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Decolonising Wikipedia: opportunities for digital knowledge activism

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Abstract

This article describes the establishment of the [Decolonising Wikipedia Network](#) (DWN) during the first lockdown of 2020, by staff and student Changemakers at London College of Communication. It outlines the approaches used to set up and facilitate DWN as a digital knowledge activism initiative, highlighting key outcomes. This includes an extra-curricular activity for students and staff belonging to the CRiSAP Sound Arts Research Centre and in-curricula activity on the MA Photojournalism Documentary Photography course. The article provides helpful insights for readers on evolving staff-student knowledge activism projects through digital learning platforms.

Keywords

Wikipedia; decolonisation; digital skills; knowledge activism; students as partners

Introduction

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Establishing and Expanding, Lucy Panesar

This edition of Spark will no doubt testify to the fact that 2020 was a year like no other, for humanity at large and for those working and studying in universities. The Covid-19 lockdown moved our teaching and learning into the digital realm, and Black Lives Matter campaigns following the murder of George Floyd prompted us to take more direct action to become truly anti-racist, decolonised institutions (Batty, 2020; Universities UK, 2020).

During spring 2020, as we were entering our first national lockdown, London College of Communication started to employ current students and recent graduates as LCC Changemakers, with the explicit remit of working as partners with staff to co-develop anti-racist and decolonial curricula and teaching practices. I was their hiring manager and team leader, and my approach was informed by sector research on working in partnership with students to critically discuss and review curricula, specifically through racially aware lenses (NUS and Universities UK, 2019; Crilly, Panesar and Suka-Bill, 2020). At the start of 2020, LCC were also invited to work in partnership with

Wikimedia UK, a charity that promotes open access to knowledge as a fundamental right and a driver for social and economic development.

The new LCC Changemakers and I saw opportunity in working with Wikimedia UK to make positive change in the realm of public knowledge, related to our media, design and screen disciplines. As a group, we did not have much experience of Wikipedia editing or teaching this to others, but we soon learnt of Wikipedia events that had been run by UAL librarian Alex Duncan with Arts + Feminism Editathon. Alex was keen to work with us, as was Wikimedia UK's Programme Coordinator, Richard Nevell, and together we ran LCC's first Wikipedia Editathon through May–June 2020.

As people were still settling into working remotely from home, managing broadband issues and domestic duties, we decided to adapt the usual Editathon model to suit. Editathons are usually time intensive events in which participants edit Wikipedia pages, either in collaboration or alongside others, often throughout a day and in-person at selected venues. We had to work with the virtual platforms available to us and to the different needs and preferences for the participants we had in mind. We wanted staff and students to be involved and we did not want anyone to feel excluded due to not being able to attend specific timed events.

Spring 2020 was when two new words came into the vocabulary of teaching staff: synchronous and asynchronous. The former for live, time specific teaching and learning experiences. The latter for teaching and learning activities for students to engage with whenever they can. With this in mind, we designed our Editathon to consist of three live events for staff and students to either attend synchronously, or watch on playback, along with asynchronous activities for individuals or groups to get on with between each event. All of this was housed in a designated Microsoft Teams site, where our staff-student participants could also chat and collaborate on shared files.

Another aspect of Wikipedia Editathons is the Wikimedia UK Outreach Dashboard, designed to track activity at specific editing events. We set up a Dashboard for the LCC Editathon and this proved helpful in understanding how much we achieved collectively. As you can see from the screenshot included, a total of 96 edits were made by 22 editors to 13 articles – not bad for our first Editathon!

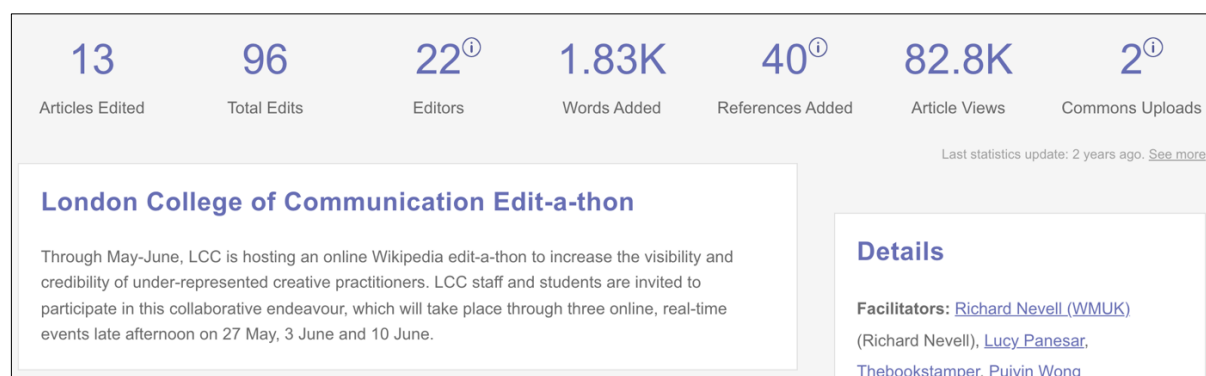


Figure 1: Screenshot of the Outreach Dashboard for the LCC Wikipedia Editathon May-June 2020. Image: Panesar (2020).

This encouraged us to keep going, but with something even more flexible and responsive, and with a name reflecting our specific editing aims as knowledge activists, making editorial interventions for racial justice. We launched the new Decolonising Wikipedia Network (DWN) in November 2020 with an online event, recorded for playback, and a new website:

<https://decolonisingwikipedianetwork.myblog.arts.ac.uk/>

We have hosted extra-curricula Wikipedia editing workshops, informal virtual cafés and been offering support to individual members as needed. We have also attracted the attention of a number of course leaders, keen to introduce Decolonising Wikipedia to students in class, in relation to their subject specialisms. Through 2021, this led to some particularly interesting outcomes, as Alex and Ana explain...

Learnings from Sound Arts, Alex Goodall

Evaluating our work through the lens of digital learning allows for some interesting observations. Notably, the evolution of a network which existed in a fairly limited capacity allowed us to break down many of the barriers which might otherwise have existed had we only worked synchronously and in-person. For instance, we have been able to reach larger groups of people with a great diversity of editing experience, regardless of their locality. This has meant less pressure on participants carrying out more intensive research tasks. Naturally, the flexibility and accessibility of Wikipedia editing truly owes itself to an online decolonial methodology, as compared to other, more traditional forms of knowledge production. Of course, this methodology is not without its limitations. The group edits which we facilitated were at times hard to manage owing to disrupted connections and the nature of collaborative Wikipedia editing, which is generally more suited to asynchronous activity.

We have delivered Wikipedia editing guidance in different formats, mostly through workshops adapted to the needs of audience and facilitators. It has been necessary to evaluate before each workshop to what extent participants are familiar with Wikipedia, for instance whether detailed technical help was required or if guidance was required in the off-Wikipedia elements of editing such as identifying and researching practitioners who were absent from the platform. In some cases, we used pre-workshop questionnaires to ask participants what they hoped to gain from the workshop. This allowed us to tailor our content and delivery to individual needs. One of the most successful outcomes of this was the delivery of live edits, where an article is edited live via screen-sharing, which helps participants who might be put off by the technical aspect of editing Wikipedia.

One example of such a workshop was with LCC-based research group Creative Research in Sound Arts Practice (CRiSAP). CRiSAP was eager to work on editing Wikipedia with a view to expanding the way the Sound Arts canon is reflected online and enlisted our help with some basic guidance around methodology and approach. Delivering this content digitally to a group of academics was a relatively daunting task, especially for a BA Sound Arts student such as myself, but so is editing a major public-facing information resource on which every action is logged. Working on Microsoft Teams to deliver this content allowed for a certain understanding between us as facilitators and CRiSAP as academic practitioners, in the sense that the digital democratisation of pedagogy broke down some of the academic barriers which might otherwise have inhibited both my own ability to facilitate and any reservations which CRiSAP may have had.

Other formats for delivering guidance have included Virtual Cafés, in which experienced DWN members are on hand in an online space for a 2–3 hour period to help with any questions related to the editing of Wikipedia. DWN have also been hosting online public panel discussions, held in response to more specific lines of enquiry.

Pursuing Wikipedia decolonisation through a digital framework for teaching, learning and collaboration has allowed sustained and dynamic engagement with the task at hand. While not without its limitations, the groundwork which we were able to lay down during the first year at LCC will help students and staff from across UAL to maintain this strand of decolonial practice, and hopefully to engage with more in-person enquiries moving forward.

Editing Photojournalism, Ana Blumenkron

Lucy and I had the opportunity to work alongside MA Photojournalism and Documentary Photography students (MAPJD) in their Collaborative Unit, a unit designed to develop collaborative working relationships with a range of external partners. As a graduate of the same course, I could understand what the unit was aimed at, and how exciting the partnership with Wikipedia could be, creating an output for your research and encouraging students, especially those underrepresented in Wikipedia editing (e.g. women and people of colour) to share their work online. In the position of being the Changemaker for the Photography department, embedding DWN was very rewarding.

We brought in Wikimedia UK's Dr Richard Nevell to speak to the students about how they could participate with Wikipedia and become active editors and content creators, and explain how valuable it is for Wikipedia to have content created by subject specialists. The nature of the unit involves working on a project that would have an output in Wikipedia. Dr Jennifer Good, Academic Liaison for MA Photojournalism and Documentary Photography, explained that:

One of the most significant things that our MA students have to offer in terms of the DWN is the diversity of the students themselves. Students have specialist cultural knowledge that we as tutors do not have, meaning that they can see the gaps that exist on Wikipedia in the first place as well as being equipped to redress those issues with their work. Our particular student group was concerned primarily not with editing existing Wikipedia pages, but creating new ones where there had been total invisibility of particular communities before. This meant starting from scratch, creating text and visual media to populate new pages, and the support of Dr Nevell and members of the DWN was helpful in that technical sense. (Good to Blumenkron, 2021)

The aim was to produce a collaborative work that could take the form of written articles, updating an existing one, or translating and editing translations within Wikipedia. The work was self-directed but DWN supported students who decided to become Wikipedia editors/creators. DWN provided students with an opportunity to play an active role in decolonising knowledge whilst improving research, writing, and editing skills. It also provided the opportunity for students to meet with Dr Nevell from Wikimedia to clarify workflows and other information. The resulting research assignment had an impact on knowledge production and dissemination both in real life and online through Wikipedia.

Contributing research towards decolonization of public internet sources has the benefit of expanding the representation of figures and topics overlooked within the traditional Eurocentric canon. This was the case with Nieves Minguenza, a student on the course. She attended one of the DWN sessions and, as she says, "immediately, [I] decided to get involved with this project, because it allowed me to collaborate and learn in a group and, most importantly, I could play an active role in decolonising knowledge". She saw the value in becoming a Wikipedia editor, as a tool to increase visibility and credibility of under-represented or marginalised figures and topics, as Wikipedia Contributors (2019) explain: "contributors are mostly male, that relatively few biographies on Wikipedia are about women, and that topics of interest to women are less well-covered".

Wikipedia gave Nieves the feel of being an activist in an academic setting, and DWN gave her a supportive, safe, and secure space to work. She added that: "The highlight of editing Wikipedia is the opportunity to increase and visualise subjects related to my research. For example, some topics that interest me and are under-represented or documented in a biased way on Wikipedia".

(Minguenza to Blumenkron, 2021)

Conclusion

Writing this article has given us the opportunity to document the origin story of Decolonising Wikipedia at London College of Communication, and to reflect upon the approaches we have taken to make this as accessible as possible for students and staff in our communities. We continue to adapt our approaches and evaluate their effectiveness, through quantitative data captured on the Outreach Dashboards and through qualitative feedback from individual participants, but we feel we are still very much at the start of a more long term project, that will continue to evolve.

In September 2021, Wikimedia UK gave their Partnership of the Year Award to LCC (Wikimedia UK, 2021) for our work on the DWN. Collaborator Dr Richard Nevell stated that:

LCC's Decolonising Wikipedia Network is an innovative approach to decolonisation, one which can have far reaching impact through its engagement with Wikipedia. We are very keen for the network to lead the way on decolonisation, an emerging area of strategic significance for the Wikimedia movement. Empowering students through the activities of the project would improve their digital literacy and help them become more critical consumers of information, and we hope may lead them to become knowledge activists.

Wikipedia editing is flexible and accessible compared to other forms of traditional knowledge dissemination. It is designed to be iterative and collaborative, and to be open to as wide an audience as possible. Wikimedia UK aims to make the internet a better place and so do we, the creative academic community. DWN continues to develop as a framework for supporting academic communities to do this, synchronously and asynchronously, according to need.

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Biographies

Ana Blumenkron is a graduate from LCC MA Photojournalism and Documentary Photography and LCC Changemaker between 2020-21. Her work focuses on feminism and gender stereotypes.

Alex Goodall is a graduate from LCC BA Sound Arts and Design (with Creative Computing), a former 2020-21 LCC Changemaker and was also a UAL Decolonising Wikipedia Assistant in 2022.

Lucy Panesar was LCC's Progression and Attainment Project Manager from 2019-2022 and UAL's Wikimedian in Residence through 2021-22. She is now working at University at Kent as Lecturer in Higher Education and her work continues to focus on inclusive education for social justice.