Chapter 4
Using Wikipedia to Teach Written Health Communication

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ABSTRACT

Unlike first-year writing courses, upper-division writing courses often require students to engage in discipline specific writing. In the author's upper-division course, Writing in the Health Professions, students examine health literacy as it pertains to both oral and written patient-provider communication. Students edit and expand a Wikipedia article for the final course assignment. The advantages of this assignment are threefold. First, students write for an authentic audience, decreasing student apathy. Second, students engage civically, improving health information accessed by millions of people across the world. Finally, students improve content of existing articles and broaden the scope of new articles written, leading to more diverse content and perspectives. In this chapter, the author discusses the above assignment, providing descriptions of scaffolding activities. Potential drawbacks of using Wikipedia to teach students how to write using plain language is discussed, in addition to strategies that might limit these difficulties.

INTRODUCTION

At North Dakota State University (NDSU), a land-grant research institution, I teach several upper-division writing courses: *Writing in the Health Professions*, *Business and Professional Writing*, and *Visual Culture and Language*. Unlike first-year composition courses, upper-division writing courses at NDSU require students to engage in discipline-specific research and writing. These 300-level courses are meant to prepare students for the workplace and / or graduate school. The primary focus of my *Writing in the Health Professions* course is health literacy as it pertains to both oral and written patient-provider communication. According to Osborne (2004), nurse and health literacy advocate, health literacy is "a shared responsibility in which patients and providers each must communicate in ways the other can understand" (p. 2). I believe health literacy is an important and appropriate focus for the course, as it best simulates the writing my students will engage in as healthcare professionals. While I could ask students to review

and / or write journal articles, both common upper-division writing assignments, realistically, most of these students will not formally review or write a journal article after graduation.

For the foreseeable future, most of my students will not be attending graduate school or working in a lab in academia. Upon graduation, a majority of the students will enter the workforce as pharmacists or registered nurses. Some students will get promotions from their current employers as they already work as pharmacy technicians, licensed practical nurses, or certified nursing assistants. When in the workplace, most will be asked to write to inform, to educate both colleagues and patients on a variety of work and health-related issues. With either of the above audiences, these students will be expected to write in a clear and concise manner. They will be expected to communicate using plain language. In my course, students quickly learn that plain language does not mean changing the meaning of their message; rather, plain language is using words and concepts people already know and understand. If that is not possible, words and concepts should be clearly defined in a manner that the reader can understand (Osborne, 2004, p. 157). Last summer, I asked students to expand a Wikipedia article of their choosing to hone their ability to communicate in a clear and concise manner. In addition to learning more about how to use plain language, students sharpened their research skills and understanding of how social media can facilitate collaboration. This chapter explores that endeavor, explaining both the benefits and pitfalls of using Wikipedia in a writing course.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Wikipedia: An Educational Social Media Platform

Some may argue that Wikipedia is not a social media site; rather, as its name suggests, it is an online reference book, an encyclopedia. While it is an online encyclopedia, Wikipedia is also a social media platform because anyone can contribute and exchange information on the site; Wikipedia is a collaborative endeavor. Wikipedia has a community of users that has a common goal: a desire to educate and make knowledge available to every single person on Earth—or at least every single person with access to a computer and the Internet. All Wikipedians (what contributors to Wikipedia are called) have their own user talk pages where they are encouraged to share information about themselves and their personal editing philosophy. They are also encouraged to share their reasoning behind each of their edits and contributions.

In addition to user talk pages, each article on Wikipedia has a talk page in which users can discuss the article's content as well as any edits prior to publishing those changes. Wikipedia encourages discussion on talk pages before changes are made. For talk pages that generate a large amount of conversation, Wikipedia archives these discussions to help keep the talk page easy-to-read and up-to-date (Help: Using talk pages, n.d.). Archiving these discussions documents the collaborative process of contributing users and is a great way to see how an article evolved. Talk areas provide Wikipedians, including student Wikipedians, a chance to communicate, socialize, and learn from one another. In addition to learning about Wikipedia and the collaborative writing process, students working on Wikipedia can improve their editing and grammar knowledge, hone their research skills, and learn how to communicate using plain language.

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