work, supervised by the teacher, or by organizing a tutorial prior to uploading.

6. Limitations and conclusion

The activity of writing a Wikipedia article has not been designed by me as a research project, and only self-report data from the questionnaire concerning my students' perceptions of this activity has been collected – in addition to my own observations of what was happening while students were researching and writing

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[6]   i.e., 'not used' – see the rubric in Figure 1.

their articles. But, since it was an open questionnaire,[7] it allowed one to point to some areas which are perhaps worth further investigations. It could be interesting to see in what ways writing their Wikipedia articles has developed students' confidence as writers, or to investigate why it was that not all of them eventually decided to upload their work to Wikipedia. It might be worth investigating what it was that contributed to an enrichment of their vocabulary – as some students claim (or, whether it was a long-lasting effect). Future iterations of this activity might also offer some deeper insights into how researching their topics for Wikipedia affects students' skills as researchers (a similar study was conducted by Miller, 2014). It could be also interesting to follow the development of the uploaded articles over time (and, some have already been revised several times), and find out whether this revision process has an influence on the development of the original authors' writing or editing skills – in other words, if and how students benefit from being part of the Wikipedia community of writers.

Presently, I can tentatively say that writing for Wikipedia might have several pedagogic benefits. It engages students in the writing process, and helps them to understand how the needs and expectation of readers influence the features of encyclopaedic articles. Choosing and researching a topic gives students an opportunity to exercise their critical thinking – as they must relate their subject knowledge to the content of their article, and they must think how to organize its content appropriately. If done collaboratively, writing for Wikipedia helps to develop students' ability to work on a project with others – which is a soft skill, much desired by students' future (or, present) employers. Overall, it seems to be a pedagogically useful activity – however, with one important caveat. For such a project to succeed, both a teacher and their students must be convinced that it is worth the effort – as one of my students wrote in the questionnaire, '(…) this project makes sense only if students write their articles reliably and take it seriously.'

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7　One could argue that most of the questions (e.g., 'Do you think this project was beneficial to you?') were in fact the so-called 'leading questions,' and hence it is possible to undermine the validity of students' responses. Nevertheless, as the questions were open-ended, they have allowed me to identify certain areas which are worth future investigations.

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Additional materials

Questionnaire (adapted from Schmidt, 2016)

1. Do you think this project was beneficial to you?
2. Do you think a reader will find it useful?
3. Are you satisfied with your article?
4. Will you tell other people about your article?

Links to some of my students' articles

Note: Not all met the requirements of Wikipedia editors after uploading. Often, students had problems with referencing their sources, and sometimes with writing 'in the genre' (e.g., some students had difficulty providing a well-written lead section). If any such projects are done in the future, these aspects of students' writing will need more attention. On the whole, it is difficult to say if and how long these articles will remain on the website – they might be removed, improved (some already have a history of editorial changes), or merged with other articles.

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