

Wikipedia in Academia

a cura di
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Wikipedia within Italian literature teaching

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As a result of a recent restricted educational experiment, this essay provides a modest insight into Wikipedia's teaching potential within higher education. According to the author, Wikipedia should be welcomed within university's classrooms as a continuous dialectic process to co-build knowledge rather than a place to formalize knowledge. The scholar also focuses both on the educational environment where teaching Wikipedia can be effective and its restrictions (timing, number of participants, strong and spontaneous motivation, medium-high specific knowledge of participants). Finally, she wonders whether teaching with Wikipedia may positively affect Italian literature teaching.

Wikipedia, teaching with Wikipedia, Italian literature

Wikipedia's educational approach

In the following pages I would like to share some thought-provoking issues arising from my experience in teaching Italian literature and in contributing to a Wikipedia entry. A limited but very diverse experience which, due to its heterogeneity, has been professionally interesting.

In October 2018 I gave a seminar at the University of Connecticut within a cooperation programme financed by the University of Padua and co-organized with an American colleague, Andrea Celli. In the same academic year I promoted a workshop within my course unit in Italian literature at the University of Padua as part of the Project coordinated by the University itself (https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progetto:Coordinamento/Università/UNIPD/Letteratura_italiana).

These were very different educational environments and learning styles.

The first one was open to a group of 10 advanced students of Italian literature, mostly not native speakers. They attended a course unit on *De mulieribus claris*, *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta and Corbaccio* by Giovanni Boccaccio and read some novellas of the *Decameron*. The seminar was broken down into two sessions and focused on the creation of the entry *Le donne nell'opera di Boccaccio* (*Women in Boccaccio's works*) https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_donne_nell%27opera_di_Boccaccio.

The second experience took place in Padua, during a course unit in Italian literature. It was very crowded (160 students) and open to students attending the first year of the Bachelor's degree programme in Language, literature and cultural communication. The students, who spontaneously registered for the workshop, were free to choose the entry they wanted to create working on two different national versions of Wikipedia: they edited Italian entries on authors and pieces of work of foreign literatures they preferred.

The two experiences required different timing and involved people with substantial difference in their educational level and motivation: comparing the two experiences, however, was astonishing.

Wikipedia as a process

A significant theoretical analysis of Wikipedia allows me not to insist on some issues that have already been sufficiently examined: the scientific reliability of Wikipedia, its 'intangible' essence which seems to clash with the idea of a strong and solid knowledge, its wide usage in the academic field, etc. Actually, I think the educational approach itself shows an interesting aspect of this storage of knowledge: the usage of Wikipedia in a university classroom encourages to develop a critic and participatory approach towards knowledge and to consider Wikipedia itself as a tool to promote an active knowledge (Bonfiglio, A. 2013; Barbe, L., Merzeau, L., & Schafer, V. (Eds.). (2015)).

This type of active knowledge can also be created through more classic learning process based on university textbooks, whether they are printed or digital, but it is not as boosted as by a Wikipedia page, especially if the latter is the result of a participatory and shared process. It can be compared to the 'Sagrada Familia' an evolving and never-ending project, just like knowledge.

Under what conditions

In my experience, the process of active knowledge offered by Wikipedia can be put into practice only if participants:

1. have medium-high knowledge of the topic they are contributing to;

2. are limited in numbers (20 up to 30 people)
3. are driven by a strong motivation.

An educational environment presenting the above-mentioned conditions may not sound much realistic. Nonetheless, on a closer analysis, the first condition is to be considered more the ending rather than the beginning of a process that develops within a classroom during an advanced course unit. The latter may be open to a limited number of students (course unit of a Master's degree programme), which would meet condition number 2. Moreover, if necessary, those students can be selected according to their voluntary basis to participate in a high-level workshop or a seminar.

The motivation condition is still to be solved: why one or more students should help to create knowledge on Wikipedia? There are at least two types of motivation to consider.

When it comes to teaching as a transmission, the teacher and the learner are the two ends of the vector of knowledge that only goes in one direction, from the teacher to the learner. In this educational environment, you either convey or receive knowledge: students have the right to receive it, but it is not their duty to give it back, except during an evaluation process (the examination). In this scenario, motivation is subordinated to evaluation: contributing to Wikipedia may affect the examination mark or may become an admission requirement for the evaluation itself.

As a result, this kind of motivation is induced and forced: although being efficient in the short run (resulting in the contribution) it may lead to an excellent result but cannot guarantee neither the quality of the process nor its actual effects on students; thus, a thorough participation in the project of a collective knowledge cannot be guaranteed.

The results of participating driven by a forced motivation are not to be underestimated though, especially if the contribution has a good level. A list, however provisional, of these results is provided below:

- developing IT skills;
- participating in a process of sharing and testing your personal knowledge;
- experimenting with writing for the general public;
- examining the procedures for organizing and conveying information;
- analysing the procedures for determining the reliability of information sources etc.

However, I do not think that this is the kind of motivation to pursue, since it clashes with one of the five principles of Wikipedia, the 'free encyclopedia'.

A 'free' motivation is only possible in an educational environment in which knowledge is the result of a shared and participatory process. In this scenario,

knowledge is no longer considered as a transmission but as a collaboration. In this educational environment, students participate in the contributing process to Wikipedia because they are interested in knowledge itself and they truly believe that this is always a provisional collective and plural goal. In this perspective, creating a spontaneous motivation is much easier than you think. Since knowledge is problematic, dialectical and is evolving and since this is a never-ending process, Wikipedia appears as a provisional formalization of knowledge (the entries) that always needs to be checked, discussed and updated within and by a community of scholars and not only of students.

In my opinion, the transition from ‘student’ (‘a person enrolled in a degree programme’) to ‘scholar’ (a person who dedicates themselves to studying) is one of the changes the mass university cannot avoid implementing. This is because the speed of changes we are suffering from nowadays requires citizens to be continuously updated: our task as teachers should be teaching learning processes as well as conveying knowledge.

Wikipedia: a difficult teaching?

Even though ‘scholars’ have medium-high knowledge on the topic to be addressed on Wikipedia, are limited in number and driven by a strong motivation, teaching with Wikipedia is not that easy. I am not referring to the technical skills to develop, which, I know from experience, can be acquired in less than an hour. I am referring to the management of the group, which implies specific communicative skills, and the time factor. A good job on a medium-length entry about a topic you are proficient in implies a specific procedure to follow:

- a) searching for sources and selecting them
- b) structuring the entry
- c) writing
- d) reviewing
- e) reconstructing the intra- and extra-Wikipedia references network.
- f) inserting iconography (if necessary).

Searching for sources is the longest task and should be mostly carried out in preparation for the workshop on Wikipedia. A preliminary class will focus on the selection of ‘sources’ which will lay the foundations for writing the entry. Another two-hour class may address the structure of the entry, while the writing stage may take from three to four classes depending on how long the entry is. Reviewing may be fully examined in one class, while the reconstruction of the references network will not take that long. Finally, inserting iconography requires to search for materials and assess them, which can take an indefinite

amount of time depending on the materials. In total, 7 to 8 classes of two hours each are necessary, which I think is an appropriate amount of time for a high-level workshop or an editorial seminar.

Wikipedia and Italian literature

On this basis, the last issue to address is whether there are good reasons for having a group of advanced students write a new Wikipedia entry or edit an already existing one on a topic concerning 'Italian literature'.

To make the study of Italian literature productive, meaning it affects written expressive skills, the co-editing task offered by Wikipedia is the best way to raise awareness on the approaches to convey information and knowledge. Co-writing a Wikipedia entry is a sort of 'transparent' expository writing, which enables to analyse the writing procedures at a textual and phrasal level, general to specific, from the overall structure of an entry to the usage of punctuation.

Taking a closer look at literary knowledge, contributing to medium-specialised entries requires major preparatory work which ranges from finding the sources and assessing their reliability to comparing them in order to detect the author's point of view. This process is good training for exercising judgment and developing critical thinking, especially if it is carried out as a collective task (by distributing one source per participant and by giving back what has been read through discussion). This is also a clear example of the temporary inversion of teacher/learner roles, which encourages the process itself.

I do not insist on the expected positive effects on the learning process, which becomes part of personal knowledge, a thorough learning strengthened by processes of discussion, analysis and debate; but I do focus on the fact that it may be worth addressing relevant entries concerning key topics of the history and theory of literature and on literary genres and forms.

In conclusion, since the 'debate' has been mentioned, Wikipedia's 'back-stage' has to be acknowledged: the area where the community of contributors can share ideas and opinions through 'discussion'. This area is good training for learning the ancient techniques of rhetoric while experimenting them: the persuasive discussion, its 'grammar', what an argument is and what types of argument to use. This lays the foundations for a proper written dialogic communication, a task that I believe a teacher of Italian literature cannot avoid undertaking.

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