

Developing students' academic literacies via Wikipedia-based tasks

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Summary

Since Wikipedia is by far the most popular (online) encyclopaedia in the world – ranking among the top ten most visited websites – it is only natural that students, too, actively make use of its vast amount of information. This, however, has caused a fair amount of polarising opinions among academics: while some of them tend to favour banning the use of Wikipedia in academic coursework altogether by pointing out its factual incorrectness and subjectivity, the others find that the ban could, in fact, do more harm than good. Academics belonging to the latter group find that Wikipedia inevitability should be accepted and students must be made more aware of how to use Wikipedia responsively (see Konieczny, 2012; Reilly, 2011). It is well established that using so called wiki tasks in teaching helps changing consumer-based notions and behaviour about Wikipedia and thereby highlights the importance of creativity or writing as a process (Dawe & Robinson, 2017). Furthermore, amongst the pro-Wikipedia camp, there are those who suggest that using Wikipedia not only increases responsibility but can also be seen as a diverse learning environment. Wikipedia offers a unique opportunity to involve students in the process, which focuses on writing intended for real readership, follows genre traditions and raises credibility, clarity and sense of purpose. Importantly, this contributes to public debates about truth, accuracy and neutrality (Crovitz & Smoot, 2009).

While Wikipedia gives opportunities for presenting genuine tasks to students, which thereby increase their involvement and motivation (e.g. Dawe & Robinson, 2017), the wiki tasks are also seen as a way of developing the students' academic literacies. Academic literacies are often likened to academic writing skill but literacies are not by any means limited to only being able to write: academic literacies demonstrate one's competence to communicate adequately in academic settings, which in turn presupposes the ability to read, critically evaluate and present the information and create new knowledge:

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both orally and in writing (Wingate, 2018). Since, based on this definition, academic literacies are no longer a single skill but rather a set of skills, Mary Lea and Brian Street suggest approaching academic literacies in the context of teaching writing as a three-fold phenomenon consisting of study skills, academic socialisation and academic literacies. It should be noted that academic literacies in a wider sense includes both study skills and academic socialisation, which enables to dissert writing in a more general institutional context. (Lea & Street, 1998)

The integral task of writing or editing an article has been used in the University of Tartu since 2012; predominantly for “Estonian Orthography and Creative Composition” but due to the reform in self-expression studies, and in various iterations, also for “Estonian for Academic Purposes”, “Communication in Estonian for Computer Science” and “Estonian Orthography and Composition.” In these courses, which last one semester and credit students 3 ECTS, students have written more than 1700 Estonian language articles to the Estonian Wikipedia called Vikipeedia (mostly on topics from their specialised fields) under the supervision of eight university teachers. Due to the fact that wiki task is one of the most often used writing tasks of the self-expression course, the main goal of this article is to establish the ways in which wiki tasks would support the development of students’ academic literacies. The article focuses on the following research questions:

1. How is a wiki task organised?
2. What are the strong points of a wiki task?
3. What are the weak points of a wiki task?
4. Which recommendations and guidelines could be given for organising wiki tasks better in the future?

In order to find answers to these questions, three focus group interviews were conducted in December 2018 and January 2019. The study selection consists of those university teachers of the self-expression course ($n=5$) who have used wiki tasks in their courses, their teaching assistants ($n=6$) and students ($n=7$). Based on the principles of qualitative content analysis, the collected data was analysed inductively.

In terms of organising wiki tasks, the focus group interviews revealed that most often the task in self-expression courses is to write a new article in Estonian. In cases where there already exists an article on the chosen topic, students would have to edit and complement it. Despite the fact that wiki tasks are often organised somewhat differently in various courses, certain universal characteristics can be drawn. In the first stage, the particular focus is given to choosing the topic. The organising principles of the task are modelled after process-centred approach to text creation; the students receive individual feedback to

their texts from teachers, assistants and/or fellow students and based on this they can amend their work before the final grading. Unequivocally, the most important part of the task is considered to be the feedback, which can be given either as aggregate feedback (a table with standard mistakes and solutions), individual feedback in a text file or presented on a Wikipedia sub page or as video feedback (with screen monitoring function enabled).

The focus group interviews also revealed that the strong points of the task of writing Wikipedia articles can be, by and large, divided into three groups: academic literacies, knowledge in a specialised field and motivation. Teachers, assistants and students agreed that wiki tasks can indeed help to develop several learning skills involved in academic literacies: digital competence (writing in text documents or Wikipedia), information competence (searching info, evaluating sources), research and analysis skills (reading scientific texts) and reading skills (citing and referencing, organising text, spelling). As an added benefit, receiving and giving feedback competence was highlighted, which directly draws upon cooperation skills. Since Wikipedia articles are usually written on specialist topics, which require reading specialist texts, wiki tasks greatly contribute to increasing one's professional knowledge. The participants of the focus group interviews pointed out that writing for public readership on topics that the writers themselves are passionate about, increases their learning motivation and offers them more meaningful learning experience.

Although the focus group interviews suggest that wiki task is indeed a great tool for teaching how to write academic texts, the interviewees also mention certain accompanying downsides. Most often, these concern difficulties arising from translating and choosing the right terms but are also to do with prejudices about the complications involved in the task. As the students of the focus group noted, wiki tasks could cause stress to some students due to the responsibility of having to write for the public. However, some of the above-mentioned difficulties are not specific to wiki tasks but are of a more general nature: e.g. lack of time, low learning motivation and difficulties in obtaining the source material.

Reflecting upon the future of wiki tasks, the teachers emphasised that we need to find ways of directing students to think as to how wiki tasks would help to strengthen their knowledge of language and shape their transferrable skills.

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