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Wikistudents. Teaching consumption through production hands on with Wikipedia

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Keywords

prosumption, collective teaching, wikipedia, consumer culture, digital humanities, peer-mentoring



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Abstract

This paper describes and reflects on a teaching experience developed as a complimentary workshops to MA class on history, theory and politics of consumption. We used Wikipedia as a tool to consider the circuit of knowledge production in the Web 2.0 era, where consumers are no longer passive audiences but producers and consumers at the same time. We developed a collaborative team-work workshop aimed at the production of Wikipedia entries on topics related to the class content. In this note we describe the structure of such “Wikiworkshops”, our teaching strategy on sources management, teamwork and group teaching, and elaborate on students' reception of the workshop. Wikiworkshops proved to be an effective exercise in a collaborative economy of knowledge, and an opportunity for young sociologists to be part of it, expressing their creativity as well as becoming aware of the boundaries and limits inherent in the mechanism.

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Introduction

This paper describes and reflects on a fascinating teaching experience that we developed for the unit Consumer Culture in Academic Year 2014-5, a subject examining the history, theory and politics of consumption, and which was taught at the University of Milan within the Master of Arts Program in Corporate Communication. A collaborative teamwork workshop was set up to complement the main textbook (Sassatelli 2007) and to reflect more critically on the complexities of the commodity circuit as it goes through the so called “sign economy” (Baudrillard 1981) and the increasing engagement of consumers *qua* producers. The workshop began by providing the class with a general introduction to the notion of “prosumption” (Fuchs 2013; Humphreys & Grayson 2008; Ritzer & Jurgenson 2010). Prosumption, a term coined by Alvin Toffler (1980), identifies the trend in late capitalism toward putting consumers to work (at the fast-food outlet or at the ATM machine, shopping on line or animating a brand community). Prosumption, by rejecting any sharp division between the production and the consumption sphere, is a concept that allows the co-creation of value and the dynamics of exploitation and control under regimes of unpaid labor and post-scarcity markets. Within this new “wikinomic” model, and the development of Web 2.0 in particular, consumers are increasingly asked to contribute to the production of both the symbolic value of commodities (fan communities, for example; see Cova, Kozinets & Shankar 2012; Van Zoonen 2014) and, notably, the production of knowledge about commodities and the world more generally. The ways consumers contribute to the generation of value in the sign economy include the production of knowledge, via, for example, reviews of films and books on Amazon and reviews of travel hotels on Booking.com. More specifically, consumers can become producers contributing to the construction of a common base of knowledge in Wikipedia, the online open-access encyclopedia based on an openly editable content and the collaboration of thousands of anonymous contributors who write for free. Wikipedia is well-known to university students worldwide as a source of information. Founded in 2001, Wikipedia can be understood as a kind of “commons”; ideally, it will provide well written, balanced entries containing comprehensive and verifiable (via clear quotations) knowledge. The challenge was to involve students in writing and editing entries, thus critically appreciating the way it engages “consumers” in the production process.

In the following page we present this innovative teaching modality and its context; consider how the modality helped to address the management and evolution of sources (academic or other); explore aspects of teamwork among students and teachers¹ (considering both difficulties and advantages of the approach); and look at students’ responses to the teaching strategy. The paper concludes with a brief summary.

Wikiworkshop with students

The Wikiworkshop was delivered in 10 weekly two-hour sessions as an integral part of the Master of Arts unit Consumer Culture. Thirty-five students were enrolled, and individually assessed on participation in class, relevance of the chosen topic, source management, editorial quality of the final draft and technical management of the upload process.

The Wikiworkshop relied on the autonomy of students forming groups and proposing Wikipedia

¹ The teaching team was composed of the four authors. The first author, as a convenor of the course, communicated regularly through a mailing list with the group leaders and sorted their requests among the teaching team.

entries. In the first week, students divided into groups of four to six people; each group was tasked with independently proposing an entry for Wikipedia. The entry could be either already existing in Wikipedia, and thus subject to modifications or integrations, or not yet present. Each group nominated a leader who acted as the connection between the students and the instructors. The only requisite for each group's entry was that it be linked to the overarching topic of the course. We choose to work with the English version of Wikipedia, as the course was held in English, and the English version was more complete and varied; however, we held a brief session comparing entries from different versions (Italian, French, German, Spanish and English) to show cross-cultural variation and the relevance of linguistic communities on the way entries are completed.

In the second week, the students were guided through an overview of the existing Wikipedia entries that dealt with the semantic universe surrounding the notion of "consumer culture" and associated phenomena (from fashion to sustainability, luxury and fair trade), observing their structure, the kinds of sources used and their validity as compared to the material used for the other components of the subject. We discussed the appropriateness and feasibility of the entry with the students and encouraged them to sketch a draft, based on the usual Wikipedia entry structure (definition of the term, history, see also, references and external links). The writing policies and procedures of Wikipedia were illustrated with reference to the "Editing Wikipedia" guide provided by the Wikimedia Foundation². The students used the guide to build their entries and improve existing entries. In particular, we encouraged students to check whether the entry was already existing (considering also other languages) and whether entries similar to the one proposed were already present in Wikipedia. Most, if not all, of the student groups opted for developing a new entry for Wikipedia rather than modifying an existing one. We asked students to produce a 1,000-word entry, to allow for precise focus and to limit their task; however, many students found it difficult to keep to the word length and quite a few entries were longer than required.

The draft of each entry was discussed during the Wikiworkshop in front of the whole class. Each draft was projected on the wall and presented by a group member. We analysed the drafts to highlight strengths and weaknesses. The members of other groups were encouraged to participate in the discussion. At this stage, we suggested either additional bibliographic material or modifications to be made to the structure of the entry to make it homogeneous to other Wikipedia entries or to improve its internal coherence. The aim was to build an entry as clear and structurally homogeneous as possible. Where relevant, students were encouraged to refer to the course textbooks, which contained information that could improve the entry.

After class discussion of all the drafts, each instructor analysed the groups material separately. Each group was allocated to a particular instructor based on the instructor's research interests and personal backgrounds. In this way, specific difficulties and needs could emerge and be addressed by one or more instructor, if necessary. At this stage of the Wikiworkshop, we gave suggestions such as what sources could be used to improve the bibliography, or the best way to find the original source of a piece of information.

Students were encouraged to insert pictures, external links and cross-citations in the entry to increase its quality. After the students completed the drafts, we corrected them, checking for minor errors (typos, absence of captions, etc.) before submission to Wikipedia.

2 https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/18/Editing_Wikipedia_brochure_EN.pdf.

The last part of the workshop consisted of creating a Wikipedia profile and uploading the entry into the encyclopedia. The workshop closed with the presentation of the uploaded Wikipedia entry to the whole class.

Throughout the Wikiworkshop we provided students with a few references on collective knowledge production and consumption. We addressed in particular the motivations of Wikipedians (Nov 2007; Keegan, Gergle & Contractor 2012), critical consumerism and consumers' choice, and open knowledge production and consumption.

Source management

Source management was a crucial concern in our workshop, for both practical and theoretical reasons. Wikipedia's verifiability policy requires contributors to use cited sources and we required students to strictly comply with this policy. This encouraged our students to reflect on general statements that could be considered mere anecdotal knowledge. This was particularly useful in training students to independently develop their own "sociological imagination" (Wright-Mills 1959) without allowing them to rely solely on our explanations. Moreover, where no appropriate sources were located, students became interested in producing original research to substantiate their arguments, and we believe many dissertation projects are likely to spawn from ideas and concepts students were not able to verify in the literature.

We chose to train students primarily in the use and management of scholarly sources. In fact, Wikipedia's policy provides no clear boundaries or hierarchies among academic, journalistic or other sources. We thus decided to present practical tools of scholarly sources and practices (databases and peer review), introducing them first at the epistemological level; that is, as technological and organisational infrastructures that produce and monitor the boundaries between professional-scientific research and lay knowledge. This preliminary discussion on the productive power of the archive, the library, the database and the quotation economy allowed us to provide a brief theoretical discussion on boundary work (Gieryn 1999; Lamont 1987), the productive power of the archive (Foucault 1969; Derrida 1995) and the hierarchical and exclusionary nature of the canon (Parker & Pollock 1981; Belsey & Moore 1989; Harding & Hintikka 1983).

Subsequently, we gave a practical presentation of a routine scholarly search for literature in sociology. Much to our dismay, we soon found that our students were more familiar with libraries as study rooms than as repositories of knowledge. Time constraints prevented us from delivering a complete training in library services and research skills. However, because our students were at least somewhat familiar with borrowing books, we chose to focus on periodicals searching, discovery and retrieval. Given the fairly narrow scope of most of the Wikipedia entries chosen for the assignment, periodical articles were also the best place to find well-supported, empirical data that could serve as a cited source.

Our institution relies on subscriptions to an extensive variety of databases and resources. Because of its comprehensiveness and relevance, we chose to demonstrate the use of ProQuest®, which includes ProQuest® Dissertations & Theses Full Text: The Humanities and Social Sciences Collection; ProQuest® Social Science Journals; and ProQuest® Sociology. While demonstrating the use of filters to narrow search results, we were able to discuss basic information retrieval topics such as specifying relevance to a particular discipline, reading and evaluating an abstract, searching with keywords and Boolean operators, filtering records according to source type, tracing

dissertations from published monographs, journals' rankings and authors' h-indexes and peer-review.

Particular attention was given to the discussion of peer-review, as a practice to assess the quality of research before it is accepted for publication. As the first and second authors were, respectively, Editor in Chief and Managing Editor of a scholarly journal, we informed this discussion with autoethnographic (Ellis 2004) examples stemming from our direct experience, thus providing students with a lively account of the “nuts and bolts” of journal publishing. We explained the basic workflow of a journal submission, from editorial filtering to peer review, author revision, proofreading and publishing, with examples and discussion of its theoretical and epistemological significance.

In fact, understanding peer-review as a mode of knowledge production allowed us to discuss the organisational logics of contemporary scientific discovery and validation, particularly in its relation to open data, publishing and access (Suber 2012). We see peer-review and open science as intimately linked, and discussed with our students the limits of maintaining solid and effective peer-review in light of the transformation of the academic publishing industry (for an investigation of peer review among fee-charging open access journals, see Bohannon 2013). The now classic “Sokal affair” can also be used as a good starting point for discussion (see Editors of *Lingua Franca* 2000). Finally, the debate on academic publishing allowed us to bring the discussion back to collective modes of knowledge production and usage, explaining how contemporary scientific discovery depends increasingly on collective intelligence (Surowiecki 2004; Nielsen 2012).

In terms of practicalities of working with Wikipedia, this was also the session when we introduced a very useful module on the use of style manuals. Wikipedia provides a quite detailed style manual, and this assessment allowed us to familiarise students with the task of ensuring consistency in language composition, orthography, quotation and citation. Brief examples from other widely used style guides, such as the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, and the Chicago Manual of Style, were also presented.

Writing for Wikipedia allows a wide usage of non-academic and non-text sources. While we steered the class towards academic text sources, we encouraged students to enrich their entries with visual elements and references to other kinds of cultural artifacts. A common sub-header in Wikipedia's entries – “References in popular culture” – was particularly useful to allow students to cite (for example) movies, songs, television shows and novels without necessarily engaging in a close analysis of that particular cultural text. The task of finding and integrating photographs also allowed us to discuss topics of intellectual rights and open knowledge. After discussing initiatives in flexible copyright, such as Creative Commons licenses (Creative Commons is a non-profit foundation that provides licenses for reusing materials with non-commercial purposes), to avoid potential copyright issues that could have stalled the entries' publication, we directed students towards Wikimedia Commons, the Wikipedia-related media repository of public domain and freely licensed materials.

Teamwork, group teaching and reception of Wikiworkshop

Throughout the Wikiworkshop we worked as a team, especially with regards to teaching and mentoring. The relationships among us were marked by a high level of collaboration, and this

resulted in a continuous exchange of materials produced by students and of our notes and minutes of the Wikiworkshop. The aim was to be constantly updated on how the students' work was progressing. Especially at the beginning, groups' formation and the choice of entry were constantly changing, making collaboration among the instructors paramount.

The choice of which groups each instructor would follow throughout the entire course was mostly determined by our fields of expertise. Some of us, for example, focused on issues of critical consumption and farmer's markets, while other preferred the topic of fashion with a special focus on gender issues. Our objective was to follow the same groups from the beginning to the end of the course to give students a consistent reference person.

We observed that through teamwork, students built strong bonds within their groups. In contrast, the groups seemed indifferent to each other, even though we encouraged collaboration among groups by discussing the drafts in front of the whole class.

With regard to students working in groups, we observed some general features. At first, students did not consider there to be a difference between, on the one hand, primary, academic, and peer-reviewed sources and, on the other hand, non-academic sources such as blogs and magazines. As a consequence, we trained them in the use and management of scholarly sources (see Source Management, above).

The students understood the guidelines and values behind Wikipedia, but some had difficulty applying and elaborating on them. For example, in choosing pictures for their entries, sometimes students failed to use open-source images (such as the ones available in the Wikipedia Commons database), instead relying on copyright-protected pictures downloaded from the internet. Some of them overcame the copyright issue by personally taking pictures and including them in the Wikipedia entry, thus showing proactivity in the completion of the assignment.

The teaching activity involved the extensive use of personal computers, both during the workshop and at home. Although students were required to possess personal computers to complete the Wikiworkshop, the students often allowed themselves to be distracted by checking their social-media profiles and personal e-mails.

However, teaching with a personal computer and online resources presented clear advantages. For example, we could play videos regarding some aspects of Wikipedia directly from the website in front of the class. Furthermore, accessing Wikipedia entries by personal computer and projecting the contents on the wall was a way to teach students how to move back and forth within the multitude of Wikipedia entries, pages, sub-sections and similar. This enhanced the teaching quality by reducing the time devoted to explanations. Additionally, the use of personal computers and, in particular, the projection of the draft entries guaranteed a certain level of homogeneity among the groups' entries. The students could actively and effectively learn by discussing others' drafts, and by observing their structures and suggested modifications.

Students' interest and level of attention reached a peak in the first and the last phases of the Wikiworkshop. The fact that their entries would be uploaded on Wikipedia guaranteed a strong motivation to complete the task. At the beginning, the possibility to choose group partners and the subject of the group's Wikipedia entry clearly represented a moment of great involvement and agency. The last stages of the Wikiworkshop included the completion of the Wikipedia entry and its uploading. The upload had some prerequisite steps that we explained to the students. They had to create a personal profile and then upload the entry. After the upload, other Wikipedia users

could check the entry and deliver a judgment on its appropriateness. This could result in the publication or rejection of the entry, or a request for modifications, along with a justification for the specific outcome.

A few entries were successfully and rapidly published on Wikipedia, and even modified by other users. In the context of our Wikiworkshop, this represented an indisputable success: not only had the entry been judged valid, but itself constituted the starting point for further production of knowledge. This might function as the clearest example of the concept of prosumerism we had presented to our students: it definitely showed the blended nature of the processes of consumption and production of a cultural good.

Some of the students, though, perceived the modification of the entry by other users as a non-appropriate act, an invasion of the personal or group domain and perhaps even a “copyright” violation. This, in our view, is an example of the fact that the comprehension of collective knowledge production might be intellectually incorporated, yet not fully personally understood and appreciated.

Students’ opinions on Wikiworkshop

The opinions collected through the anonymous questionnaires – which were completed by all the enrolled students and informal feedback collected at the end of the workshop confirmed our impression of the students’ positive reception of the Wikiworkshop experience.

The large majority of the students said they were interested in the topics dealt with during the workshops, and satisfied, on the whole, with the course. This positive evaluation was evident in the overall level of attendance, which remained quite high during the entire period (according to the students’ self-declarations), even if it seemed to us to vary from week to week. Specifically, we noticed that the number of the students attending the workshop was higher both in the first and in the last phase of the Wikiworkshop, while their participation decreased in the middle.

Since almost all the students were enrolled in the Corporate Communication program, they appreciated the fact that the teaching strategy reflected the learning objectives set out in their degree program. They thus considered the Wikiworkshop to be well integrated and connected with their career orientation, as well as judging their preliminary knowledge as sufficient for understanding the topics dealt with during the workshop. Furthermore, they affirmed that the objectives and content of the course were presented clearly at the beginning of each session, contributing to the establishment of boundaries that ensured clarity in carrying out the classwork. Finally, the students’ universal familiarity with web cultures and, in particular, Wikipedia³, contributed to the success of the workshops by increasing participants’ curiosity and personal interest.

The students were slightly critical of the course load: while most considered it appropriate, a few deemed it too heavy and suggested reducing it. Understandably, to plan a Wikipedia entry requires a certain effort to be creative and analytically clever and to write in a clear and compelling manner. Unlike other university assignments, in this case the final product is expected to be public and

3 It is interesting that none of the students had previously ever written for Wikipedia, yet many informally suggested their intention to continue contributing after the end of the Workshop.

accessible on the web, thus exposed to open judgment, demanding from the students an extra effort to be coherent and well informed on very specific topics, as well as quite accurate in the process of writing. Several participants encountered individual difficulties in the writing process, although this weakness was partially offset by relying on teamwork. Teamwork stimulated individual innovation by embedding members in a comfortable, small-group environment. We encouraged students to divide into groups taking into consideration individual capabilities⁴, to create synergies and compensate weaknesses with strength.

Some of the most positive questionnaire results referred to the teaching activities. In particular, the large majority of the students considered the course convenor capable of introducing the topics in a clear and comprehensive manner, able to motivate students to take an interest in the subject and ready to act in a correct and helpful manner towards them. Moreover, although a few students did not express an opinion as to collective teaching, the majority evaluated this approach positively. They generally considered the activities of the teaching team as well-coordinated and integrated, and judged useful any eventual repetition.

All in all, the students' evaluation of the course was highly positive, a result that could be attributed to several elements that we have tried to highlight in this brief contribution. First, we considered collective mentoring as a positive experience that allowed us to experiment with something quite alternative compared with individual teaching, the most common tertiary paradigm: it engaged with a wider range of research competencies and relational and educational skills, which needed to be well coordinated and supported through a preliminary definition of shared objectives and expected achievements. During the actual workshops, our collective work consisted mainly of mentorship and support to the students, paying great attention to supporting their autonomy and creative effort. This was very labour-intensive, as it required the joint presence of all four instructors, but produced a veritable creative effervescence in the classroom.

Students were likewise required to work in groups and be ready to present to the whole class. For them, Wikiworkshop constituted an occasion, even if limited, to improve their ability to conduct an innovative research project: the workshops attempted to enhance students' awareness of the use of credible sources of information; stimulate their creativity and initiative; improve their capacity to make clear and well-supported arguments; prompt their ability to speak in formal and academic settings; and, finally, train them to face an external collective judgment, i.e. not only the teachers' evaluation, but also the entire class's opinion, and the final approval of the whole community of Wikipedia users (the Appendix lists the entries actually published by Wikipedia).

Concluding notes

In a recent article, "Rethinking Wikipedia for the Classroom", Piotr Konieczny (2014, p. 83) considers whether we are ready to use Wikipedia to teach, and particularly to teach scholarly writing. We were aware that academics often express doubts about whether Wikipedia's prosumerist approach to knowledge can do better than the traditional peer-review academic model. However, Wikipedia is allegedly improving its status in the eyes of academics (Xiao & Askin 2014), and has over a decade proved that its entries are much more solid and reliable than originally expected (Brock 2006; Kittur, Suh & Chi 2008). While writing, and teamwork writing in

⁴ Not surprisingly, we noted an IT gender gap, with most male students (20% of the total class) being assigned by the teams as responsible for the technical tasks (setting up accounts, uploading contents, etc.).

particular, has proven very useful, we are fully aware that there is no substitute to lectures, interactive seminars and actual empirical research for proper sociological training. Yet, like Konieczny (2014, p.[?]), we consider that it might be “one very promising path for realizing a more engaged and engaging public sociology”. While we agree with Peter Burke (2012) who argues that each of the main trends of the Encyclopedic period from the 18th century to Wikipedia – including secularisation and democratisation – coexist and interact with their opposites, we also thought that it was quite useful to draw on the writing of Wikipedia entries to allow students to come to terms critically with the professionalism that has long helped to separate the production of knowledge from its consumption. In particular, we used it as a tool in a unit on consumer culture to consider the circuit of knowledge production in the Web 2.0 era, where consumers are no longer passive audiences but producers and consumers at the same time, producing content as part of a virtual community of prosumers. The Wikiworkshop for us was a way to show how a collaborative economy of knowledge may develop – and, more importantly, how young sociologists can be part of it, exercising their creativity as well as becoming aware of the boundaries and limits inherent in the mechanism and of knowledge as a process, and acquiring a proactive, responsible ethos for its production. Thus, for example, although Wikipedia is considered the major source of plagiarism when producing assignments and papers, our teaching experience appeared instead to work as a pedagogy of good practice for knowledge production. Like Robert Cummings (2009), who a few years ago pioneered the use of Wikipedia as a writing tool for his creative writing class, we found that students were quite motivated, as they perceived they were not only writing collectively, but also for a public, producing something others would consume, that would remain in the public sphere, open to review and assessment. Facing of the practicalities detailed above allowed students to develop a more critical eye for knowledge. The perception of doing something that would have effects outside the classroom boosted their sense of participation and effectively empowered them to work at their best.

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