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The Collaborative Writing Project

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The [Collaborative Writing Project at SUNY Geneseo](#) is a wiki hosting several different kinds of multi-authored student work: dictionaries, annotated texts, informational articles, essays, and an annotated bibliography. Below, I describe why and how I first began the CWP in Fall 2005; how the mere act of setting up the project changed my thinking not only about the pedagogical uses of wikis but about my academic discipline; how, in my first semester assigning work at the CWP, I dealt with several practical challenges; how the project has grown since that first semester; and where the project may be headed next.

Burke's Parlor

Toward the middle of the last century, the literary critic Kenneth Burke propounded a theory of human relations based on concepts from drama. Human history for Burke was a “‘dramatic’ process, involving dialectical oppositions.”¹ Borrowing from the sociologist George Herbert Mead, Burke proposed that the drama of history draws its materials from an “unending conversation” about human affairs.² “Imagine that you enter a parlor,” Burke wrote:

You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending on the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.³

Long before I launched the Collaborative Writing Project, I had begun telling my undergraduate literature students that Burke's parlor metaphor perfectly described their role, as well as mine, in the interminable conversation that is literary criticism. What my students needed to understand above all, I thought—and still think—is the difference between a reader and a critic. The first performs an activity that is comparatively private, the second an activity that is inescapably social. As readers, we may understand works of literature any way we please; as critics, what we can say about these works is more constrained. The others in the parlor will ignore you unless you've listened to the discussion and caught its tenor before putting in your oar; you will not find any allies if you don't know how to argue.

Not surprisingly, then, I'd been an early adopter—relative to my colleagues in the humanities, anyway—of conversation—enhancing web technologies, in particular electronic bulletin boards. Like its real-time cousin the chat room, the board is a virtual parlor where students can better learn how it feels to be a critic. They learn this already, to some extent, by writing papers, especially papers in which they engage the views of professionals in the field; but because papers are work submitted for one individual's approval rather than a contribution to genuine dialogue, the learning is incomplete. Class discussion adds to what students learn from writing papers, but most of the time class discussion is a series of bilateral exchanges between students and their professor rather than a multilateral discussion among peers; it resembles a receiving line more than it does a parlor. And its medium is the spoken word,

whereas literary criticism’s “unending conversation” takes place mostly in writing. The bulletin board is hardly a perfect simulacrum of critical conversation, but it rounds out what students learn from paper-writing and class discussion by providing the opportunity for a multilateral exchange of ideas in written form.

When I first discovered [Wikipedia](#)—or rather, to be perfectly honest, when I first understood how it worked and realized that it had no connection to wicca (other than the fact that it appeared absolutely magical), I immediately saw it as yet another kind of virtual parlor. I wanted a wiki of my own where my students could mingle and converse. And I had a particular kind of conversation in mind for them: I wanted them to discuss a poem by singling out words and phrases for interpretive commentary, creating a unique page for each word or phrase that seemed worthy of comment.

What I saw in the wiki concept was the opportunity to do something that bboards don’t readily allow, to create a virtual parlor containing not only talk but the object of that talk, with the object at the center and the talk fanning out from it in a roughly circular array. A first-time visitor to the parlor would be in something like the position of a museum-goer walking into a room where a sculpture is displayed and where knots of other visitors are already engaged in discussion of the sculpture’s various features, each group focused on a different aspect of the sculpture’s form or meaning. Whereas the basic organizing principle of the bboard is the conversational thread, a wiki would let me organize around the work of art itself. A latecomer to the parlor would begin by looking at the poem, not, as on a bboard, by sorting through threads named with possibly unrevealing or even misleading headers. The direction of the parlor-talk in each conversational knot would be set, not by a question from me (the usual procedure on my bboards), but by a question that students asked of the poem.

The wiki concept offered another opportunity as well, the opportunity for students to engage in asynchronous co-authorship. Whereas bboard users can only “reply” to one another’s contributions, the editing capability that is the heart and soul of wiki software enables wiki users to “change” one another’s contributions. As a result, they can speak with one voice (though from the record of their mutual edits—preserved on the “history” page associated with each wiki entry—one can, if one wants, reconstruct a kind of conversation). Although I grasped this capability from the outset—it’s the basis of the Wikipedia, of course, as well as the reason for the word “collaborative” in the title of my own wiki—I did not see just at first

that it would force me to re-evaluate the sufficiency of Burke’s metaphor as a model of the way literary criticism works.

A Visit from St. Nicholas

We are fortunate at [SUNY Geneseo](#) in having a technology office receptive to faculty requests for help in pursuing innovative pedagogies. One summer day in 2005, after looking over several open-source wiki solutions with our chief web specialist, I decided to go with the [MediaWiki](#) software, and a day later I had my site.

My plan was to try out the wiki on my Fall 2005 section of Critical Writing and Reading, a required course for first-year Geneseo students that teaches how to argue in writing and evaluate the arguments of others. Every section of Critical Writing and Reading, aka [Intd 105](#) revolves around a single topic and a handful of texts. My topic for Fall 2005 was “[The Battle for Christmas](#).” Historian Stephen Nissenbaum’s social history of Christmas in America bearing the same title would be one main text, Dickens’s “A Christmas Carol” another, and a chapter on the poem “[A Visit from St. Nicholas](#)” (better known as “Twas the night before Christmas”) from Don Foster’s collection of literary essays titled *Author Unknown* would be the third.

The first page I added to the wiki contained the text of “A Visit from St. Nicholas.” To illustrate how a simple annotation of the text might look, I selected a phrase from the fifth stanza of the poem—“As dry leaves”—and linked the phrase to a page commenting on the two rather clumsily constructed lines that begin with that phrase: “As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,/When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky...” My annotation untangled the syntax of the lines and explained that they represent an example of epic simile, a literary convention at least as old as Homer.

Proud as I was of my sample annotation, looking for all the world like a page of the Wikipedia, I felt that something wasn’t right. The annotation wasn’t an interpretation so much as a gloss; in writing it, I wasn’t really “putting in my oar.” I couldn’t imagine anyone offering an “answer” to what I’d written. My illustration of parlor-talk, designed to show my students how to be critics, was more or less a conversation-stopper. I wasn’t setting them a good example at all.

On the bright side, though, I was providing useful information, information that could

make the poem more accessible and meaningful to them. Not only could I see no reason not to do this, I saw no reason why they shouldn't do the same for each other. If there was something amiss with my page on "As dry leaves," perhaps it wasn't because I'd failed to put in my oar. Perhaps it was because the image of the critic as the pilot of a boat of which he is the sole occupant does a disservice to criticism. Critics sometimes sit together in one boat, rowing in unison to propel the boat by force of their combined strength.

I don't mean simply that literary critics occasionally engage in co-authorship, but that even when working as individuals, often enough they see their work as a contribution to a collective enterprise. This is especially the case when they undertake to improve the general quality of criticism's "unending conversation" by grounding the conversation in facts that their interlocutors haven't known previously or have too often overlooked—facts, for example, about an author's life or historical moment, facts about the text and the conditions of its publication—or by informing their interlocutors (who, as Burke notes, are by necessity always latecomers to the party) of what has been said about a given literary work or critical subject in the past. It's the possession of such information that makes participants in any conversation what we call "conversant": that is, intelligent parlor-guests with the power to move the conversation forward.

Now, college students of literature are far more conversational than they are conversant, and a large part of our job as teachers of literature is to address this shortcoming by providing them with information. In untangling "As dry leaves," I had been doing a bit of just that. By asking them to do the same for themselves, I would be encouraging greater self-sufficiency (another part of the teacher's job), but more important, I would be making my class a more accurate model of the critical community at large. I would be letting my students move back and forth, as professional critics do, between rowing their own boats—offering interpretive perspective—and joining the galley on the big boat, informing the conversation with facts.

But why stop with annotating bits and pieces of the text? Why not allow them to do some research on "A Visit from St. Nicholas" and publish it on the wiki as an informative essay? I created a page titled "[All About 'A Visit from St. Nicholas'](#)" and decided to let my Intd 105 students contribute content to it in place of writing one of the six required papers in the course.

In creating this new page I was inviting my students to collaborate as genuine co-authors, not merely as multiple contributors to a common enterprise. Having originally conceived the Collaborative Writing Project as a space for conversation, I now saw the Project as a home for multiple spaces in which students might work jointly in a variety of ways, preserving their individual voices and perspectives to a greater or lesser extent depending on the particular purpose of each space.

Practical Challenges: Skill, Motivation, Evaluation

I began my fall semester, then, with a pretty good idea of how I wanted to use the wiki, and two pages ready and waiting for student content. All that remained was to get my students to add that content and to figure out how I would give them credit for their work. All that remained, in other words, was the hard part.

When you get stuck doing something on your computer, the popular wisdom goes, you should ask the nearest seven year-old for help. I'm looking forward to the day that seven year-old enters my classroom; presumably she won't need the kind of hand-holding that my mostly 18-22 year-old students need over anything technological. They may all have accounts on Facebook, but many of them still have trouble attaching a file to an email.

To deal with students' anxieties and uncertainties around technology, I've made it my practice to devote plenty of class time at the beginning of the semester to explaining my expectations and demonstrating how to carry out such basic required tasks as posting to the bulletin board, starting and maintaining a blog, and submitting work electronically. As the number of these tasks has grown, though, I've begun to feel that all the explaining and demonstrating creates too long a running start for the course and hinders my efforts to get students excited about the subject-matter, be it Christmas in America, the practice of literary criticism, or British literature since 1700.

This semester (Fall 2006), I've cut back significantly on in-class technology instruction by creating a series of video tutorials, each of which covers a single task, such as replying to a bulletin board post, emailing a paper, or editing the Collaborative Writing Project wiki. I used Snapz Pro X 2 from [Ambrosia Software](#) on my Mac to make these one-to two-minute screencasts and QuickTime Pro to edit them and add voiceover audio. (The Snapz software will let you record your screen and voiceover audio simultaneously, but I find that it works

better to record the audio as I watch the already-captured video than to speak while I point and click. I record the audio track using Audio Hijack Pro from [Rogue Amoeba](#).)

When I rolled out my wiki in Fall 2005, I was leery of making its use a course requirement, since I was already expecting my students to blog and post to the bulletin board. So I offered two ways to edit the wiki for extra credit. Students could add up to 10 points to the grade on one paper (out of six required in the course) by helping to annotate “A Visit from St. Nicholas.” If they chose to help create the informative article “All About ‘A Visit from St. Nicholas,’” they would be excused altogether from writing the third paper of the semester.

I expected more students to choose the first option, which was risk-free and seemed pretty painless, than the second. But in the end, only four different students annotated words or phrases from Moore’s poem, whereas 18 students—more than 80% of the class—helped build the page about the poem rather than write the third paper, despite the risk that they might prove less successful at this unfamiliar task than at conventional essay-writing.

I confess that I did my best to make the risk seem worth taking. I made the topic for the third paper a little tougher than those for the first two, and I reassured my students that they could spend most of their collaborative writing energy executing whatever writing task they did best: gathering information and getting it down in rough form; organizing; editing for clarity, continuity, and grace; correcting spelling or punctuation. Everyone, I told them, would be expected to make some contribution to the page’s factual content; however, the whole point of working as a group was to bring their varied strengths together so that no one’s weaknesses need matter greatly.

Still, each knew that one’s final grade on the assignment would reflect both the quality of one’s individual contributions and the logic, coherence, and polish of the article or essay. To their credit, the students who contributed were willing to bet on their classmates’ commitment to producing a high-quality final product.

One thing they didn’t have to worry about—and herein lies, to my mind, one of the greatest virtues of the wiki as a tool for collaborative work—was that some contributors might walk away with a high grade in exchange for little effort, freeloading off the commitment of others. I showed them how the wiki enabled me—and them—to track each user’s participation in the project. In the end, a student whose contribution amounted to a few brief, marginal paragraphs earned a C- for the assignment, while two students who contributed a large quantity

of excellent material earned a grade of A⁺. Other grades ranged from B⁻ to A.

When completed, “All About ‘A Visit from St. Nicholas’” was not as well-organized or as polished as I would have liked. Many articles on Wikipedia are similarly rough, of course, reflecting the absence of supervisory editing. During the approximately two weeks that the article was in process, I twice used the page’s associated “discussion” space to make suggestions for tightening the article’s structure and wording, but my suggestions had only a minor impact.

Moreover, I found myself unable to develop a sensible mathematical formula (as I half-suspected, from the outset, would be the case) for combining the finished product with individual contributions to arrive at each student’s grade. Although the article as a whole deserved perhaps a B⁺, I thought it unfair to award those two students who had taken the lead and done the best work with anything less than the highest possible grade, especially since their early excitement for the project had proved instrumental in bringing other students on board. My “calculation” of the other students’ grades was similarly intuitive, with the result, I think, that the grades at the ends of the spectrum were determined most by individual performance, while those in the middle derived the greatest benefit from the project’s overall quality. As an English professor, I wasn’t bothered much by this rough method of evaluation, which at least honored the spirit, I believe, of my original contract with the students. Judging from the absence of complaints, the students weren’t bothered either.

What my students’ page lacked in organization and finish, it made up for with unexpected thoroughness and verve. At roughly 4000 words, “All About ‘A Visit from St. Nicholas’” offers a solid and spirited, if at times somewhat rambling, discussion of the poem’s murky provenance, enduring popularity, and complicated relationship to the history of Christmas. In their enthusiasm, the students put more than 3140 additional words on related pages covering Clement Clarke Moore (the most likely author of the poem), Henry Livingston, Jr. (a rival claimant), Joe Nickell and Don Foster (critics who have written on the authorship controversy), and the historical development of Santa Claus. They filled out these pages with appropriate images imported from elsewhere on the Web. And although few of these students were familiar with Wikipedia when the semester began, their many links to Wikipedia entries (*Washington Irving*, *Thomas Nast*, *Zwarte Piet*, *the New York Historical Society*, *Jeffersonian*,

patrician, plebeian, Doomsday, Norse, Thor, Santa Claus is Coming to Town, and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer) demonstrated how quickly and completely they had grasped the power of wikis to put information and ideas, as well as users, into relation with each other.

“If you contributed to the Wiki for Paper 3,” I asked my students in an online survey, “did you find the experience worthwhile?” Seventeen of 18 contributors answered “Yes.” Among their comments: “I thought it was a great way to try and combine all the knowledge we had obtained by that point. It helped to bring all the facts together in a more coherent fashion.” “I liked having the people who knew the best about a subject write about it. Everyone could find their own niche in the wiki.” “I loved the Wiki project. I not only learned how to edit and use Wikipedia, but I also loved the finished product. It was enjoyable to contribute based on my strengths instead of struggling over my weaknesses. I personally thought the page looked very good when we were done!”

The one negative reaction highlights a challenge that I hadn’t, but probably should have, anticipated: “At first, I thought the Wiki was an amazing idea, especially when I knew that it was a group experience. However, some students jumped right in and basically took it over. There wasn’t much left to do.” This complaint was echoed by another student who nevertheless found the experience worthwhile overall: “The only thing I didn’t like was some people did the entire assignment right away, and I felt like I didn’t make a worthwhile contribution even though I was capable of doing so.” Although one of these comments may have come from a student who waited until the day before the project’s official closing date before posting (the others all posted within the first week of the two weeks allotted), a good collaborative essay-writing assignment should probably include some safeguards to keep the brightest, most eager students from intimidating others.

The Project Expands

More than happy with the Collaborative Writing Project’s first semester, I added two new pages for my Spring 2006 classes. One of these classes, English 170 (The Practice of Criticism) is our department’s introduction to literary criticism; the other, English 315, is our survey of Victorian literature. I asked my 170 students to begin building a dictionary of literary terms and my 315 students to begin building an annotated bibliography of Victorian literature.

“Begin” is the important word here. I’d conceived the article about “A Visit” as a single-class project, whereas the dictionary and the annotated bibliography were meant to be inherited by my future sections of 170 and 315. I used this “legacy” dimension of the new pages to motivate my spring classes, appealing to their community spirit by pointing out that their work today would benefit students to come.

Meanwhile, I myself began to appreciate more fully the wiki’s power to create community. I divided the learning outcomes for my spring courses into two categories: individual learning outcomes and community learning outcomes. The latter were to be outcomes for the entire class, such as producing and sharing knowledge. I explained to my students that these course outcomes were analogs of those for which the larger, scholarly community strives.

The Dictionary of Literary Terms is an alphabetical list that includes entries such as Metonymy and Narrator. I set up the list, then told my students to link each entry to a page providing a definition and examples drawn from the semester’s readings. In future semesters, I’ll ask students to refine the definitions and add more examples.

The Annotated Bibliography of Victorian Literature is a list built by students themselves. My students in English 315 delivered oral reports throughout the semester on scholarly articles they’d found through library searches. Each student, after delivering a report, added a citation to the list for the work in question, then linked it to a page providing a summary of the article. Since another requirement of the course was to write a critical essay using at least two scholarly sources, the annotated bibliography served, among other things, as a place where everyone could go in search of topic leads and critical perspectives.

From the first, I’d envisioned the Collaborative Writing Project wiki as a space to be used not just by me but by other SUNY Geneseo colleagues as well. An English Department colleague who teaches a course titled History of the English Language has in the past asked his students to identify and define colloquialisms unique to Geneseo; when I learned of this assignment last spring, I recruited him for the CWP, where his Fall 2006 students have begun building a Dictionary of Geneseo English—an urbandictionary.com for Geneseo that can now grow each time the class is taught. Another colleague has a small group of students working to annotate Wallace Stevens’ poem “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” and to build an informational page on Stevens’ collection Harmonium. Yet another colleague—this one in

Sociology—has asked his students to write a collaborative essay discussing their various field experiences for his Fall 2006 hands-on course in Community Organizing.

Final Reflections

I began my course in *The Practice of Criticism* last spring by introducing my students, as usual, to Kenneth Burke's parlor metaphor. Between my bulletin board and the wiki, I now had two virtual spaces in which students could bring this metaphor alive through their own activity. In the wiki, I also had a means to illustrate the limitations of Burke's metaphor and the communal dimension of literary scholarship. I'm convinced that the students' exchange of perspectives and their collaborative efforts made their learning about the purposes and methods of literary criticism more intentional than that of my students in past semesters.

This fall, I am finally using the wiki as I'd originally planned: as a place for students to mark up a text with interpretations. In annotating "A Visit from St. Nicholas," my students in Intd 105 followed my lead and created informative rather than interpretive commentary. I've asked my Fall 2006 students in *British Literature Since 1700* to link words and phrases from poems by Blake and Keats to pages that relate those words and phrases to the poems' larger meanings. I've also asked these students to begin work on a *Dictionary of Literary and Critical Movements*.

I'm more intrigued than ever by the teaching potential of multiple-author essays such as my students' article about "A Visit." I suspect that once they graduate, students are likely to do more collaborative than individual writing—except for those who enter a handful of fields such as creative writing, journalism, or academia in one of its humanistic branches—and that they will do this writing in a virtual environment of some kind, quite possibly a wiki. Even academics in the humanities have to write collaboratively from time to time—for example, in producing self-study reports for a department or for accreditation. (I've been urging administrators at my own campus to use a wiki for our next report to Middle States.) Collaborative writing of this kind demands skills that in a college curriculum are best taught through multiple-authorship assignments.

Is it possible, I wonder, for a large number of authors to collaborate not only on a report or informational article but on a work of literary exegesis? The idea may seem to violate the spirit of interpretation—usually understood as a highly subjective process of meaning-making—but

as Burke's parlor metaphor makes clear, guests at literary criticism's party win credibility only by attracting allies, and they can only do this by following the canons of literary argument. These constraints naturally produce large areas of intersubjective agreement, so that at any given time in the party's interminable existence, there is broad consensus on many interpretive matters. What if the furious individual rowing that produces this consensus took place in one room (remember that the mixed metaphor is Burke's), while in another what we heard was simply the consensus itself? In other words, what if 35 students worked out a shared interpretation of a poem or a short story through multiple edits of a single page, using the associated "discussion" page to lay out, work through, and where necessary hold onto their differences?

I'm not ready to try the idea this fall, but down the road, I'd like to.

References

¹Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 2nd ed.

(1941; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1967) 109.

²Burke 110.

³Burke 110.