Hacking the Academy

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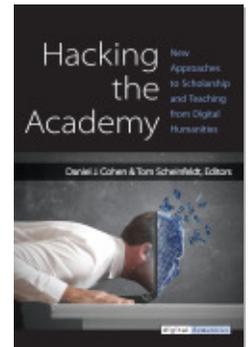Published by University of Michigan Press

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Digital Literacy and the Undergraduate Curriculum

Jeff McClurken, Jeremy Boggs, Adrianne Wadewitz, Anne Ellen Geller, Jon Beasley-Murray

Digital Literacy and the Undergraduate Curriculum
—Jeff McClurken

The notion of digital literacy is sometimes criticized for being overused and having multiple definitions. Those are real problems, but they are also opportunities. I actually like the phrase for people's familiarity with it and for that very richness of meanings, and I've viewed the goals of my undergraduate digital history course through some of those definitions.

One goal of my digital history course is to teach the most conventional form of digital literacy: How does one find and evaluate online materials for scholarly—and nonscholarly—uses? How does one begin to sift through the massive content that is available in a systematic and/or creative way? What are the pitfalls and perils, the promises and potentialities of the online information experience?

Another facet of digital literacy is the notion of digital identity: This is a class that, through individual and group online presence—often blogs and wikis, but many other tools are available as well—explicitly engages students in discussions of their digital identity. How should we present ourselves to the online world—personally, professionally, and intellectually, but also individually, and in groups? In future iterations, it might encourage them to create their own centralized online presence that wouldn't necessarily be housed by the university—or restricted by a single course. We've been engaged recently at University of Mary Washington in a number of discussions related to this notion of enabling students to take control of their digital identity.

Increasingly, I have become convinced that a key, but often overlooked, aspect of digital literacy is a willingness to experiment with a variety of online tools, and then to think critically and strategically about a project, and to identify those tools that would be most useful to that project. Note that I'm not talking about training in a specific tool or even a set of tools. This is not a Microsoft Word or Blackboard skills class. This digital history class offers students a "digital toolkit" from which to choose. There certainly needs to be some basic exposure and technical support, but part of the goal is to get students to figure out how a new tool—system, software, historical process—works on their own.

Broadening the previous point, one of my desires for students is for them to be comfortable with being uncomfortable as they try new things. Figuring how to deal with constantly changing technology is something we all are dealing with, yet in higher education we often put students in new situations only when they first begin. Before long, they've got the process and procedures down, and can churn out eight- to ten-page papers in their sleep. Yet what kind of preparation is that for the larger world? I know, I know. There are much larger philosophical and practical and even political issues at work here. But my point is simply that it's good for college classes to shake students—and faculty—out of their comfort zone. Real learning happens when you're trying to figure out the controls, not when you're on autopilot.

Finally, I think digital literacy for undergraduates in history should encompass at least some exposure to the complex new approaches to research in the discipline offered by recent advancements in computing, including text mining or GIS—if only because those methods are influencing a new generation of scholarship that students will need to understand. As they become more accessible and widely used, there will be more opportunities for students to also engage in the application of these tools in their own work.

Three Roles for Teachers Using Technology
—Jeremy Boggs

Instructor as Role Model

I think any instructor using technology, in the class or out, should think of themselves as a role model for how those technologies can be used

for responsible, beneficial goals. One way I do this is to be completely transparent with students regarding my use of technology. I provide links to my blog, Twitter account, Flickr account, YouTube and Vimeo user-names, Facebook page, and my instant-messenger screennames. I encourage them to follow me, and contact me through any of these methods. I set up rules for contacting me, though, which are followed 99.9 percent of the time, and that 0.1 percent is not enough of a problem for me to change my transparency. I also show students how I've used my blog, Twitter feed, and other accounts to build a professional network and share information. While others warn about the ill effects of putting too much of yourself online—which can be true—I try to show students how I use technology to expand my opportunities, not limit them. Overall, I've had positive feedback from students about my openness. I think that I use technology and social media responsibly—though I could work on the efficiency part. Setting an example that students can follow is important if we want those students to be more critical about their use of technology.

Instructor as Tech Support

When utilizing social media and technology in my courses, I've found myself serving as the primary tech-support person when students run into trouble. With my tech background, I'm comfortable with this, but I suspect a lot of teachers are not. Explaining the technical aspects of blogging, wikis, RSS feeds, YouTube, and Flickr can take up time spent on other things in class and out, but I think it's very important to take on this role. In a lot of cases, support involves me showing students how to find answers to their questions on the web, on support forums, or other resources. In other cases, support involves me taking five–ten minutes at the end of class to explain how a particular technology works. While this can be an enormous amount of work, serving as tech support has, I think, given my students more confidence in my ability to teach with and use technology (going back to Instructor as Role Model).

For example, I have an assignment that asks students to research and write an article on *Wikipedia*. It's not a big article—around 500 words— but the assignment does ask a lot from students such as: learn how to do proper formatting for *Wikipedia*, research an article, and try as hard as they can to ensure their article isn't vandalized or deleted, and encourage

other users to contribute to the article. Learning these things requires a lot of my time for tech support: explain how *Wikipedia* works; how to format footnotes, headings, et cetera; and how to find guidelines to follow if a student's article is up for deletion. This is not the kind of task I'd ask of university tech support, because the assignment is as much about learning these technical things as it is learning about collaborative writing and research. The fact that I can take on a role of tech support helps make the assignment successful.

Instructor as Cheerleader

Out of the three, I think the role of Instructor as Cheerleader is the most important. I really think that there's a lack of cheerleading or positive reinforcement in higher education in general, particularly when trying to teach students to use new kinds of technology or social media. At the beginning of the semester, usually after the first class when I've introduced all the things we'll be doing with computers, I get a few emails from students saying something to the effect that "I'm not good with all this computer stuff." And they probably aren't; I'm not convinced that this generation, like previous generations, is that tech savvy. But I do think every student I have is capable of becoming more proficient with technology than before they entered my class, and can learn how to use the technology they're exposed to every day in new, meaningful, efficient ways.

  The prospect of editing a *Wikipedia* article, to return to that example, is a strange—and sometimes frightening—proposition for my students. Learning how to format footnotes in *Wikipedia*, insert images, and write the proper code for headings and bulleted lists can be daunting to many, let alone connecting with a few dozen completely unknown Wikipedians to discuss the merits of their articles as some face deletion. Encouragement and genuine interest in the success of each student's project is imperative, as is patience. There may be some hand-holding involved as students negotiate with sometime rude *Wikipedia* admins—I've done this—or spending some extra time during office hours explaining wiki formatting while encouraging students that they are in fact smart enough to do all this computer stuff—I've also done this. Pointing out successes in class, even if it's as simple as successfully inserting a YouTube clip into a blog post, goes a long way to get students vested in the assignments, and class as a whole.

Results

All of these roles help me accomplish one of my goals in class: help my students become more savvy, more responsible consumers and producers of media and technology. I think trading of some time covering some particular historical topic to teach students how to extend learning beyond my classroom is more than worth it. In the end, I get more students interested in exploring history, and help shape more responsible social-technology users. Even if I only influence a handful of students, I'll consider my class a success.

Opening Up the Academy with *Wikipedia*
—Adrianne Wadewitz, Anne Ellen Geller, Jon Beasley-Murray

Like an uninvited guest at a party, *Wikipedia* hovers at the fringes of academia. Yet the online encyclopedia's aims are eminently academic: it collects, processes, stores, and transmits knowledge. Judging by the site's three-million-plus articles, many of which are extensively referenced to the scholarly literature, and its popularity on the Internet, *Wikipedia* has been remarkably successful at promoting a culture that honors intellectual inquiry, yet it is derided by many academics.

Still, we all use *Wikipedia* in one way or another—even scholars, although we might not want to admit to the fact. Most of us find it a very convenient resource. Above all, students use *Wikipedia*, openly or otherwise; as Alison J. Head and Michael B. Eisenberg wrote for *First Monday* in 2010, over half of U.S. undergraduates use it "always" or "frequently" in their research.[1] However, these students do so without necessarily knowing how the information is written and revised. They are often told not to use *Wikipedia* because it is "bad"—but they are not told why.

We do not want to debate whether or not *Wikipedia* is a reliable source for research: we agree that it is not. However, many academics use *Wikipedia* as a *first* source on a topic with which they are unfamiliar. The extent to which *Wikipedia* is a credible source is one of many conversations about *Wikipedia* we can enter into with our students—but it is not the most interesting. Such discussions are already a *de rigueur* part of any research assignment, since we raise the same questions regarding other online sources such as blogs and other self-published websites. The deeper, more

interesting conversations we want to foster with our students are about how, and by whom, knowledge is created and gatekept.

We three have welcomed *Wikipedia* into our teaching in structured ways, as have other teachers and academics referenced in this volume. What we all share is the belief that incorporating *Wikipedia* into our teaching is a form of hacking the academy, giving those who contribute to *Wikipedia*—Wikipedians—a mechanism by which to bypass the typical, hierarchical routes of knowledge construction and to become knowledge makers themselves.

Students who analyze *Wikipedia* articles and participate in their development are made aware of the construction of knowledge and the ends towards which it is put. Most students utilize *Wikipedia* only to find information, and therefore have little understanding of how the articles are developed, who develops them, or the oftentimes extensive discussion and review that goes into making an article. For example, many students are unaware that every article on *Wikipedia* has an associated "discussion" page, also known as a "talk" page. Such pages are filled with ongoing conversations about the development and revision of the articles; introducing students to them is an excellent way to begin a conversation about what knowledge is, and who makes it. For example, asking students to analyze the threads on discussion pages shows them that there are often multiple narratives about a particular historical event or person, and that these competing narratives have important political valences.

As with any research paper, students learned the basics of researching, citing, summarizing, and quoting. However, because they were doing this on *Wikipedia*, unique learning experiences were offered. The premise of the project was that students had been using *Wikipedia* as a source without properly considering its drawbacks. So it should come as no surprise that, when seeking sources for the *Wikipedia* articles they were writing, students all too often made analogous mistakes of scholarship. They added information that was unsourced, poorly referenced, or even plagiarized, or they resorted to referencing other web pages and online encyclopedias.

Yet herein lay a great benefit of the assignment. Because *Wikipedia* asks that assertions be referenced, students were forced to reveal their sources. These poor sources might never have been revealed, had the students been writing a term paper. Moreover, because writing on *Wikipedia* is a process of continual revision, they could be asked to go back and reevaluate their sources, find better ones, and try again. Even with plagiarism, there was

no longer a need to make a fuss, because at no time were they handing in what purported to be a final product. They simply had to start over.

In short, the assignment not only reveals the weaknesses in students' research skills, but also teaches them those skills. It shows them that research—like writing—is a process, often a lengthy one. Although you might start with suboptimal—such as *Wikipedia* itself—you progress to look for ever stronger evidence for the information at hand, or for new information that the first sources did not reveal.

Note

1. Alison J. Head and Michael B. Eisenberg, "How Today's College Students Use Wikipedia for Course-related Research," *First Monday* 15, no. 3 (March 2010), http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2830/2476.