

The Benefits of Traditional vs. Wikipedia Assignments

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Watch Megan John from Concordia College present her poster “The Benefits of Traditional vs. Wikipedia Research Assignments for Introductory Psychology Students” at the APS 25th Annual Convention in Washington DC.

This presentation describes how a Wikipedia assignment was integrated into a psychology course to replace the traditional major paper typically assigned in such courses. Thirty-three students worked on significantly expanding and improving eight different Wikipedia articles over a period of 15 weeks. A 30-item survey was administered at the end of the academic semester in order to capture and quantify students’ perceptions of the experience. The survey yielded both qualitative and quantitative data on the perceived benefits of the Wikipedia assignment across multiple domains, and on ways the Wikipedia assignments could be improved.

The Wikipedia assignment particularly increased students’ ability to: 1) communicate ideas to general audiences, 2) take criticism, 3) present information with neutrality, and 4) ethically and effectively use sources to back up claims. Despite these gains and despite reporting significantly higher confidence in their ability to complete similar projects again, many students indicated that they had difficulty figuring out the Wikipedia editing code and that they would not be very interested in engaging in such a project in the future.

Focus group data was collected a few months later to shed light on some of the reasons students were reluctant to continue editing Wikipedia pages. In addition, a comparative sample of 33 undergraduates enrolled in general psychology and completing a traditional research project was also assessed to ascertain whether the Wikipedia assignment yields any additional benefits over and above those experienced as a result of a typical introductory psychology course research assignment. Independent sample t-tests indicated that students perceived significantly higher benefits from the Wikipedia assignment on some of the survey questions and significantly higher benefits from the traditional assignment on others.

These findings inform educators about the motivational benefits of having students write for Wikipedia and suggest ways to more effectively plan such course assignments.

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