

Fall 2012 James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize
 Instructor: Christine Yao
 Course: ENGL1105.102 “Sluts, Spinsters, and Drag Queens”

Title of Assignment Sequence: Erotic Encyclopedia

Overview: A three-part assignment sequence in which students to put together a collaborative wiki-style encyclopedia through Google Sites based on original research about artifacts they’ve found in the Human Sexuality Collection in the Kroch Rare Books Library.

You can view the finished project here: <https://sites.google.com/site/humansexualitycollection/>

Rationale: How can we engage our students in research and writing beyond the traditional format of the research essay? How can we develop their abilities as informed readers and empower them as writers and researchers?

Through this encyclopedia project I wanted to give my students new experiences with both traditional and cutting-edge forms of knowledge: hands-on archival research and collaborative wiki sites exemplified by Wikipedia. In an increasingly digitized age, students have come to rely upon easy access to often dubious Internet sources and may assume that all knowledge worth having is now available in online databases. By working with Brenda Marston, resource librarian for the Human Sexuality Collection, I wanted to introduce my students to the experience and importance of interacting with physical archives and doing original research. Through using Google Sites, a free wiki and web-page creation site, my students became engaged as writers and editors through a new technological tool.

Other important aspects of this project had to do with audience and collaboration. My students created this project that would have a (limited) public presence, and, therefore, a different form of accountability to their writing and research. (The website is only available to those who have the URL.) Moreover, the wiki format entails a degree of collaboration that goes beyond typical peer editing for essays: while the project draws upon peer editing skills, it involves the creation of a final product that would be a collective effort.

Preparations: I set up a research session with Brenda Marston in order to teach my students how to use the archives of the Human Sexuality Collection and to give them an overview of materials and artifacts related to our freshman writing seminar. I also had to familiar myself with Google Sites in order to set up the class wiki, make sure that the technology would be accessible and usable to my students regardless of their level of tech-savvy, and to be able to help them with the site once they began the project.

At this point my students also had experience with research: the previous assignment involved the use of secondary sources and we had a library information session on general research using the Cornell library catalogue and evaluating authoritative versus dubious sources.

Erotic Encyclopedia Part 1: Report

It can be easy to demonize Wikipedia for questionable content and lazy research, but it’s important to understand the role it plays in terms of access to knowledge. The first part of the assignment involved the students going to the familiar resource of Wikipedia and turning a critical eye to the content, organization, reliability, and style of two articles. Their reports had to evaluate one

“featured” article, the highest recognition of quality on Wikipedia, and the other could be an article of any quality on the Wikiproject article grading scale. The topics of these articles could be anything that interested them: I wanted their curiosity to guide them as they critically assessed the effectiveness of the articles. Part of the report required that the students not only analyze the article itself, but its “talk page” where the editors discuss edits and other changes to the article. I wanted to let the students see how a community of editors collaborate and the process of writing an article. I geared the class discussion to talking about students’ experiences with Wikipedia and how they found it compared to reading more authoritative scholarly sources as in their previous assignment.

These reports were the basis for their own understanding of what they should and should not do to write their own effective encyclopedia entries. Rather than just giving them guidelines for the quality of their articles, it was far more effective for them to do their own research and evaluations about the factors that contribute to the quality of a wiki-style encyclopedia article.

Reflection: For next term, I will do a more focussed discussion by having the students read the Wikipedia articles for two of the works we’ve studied so we have a common basis for discussion that draws upon coursework. My students’ reports covered a fascinating range of topics that reflected their interests and were thorough, critical analyses of their chosen pages. This part of the assignment sequence made them active rather than passive readers of Wikipedia, leading many of them to conclude in their reports the limited usefulness of Wikipedia but also the importance of public knowledge that would inform their future use of the site.

Erotic Encyclopedia Part 2: Archive and Encyclopedia Entry

I gave my students this assignment sheet before Brenda Marston’s presentation on the Human Sexuality collection so that they would have the requirements in mind. The next class I also used the projector to demonstrate how to navigate the Google Sites wiki. Beyond the instructions on the assignment sheet, I emphasized the time management that this component required: visiting the archives and takes notes/photos, and then assembling their materials for their article page. They had to have a “rough draft” up before leaving for Thanksgiving Break, allowing them time to edit and to see each other’s work before finalizing their articles.

This part of the sequence required them to draw upon their previous reports from Part 1 in order to put together the most effective article in terms of content, sources, organization, and writing style. Similar to the first part, I left the specifics of the artifact open to whatever topic of human sexuality or medium they desired so that my students would be able to explore what piqued their interests, doing research for their own sake and not just for the sake of their FWS assignment. There was also a return to familiar authoritative sources of information since each article had to incorporate at least 2 other sources found through the Cornell Library website in order to give more in-depth information or more context to the artifact.

Reflection: It was fascinating to see the gradual development of the wiki as students progressed in different stages of their work. There was an element of vulnerability for me as the instructor since I had set up the wiki and was now letting my students have full privileges as editors to create their pages as they pleased. My students got to exercise their own agency and the range of artifacts was fascinating to observe; moreover, it allowed both me and the students to see the work processes of others. Even as this stage working on their own articles, they began collaborating by asking each other for help with formatting, inserting visuals, etc.

Erotic Encyclopedia Part 3: The Greater Good

This final component was meant to emphasize the collaborative aspect of the wiki. They used the knowledge they had gained from Part 1 about how to write a good article and their hands-on experiences with the archive and the Google Site in Part 2 to do editing and peer evaluations of each other's articles. Moreover, they also had the option to fully realize the potential of the project as collaborative by enhancing the encyclopedia as a whole: taking on additional organizational or editing duties. During this time they also responded to the feedback of their peers and continued to edit their entries.

This section also gave them the opportunity to reflect on the project as a whole, helping them to contextualize their work in relation to anything from the course's themes, the development of their writing, their growing role as scholars and editors, etc. As the final major academic assignment of the term, writing the "importance of this project" paragraph helped them realize the trajectory of the course and the individual development of their own work.

Reflection: This project became fully realized as a collective endeavour when my students became actively engaged in encouraging one other and giving each other substantial feedback; in some cases, the original author would engage in a dialogue with their editors about the changes and ask for help about formatting and other problems. I was impressed by the careful attention to detail in many of the comments that clearly drew upon their observations in Part 1 about how to write a quality encyclopedia article, addressing not only content, but organization and style. Some students also took the bonus component to heart: they found interesting thematic connections between their article and a few others and would reorganize the related pages under a category heading. What was particularly interesting for both me and them was to see the variety of perspectives on what they thought the importance of the project was to both the course and their own work. Everyone emphasized different aspects of what was important to them. It acted as a finale to the course not only them but me as well.

Next term I will build in more time for students to both comment and respond to the comments of their peers. Since I made the deadline in Part 2 for the draft and not the final product, some students were at varying levels of completion in their articles, which affected the type of feedback they received. Perhaps I will split up the two mandatory comments, making one mandatory after the draft deadline for Part 2, and the other a set period after the revision of that draft.

Concluding Thoughts

I had initially been hesitant about making this assignment sequence since I thought it may be too challenging; however, all of my students rose to the challenge and did very well. The amount of freedom I gave them within the assignment's requirements was intimidating to some, but eventually this allowed the students to explore their interests and push themselves. They appreciated the introduction to both archives and wiki-style sites; moreover, the (semi) public nature of the project made them create a project they could be collectively proud of as a testimony to their hard work and development as writers and researchers.

I shared the completed encyclopedia project with Brenda Marston and the other librarians at the Kroch Rare Book Library. Brenda was very pleased with my students' work and intends to show it to noted sex writer and educator Susie Bright, whose papers will be soon joining the Human Sexuality Collection, as an example of the work Cornell students can do with the archive.