CHAPTER 1

LIBRARY-FACULTY COLLABORATION USING WIKIPEDIA FOR LEARNING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Jyldyz Bekbalaeva¹, Aisuluu Namasbek kyzy¹, Shirin Tumenbaeva¹, and Zhuzumkan Askhatbekova¹

¹ American University of Central Asia

Abstract

Wikipedia uses collaborative models of content creation and fosters a culture of collaboration. Understanding how it works and mastering editing skills often calls for partnerships between different members of the university community. Library-faculty Wikipedia-centered collaboration can open new opportunities to develop information and media literacy, student agency, and civic participation. This chapter shares faculty and librarians’ experience with using Wikipedia as a teaching tool as part of an initial pilot project aimed at using open educational resources. The library-faculty team from the American University of Central Asia worked together to use Wikipedia as a tool for collaborative learning and civic participation among students in sociology classes.

Keywords


DOI: https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11778416.ch1.en
Introduction

Wikipedia is a global, open-source encyclopedia of information that engages users around the world in the creation, storage, and dissemination of knowledge. It has become an established starting point for preliminary research on the web. Over the last nineteen years, the encyclopedia has grown to 54 million articles in over 312 languages (Wikipedia, 2020). Consistently ranking as one of the most popular sites on the web, Wikipedia has over 200,000 volunteer contributors around the world who help to improve free access to knowledge in their languages (Wikimedia Foundation, 2020).

The use of Wikipedia as a teaching and learning tool has been increasingly implemented in a significant number of educational contexts and has become a common practice in many countries (Wikimedia Education, 2020). The platform has drawn the attention of faculty, librarians, instructional technologists, students, and other stakeholders in the academic community, and many have come to see it as a useful tool in fulfilling their mission. Librarians welcome Wikipedia as an open resource that aims to expand access to information, while faculty have become interested in how they can use Wikipedia in teaching and in the achievement of their pedagogical goals. Wikipedia is among the most popular open sources that students consult to gain an initial grounding in a topic before delving further for study or research purposes. Despite variation in the perception and acceptability of usage of Wikipedia, people in academia consult, edit, and contribute to the online encyclopedia.

The pedagogical use of Wikipedia is often limited to certain activities such as the critical analysis of existing articles, the editing of these, and/or the creation of new ones. However, even these limited practices are believed to improve students’ basic skills in reading comprehension, writing, research, and motivation (Lerga & Aibar, 2015). Faculty members who use Wikipedia have a positive perception of the online resource when it comes to using it as a teaching tool. Nevertheless, conflicts can arise with regards to standard knowledge-building procedures habitual in the academic setting and the open collaborative model common to Wikipedia (Aibar et al., 2015)
This platform uses collaborative models of content creation and fosters a culture of collaboration. Understanding how it works and mastering the editor’s skills often call for partnerships between different members of the university community. Wikipedia projects can bring extra value to academic libraries and be used for information literacy instruction and digital and media literacy programs (Lubbock, 2018). Library-faculty collaboration can open new opportunities for information and media literacy and increase student agency and civic participation. This chapter shares faculty and librarians’ experience using Wikipedia in the context of an initial pilot project aimed at adopting open educational resources (OER). The library-faculty team from the American University of Central Asia worked together to use Wikipedia as a tool to increase collaborative learning and civic participation of students in sociology courses.

Context

The American University in Central Asia (AUCA) is an international liberal arts university located in Kyrgyzstan, a former Soviet republic. The university offers a multidisciplinary learning environment and aspires to develop leaders for the democratic transformation of the Central Asian region. Students come from twenty-five countries around the world, including all the Central Asian countries, as well as Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Russia, and South Korea, among others. AUCA faculty and librarians implement various instructional approaches to support learning and to promote critical inquiry and free expression. Wikipedia has become one of such tools helping to complement classroom learning and library instruction at the university.

In Kyrgyzstan, Wikipedia is listed among the most visited websites (SimilarWeb, 2020). The development of Wikipedia in the local context was implemented by nonprofit organizations that aimed to launch a Kyrgyz version of the platform. In the early 2010s, the local organization “Bizdin Muras,” with the support of the Open Society Foundation, attracted more than 10 universities, 30 academics, and about 300 students...
from across the country to start creating content for Kyrgyz Wikipedia (Saadanbekov, 2013). In March 2011, the first “Week of Wikipedia” was held at five universities by the Movement of Kyrgyz Wikipedians. Each university committed to producing 500 articles in the first half of the year in exchange for Wi-Fi installation on their campuses. Kyrgyz Wikipedia has grown rapidly from 1,300 entries at the beginning of the project to 23,000 entries by the end of the project. Currently, the Kyrgyz version of Wikipedia has 80,271 entries (Kyrgyz Wikipedia, 2020).

The development of Kyrgyz Wikipedia coincided with the rise of a countrywide movement to promote OER. A series of events and activities was launched by education practitioners and institutions, with the development of Kyrgyz Wikipedia as an integral part of these (Roza Otunbayeva Initiative, 2015).

**OER as a Starting Point**

At AUCA, the faculty-library partnership around Wikipedia evolved from a pilot project aimed at implementing the use of OER. It has become common for academic libraries to pioneer OER at the institutional level through the raising of faculty awareness and providing needed support in adopting open-license materials (Crozier, 2018; Walz, 2015). OER and open educational practices can receive a great deal of support at different levels within an institution, but past experiences have shown that small-scale projects and tailored support for educators lead to more effective results (Jong et al., 2019). AUCA faculty and staff members chose to follow the above mentioned model, taking small steps in small teams to explore the potential of OER.

There were several reasons AUCA librarians chose to invest time in learning about OER. These included financial considerations with regards to the acquisition of multiple copies of textbooks, which is required by the government. Beyond the financial benefits, OER could be edited and customized by faculty to suit course needs and to reflect the local context. Furthermore, OER could have multiple applications across the university as different campus members were encouraged to adopt, edit, create, and share them.
In spring 2017, AUCA librarians launched a series of events to raise awareness of OER in the university. They reached out to interested faculty members in order to develop the first OER project at the university level, and the library-faculty collaboration team began to pilot the use of openly licensed textbooks for the introductory class in sociology in the 2017 fall semester. The experience of using an open textbook was rated as quite positive by students and faculty members in the end of semester survey. In the 2018 spring semester, the project went beyond the simple adoption of OER and expanded into the creation of open educational content by students.

Although the adopted textbook covered major topics in the discipline and helped students to grasp the main concepts, the cases and examples used in the text were predominantly Western focused and did not always allow students to relate the concepts to their experience. Adapting the textbook to the local context was needed, and the nature of open licenses made this possible. Engaging students in the creation of content that could complement the textbook seemed a reasoned step to follow. Students in the General Sociology for Non-Sociologists class were given the assignment to write about a pressing societal issue in their immediate surroundings as reflected through the lens of common sociological theories. The student papers submitted were then assembled for further use as supplementary course reading material.

At that stage of the project, librarians conducted a session for students to introduce them to the notion of Creative Commons and the ways authors may share and modify creative content through open licenses. The AUCA librarians also helped to compile student work into a handbook that could be further used as open educational content.

The move from OER adopters to contributors expanded the scope of activities the team could embrace as participants of the contemporary knowledge community. Following the themes of openness and contribution, faculty and librarians wanted to explore other ways of engaging students in participatory and collaborative learning experiences. This became one of the goals of the next stage in the faculty-library partnership.
Wikipedia as a Work in Progress and Its Potential in the Classroom

Why Wikipedia?

Wikipedia is based on the idea of openness and collaboration. Its Five Pillars align perfectly with what the team was looking for: an “online encyclopedia” with a “neutral point of view” providing “free content that anyone can use, edit and distribute,” encouraging contributors to “treat each other with respect and civility” without imposing “firm rules” (Wikipedia: Five pillars, n.d.). The Five Pillars inspired the team to continue their work with open resources in other courses taught by the same instructors. In the 2019 fall semester, two courses, Introduction to Gender Studies and State and Society, provided students with the opportunity to become Wikipedia editors and to contribute to raising awareness on gender issues in the country. While one of the courses focused on gender issues, the second course included topics of gender roles in society. Gender-related topics became an intersection of team members’ personal interests. Wikipedia, as an online open platform promoting a “neutral point of view,” seemed the right tool for classes aiming to explore gender justice, still a sensitive topic in Kyrgyzstan (Rysbekova, 2020).

Working with Wikipedia, the team also learned about some gaps that could be addressed on the platform, such as the lack of global coverage and geographic and language underrepresentation. Gender imbalance in Wikipedia has been continuously studied in recent years. Graells-Garrido et al. (2015) argued that multiple groups are underrepresented in Wikipedia and one of these groups is women. Women only constitute 16 percent of the Wikipedia editors, which affects the generated content. Research indicated that, out of 1,445,021 biographies, only 15 percent were about women. The researchers also found that the significant gender disparity in the number of editors had influenced not only the content but also the narratives and attitudes expressed in those pages.

The literature has suggested that gender bias goes beyond a lack of representation. Lam et al. (2011) found that coverage of topics of
potential interest for women was significantly less, and that male and female editors focused on different content areas when writing for Wikipedia. Wagner et al. (2016) found that there is topical gender bias on Wikipedia, as the most searched terms in relation to women (pre- and post-1900) were her husband, women’s, actress, and female, whereas for men words included served, elected, politician, played, league, and football. Research on gender imbalance on Wikipedia demonstrates that the content of the platform cannot always be “neutral” due to the gender bias among the contributors.

The lack of representation of women on Wikipedia motivated the team to address the issue by contributing to Wikipedia content about women activists in the region and the impact these women have had on their communities. The idea was also influenced by a public event that touched upon gender issues in the country. In the fall of 2019, Kyrgyzstan experienced an incident that caused heated discussions in the country about gender justice. The feminist art exhibition, Feminnale, brought whip-wielding nationalists out to protest. “Controversial” performances and installations, designed to call attention to women’s problems, appeared in the press and became the fulcrum of public debates (Suyarkulova, 2020a). Public opinion was divided and both sides were presented in the media. However, the prevailing coverage appealed to traditions pertaining to patriarchal cultural norms, leaving aside such issues as women’s economic empowerment and gender violence, both of which had been central themes of the exhibition (Tuitunova, 2019).

Students in both courses were given the space to discuss the event from different perspectives. These discussions resulted in the creation of Wikipedia content aimed at filling the gaps in coverage of women issues in the region. For both courses, the faculty-library team designed Wikipedia assignments aimed at developing students’ research skills, while also increasing their motivation, enthusiasm, and overall learning experience. In one of the courses, students were offered the chance to create Wikipedia pages about female political leaders in Central Asia, including members of parliaments. In the other course, the assignment included writing pages about feminist activism in the
region, including about women-led initiatives, biographies of activists, and women leaders.

Librarians worked closely with the instructors to help ensure the assignments met the learning objectives and to facilitate students’ needs in searching of information, source evaluation, and citation. Librarians delivered training sessions on Wikipedia editing for both courses. Even though all students had previously used Wikipedia for personal or academic purposes, none of them knew about the Wikipedia policies and guidelines. The training session covered information about the history, purpose, and mission of the platform, with a focus on the rules and regulations for editing and creating articles. It was important to help students understand the collaborative culture and philosophy of the platform, so they could feel connected to the Wikipedia community while bringing their perspectives into the construction of knowledge.

Students were given freedom in selecting topics, individuals, or events to cover in their assignments. Several students wrote Wikipedia pages about outstanding women they had known in their communities. One student wrote about one of the first female members of parliament in her country and the contribution of that woman to fighting gender inequality. This was especially important since gender inequality in the higher echelons of power is high in the region (IWPR Central Asia, 2020). Another student created a page about one of the feminist activists in Kyrgyzstan whose popularity increased after she had organized the earlier-mentioned “controversial” Feminnale art exhibition. The page included her achievements as a feminist, a writer of children’s books, and a researcher.

Several pages were created to acknowledge women’s accomplishments that were quite remarkable and important in their communities. For example, a well-known Village Girl project aiming to empower young girls in rural areas evolved from a small community project into a big countrywide initiative (“Village Girl Project,” 2019). A Wikipedia page gathered information about that project and its activities and included information about the young woman activist who initiated the initiative.
Women in STEM became another topic of interest for students. One of the pages was dedicated to the First Satellite Launch in Kyrgyzstan project, the very first girls-only space program (BBC News, 2018). The page included information about the project goals, the training of the team, and the engineering process.

Students in the courses used various methods to collect information for their projects. Supporting students in the search for and ethical use of information was important in this project. Students collected information from openly available resources, such as public websites, news sites, social media, personal blogs, or official web pages. Some students even conducted interviews with the founders of women initiatives. After completing preliminary research, students received guidance from librarians on how to write, edit, and format pages on Wikipedia.

Students were given freedom in selecting the language of their pages, and the majority preferred their native languages, which included Kazakh, Turkish, Dari, and Russian. This helped contribute to the development of Wikipedia content in languages other than English. It is recognized that English is the dominant language of today’s online knowledge (“Top Ten Languages Used in the Web,” 2020). The development of Wikipedia pages in local languages helps to deliver information to non-English-speaking communities. This also aligns with the idea of making knowledge more accessible, which supports the concept of openness, and which had at first inspired the team to start the OER collaboration.

What Did We Learn?

The Online Environment Necessitates Responsibility

While working on Wikipedia assignments, several issues came to light including online privacy and safety. Concerns remain about online violence toward different groups of people. Women and people with nonheterosexual gender identities are more at risk of online harassment and bullying (UN Women, 2015). Cases of discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity are known in Central Asia, as conservative norms prevail in the region (Suyarkulova, 2020b). The safety of the individuals and organizations selected by students for the Wikipedia assignment raised some concerns because of
patriarchal attitudes. The questions of online security were discussed with students during the course to ensure the information used was taken from public and open sources.

**Inclusiveness May Require Additional Work**

By giving students freedom in choosing the language of the assignment, the team hoped to increase the inclusivity and accessibility of knowledge. At the same time, it created more work for instructors when evaluating the assignments. Some pages were written in languages in which faculty members did not speak. However, the instructors did not want to put extra work on the students with translating the content. For the pages created in languages other than Russian, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and English, which were familiar to the instructors, students were asked to submit their original texts as Word documents, which were then translated with the help of an online translation tool.

**Censorship of Wikipedia**

The issue of censorship of Wikipedia also came up during the project. A Wikipedia ban has been implemented in several countries, either as a part of more general internet censorship or as a targeted block of the online encyclopedia (Ant, 2017; Vinton, 2015). This had an impact on the work of one of the students who was not able to create a Wikipedia page in Turkish. Wikipedia has been banned in Turkey for over two years, with access being restored in early 2020 (BBC News, 2020). Therefore, the student working on the assignment in the 2019 fall semester had to write a page about a Turkish female activist in English.

**Wikipedia for Civic Activism**

Like many other online platforms, Wikipedia can be used as a tool to engage students in a discussion of important societal problems. As students progressed in their assignments, they became more aware of issues around gender justice in the region, studying them from various perspectives. Creating Wikipedia pages on feminist activists and female political leaders of the Central Asia region not only allowed students to address the lack of content in the local languages but also became a small, yet important, step in minimizing the impact of
patriarchal history on the representation of women in the region. This also is an avenue to help raise awareness of women’s issues in communities where such online content could be limited.

Conclusion

As the landscape of knowledge and information has changed, the perception of Wikipedia has also changed from a quick online reference platform to a potential teaching resource. University members can find many benefits in using Wikipedia to fulfill their academic missions. At AUCA, the library-faculty collaboration provided new opportunities for instruction, learning, and participation. The partnership worked well and enriched team members’ and students’ experiences. Faculty members experimented with using open resources and new ways of engaging students in discussion. Students had an opportunity to participate in collaborative knowledge production and sharing and to contribute to the advancement of important topics in the public discourse. Librarians went beyond the traditional information literacy instruction by supporting both students and faculty throughout several semesters. Wikipedia editing workshops have become a part of the library instruction agenda and are currently delivered upon invitation from faculty as in class training sessions.

The role of Wikipedia in higher education is an ongoing discussion, and further studies can be very useful in deepening the understanding of this. One of the key features worthy of further exploration is the use of Wikipedia as a collaborative and open model that fosters, promotes, and provides the grounds for both engagement with the knowledge it provides and the further development of the platform itself. Given the increasing role of online learning today, Wikipedia has the potential to become a useful tool for diversifying learning experiences and motivating students.

References


