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Activism in the Classroom: Wikipedia and American Art

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In the spring of 2015, I taught a survey of American art to 1945 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA). My plan was to offer a course that challenged the established canon of white, male artists of privilege, and I assigned the insightful *American Encounters* as the main textbook for the course.¹ But as I prepared my lectures throughout the semester, I found it difficult to obtain the instructional resources I needed to teach an expanded canon of American art. Specifically, access to high-quality images for PowerPoint presentations and analysis of artworks beyond basic artists' biographies proved difficult to find. I resolved to think about what I could do as an instructor to increase the resources available on the careers of underrepresented American artists, especially women and artists of color. That fall, I developed an assignment for my Women in American Art course in which students would write articles for the online encyclopedia Wikipedia in order to combat the lack of recognition of underrepresented artists online. Through this assignment, students practiced their research and writing skills in order to reach a worldwide community of Wikipedia readers and increase the visibility of American women artists.

Wikipedia is only one of many online educational resources currently available to instructors in American art history. Online databases, image repositories, search engines, and presentation software have drastically altered the landscape of art history pedagogy. Where it was once necessary

to assemble slides in carousels in institutional visual resources libraries, art history professors now have access to a vast collection of digital images through a wide range of sources: Artstor, Google Images, Wikimedia Commons, and many museums and institutions that make their collections widely available for instructional use. Likewise, text databases such as JSTOR and Google Books, and online encyclopedias, such as Wikipedia, provide instant access to enormous swaths of information. In addition, there are many resources specifically designed to support digital pedagogy in art history, including Art History Teaching Resources and its new online journal, *Art History Pedagogy and Practice*, and smarthistory.org, supported by the Khan Academy.² All of these developments point to exciting new opportunities for art history educators.

The ease of access provided by these powerful tools can however serve to reinforce existing biases when the information available mostly concerns artists already in the established canon of American art. When preparing lecture material for a broad survey course, it can be easy to fall into the trap of working with only well-known artists and artwork, and the ready availability of information only adds to this tendency. In order to expand the range of material offered in the American art survey, it is necessary to expand the resources available to instructors in learning and preparing new material. This means a commitment to researching, writing about, and indexing information on a wider range of artists in online databases and encyclopedias. And students can be powerful allies in carrying out this work. With a little transparency about the state of the field, there is much that can be done to address the problem of online representation with the help of students in graduate and undergraduate classes. Research projects are a common form of assessment in many art history classes, and with some planning, it is possible to turn the work that students are already doing into assignments with real-world impact in raising the visibility of underrepresented artists.

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In fall 2015, I taught *Women in American Art* at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and I used the course as a testing ground for an assignment that would address issues of inequality in online representation of women artists. Specifically, I decided to experiment with using Wikipedia as a platform for student work. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia with content provided and edited by a worldwide community of volunteers. Many professors discourage the use of Wikipedia by students in higher education, explicitly warning against referencing it as a source for research projects. Because anyone can edit Wikipedia, incorrect information may appear in articles, and controversial political topics may become the targets of edit wars between opposing factions. But what may be a weakness for Wikipedia as source material for student papers becomes a strength when students are the editors: students learn to think critically about how information is created and sourced.³ Furthermore, Wikipedia is a highly visible encyclopedia consulted by millions of users worldwide, and representation on this platform matters. Improving the coverage of underrepresented American artists on Wikipedia is an important step in increasing visibility of these artists more broadly.

Wikipedia recognizes the potential power of student participation in editing the encyclopedia and offers a great deal of support for educators interested in improving Wikipedia through student work. Through the Wikipedia Education Program, the Wikimedia Foundation offers tutorials on editing the encyclopedia, brochures on integrating Wikipedia into the classroom, and other resources for educators.⁴ Wikipedia also offers assistance from Campus Ambassadors and Online Ambassadors, volunteers trained to assist college professors in creating assignments and learning to edit the site either on campus or remotely.⁵ Many college professors have also begun to incorporate Wikipedia-based assignments into their syllabi, and some have published accounts of their

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experiences in traditional journals or online.⁶ Finding this material gave me the resources I needed to develop a Wikipedia-based assignment for my students.

Wikipedia as a platform also proved especially meaningful for a class on American women artists. While the encyclopedia purports to cover the breadth of human knowledge, in practice a great deal of gender bias appears among editors and in content. Between 84 and 91 percent of Wikipedia editors are male, and content on the encyclopedia skews in favor of male-centered issues and notable men in history or science. At times, this bias is expressed in hostility toward female editors and viewpoints.⁷ To combat this, Wikipedia has launched the Gender Gap Task Force to address the issues facing women as editors or as the subjects of articles and to encourage editors to write article about female-centered topics.⁸ But while the Wikipedia gender gap is daunting, working with the platform also offers an opportunity to practice feminist pedagogy in a course centered on women artists. In her work on feminism and Wikipedia, Alana Cattapan identifies four key principles of feminist pedagogy: “challenging the instructor/student hierarchy, creating connections to the world outside of the classroom, recognizing collective discussion as knowledge-building, and attempting to make social change by focusing on gendered inequalities.”⁹ By offering students the opportunity to work together to create knowledge and combat inequality on a real-world international platform, the Wikipedia assignment puts many of these principles into practice.

In designing my Wikipedia assignment, I considered numerous options for student engagement using the encyclopedia. College instructors have developed several different types of Wikipedia assignments to meet the varied needs of the online encyclopedia. These have included copyediting for typos and grammar, adding photographs or infographics, and translating existing articles into new languages. But the most common assignment challenges students to improve existing articles on Wikipedia or to draft new articles on important topics not yet covered by the

encyclopedia.¹⁰ For a course assignment focused on increasing the visibility of underrepresented artists, this seemed like the right approach. But as I made plans for the semester, I had a few concerns. First, I worried that learning the Wiki markup language, used to edit the encyclopedia, would prove challenging for students without a strong technical background in computers. I also wanted to make sure to design an assignment with a great deal of oversight to ensure that all student contributions to Wikipedia would be improvements of high quality. Finally, I hoped to minimize the likelihood that students would encounter conflicts with other Wikipedia editors over their edits. With these concerns in mind, I drafted an assignment that would give students early opportunities to familiarize themselves with Wikipedia, with benchmarks throughout the semester to allow me to keep an eye on student progress.

As the course concerned women in American art, the students focused on drafting or improving Wikipedia articles on American women artists. In order to produce the best possible results, I designed the assignment as a group project, asking students to work in clusters of two to three. Early in the semester, I searched Wikipedia for women artists who were either unrepresented by the site or whose articles needed improvement and expansion. Based on my search, I compiled a list of topics and invited students to choose an artist to research. For a class of twenty-five students self-selected into eleven groups, I initially developed a list of seventeen artists who would be suitable for the project. Ten of the groups chose to expand an entry on an existing artist, and the eleventh drafted a new article on Frances Flora Bond Palmer (1812–1876), one of the most talented lithographers working for Currier and Ives in the mid-nineteenth century.¹¹ The groups chose to research artists ranging from miniature painter Anna Claypoole Peale (1791–1978), active in the early nineteenth century, to Emma Amos (b. 1938), who continues to work today in the media of printmaking, painting, and textiles.¹²

In preparing their articles, I asked students to work with Wikipedia's good article criteria in mind. For Wikipedia, a good article is an official designation obtained by passing through a nominating process, meant to designate quality work. Of more than five million articles on the site, approximately twenty-three thousand meet these criteria. According to Wikipedia, a good article should be well written, with correct grammar and concise prose; verifiable with no original research, meaning that it has a list of references to reliable published sources; broad in its coverage of the main aspects of a topic; neutral in its viewpoint; stable in its content, without ongoing disputes; and illustrated with images, if possible.¹³ While we did not end up submitting any of the articles for nomination as a good article, partially due to time constraints at the end of a busy semester, meeting these criteria is a worthy goal for any Wikipedia-based assignment.

In order to track student progress in building successful articles, I arranged benchmarks throughout the semester to walk them through the process of researching a topic and learning to use Wikipedia. In mid-September, I designed a brief assignment introducing students to Wikipedia, in which they read through a basic tutorial on editing articles and created a user page using the Wiki markup language to practice what they had learned. As another facet of this assignment, students had the option of forming their own groups and reporting them to me; I arranged the remaining students into groups during class on the day the assignment was due. The next two steps of the project included a bibliography of at least five published sources on the artist chosen by the group, and an outline of planned work on the article, including a commitment from each group member to work on a particular section of the assignment. During the week of October 29, I set up conferences with each group to check their progress and to keep an eye out for potential conflicts between group members. Through these conferences, I found for the most part that the groups were working together smoothly. By November, the students were producing drafts of their work. I asked each

group to bring several copies of their first draft to class on November 5: one to hand in to me, and one for each group member to exchange with another student in the class. Each student was then responsible for critiquing another group's rough draft. With edits from their classmates and from me, students produced a second draft of the article that was due just before the Thanksgiving break. I made one more round of edits for style and content in advance of an in-class Wikipedia edit-a-thon on the last day of class, December 10.¹⁴

On that day, we met in the PAFA computer classroom. Each group manned a computer, and the students went to work adding their changes to the site. I continued to be concerned that students would have trouble working with the Wiki markup language, but we soon found that all of the computers in the lab were able to work with the Wikipedia new VisualEditor. The VisualEditor, which is still in beta, allows users to edit Wikipedia without learning the markup language, making the editing process much more accessible for users with limited computer literacy.¹⁵ Once this hurdle had been crossed, the session proceeded smoothly, and over the course of about two hours we successfully added all of our edits to the site. One of the most touching elements of the session was that without prompting from me, students had discovered Listen to Wikipedia, a website that animates updates to the encyclopedia in real time with musical cues and bubbles to indicate the scope of the edit.¹⁶ Several of the groups kept this site open in a separate window as they worked, and we enjoyed watching the class edits as they appeared. The high level of student engagement and excitement about making a difference in a real-world setting was a particularly rewarding aspect of the project.

In the aftermath of our edit-a-thon, another concern was that other Wikipedia editors might object to the changes we made to this set of articles. Given that our topic was relatively uncontroversial, and given the amount of oversight built into the assignment to assure quality

submissions, I thought a full-blown edit war was unlikely. However, I had read some horror stories of students clashing with experienced Wikipedia editors over classroom projects, and I did not want this to happen to my students after all the work they had put into their articles.¹⁷ To alleviate this concern, I asked all students to place a comment on the article's talk page explaining that their edits were made in the context of a class project. I then left a subsequent comment directing all inquiries about the project to my user page. On my user page, I provided a summary of the course and project objectives, with a list of all of the pages that my students created or updated as part of the course.¹⁸ I also placed all of the student-edited pages on my Watchlist, a utility that allows Wikipedia editors to monitor the activity on pages they have created or edited. To date, reactions to the students' work have been generally positive, with other Wikipedia editors offering some minor tweaks and corrections.

The Wikipedia article assignment worked well for my needs in the context of my Women in American Art class, but it could also be applied to many instructional contexts in art history and in other disciplines. The encyclopedia is always in need of editors to improve coverage of a wide range of topics, and there are many coordinated WikiProjects designed to bring together groups of writers to target expansion in specific areas. For instance, WikiProject Women artists works to improve the quality and coverage of the careers of women artists in order to help alleviate the systemic bias against women artists in the encyclopedia. In a similar vein, Art+Feminism, founded by Sian Evans, Jacqueline Mabey, Michael Mandiberg, and Laurel Ptak, organizes periodic Wikipedia edit-a-thons to address gender inequality on the platform. Other initiatives might also be of interest to instructors in American art. GLAM/Archives of American Art, in which GLAM stands for galleries, libraries, archives, and museums, is a partnership between the Archives of American Art and Wikipedia to improve articles on American artists using materials from the archive. WikiProject Public Art

improves the quality and quantity of articles on artworks in the public sphere. WikiProject African diaspora aims to improve all articles related to the cultural contributions of people of African descent all over the world. A full listing of ongoing projects can be found in Wikipedia's WikiProject Directory, and art history educators interested looking for a project to suit the needs of a specific class are likely to find one that fits their parameters.¹⁹

Working with Wikipedia is one way to get students involved in conversations about who is represented in American art surveys, and which artists deserve further attention. For my students at PAFA, it was an opportunity to make a real-world impact through class assignments, and several of the students expressed satisfaction with this aspect of the project after the semester ended. In increasing the coverage of underrepresented artists in online databases and encyclopedias, there is still much work to be done. Making this an explicit goal of classroom instruction can be rewarding for both students and educators.

Notes

¹ Angela L. Miller et al, *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008).

² The first issue of *Art History Pedagogy and Practice* is forthcoming in fall 2016. For more information, see "Art History Pedagogy and Practice," <http://academicworks.cuny.edu/ahpp/> , accessed August 31, 2016.

³ For further analysis of the pros and cons of using Wikipedia in the classroom, including a debate over the accuracy of the encyclopedia, see Donna Lind Infeld and William C. Adams, "Wikipedia as a Tool for Teaching Policy Analysis and Improving Public Policy Online," *Journal of Public Affairs Education* 19, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 445–59; Cullen J. Chandler and Alison S. Gregory, "Sleeping with the Enemy: Wikipedia in the College Classroom," *The History Teacher* 43, no. 2 (February 2010): 247–57.

⁴ For a basic introduction to the Wikipedia Education Program, including links for training in Wikipedia editing, creating a course page, seeking assistance from experienced editors, and designing an assignment, see "Wikipedia: Education program/Educators,"

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Education_program/Educators, accessed August 31, 2016. Helpful brochures for getting started include “Case Studies: How instructors are teaching with Wikipedia,”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Case_Studies,_How_instructors_are_teaching_with_Wikipedia_\(Wiki_Education_Foundation\).pdf](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Case_Studies,_How_instructors_are_teaching_with_Wikipedia_(Wiki_Education_Foundation).pdf), accessed August 31, 2016; and “Instructor Basics: How to use Wikipedia as a teaching tool,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Instructor_Basics,_How_to_use_Wikipedia_as_a_teaching_tool_\(Wiki_Education_Foundation\).pdf](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Instructor_Basics,_How_to_use_Wikipedia_as_a_teaching_tool_(Wiki_Education_Foundation).pdf), accessed August 31, 2016.

⁵ For a list of Campus Ambassadors for Wikipedia, see “Campus volunteers,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:CampusVolunteers>, accessed August 31, 2016. For a list of Online Ambassadors, see “Online volunteers,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:OnlineVolunteers>, accessed August 31, 2016.

⁶ One of the most helpful sources on Wikipedia as a teaching tool is Piotr Konieczny, who has written several articles on his experiences with Wikipedia and guides for educators considering incorporating it, including many links to additional resources. For example, see Piotr Konieczny, “Wikis and Wikipedia as a Teaching Tool: Five Years Later,” *First Monday* 17, no. 9 (September 3, 2012), <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3583/3313>, accessed August 31, 2016. See also Infield and Adams, “Wikipedia as a Tool for Teaching Policy Analysis and Improving Public Policy Online”; Chandler and Gregory, “Sleeping with the Enemy: Wikipedia in the College Classroom”; Rachel Goodman, “Students Contribute to a Global Community through Improvement of Wikipedia,” *The American Biology Teacher* 70, no. 3 (March 2008): 138; Elizabeth M. Nix, “Wikipedia: How It Works and How It Can Work for You,” *The History Teacher* 43, no. 2 (February 2010): 259–64; and Alana Cattapan, “(Re)Writing ‘Feminism in Canada’: Wikipedia in the Feminist Classroom,” *Feminist Teacher* 22, no. 2 (2012): 125–36.

⁷ On gender bias in Wikipedia, see Emma Paling, “Wikipedia’s Hostility to Women,” *The Atlantic*, October 21, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/10/how-wikipedia-is-hostile-to-women/411619/>, accessed August 31, 2016; and Noam Choen, “Define Gender Gap? Look Up Wikipedia’s Contributor List,” *New York Times*, January 30, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/31/business/media/31link.html?_r=0, accessed August 31, 2016.

⁸ For more information about Wikipedia’s Gender Gap Task Force, see “Wikipedia: WikiProject Countering systemic bias/Gender gap task force,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Countering_systemic_bias/Gender_gap_task_force,” accessed August 31, 2016.

⁹ Cattapan, “(Re)Writing ‘Feminism in Canada’: Wikipedia in the Feminist Classroom,” 126.

¹⁰ A discussion of the benefits of these various assignments can be found in “Instructor Basics: How to use Wikipedia as a teaching tool,” 4. See also Konieczny, “Wikis and Wikipedia as a Teaching Tool: Five Years Later.”

¹¹ Also known as Fanny Palmer, Frances Flora Bond Palmer was a prolific lithographer who produced hundreds of scenes for Currier and Ives. On her early career, see Charlotte S. Rubenstein,

“The Early Career of Frances Flora Bond Palmer,” *American Art Journal* 17, no. 4 (Autumn 1985): 71–88.

¹² The full list of artists included Anna Claypoole Peale (1791–1878), Frances Flora Bond Palmer (1812–1876), Anne Goldthwaite (1869–1944), Sally James Farnham (1876–1943), Marion Greenwood (1909–1980), Georgette Seabrooke (1916–2011), Elaine de Kooning (1918–1989), Grace Hartigan (1922–2008), Faith Ringgold (b. 1930), Lee Bontecou (b. 1931), and Emma Amos (b. 1938). For a fully hyperlinked list of articles written or improved by the students, see my Wikipedia user page, “User:Sbeetham,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Sbeetham>, accessed September 2, 2016.

¹³ For more on Wikipedia’s Good Article Criteria, see “Wikipedia: Good article criteria,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Good_article_criteria, accessed September 2, 2016.

¹⁴ For more detail on these specific assignments, including PDF files of all of the worksheets I handed out during the course of the semester, see Sarah Beetham, “Wikipedia Resources,” <https://sarahbeetham.wordpress.com/wikipedia-resources/>, accessed September 2, 2016.

¹⁵ For more information on Wikipedia’s VisualEditor and the process underway to improve its functionality and make it available to all users, see “Wikipedia: VisualEditor,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:VisualEditor>, accessed September 2, 2016.

¹⁶ See “Listen to Wikipedia,” <http://listen.hatnote.com/>, accessed September 2, 2016.

¹⁷ Elizabeth M. Nix offers one example of an assignment in which students wrote articles related to Baltimore history, and most of the articles lasted less than twenty-four hours on the site before being marked for deletion by other editors. See Nix, “Wikipedia: How It Works and How It Can Work for You,” 261–63.

¹⁸ See “User:Sbeetham,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Sbeetham>, accessed September 2, 2016.

¹⁹ See “Wikipedia: WikiProject Women artists,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Women_artists, accessed September 4, 2016; “Art+Feminism,” <http://art.plusfeminism.org/>, accessed September 4, 2016; “Wikipedia: GLAM/ Archives of American Art,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:GLAM/Archives_of_American_Art, accessed September 4, 2016; “Wikipedia: WikiProject Public Art,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Public_Art, accessed September 4, 2016; “Wikipedia: WikiProject African diaspora,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_African_diaspora, accessed September 4, 2016; and “Wikipedia: WikiProject Directory,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Directory, accessed September 4, 2016.