15-MINUTE ACTIVIST

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Chipping away at Wikipedia's gender gap

The Art+Feminism Edit-a-thon

By SHOMIAL AHMAD

The percentage of female Wikipedia contributors – those who edit or create entries in the popular crowd-sourced encyclopedia – is strikingly low. Surveys by the Wikimedia Foundation show that fewer than 13% of contributors are women. Wikipedia has a project page on countering systemic bias, which notes that lopsided demographics can contribute to "imbalanced coverage of a subject" (see tinyurl.com/Wiki-bias-proj).

That might help explain why Ximena Gallardo, professor of English at LaGuardia Community College, was "appalled" when she read the Wikipedia entry for Octavia Butler, an African-American female science-fiction writer. Gallardo says the entry was short when compared to other male science-fiction writers of similar stature, and the entry to one of Butler's most famous books had errors in the plot summary.

Gallardo's solution was to teach her students how to fix the problem. Last spring, her English 103 students revised the entry for one of Butler's most well-known books, *Kindred.*

BECOMING EXPERTS

"We read the reviews, the criticism and the students debated the research," Gallardo told *Clarion.* She divided the students into teams to research a specific aspect of the novel that they would eventually write as part of the Wikipedia entry. "They moved from being knowledge consumers to knowledge creators."

During the same semester that Gallardo tasked her students with adding to an existing Wikipedia entry, she was involved in the inaugural Art+Feminism Wikipedia Edit-a-thon, an event that was repeated this year. Around 600 people participated in local edit-a-thons around the world during the 2014 event, creating about 100 new entries and enhancing around

Participants in the 2015 Art+Feminism Edit-a-thon work on a Wikipedia entry.

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90 more. Artists for whom new entries were created included Senga Nengudi, an African-American performance artist and sculptor, and Zarina Hashmi, an Indian artist who works primarily with paper.

The second Art+Feminism Wikipedia event took place this year on March 8, International Women's Day. This time there were more than 1,500 participants at 75 events across the world, with the flagship event at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Participants created about 400 new pages and made significant improvements to 500 articles.

LEARNING SKILLS

Ann Matsuuchi, an instructional technology librarian at LaGuardia Community College, led "train the trainers" sessions in preparation for the edit-a-thon this year. Matsuuchi has been active in the local Wikimedia community for some time, helping put together workshops, training sessions and assisting faculty who use the site in the classroom.

People can contribute to Wikipedia at different levels, Matsuuchi says: they can work on a section, add references to an existing entry, upload an image or write an entirely new entry from scratch. "There's no one right way to do it. Some areas are going to be trickier," Matsuuchi told *Clarion.* But those who want to get involved will soon find that they're not alone: "There's a community to call upon for advice and guidance," she emphasized.

Matsuuchi says that students who work on Wikipedia entries learn a host of skills, from properly referencing material to intellectual property issues. One of the advantages that college students have as potential Wikipedia contributors, Matsuuchi notes, is that they can have access to scholarly journals — which are often behind paywalls.

Students' revised entry gets 6,000 monthly page views.

Those kinds of barriers can contribute to "a kind of information impoverishment, so our students are starting to see their privilege," Matsuuchi told Clarion. "They can help provide access to high-quality resources."

"I've never edited a Wikipedia page in my life," Paola Sokayeva, one of the participants at this year's Art+Feminism edit-a-thon told the *Wall Street Journal.* She was interviewed at MoMA while editing an entry on Elaine de Kooning, a prolific artist who was also the wife of abstract expressionist artist Willem de Kooning. "It doesn't really have much in the way of her career, so I'm trying to beef that section up," Sokayeva said.

ART+FEMINISM

Wikipedia "is one of the keystones of our digital commons, and it's become one of the backbones of the Internet," says Michael Mandiberg, an artist and associate professor of media culture at College of Staten Island who was part of the Art+Feminism organizing team. Many popular sites automatically pull content from Wikipedia, Mandiberg notes, and it's a first point of reference for hundreds of millions of people around the world. "So gaps and absences there are ones that really matter."

With Siân Evans, coordinator of the Women and Art Special Interest group for the Art Libraries Society of North America, and curators Laurel Ptak and Jacqueline Mabey, Mandiberg was part of the initial group (which soon expanded) that organized the 2014 Art+Feminism event at Eyebeam, a center for art and technology in New York City. Ptak was then a fellow at Eyebeam, where Mandiberg also works.

Similar edit-a-thons have aimed at addressing other gaps in Wikipedia's demographics and content. This past spring, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture hosted a Black Life Matters Wikipedia edit-a-thon, and the AfroCrowd initiative has organized regular editing sessions at the Brooklyn Public Library (tinyurl.com/AfroCrowd-NYC).

In his undergraduate course History of Design and Digital Media, Mandiberg had students write entirely new or enhance existing entries on one of the works they saw at a Museum of Modern Art exhibit. He gave extra credit to students who contacted the subject of their Wikipedia article to either release a Creative Commons photo of themselves or their work. "In their reflection papers, almost all the students said they really didn't want to do the assignment, that it was really hard, but they were glad they did," Mandiberg told the Wikimedia blog.

Gallardo says that when her students worked in groups on revising the Octavia Butler entry, they learned the power of Wikipedia and the community around it. They expanded the entry from around five pages to 20, and once their edits were posted, the Web page continued to morph with help from other Wikipedians.

AN ONLINE COMMUNITY

"It was like little elves came in," Gallardo said. "They came in and reformatted the entry. Another person came in and copyedited, and someone else came in and added links."

That one entry that her students significantly revised garners more than 6,000 page views per month. "Now everybody is reading something I wrote," LaGuardia student Julia Pazmino told *CUNY Newswire.* "Maybe I'm influencing someone who was influencing me. I was that person looking for information and now I am actually helping someone else looking for information."

For more information on how to teach writing for Wikipedia, go to tinyurl.com/Wikipedia-Teach or visit the Wiki Education website at wikiedu.org.