Ditching the "Disposable Assignment" in Favor of Open Pedagogy

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Abstract

Most course assignments are "disposable" in the sense that they will only ever be seen by the instructor. Moreover, students often see little point in them and rarely revisit them. But what if we redesigned our course assignments to empower our students as creators of resources for the commons? Whether creating videos, editing wiki articles, or writing op eds, open pedagogy might be the best way for us to "give psychology away."

Ever since George Miller's famous (1969) APA presidential address, many others have called upon our field to "give psychology away" (e.g., Epstein, 2006; Goldman, 2014; Klatzky, 2009; Lilienfeld, Ammirati, & Landfield, 2009; Tomes, 2000; Zimbardo, 2004). There is arguably no better way to achieve this than by adopting open pedagogy to place the knowledge base of our discipline in as many hands as possible.

With open pedagogy, students are not just consumers of educational resources but also producers of educational resources. A key aspect of open pedagogy therefore involves replacing "disposable assignments" with "renewable assignments" (Wiley, 2013). Disposable assignments are those that are typically only seen by the instructor. Students often see little point in them (and rarely revisit them) and many instructors despise grading them. David Wiley, an open education pioneer, describes them bluntly:

> They're assignments that add no value to the world – after a student spends three hours creating it, a teacher spends 30 minutes grading it, and then the student throws it away. Not only do these assignments add no value to the world, they actually suck value out of the world. Talk about an incredible waste of time and brain power (and a potentially huge source of cognitive surplus)! (2013, para. 5)

By contrast, renewable assignments are those in which the students' energy and efforts are repurposed by having them generate materials and resources for the "commons," including future students taking their course and other formal and informal learners around the world. The materials produced might include developing tutorials, wiki entries, or even videos posted online.

Incorporating openness into pedagogy is simultaneously liberating and terrifying. It challenges instructors to reflect on their practices and move away from the traditional top-down model of pedagogy by assigning open-ended problems and empowering students to act as co-creators (Rosen & Smale, 2015). But whereas it takes a degree of courage to untether

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oneself from the security and predictability of the staid research essay, once accomplished, the benefits to the learning process are sizable. For one, students and instructors work collaboratively towards creating resources for public consumption, adding tangible value to the world outside of their classroom. Second, students tend to invest more effort and care more deeply about the product when they know that their work has a larger potential audience than just their instructor (Farzan & Kraut, 2013). Third, open pedagogy unleashes the students' creative potential, allowing them to ascend the rungs of the cognitive process dimension in Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Here they generate, plan, and produce instead of merely recognizing and recalling, in the process acquiring higher-order cognitive and meta-cognitive skills that will serve them throughout their university education and career. Fourth, depending on the specific nature of the assignment, the resource produced may serve as an enduring electronic portfolio of their academic work that can be shared with others, including potential employers. In this fashion they may showcase their writing skills (e.g., blogs, wiki entries, etc.), multimedia skills (e.g., videos, websites, etc.), or even their ability to integrate and apply research findings (e.g., policy proposals or briefs). And finally, "because any one of these remixes might end up helping next semester's students finally grasp the concept that has proven so difficult in the past, faculty are willing to invest in feedback and encouragement at a different level" (Wiley, 2013, para. 16).

Instructors interested in experimenting with open pedagogy might, for example, design course assignments that require students to create a guide for parents on the use of rewards and punishments with young children based on principles from learning theory, design a public service announcement for a local nonprofit organization based on principles from social psychology, build and edit a wiki that might serve as an instructional resource for future students, write questions for an in-class practice quiz ahead of midterm examinations, or publish blog posts that critically analyze depictions of psychological phenomena in popular films. On a larger scale, an excellent example of an organized open pedagogy initiative is the Association for Psychological Science's (APS) Wikipedia Initiative.

APS Wikipedia Initiative

Wikipedia is a free, online encyclopedia, written and edited collaboratively by those who use it. Its English language edition includes about 4.7 million articles and is the sixth most popular website in the world, with nearly 500 million unique visitors every month ("Wikipedia," n.d.). Its incredible popularity among students, for whom it is often the first resource accessed when looking up background information for a term paper (Head & Eisenberg, 2009; Lim, 2009), is matched only by its equal unpopularity among faculty, who strongly caution against citing its articles or even penalize their students for doing so (Waters, 2007). Some instructors may work with librarians to better instruct their students on how (and why) to access refereed articles from research databases, but this strategy is merely a weak left jab at the problem. The

APS Wikipedia Initiative (APSWI), on the other hand, presents a creative and pragmatic right hook.

Born out of a desire to "deploy the power of Wikipedia to represent scientific psychology as fully and as accurately as possible and thereby to promote the free teaching of psychology worldwide" ("APS Wikipedia Initiative," n.d.), the APSWI serves to improve the very resource whose use psychology faculty routinely rail against.

For context, there are currently more than 8,500 articles on Wikipedia devoted to topics in psychology. At the time of this writing, only 63% of these have been assessed through Wikipedia's peer assessment system. Far more terrifyingly, only 9% of these have achieved "good article" status while the remaining lower quality articles are viewed in excess of 64,000 times every six months ("APS Wikipedia Initiative," n.d.).

These sorts of numbers are why, in 2011, then-APS President Mahzarin Banaji called upon psychology faculty to participate in the APSWI as contributors, reviewers, and especially through adopting open pedagogy:

> The likely most effective way to generate contributions, in my opinion, is to include writing for Wikipedia as part of college and graduate-level courses. In this way, professors and students in a class can begin to populate Wikipedia on the topic of the course, taking advantage of the built-in expertise that is contained in that collective, in a semester long time frame. Writing Wikipedia entries from scratch, editing entries, or evaluating them can be a worthwhile learning experience in a standard classroom. Such work can teach students so much — that even the simplest ideas are hard to communicate to general audiences; that logic, strength of argument, flow and clarity of writing, citations of the appropriate literature, and, above all, accuracy need to be mastered in order to be a member of this guild. *My request is that for any course that you are about to teach this semester and beyond, that you consider adding contribution to Wikipedia as part of the course's requirements*. (para. 8)

Many faculty have since responded to Banaji's call. During the Fall 2011 and Spring 2012 semesters alone, 640 students across 36 classes participated in the APSWI. Collectively, they edited 840 articles – "the rough equivalent of writing a 1,200 page textbook in psychology" (Farzan & Kraut, 2013, p. 5). Participating instructors have ranged from those completely new to Wikipedia (e.g., Hoetger & Bornstein, 2012) to those with extensive experience (e.g., Marentette, 2014), and the classes enrolled have ranged from small seminars (e.g., Karney, 2012) to enormous 1,700 student sections (Joordens, 2012). The APSWI has also been incorporated into courses at all levels, displacing a research paper in an introductory psychology course (Ibrahim, 2012), a literature review in a 200-level cognitive psychology course (Munger, 2012), a research article review in an upper level course on memory (Hoetger & Bornstein, 2012), an essay for a fourth-year course on the history of psychology (Reynolds,

2011), a 15-page paper in a graduate seminar in social psychology (Karney, 2012), and a traditional final paper in a graduate course on clinical neuropsychology (Silton, 2012).

Naturally, appropriate instruction and support must be provided and the specific assignment (e.g., adding citations, writing or revising articles, being granted "good article" status by the Wikipedia community on the basis of the quality of writing, neutrality, and appropriate sourcing, etc.) must be tailored to the level and ability of the class. For example, introductory psychology students might be best served by working in teams and focusing their efforts on a small number of articles, adding citations, images, and links where necessary, tagging them appropriately when problems are located, and incorporating feedback from their peers and the Wikipedia community. The potential benefits to students from participating in the APSWI include achieving a deeper understanding of the topic (Farzan & Kraut, 2013), learning to evaluate and defend the credibility of their sources (Marentette, 2014), learning to write more concisely and think more critically (Farzan & Kraut, 2013), collaborating with students from other universities and around the world (Karney, 2012), learning to provide as well as receive constructive feedback (Ibrahim, 2012), enhancing digital literacy (Silton, 2012), and learning how to communicate ideas to a general audience (Association for Psychological Science, 2013).

Although some students begin a little wary of the assignment, they go on to derive excitement, meaning, and even pride from the open nature of their work, as the following instructor testimonials indicate:

> The students also realized they were a valuable asset to Wikipedia. Their thinking and writing skills as well as their access to an extensive academic library were not broadly shared. As knowledge translators, they could also provide a service to the general public by clearly communicating basic concepts about language acquisition. They wondered who their readers might be: parents? teachers? students in developing countries? One thing that the students uniformly loved about this project was the possibility of other people seeing and recognizing their work. (Marentette, 2014, p. 37).
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> They felt their work was meaningful because their contributions are shared with the entire world, rather than just their instructor. They liked that their contributions will not end up in a drawer after the semester ends, but will continue to be available to many people as a useful resource. Some students even noted with pride that their contributions might have wider use than some articles published in academic journals. (Ibrahim, 2012, p. 29)

Of course, participating in the APSWI is not without its challenges, which include developing an appropriate rubric for grading (Silton, 2012), learning the writing style and referencing standards of Wikipedia (Reynolds, 2011), managing the time frame of the assignment (Marentette, 2014), and maintaining flexibility with the assignment guidelines (Hoetger & Bornstein, 2012). Some practical strategies for instructors considering participating

in the APSWI include providing a list of topics not yet covered on Wikipedia, gaining experience with posting an article, looking through the sample Wikipedia assignments provided by the APS, making use of the many articles and step-by-step guides for editing Wikipedia articles and participating in the APSWI, and enlisting the help of a campus Wikipedia Ambassador (Hoetger & Bornstein, 2012; Ibrahim, 2012).

Concluding Thoughts

Adopting open pedagogy can seem daunting at first but does not have to mean designing an entirely new assignment or working with new media. All that is required is for the students to work towards producing a resource that others will find useful. This could include literature reviews, evidence-based policy recommendations, or practical guides for the application of psychological knowledge (e.g., promoting environmentally responsible behavior, parenting, etc.). However, if an assignment requires students to develop and exercise a new skill, instructors will need to plan to provide instruction and support throughout the process (e.g., it takes some practice to learn how to properly edit Wikipedia articles). Depending on the nature of the assignment, instructors may also have to develop or locate an appropriate grading rubric.

As mentioned earlier, adopting open pedagogy is simultaneously liberating and terrifying. With traditional (closed) assignments, vague guidelines, a poor design, unclear rubrics, and insufficient support remain hidden, with student evaluations and perhaps a few grey hairs being the only enduring record. With open pedagogy, on the other hand, both successes and failures with the assignment are much more public. But while this opens the instructor to more criticism, it is also an opportunity to share, collaborate, and receive constructive feedback. More importantly, it creates a foundation for our students to begin to invest more deeply, think more critically, work more collaboratively, and communicate more accessibly—exactly the skills needed to be able to “give psychology away.”

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