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Democratising case law while teaching students: writing Wikipedia articles on legal cases

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Abstract

This article draws on qualitative student feedback and lecturer experience to provide a guide for educators who are interested in creating Wikipedia article-based assignments. Using legal cases as an example, this article details how these assignments can encourage students to deepen their understanding of a topic and consider how knowledge can be communicated effectively. In particular, this article focuses on how educators outside of the United States and Canada can navigate Wikipedia's bureaucracy and how they and their students can contribute information of relevance to smaller jurisdictions on a publicly-accessible repository. This article begins by addressing concerns that educators may have with student use of Wikipedia, while highlighting pedagogical benefits for students who write Wikipedia articles. It goes on to provide a guide for educators who want to create a Wikipedia article writing assignment – in particular, the preparatory steps required to make the assignment effective, how to support students in their writing journey, and how to better ensure that student-authored articles remain available on Wikipedia once uploaded. This article concludes by encouraging educators to consider using Wikipedia as an educational tool, and to teach their students how they can use Wikipedia article writing to contribute to public knowledge.

Keywords: Best practice guide, law school, public knowledge, Wikipedia, student skills.

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Introduction

Wikipedia and academia

Wikipedia has been described by the Irish courts as 'a form of continually evolving encyclopaedia maintained on an internet site'.[1] It has today become a profoundly influential source of information.[2] Founded in 2001,[3] Wikipedia reached twenty-four billion monthly page views in January 2023.[4] This makes the online encyclopaedia the seventh most-visited website in the world.[5] Although originally conceived as a peer-reviewed free and evolving encyclopaedia that would be authored and edited by academics and experts,[6] it is now a platform whose content can be edited and added to by virtually anyone. This has transformed Wikipedia into one of the world's largest user-generated content platforms.[7] Use of Wikipedia is driven by current events, media, a desire for in-depth knowledge about a topic, random exploration, or a work, business, or school-related information need.[8]

Yet despite Wikipedia's scope and reach, it has occupied an uneasy relationship with academia. Those of us teaching within universities and other higher education institutions may seek to dissuade students from relying on

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[1] *IR v Minister for Justice Equality & Law Reform & anor* [2009] IEHC 353 [18] (Cooke J).

[2] In a more recent case in Ireland in 2018, the High Court simply referred to Wikipedia, without any need to explain what it meant – see, *RAK (Eswatini) v The International Protection Appeals Tribunal & anor* [2018] IEHC 681.

[3] Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia> accessed 26 February 2023, see also John C Kleefeld and Katelyn Rattray, 'Write a Wikipedia Article for Law School Credit – Really?' (2016) 65(3) *Journal of Legal Education* 597, 599.

[4] 'Wikimedia Statistics' (*Wikimedia Foundation*) <https://stats.wikimedia.org/#/all-projects> accessed 26 February 2023.

[5] 'List of most visited websites' (*Wikipedia*) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most_visited_websites> accessed 26 February 2023.

[6] Nate Lanxon, 'The greatest defunct Web sites and dotcom disasters' (*CNET*, 18 November 2009), <https://www.cnet.com/tech/computing/the-greatest-defunct-web-sites-and-dotcom-disasters/#:~:text=Nupedia%20(2000-2003%3B%20precursor%20to%20Wikipedia)> accessed 26 February 2023.

[7] Wikipedia, 'User-generated content', <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User-generated_content#:~:text=Wikipedia%2C%20a%20free%20encyclopedia%2C%20is,used%20as%20an%20instructional%20aide> accessed 26 February 2023.

[8] Florian Lemmerich, Bob West, and Leila Zia, 'Why the world reads Wikipedia: What we learned about reader motivation from a recent research study' (*Wikimedia Foundation*, 15 March 2018) <https://wikimediafoundation.org/news/2018/03/15/why-the-world-reads-wikipedia/> accessed 26 February 2023.

Wikipedia as a source of information. We may not train our students how to use Wikipedia critically or how to improve it. Instead, we simply tell them that it 'isn't recognised as a reliable source'.[9]

In recent years, however, there has been an emergence of examples of lecturers and instructors setting Wikipedia-based assignments as an alternative to students 'handing in papers, having them graded, and getting them back (generally with no opportunity to revise them)'.[10] For instance: Kleefeld's law students in Saskatchewan College, Canada edited Wikipedia articles about legal topics;[11] Edwards allowed her Manhattan College, New York history students to either critique an existing Wikipedia article or to create a new one (although in neither case were the edits or new articles required to be published on Wikipedia);[12] and Chandler and Gregory's students in Lycoming College, Pennsylvania were asked to create Wikipedia articles on Islamic history, or to edit existing articles.[13] To help academics and students contribute to Wikipedia, the Wiki Education Foundation ('WikiEdu', a non-profit organisation) supports projects in the United States (the 'U.S.') and Canada.[14] Although WikiEdu works with academics from these two countries to write about a wide range of topics, this nevertheless results in a specific jurisdictional, and arguably North American, framing of content production that may not adequately address issues of relevance in smaller jurisdictions.

Reflecting this narrow jurisdictional focus, prior to our exercise there was scant information on Wikipedia concerning the judgments of the highest court in Ireland – the Irish Supreme Court. In an exercise that we conducted in collaboration with students, we established a category of Wikipedia articles

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[9] Anonymous feedback provided by a student as part of a feedback questionnaire distributed to participants in May 2019 and December 2019 ('Student Feedback') – No3 (anonymous responses were given a number). The questionnaire was approved by the Maynooth University Ethics Committee - reference SRESC-2018-098. See also, Charles Knight and Sam Pryke, 'Wikipedia and the University, a case study' (2012) 17(6) *Teaching in Higher Education* 649, 652.

[10] Matt Barton, 'Is There a Wiki in This Class? Wikibooks and the Future of Higher Education' in Robert E Cummings and Matt Barton (eds), *Wiki Writing: Collaborative Learning in the College Classroom* (University of Michigan Press 2008) 177, 189.

[11] Kleefeld and Rattray, (n 3).

[12] Jenifer C Edwards, 'Wiki Women: Bringing Women Into Wikipedia through Activism and Pedagogy' (2015) 48(3) *The History Teacher* 409.

[13] Cullen J Chandler and Alison S Gregory, 'Sleeping with the Enemy: Wikipedia in the College Classroom' (2010) 43(2) *The History Teacher* 247.

[14] 'Teach with Wikipedia' (*Wiki Education Foundation*) <https://wikiedu.org/teach-with-wikipedia/> accessed 26 February 2023.

that had previously been virtually non-existent: summaries of Irish Supreme Court cases. Given the accessible nature of Wikipedia as a source of publicly available knowledge, we considered the addition of dozens of Wikipedia articles about Supreme Court cases from a smaller jurisdiction, such as Ireland, to be in the public interest.

For our exercise, we tasked students with writing Wikipedia articles on cases that they had chosen, within an area of law with which they felt comfortable. Our Wikipedia article exercise ran over 2019 and 2020 as part of a larger, ongoing research project. The articles were published on Wikipedia, and all remain available at the time of writing.[15] Open to both undergraduate and postgraduate law students at Maynooth University, Ireland, this exercise sought to build research and writing skills, and information literacy. We also found using Wikipedia article writing in class to be an archetypal example of a civic engagement pedagogy by providing our students with an academically rigorous opportunity to contribute to wider public knowledge and develop a sense of civic responsibility.[16] In this way, our students' Wikipedia additions directly expanded Wikipedia's content to cover topics that are central to the development of legal rights and obligations within a small jurisdiction (Ireland).

However, educators must be cautious when framing and rolling out Wikipedia-based assignments. Using Wikipedia in the classroom requires significant time and preparatory work. Educators need to work closely and carefully with students to ensure both a positive experience for the students, and that class engagement and content production are not disruptive to the encyclopaedia.

This article charts our experience of creating and implementing a Wikipedia-based assignment. It is one of the only detailed guides to Wikipedia-based assignments created for educators outside of the U.S. and Canada and is designed to make the process rewarding for educators and students. While our students wrote articles about Irish court cases, our experience can be applied to any in-class Wikipedia article writing exercise, legal or otherwise.

First, this article explores the background and objectives of the exercise. It considers Wikipedia's reputational issues and the importance of allowing

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[15] February 2023.
[16] Debra L. DeLaet, 'A Pedagogy of Civic Engagement for the Undergraduate Political Science Classroom' (2016) 12(1) *Journal of Political Science Education* 72, 73.

students to use Wikipedia to both build their own skills and contribute to public knowledge. It then discusses the process of developing and implementing a Wikipedia-based assignment, outlining the challenges that we faced and providing a narrative guide on how to facilitate an effective Wikipedia-based assignment. Next, it evaluates the success of the exercise by reflecting on the experience from both our students' and our perspectives. Finally, it concludes by encouraging educators, particularly those outside of the U.S. and Canada, to consider using Wikipedia in class assignments.

Background and Objectives

Reputational issues faced by Wikipedia

The use of Wikipedia in higher education has been the subject of debate for many years. There have been several examples of attempts by academics to integrate Wikipedia authorship and editing into the classroom, to 'give students the opportunity to learn through their contributions.'[17] Yet the ability for anyone to anonymously contribute to Wikipedia underpins the reputational difficulties faced by the free encyclopaedia in an academic context. You do not need qualifications or expertise to create or change a Wikipedia page. This is in contrast to academics' usual preference for encouraging their students to learn by reading sources that have a level of overt academic credibility – be that peer reviewed articles or benchmark works from leading academics published by respected publishers. As academics, we seek a clear line of authorship, peer review and with that, credibility, in our sources.[18]

Scepticism surrounding the academic legitimacy of Wikipedia and the reliability of its content has led to entire university departments banning citation of Wikipedia in academic writing[19] and lecturers telling students that any Wikipedia citation in their assignments will result in an automatic zero.[20] As one of our students reflected, 'several people (teachers/lecturers) have told me not to use [Wikipedia] calling it "unreliable"'.[21] While this scepticism is rooted in the academic goals of rigour, transparency and

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[17] Kleefeld and Rattray, (n 3), 604.
[18] Chandler and Gregory, (n 13).
[19] An example of which is Middlebury College's history department – Meghan Sweeney, 'The Wikipedia Project: Changing Students from Consumers to Producers' (2012) 39(3) *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 256, 257.
[20] Chandler and Gregory, (n 13), 249.
[21] Student Feedback No3.

accountability, it is not limited to university corridors. Partners in law firms have criticised the use of Wikipedia by trainee lawyers asked to produce a piece of research,[22] judges have expressed doubts about Wikipedia as a valid source of information for the courts,[23] and news organisations have banned their journalists from using Wikipedia as a source.[24]

In addition to concerns arising from the credibility of Wikipedia's content, academics may fear that Wikipedia is used as a 'one-stop shop' by students to avoid having to critically evaluate multiple sources. Consulting Wikipedia is quick and easy. Internet search engines' reliance on Wikipedia to generate search results further aids this accessibility.[25] While Wikipedia may be used as a springboard into underlying (and more authoritative) literature on a topic,[26] there is research that suggests that those reading Wikipedia may go no further in verifying the information that they read on the encyclopaedia, satisfied that the content provides them with their answer. Rieh and Hilligoss have shown that students are sometimes willing to compromise information reliability of their online sources for speed and convenience,[27] while Fallis has found that people tend to choose easily available sources of information.[28] Our own students reflected that they 'do look up to see whether the[re] may be case[]

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[22] Natasha Choolhun, 'Google: to use, or not to use. What is the question?' (2009) 9 *Legal Information Management* 168.

[23] As the Irish High Court noted in *Rowan v Kerry County Council and others* 2012 [IEHC] 65, [31] (Birmingham J):

> I have been referred to a number of dictionary definitions […] This exercise reached its nadir in the first affidavit sworn by Dr. Martin Rogers which referred to Wikipedia and Wiktionary entries. *Sensibly, counsel for the applicant indicated that he was not relying on these passages from the affidavit.* [emphasis added].

[24] Laura Oliver, 'AFP reporters barred from using Wikipedia and Facebook as sources' (Journalism.co.uk, 17 January 2008) <https://www.journalism.co.uk/news/afp-reporters-barred-from-using-wikipedia-and-facebook-as-sources/s2/a530941/> accessed 26 February 2023.

[25] Conor McMahon, Isaac Johnson and Brent Hecht, 'The Substantial Interdependence of Wikipedia and Google: A Case Study on the Relationship Between Peer Production Communities and Information Technologies' *Proceedings of the Eleventh International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* (ICWSM 2017) 142, 148-149.

[26] Neil Thompson and Douglas Hanley, 'Science Is Shaped by Wikipedia: Evidence From a Randomized Control Trial' (13 February 2018) *MIT Sloan Research Paper* No. 5238-17, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3039505>, accessed 26 February 2023.

[27] Soo Young Rieh and Brian Hilligoss, 'College students' credibility judgments in the information-seeking process' in Miriam J. Metzger and Andrew J. Flanagin (eds) *Digital Media, Youth, and Credibility* (The MIT Press, 2007) 49.

[28] Don Fallis 'Toward an epistemology of Wikipedia' (2008) 59(10) *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 1662.

summaries up on wikipedia when it is last minute to see what the case was about.'[29]

Scepticism has not, however, prevented academics,[30] students,[31] professionals,[32] and even the courts,[33] from relying on Wikipedia for information (albeit not always overtly). Over the last decade, empirical research has demonstrated the impact of Wikipedia, from the use of its content in articles published in peer-reviewed science journals to the economic benefit from tourism for towns in Spain that have articles on the English language version of Wikipedia.[34] Yet one of Wikipedia's main downfalls as a reliable source of information is that each article is only as good as its anonymous author and its subsequent editors – from the reader's perspective, 'the author [is] unknown'.[35] As one commentator noted, '[b]ut what if the information provided on Wikipedia is misleading, or even wrong? The answer is supposed to be: Then change it. That's what collaboration means. But what if nobody changes it? What if nobody cares?'.[36] Reflecting this concern, articles on Wikipedia where the content is more 'peripheral' have been found to be of lower quality[37] and a 2018 study found Wikipedia content to exhibit greater

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[29] Student Feedback No6.

[30] A survey of Spanish academics found that 38.1% of faculty consult Wikipedia articles from their own discipline 'frequently' or 'very frequently' and that many use Wikipedia articles as a stepping stone to the sources they reference, Tiziano Piccardi and others, 'On the Value of Wikipedia as a Gateway to the Web', *WWW '21: Proceedings of the Web Conference 2021* (2021) 249, 255-256.

[31] Tomoko Traphagan and others, 'Changes in college students' perceptions of use of web-based resources for academic tasks with Wikipedia projects: a preliminary exploration' (2014) 22(3) Interactive Learning Environments 253; Michael Piccorossi, 'Teachers Say that for Students Today 'Research = Googling'' (*Pew Research Center*, 6 December 2012) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2012/12/06/teachers-say-that-for-students-today-research-googling/> accessed 26 February 2023.

[32] Elisa Alonso, 'Analysing the use and perception of Wikipedia in the professional context of translation' (2015) 23 *The Journal of Specialised Translation* 89.

[33] Neil Thompson and others 'Trial by Internet: A Randomized Field Experiment on Wikipedia's Influence on Judges' Legal Reasoning' in Kevin Tobia (ed) *The Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Jurisprudence* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2023); Joseph L Gerken, 'How Courts Use Wikipedia Developments' (2010) 11(1) *The Journal of Appellate Practice and Process* 191, 198.

[34] Marit Hinnosaar and others, 'Wikipedia matters' (2019) *Journal of Economics and Management Strategy* 1, 10-11; Neil Thompson and Douglas Hanley, (n 26).

[35] *R v Amjad* [2016] EWCA Crim 1618, (Lady Justice Rafferty), [11].

[36] Denis Hlynka, 'Educational Technology and "Wikipedia"' (2009) 49(5) *Educational Technology* 50, 50.

[37] Gerald Kane and Sam Ransbotham, 'Content as Community Regulator: The Recursive Relationship Between Consumption and Contribution in Open Collaboration Communities' (2016) 27(5) *Organization Science* 1258. Technically, 'peripheral (low

bias than comparable entries in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.[38] These are legitimate issues that are of particular concern for educators in smaller jurisdictions, where students (and the public) may be relying on weaker quality Wikipedia articles.

Are these reputational issues a roadblock to reliable content on Wikipedia?

While Wikipedia articles can be created by anyone, they can also be improved, added to, and corrected by those in the vast community of Wikipedia editors. As Noveck has noted, '[t]hese tools are designed around the assumption that in certain circumstances the judgment of many is better than the judgment of few and that the quality of information will improve with more contributions.'[39] As a source of information, therefore, Wikipedia is not necessarily the muddle of inaccuracies and misunderstandings that its detractors sometimes make it out to be.

Research into the accuracy of Wikipedia's content is almost as old as the encyclopaedia itself. In 2005, *Nature*, the multidisciplinary science journal, compared scientific articles on Wikipedia and those in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. While acknowledging errors in both encyclopaedias, the study found that the level of accuracy between the two was comparable, with Wikipedia having only slightly more inaccuracies than the printed book.[40] Similarly, Chesney's 2006 study asked researchers to review a Wikipedia article in their field of expertise and another article in a field in which they were

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centrality)' means a lack of graph centrality where Wikipedia pages are nodes on the graph and edges are the links between them. Quality was measured on a seven-point scale from lowest to highest quality evaluated by the Medicine WikiProject. They also use additional measurements of quality, including agreement with experts, such as medical students. See further, Linton C Freeman, 'Centrality in social networks conceptual clarification' (1978-1979) 1(3) *Social Networks* 215.

[38]   Shane Greenstein and others, 'Do Experts or Crowd-Based Models Produce More Bias? Evidence from Encyclopædia Britannica and Wikipedia' (2018) 42(3) *MIS Quarterly* 945.

[39] Beth Simone Noveck, 'Wikipedia and the Future of Legal Education' (2007) 57(1) *Journal of Legal Education* 3, 6.

[40] Jim Giles, 'Internet Encyclopaedias Go Head to Head' (2005) 428(7070) *Nature* 900. See also, Jona Kräenbring and others, 'Accuracy and Completeness of Drug Information in Wikipedia: A Comparison with Standard Textbooks of Pharmacology' (2014 9(9) *PLoS ONE* e106930. Encyclopaedia Britannica objected to this study, following which Nature published a follow up in 2006: 'Britannica attacks', (2006) *Nature* 440, 582.

not an expert.[41] The accuracy of Wikipedia was found to be high, with the researchers who were experts rating the Wikipedia articles to be more credible than the non-experts.[42] Since *Nature* and Chesney's studies, others have examined specific content areas of Wikipedia more closely. Health and medicine are topics of particular importance to researchers given the potential impact of inaccurate content for readers. Wikipedia has performed well here, aided by editing initiatives and partnerships with public health professionals and academics.[43] Since 2014, Wikipedia has partnered with the Cochrane Library (which compiles databases containing healthcare related information)[44] to grant Wikipedia's editors access to high quality medical research.[45] In late 2020, the World Health Organization made all of its information, graphics, and videos available to Wikipedia editors to help combat disinformation about COVID-19.[46]

The basis for our study of Irish Supreme Court cases on Wikipedia

These discussions as to Wikipedia's article quality and accuracy, or any ideas about using the platform to bring together collective knowledge on a subject, are, however, only possible when the relevant Wikipedia entry on a particular subject actually exists. Prior to our research, this was not the case for Wikipedia entries on Irish Supreme Court decisions on which there were only nine articles.[47] A similar absence of Wikipedia entries could also be highlighted with respect to topics of relevance in other comparable jurisdictions.

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[41] Thomas Chesney, 'An Empirical Examination of Wikipedia's Credibility' (2006) *First Monday* <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1413> accessed 26 February 2023.

[42] ibid.

[43] Norman J Temple and Joy Fraser, 'How Accurate Are Wikipedia Articles in Health, Nutrition, and Medicine?' (2014) 38 *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Sciences* 37.

[44] Cochrane Library, 'About the Cochrane Library' <https://www.cochranelibrary.com/about/about-cochrane-library> accessed 26 February 2023.

[45] Wikipedia, 'WikiProject Medicine/Cochrane' <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:WikiProject_Medicine/Cochrane&oldid=949298411> accessed 26 February 2023.

[46] Donald G McNeil Jr, 'Wikipedia and W.H.O. Join to Combat Covid-19 Misinformation' (New York Times, 22 October 2020) <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/22/health/wikipedia-who-coronavirus-health.html> accessed 26 February 2023.

[47] Contrast this with other disciplines – a study of the field of chemistry showed that nearly 90% of university undergraduate topics and 50% of graduate topics are covered by

Case law is a key source of law in Ireland. In a common law system, like Ireland, the United Kingdom and the U.S., legal rules are articulated, shaped, and developed by judges in the context of individual court cases. As with other common law jurisdictions, the doctrine of 'precedent' – which dictates that a court is bound by earlier court decisions of superior courts on analogous legal issues – is central to the Irish legal tradition.[48] This doctrine is both a source of consistency and predictability in the application of the law, and a means of alleviating the need for fresh reconsideration of a legal issue in each case that it arises.[49]

Once a decision is handed down in an Irish High Court, Court of Appeal or Supreme Court case, open access to written judgments is available through the Courts Service of Ireland website.[50] The judgments of Ireland's superior courts are, therefore, freely available to the public. However, the practical utility of this website to the public as a source of information about legal rules in Ireland is questionable. The published judgements are not categorised by area of law, they (generally) do not contain a readily accessible summary of the decision, and they are typically drafted for an experienced legal audience. It is only once these written judgments are uploaded onto subscription-based legal databases, accessible through a paywall, that they are collated, organised, indexed, and summarised. This can be contrasted to larger jurisdictions such as the U.S., where summaries of over 3,000 U.S. Supreme Court cases already exist on Wikipedia – making them freely accessible and readily comprehendible. The man from the country in Franz Kafka's *The Trial* reminds us that '[t]he law should be accessible to anyone at any time',[51] yet Irish case law, and the legal rules these cases establish or develop, are not truly accessible. It was to begin the process of filling this gap with respect to Irish case law that we engaged students as direct contributors to Wikipedia's knowledge database.

Wikipedia articles, and that Wikipedia is either the largest or second largest source of review-like articles in the world (with only academic literature itself having more), Neil Thompson and Douglas Hanley, (n 26).

[48] Sumner Lobingier, 'Precedent in Past and Present Legal Systems' (1946) 44 *Michigan Law Review* 955, 962.

[49] Benjamin N Cardozo, The Nature of the Judicial Process (Yale University Press 1921) 149, quoted in Michael BW Sinclair, 'Precedent, Super-Precedent' (2007) 14(2) *George Mason Law Review* 363, 372.

[50] The Courts Service of Ireland, <https://courts.ie> accessed 26 February 2023.

[51] Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (Breon Mitchell, trans) (Schocken Books 1999) 215-216.

Getting Students Involved - From Knowledge Consumers to Producers

As part of a larger research project studying the use of Wikipedia by Irish courts,[52] our students wrote full Wikipedia articles on Irish Supreme Court cases. 77 of these were published as new articles on Wikipedia in 2019 and 2020.[53] This was an exercise in which the students had to engage with cases that they may only have referred to in passing throughout their legal studies. The articles produced from the assignment resulted in Wikipedia's database of articles on Irish Supreme Court cases increasing almost tenfold.

Engaging undergraduate and postgraduate law students in the task of reading, understanding, and then explaining Irish Supreme Court cases in the form of individual Wikipedia articles was a shift in the style of assignment to which the students were accustomed. The assignment moved students away from the standard essay, assessed only by their lecturer, to a text subject to ongoing scrutiny by a group of anonymous editors.[54] It was also the first time that most of the students produced work that was made publicly available. These characteristics in themselves made a Wikipedia-based assignment unique for both the students and lecturers involved. The students, so used to being passive consumers of published knowledge, would now be producers, adding to the knowledge bank of Wikipedia.[55] The lecturers no longer had the final word on the articles – this was left to the online community into which they were released. This assignment was designed to give students a clear rationale for reading the cases, and sought to enhance students' legal research and writing skills.

Reading cases is an important aspect of a law degree. Particularly in a common law context, this is how students understand 'how formal legal rules are

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[52] The findings for which can be found here, Thompson and others, (n 33). WikiEdu itself discussed the benefits of this research in Ian Ramjohn, 'Judging Wikipedia's content' (*WikiEdu*, 10 August 2022), <https://wikiedu.org/blog/2022/08/10/judging-wikipedias-content/> accessed 26 February 2023. This research has also been covered extensively in popular media, including Wired: Will Knight, 'Wikipedia Articles Sway Some Legal Judgments' (*Wired*, 2 August 2022), <https://www.wired.com/story/wikipedia-articles-sway-some-legal-judgments/> accessed 26 February 2023 and CNET: Stephen Shankland, 'Wikipedia Articles on Court Cases Influence Judges, MIT Study Finds' (*CNET*, 27 July 2022) <https://www.cnet.com/culture/internet/wikipedia-influences-how-judges-work-mit-study-finds/> accessed 26 February 2023.
[53] Which included 7 faculty-authored articles.
[54] Piotr Konieczny, 'Rethinking Wikipedia for the Classroom' (2014) 13(1) *Contexts* 70, 82.
[55] Kleefeld and Rattray, (n 3), 604.

generated, shaped, and justified'.[56] Understanding cases, and the legal rules that they establish, is also a skill that must be practised and developed over time.[57] Yet law students frequently do not know or understand why they are assigned lists of cases to read as part of their degree. Instead, they may read 'cases in a vacuum',[58] skimming the judgment, failing to see the wider legal context of the judges' words, missing the significance of the legally relevant sections.[59] As part of our assignment, students had to consider what legal principle each case was authority for and how the judges reached that conclusion – without having any Wikipedia article about the relevant case to help them. They then had to take their case analysis and present it in a way that was understandable to an audience without legal training. We wanted to give the students' actions a practicality and tangibility – they were active readers digesting and explaining legal principles and judicial reasoning.[60]

The Wikipedia-article writing assignment was not, of course, a university assessment that yielded only inward-looking results. By publishing articles on Wikipedia, we wanted students to focus on their civic engagement by contributing to public knowledge. As Edwards notes, giving students the opportunity to add to Wikipedia 'is important for shaping history, for shaping knowledge. Doing this within the university is an important way to bring academic knowledge to the public, particularly since so much scholarly work is now available only behind a paywall in expensive article databases.'[61] The cases for which our students wrote articles were often long, complex, and difficult to understand. Indeed, initial attempts to read case law have been described as 'like stirring concrete with [one's] eyelashes'.[62] But our students benefit from several years of academic legal study, guidance from members of the law faculty, and access to subscription-based peer-reviewed research that

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[56] Vincent Kazmierski, 'How Much "Law" in Legal Studies? Approaches to Teaching Legal Research and Doctrinal Analysis in a Legal Studies Program' (2014) 29(3) *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* 297, 301.

[57] Martin Davies, 'Reading Cases' (1987) 50(4) *The Modern Law Review* 409, 431.

[58] Patricia Grande Montana, 'Explaining the "Big Picture": Why Students Should Know Why They Read Cases in Law School' (December 2008) Legal Studies Research Paper Series Paper #08-0162, St John's University.

[59] James F Stratman, 'When Law Students Read Cases: Exploring Relations Between Professional Legal Reasoning Roles and Problem Detection' (2002) 34(1) *Discourse Processes* 57, 61.

[60] Eryk Salvaggio, 'Five reasons a Wikipedia assignment is better than a term paper' (28 March 2016) < https://wikiedu.org/blog/2016/03/28/five-reasons-a-wikipedia-assignment-is-better-than-a-term-paper/> accessed 26 February 2023.

[61] Edwards, (n 12).

[62] Scott Turow, *One L* (Penguin 1978) 30-31.

is inaccessible to the public. This gives those student authors valuable legal context in which to digest and present cases to that public. In this way, their articles on Wikipedia sought to improve public access to legal knowledge in an otherwise neglected topic. For jurisdictions outside of the U.S. and Canada, where article coverage is often sparser, this contribution to accurate and jurisdictionally-relevant public knowledge is particularly valuable.

In the following sections, we provide a guide for those who want to implement a Wikipedia article-writing assignment.

Method and Process – Pre-semester preparation

Wikipedia describes itself as 'the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit'.[63] However, veteran editors and researchers have suggested that a more accurate description is, '[t]he encyclopaedia that anyone who understands the norms, socializes himself or herself, dodges the impersonal wall of semi-automated rejection, and still wants to voluntarily contribute his or her time and energy can edit.'[64] Any attempt to add complex, specialised content to Wikipedia, especially the number of new articles created as part of our exercise, requires an in-depth familiarity with the platform's curation process. Prior to beginning a classroom-based Wikipedia assignment, therefore, we recommend that educators gain experience with the Wikipedia community and platform, undertake a trial run of uploading Wikipedia articles to gain familiarity with the process, and develop resources for students.

Understanding the community and the platform

Creating a new article on Wikipedia is more difficult than editing an existing article.[65] Following the creation of a hoax biography of the journalist John Seigenthaler in 2005, Wikipedia created a complex curation process.

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[63] 'Wikipedia:The Free Encyclopedia'
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:The_Free_Encyclopedia#:~:text=The%20subtitl
e%20of%20Wikipedia%20is%20the%20free%20encyclopedia%20that%20anyone%20can
%20edit> accessed 26 February 2023.
[64] Aaron Halfaker and others, 'The Rise and Decline of an Open Collaboration System: How Wikipedia's Reaction to Popularity Is Causing Its Decline' (2013) 57(5) *American Behavioral Scientist* 664, 683.
[65] Some university Wikipedia projects required students to edit an already written article, or an article that is a 'stub', rather than requiring the creation of completely new Wikipedia pages (and, indeed, the near creation of a new Wikipedia category 'Supreme Court of Ireland cases').

Unregistered users cannot create new articles directly on Wikipedia - any such articles must first be vetted through a process called 'Articles for Creation' ('AfC'). Through the AfC process, experienced editors assess articles with one primary consideration: whether the article will survive if nominated for deletion by another editor.[66] *Registered* users who have made at least ten edits on Wikipedia pages and have an account that is at least four days old can create new articles directly on Wikipedia. However, there is a curation process here too. New articles created directly on Wikipedia are not visible (indexed) to search engines until a volunteer from Wikipedia's 'New Pages Patrol' ('NPP') accepts the article, or ninety days pass (whichever is sooner). NPP also approves articles accepted through AfC. Two concerns dominate the NPP process: copyright violation and 'notability'. Other key policies include 'Neutral Point of View',[67] 'No Original Research'[68] and 'Verifiability'.[69] Critiquing these policies is a worthwhile pastime (and some observations follow), but any educator wishing to help students add content to Wikipedia must understand how these policies operate in practice.

The biography article of physicist Donna Strickland, which AfC rejected a few months before she won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2018, acts as an example of the obstacles that new Wikipedia contributors, including educators, face. This serves to highlight why an educator must understand the Wikipedia community and its policies before setting a Wikipedia-based assignment. These policies are nuanced, and – if not understood at the start of the project – can result in the rejection of an article.

The rejection of the Strickland article highlights a number of issues in Wikipedia's curation process. Starting with the concept of notability on

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[66] 'Wikipedia: WikiProject Articles for creation/Reviewing instructions' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Articles_for_creation/Reviewing_instructions> accessed 26 February 2023.
[67] 'Wikipedia: Neutral Point of View' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral_point_of_view> accessed 26 February 2023.
[68] 'Wikipedia: No Original Research' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No_original_research> accessed 26 February 2023.
[69] 'Wikipedia: Verifiability' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Verifiability> accessed 26 February 2023, see more generally, 'Wikipedia: Core Content Policies' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Core_content_policies> accessed 26 February 2023.

Wikipedia,[70] which Wikipedia defines as being when a topic 'has received *significant coverage* in *reliable sources* that are *independent of the subject*'.[71] In essence, AfC and NPP volunteers look for citations to established sources – primarily newspapers – when assessing notability. As topics become more complex, so too does the process of assessing their notability. For example, there were few references in the news to Strickland prior to her winning the Nobel Prize. The original article on Strickland sent to AfC referenced her role as the former President of The Optical Society (OSA) (now known as Optica) and cited a press release from this organisation and its biography of her. However, Wikipedia editors concluded that this source was insufficient to establish notability because, in their eyes, it lacked independence. Of course, any expert in the field of physics would immediately recognise that only a notable individual would be elected as President of The Optical Society (OSA). While Strickland may not have been a household name, she met the benchmark of notability within the field of physics. Yet the Wikipedia article about her was rejected. Similar issues have arisen for other contextually-notable entries – television personalities from the Global South,[72] female chemists,[73] and superior court decisions from smaller jurisdictions.

There are some specific policies that grant automatic notability to articles. For example, a song that won a Grammy or a populated, legally recognised place are presumed notable.[74] The policy for academic notability identifies several characteristics, any one of which confers notability. One of these is: 'the person has been an elected member of a highly selective and prestigious scholarly

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[70] Ed Erhart, 'Why didn't Wikipedia have an article on Donna Strickland, winner of a Nobel Prize?' (*Wikimedia Foundation*, 4 October 2018) <https://wikimediafoundation.org/news/2018/10/04/donna-strickland-wikipedia/> accessed 26 February 2023.

[71] 'Wikipedia: Notability' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability> accessed 26 February 2023, emphasis added.

[72] Michael Barera, 'Mind the Gap: Addressing Structural Equity and Inclusion on Wikipedia' (University of Texas at Arlington Open Access Week, 20 October 2020) <https://rc.library.uta.edu/uta-ir/handle/10106/29572> accessed 26 February 2023.

[73] Katrina Kramer, Female scientists' pages keep disappearing from Wikipedia – what's going on? (*ChemistryWorld*, 2019) <https://www.chemistryworld.com/news/female-scientists-pages-keep-disappearing-from-wikipedia-whats-going-on/3010664.article> accessed 26 February 2023.

[74] 'Wikipedia: Notability(music)' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability_(music)> accessed 26 February 2023, 'Wikipedia:Notability (geographic features)' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability_(geographic_features)#Geographic_regions,_areas_and_places> accessed 26 February 2023.

society or association…'.[75] The rejection of the original Strickland article can thus be attributed to two causes. First, the editor at AfC failed to grasp the notability of a person elected as President of The Optical Society (OSA). Second, the original author presumed that Wikipedia editors would recognise Strickland's notability without the need to pad the article with citations to newspapers and other secondary sources.

Other elements of context are also important. The author of the Strickland article possessed no prior editing history on Wikipedia. Editorial authority on Wikipedia derives primarily from an editor's contributions to the encyclopaedia. Wikipedia displays an editor's 'edit count' on both the AfC and NPP curation tool. New authors with no or little edit count lack this key visible status marker. In addition to this, a Stakhanovite ethic prevails among the volunteers. Content creation is valued amongst editors, but administrative work is arguably more important for building credibility with the community of editors.[76] New authors must be willing to work on improving existing content before creating something new on the encyclopaedia. Each of these elements builds the picture of what an educator must be prepared for ahead of setting a Wikipedia-based assignment, and how that educator can take initial steps to minimise risks of article deletion.

In order to address the AfC and NPP processes at the outset, therefore, we suggest that educators take a number of preliminary steps.

First, familiarise yourself with Wikipedia by creating an account and completing a tutorial. The tutorial 'The Wikipedia Adventure'[77] is straightforward and has the advantage of generating badges on your user page; this presents you as a conscientious novice. In addition, you should update your user page with a description of your area(s) of expertise.

You can then start making modest edits (and in doing so, building your credibility) by using the tool 'Citation Hunt' to find articles where editors are

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[75] 'Wikipedia: Notability (academics)' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability_(academics)> accessed 26 February 2023.
[76] Jemielniak, Dariusz, *Common Knowledge?: An Ethnography of Wikipedia*. Redwood City (Stanford University Press, 2014).
[77] 'Wikipedia: The Wikipedia Adventure' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:The_Wikipedia_Adventure> accessed 26 February 2023.

asking for citations to be added.[78] The combination of subject-matter expertise and access to peer-reviewed sources makes academics strong contributors here. In addition, the edits will be modest—you are adding citations rather than content. Participating in a WikiProject is another good way to gain experience contributing while also becoming familiar with the culture of Wikipedia. These WikiProjects are groups of editors who edit about a topic of shared interest. There are WikiProjects for just about everything, from Dungeons & Dragons, to women's history, to cities.[79] The page of the relevant WikiProject will generally contain a form of 'to-do' list setting out the upcoming goals of that WikiProject.

Once you are familiar with the structure of Wikipedia articles, the editing process, and the community norms, you can then add a new article to Wikipedia. Here too, WikiProjects are helpful. Before starting our project, one of our co-authors wrote Wikipedia articles requested by the WikiProjects 'Birds,' 'Ireland,' 'Women's History,' and 'Dungeons & Dragons' to gain familiarity with the process. In doing so, they had the support of editors from these WikiProjects and gained practice focusing on secondary sources as citations. We recommend that any interested educator contribute to Wikipedia through independent edits or via a WikiProject for at least two months – with just a handful of edits weekly and one new article – before engaging with it as a classroom assignment. This will help immeasurably with the subsequent upload of student-authored articles.

Use a trial run

Before beginning any student inductions, we sought to manage Wikipedia's curation process using a trial run of new Wikipedia articles. To do so, law faculty members of the project wrote Wikipedia articles on seven Irish Supreme Court cases in early 2019. Bots (computer programs that perform automated tasks on Wikipedia) incorrectly identified direct quotes from case decisions in the faculty articles as copyright violations and editors nominated several of them for deletion (in general, Wikipedia discourages direct quotations, even if those quotations are cited).[80] We were successful in saving

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[78] 'Citation Hunt' <https://citationhunt.toolforge.org/en?id=1226ea58> accessed 26 February 2023.
[79] 'Wikipedia:WikiProject Council/Directory' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Council/Directory> accessed 26 February 2023.
[80] Salvaggio, (n 60).

these articles by reducing the quoted material and adding additional citations to secondary sources. Our familiarity with the deletion process (as a result of our preparatory steps) allowed us to move quickly and we even managed to save one article that had been nominated for 'speedy deletion', a measure that removes the need for a consensus based on a deletion discussion.[81] We subsequently contacted the volunteers who oversee copyright on Wikipedia. They agreed to whitelist Irish Supreme Court decisions on the British and Irish Legal Information Institute (BAILII)[82] website so that the bots would not flag articles with direct quotations that matched text from that site.

After publishing these seven articles on Wikipedia, we also reached out to WikiProject Law[83] for feedback and to inform them of our future plans. An editor there commended the idea of adding articles about court decisions from a smaller jurisdiction. The editor suggested that we increase the number of secondary sources and use less technical language in our upcoming student-authored articles. Finally, we reached out to NPP directly to let them know that we would be publishing dozens of articles in batches, and emphasising that we had received feedback from WikiProject Law. This also gave NPP a point of contact if they had questions about the articles.

Creating student resources

Previous experience working with students on Wikipedia article-based projects imparted valuable experience both on the support necessary for students and the proper formatting and style of Wikipedia articles.[84] Prior to engaging our students in this exercise, therefore, we developed a suite of electronic resources to help students with Wikipedia article creation and editing. These consisted of a series of screencasts that explained how to set up an account, how to add detail to a user page (including a link to the Wikipedia account of one of the

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[81] 'Wikipedia: Criteria for speed deletion'
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Criteria_for_speedy_deletion> accessed 26 February 2023.

[82] British and Irish Legal Information Institute (BAILII) <https://www.bailii.org> accessed 26 February 2023.

[83] 'Wikipedia: WikiProject Law'
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Law#:~:text=This%20Wikiproject%20is%20aimed%20at,and%20proper%20categorization%20of%20articles> accessed 26 February 2023.

[84] Brian McKenzie and others, 'From Poetry to Palmerstown: Using Wikipedia to Teach Critical Skills and Information Literacy in a First-Year Seminar' (2018) 66(3) *College Teaching* 140, 140.

supervising lecturers), a Wikipedia style guide, an overview of the structure of a Wikipedia article, and a step-by-step guide on the editing process and adding citations to an article.

We hosted these on a dedicated Moodle (our Virtual Learning Environment) site. Students participated in the project as part of two cohorts. In the spring of 2019, undergraduate law students voluntarily participated as part of the civic engagement stream of the Maynooth University Student Experience Award – an extracurricular programme that emphasises experiential learning. Given the paucity of Irish legal information on Wikipedia, civic engagement was a compelling framing of our student authors' work. Their articles were democratising knowledge and actively increasing the publicly accessible information base. In the autumn of 2019, the second cohort, a class of graduate law students, contributed as part of a professional development module designed to build students' employability skills. The exercise fitted well with this skills-based module as the development of explanatory writing and discipline-specific research skills will benefit students in their future legal careers.[85]

Method and Process – Activities during the Semester

Student training and support with the writing process

Our approach to the authorship of articles was as important as our ability to navigate Wikipedia's community norms and curation process. We used the seven faculty-created articles, written during the trial run described above, to determine the optimal method for this authoring process. We discovered that it was better to use an individual author's 'sandbox' (in essence, a personal test space on Wikipedia) rather than compose articles in the 'draft' space of Wikipedia where they might be flagged by bots for copyright violation of BAILII. Draft space articles are also occasionally published by random editors who deem them acceptable – this would not have worked from our perspective due to the need for all articles to be released in a managed way in light of our wider ongoing project. As a result, the use of sandboxes allowed for closer quality control of student work, and greater curation of the publication process. Working to create new articles in a user sandbox also minimises interaction with other Wikipedia editors. Although this limits students' experience of Wikipedia as an exercise in collaborative content creation, it prioritises student

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[85] Kleefeld and Rattray, (n 3), 609-620.

well-being. For example, previous efforts by a student to add information on gender to the article 'Chef' directly on Wikipedia were deleted. Efforts by other students to edit popular articles relating to Premier League football teams were also deleted. If the primary goal of the class is content creation - as it was for us - then project design should focus on making this as smooth and as successful an experience as possible.

A common problem with student editing is that contributing to existing articles can be difficult and result in a negative experience for students, but creating new articles on topics selected by students can result in the creation of obscure, short articles (called 'stubs' on Wikipedia) with questionable notability by Wikipedia standards. Such articles are also frequently orphan articles (meaning that no other article on Wikipedia links to it). In contrast, there are several advantages to writing articles about Supreme Court cases from any jurisdiction. Sources to satisfy notability are likely available and articles about cases are standalone. Wikipedia editors often recommend that smaller, more obscure topics be merged into a larger article. For example, an article about the feeding behaviour of a bird would probably be merged into the main article for that bird. In contrast, it is unlikely that a Supreme Court decision article will be merged with another article. Finally, it is easy to connect other articles on Wikipedia to Supreme Court cases. The Wikipedia article about a law, or even the constitution of a country, could link to the article of a relevant case decision written by a student; articles about notable people or corporations could link to a case decision naming them. The combination of authoring in a sandbox and writing articles that are discrete and that easily satisfy Wikipedia's notability requirements minimises the chance that a student will encounter other editors, that their work will be immediately edited by other editors, or that the article will be nominated for deletion when published.

With respect to our own student writing process, student cohorts had a mandatory induction session before selecting their cases and beginning their editing. For the undergraduate cohort, students could then edit on their own with the help of the electronic resources that we created for them or attend fortnightly editing sessions in a computer lab. For the postgraduate cohort, further support was embedded within their professional development class in which we ran the induction session, supplemented by a question-and-answer session and an editing session.

Students were able to select cases from a list grouped into seven categories of law: administrative and constitutional law; asylum, immigration and nationality; crime and sentencing; family law; tort; practice and procedure; and banking and finance. This approach gave students the independence to choose what cases they researched and wrote about, and to pick an area of law that particularly appealed to them. The faculty-authored articles served as exemplars and our electronic resources and computer lab sessions provided technical and research support. Conscious of the importance of articles being deemed noteworthy, we also emphasised the importance of secondary sources, the use of internal cross-referencing to other Wikipedia articles, and the creation of strong article leads providing a concise summary that demonstrates why the topic is notable by Wikipedia standards in a way that a typical editor would recognise.

We also required students to include a Wikipedia infobox for each case. An infobox is a table that summarises important information about a topic (so, in our case, the relevant Irish Supreme Court case). Infoboxes improve the appearance of the article, but crucially they also embed metadata that allows search engines to draw on their content. Significantly, the addition of an infobox does not require any special coding skill. They exist on Wikipedia as editable tables that an author can insert into an article.

Publication of the articles

After the students completed their articles, these were reviewed by faculty. The articles were then published from the sandbox to Wikipedia itself (referred to as 'mainspace' or 'namespace' by editors). This is a straightforward process, consisting of moving the sandbox to mainspace, but our familiarity with the procedure following our trial run proved helpful. Once published, we made two small additions to each article. First, we added a short description to each article: 'Irish Supreme Court case'. This short description is important for the visibility of Wikipedia articles on mobile platforms.[86] Second, we added several categories to each article: 'Supreme Court of Ireland cases,' '[*year of case*] in case law', '[*year of case*] in Irish law', and the area of law, for example, immigration, criminal or constitutional. Categories at the bottom of a

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[86] 'Wikipedia: Short Description'
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Short_description> accessed 26 February 2023.

Wikipedia article are important metadata for search engines and for internal Wikipedia linking.

As part of this project, we also created one article – 'List of Irish Supreme Court cases' – that, unlike the other articles, was not about an individual Supreme Court decision. Instead, this article collates links to every Irish Supreme Court case article on Wikipedia (almost all of which our students created). This 'list article' allowed us to provide a consolidated resource for readers interested in Irish law and searching Wikipedia for Irish Supreme Court case articles. List articles of this type are important for search engines, and supplement the use of categories in the case articles themselves. For example, when 'Irish supreme court cases' is entered into Google, the result is a carousel based on the articles in our Wikipedia list article and the articles that have the category 'Irish Supreme Court case'.

The combination of infoboxes, categories, short descriptions, and a list article resulted in high-level visibility for our articles on various search engines and greater accessibility of our articles to the public. Once published, our Wikipedia articles were the first result for almost every case when searched by case name or citation. Most impressively, internet search engines (Google, Bing, Duckduckgo) now pull text and information from our article leads and infoboxes to create so-called 'knowledge panels', which are summary boxes to the right of the search results.
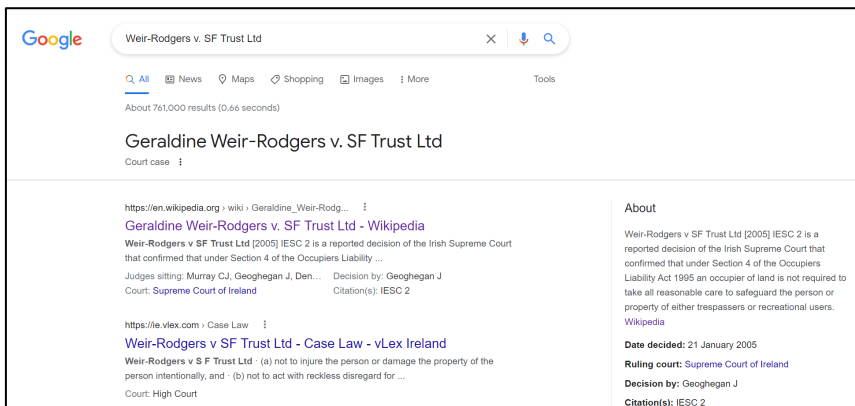
Figure 1: Screenshot of Google search results (21 June 2022) for Weir-Rodgers v. SF Trust Ltd.

Discussion – Evaluating Success

Student Feedback on the Exercise

In anonymous qualitative feedback provided by our students following the Wikipedia article writing exercise, students reflected on their impressions of Wikipedia as a useful research tool before and after undertaking the article writing process. The majority of respondents acknowledged the usefulness of Wikipedia as a platform through which information can be obtained quickly – 'I think it is a useful research tool in gaining quick access to secondary sources'[87] one commented, while another felt that it was 'a good starting point'.[88] Yet despite this, when asked about their impression of Wikipedia's accuracy *before* they participated in the exercise, students noted their scepticism (or at least acknowledged that they had been told to be sceptical) of Wikipedia's accuracy. One student noted that they 'have never trusted the accuracy of information provided via Wikipedia',[89] while another commented that 'I was (and still am) cautious when approaching smaller topics on Wikipedia, as they are very easy to change without anyone noticing. Therefore when I see something obscure that looks dubious on Wikipedia, I often assume it is false or vandalized, just to be safe, and look into it myself elsewhere'.[90] Reflecting the sometimes-tense relationship between Wikipedia and academia, another student noted that 'I was always told that you can use Wikipedia as a guide but to never cite it as it[']s not a peer reviewed website. I was under the assumption that while the knowledge pool in Wikipedia is vast the authenticity of the information is questionable and subject to scrutiny.'[91] Overall, the students displayed a notable level of astuteness with respect to the potential shortcomings of Wikipedia, highlighting the limitations of it as a platform for deep academic research, with one student commenting that they 'think Wikipedia, despite its flaws, has a worse reputation than it deserves as a research tool. While I don't believe it should be cited directly as a source at all, I do appreciate its ability to provide a foothold in an unfamiliar topic or help someone get their bearings in a large one.'[92] 'I think' one noted, that Wikipedia 'is a useful tool for learning about specific things and gaining knowledge of the facts surrounding something. However, because it isn't recognised as a reliable

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[87] Student Feedback No1.
[88] Student Feedback No7.
[89] Student Feedback No1.
[90] Student Feedback No4.
[91] Student Feedback No5.
[92] Student Feedback No4.

source when writing essays for example I don't think it can be considered a useful research tool'.[93]

This feedback reflects what other researchers have found – people express uncertainty about the accuracy of Wikipedia's contents, particularly for academic research, but they still refer to it as an easily accessible source of information.

The process of researching and writing Irish Supreme Court case articles on Wikipedia does, however, appear to have resulted in students having a greater appreciation for the quality of content that can be possible on Wikipedia and the effort that goes into creating much of that content. When asked whether, *after* preparing the articles, the students' view on the relevance of Wikipedia as a tool for learning had changed, one student noted that '[a]s I am now more aware of the integrity and effort which goes into the development of articles on Wikipedia I will not be as quick to disbelieve things I read on it'[94] while another reflected that '[t]he experience has taught me that a lot of research and preparation goes into writing Wikipedia articles and reinforces my initial thoughts that the majority of [articles] are accurate'[95] and a third noted that 'I see now that writing a Wikipedia article involves quite a lot of research and meticulous writing, as well as careful formatting to prevent things like broken links. It reminds me of writing a college essay.'[96] This was an interesting transition – the exercise highlighted for the students that while Wikipedia is an open access encyclopaedia that can be edited by the public, there are a number of safeguards in place to control the content that is added. For these students, therefore, Wikipedia 'is not so much a collection of random facts from around the world. It is a well organised and well reviewed collection of important topics from people who have a want to publish this information'.[97]

Pedagogically, this exercise also had the effect of demonstrating to students that in order to truly understand a case, and to be able to explain the decision reached in that case, it is not enough to skim read it, or to rely on a summary in a book. A number of students specifically commented on how this exercise will make them more likely to read cases as part of their future studies – as one

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[93] Student Feedback No3.
[94] Student Feedback No1.
[95] Student Feedback No3.
[96] Student Feedback No4.
[97] Student Feedback No5.

noted 'I believe I'm more likely to read the cases following this project as it is the only guaranteed way to ensure nothing is missed',[98] while another commented that 'I will be more likely to read the more important cases, as they often contain information that one might gloss over'.[99] Another student went so far as to suggest that going forwards they would be '[m]ore likely to read cases and read the subsequent cases also that… cite the original case'.[100] Students also commented on the benefits to their studies more broadly of summarising cases, and taking 'the points made in a case and summariz[ing] them to the most important points which will help my study'.[101]

Our Review and Feedback

This exercise gave our students a level of agency and a responsibility to get things right that went beyond the expectations of their usual class assignments. They were responsible for selecting the most appropriate information to include in their articles; they were responsible for accurately distilling the most important elements of each case; and they were responsible for ensuring that the information that was set out in each case summary was useful and accessible to a non-specialist audience. While they had ongoing support from faculty members, and case summaries were reviewed by faculty before publication, students were always aware that they were ultimately contributing to a public knowledge base. This sought to place the students in the role of expert and public knowledge contributor and in doing so, 'removes students' work from the ivory tower and puts it squarely in the real (virtual) world'.[102]

Pedagogically, this project had positive benefits, as reflected in student feedback (and the final case report articles). Students' research became deeper, with a focus on supporting statements with accurate and varied sources. Students also became more aware of the importance of reading cases closely in order to understand their outcome and impact and to consider how best to convey that understanding to a wider audience. Based on the feedback that they provided, students who participated in this project appear to have realised that fully engaging with case reports is the most effective way of gaining the necessary level of understanding of key cases in their legal studies. Our

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[98] Student Feedback No3.
[99] Student Feedback No4.
[100] Student Feedback No5.
[101] Student Feedback No5.
[102] Alana Cattapan, '(Re)Writing "Feminism in Canada": Wikipedia in the Feminist Classroom' (2012) 22 *Feminist Teacher* 125, 129.

experience aligns with that of Kleefeld and Rattray, who also asked law students to contribute to Wikipedia as a class project. They argue that editing Wikipedia benefits law students by improving their expository writing and their ability to synthesise information. [103] To this we would add that editing Wikipedia imparts digital skills that otherwise would not be achievable as a learning goal using traditional assessment formats.

By going beyond the standard in-class assignment, students who prepared Wikipedia articles were also empowered to see their work in a public setting and with that, to take greater ownership of it. This was an effective way of bringing students in as knowledge disseminators. Students showed that they are in a strong position to add to the public knowledge base on topics that they study in class – they are familiar with the paywalled academic databases that are not available to the public, they have been encouraged to be discerning in the sources of information that they use, and they have the faculty support to give them the confidence to disseminate their knowledge in a meaningful and public-facing way. By adding to Wikipedia, students can see that these topics have real-world relevance and a tangibility that is often lost in more traditional assignments. Reflecting this, students have already included their participation in the project in their CVs, cover letters and in posts on LinkedIn. Wikipedia administrators, familiar with the nuances of Wikipedia authorship, have also commented on the wider knowledge benefits of this particular assignment noting that 'it seems like it was a net positive to the encyclopedia by getting some articles written about subjects we should be covering'.[104] Indeed one administrator of the encyclopaedia suggested that '[a]mbitious undergrad college professors trying to organize miniature classroom edit-a-thons should take notes from this.'[105]

However, while the exercise of preparing and uploading articles to Wikipedia as part of this project had positive benefits both for students and the wider community, it posed challenges for the faculty involved.

Students need to be incentivised to participate in a project of this nature beyond the longer-term skills development and civic engagement benefits. Without

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[103] John C Kleefeld and Katelyn Rattray, 'Write a Wikipedia Article for Law School Credit—Really?' (2016) 65 Journal of Legal Education 597.
[104] Wikipedia:Administrators' noticeboard/Archive345, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Administrators%27_noticeboard/Archive345#Wikipedia_used_to_test_behaviour_of_Irish_judges> accessed 26 February 2023.
[105] *Ibid.*

some incentive that students saw as directly relevant to their ultimate degree qualification, other priorities took students' time and attention. Even with the Maynooth University Student Experience Award offered to participating undergraduate students, the number of students who submitted final case report articles was relatively small (despite the initial interest being significant). Much more effective in terms of both student engagement and production of finished articles was the integration of the assignment into a credit-bearing class (in our case, the postgraduate professional development class). Going forward, when implementing a similar initiative, we would recommend that educators embed Wikipedia article writing within a class, to allow students to gain research and writing skills and to develop a deeper understanding of topics relevant to that class. This way, students are incentivised to finish their articles, increasing scope for students to gain all the benefits of this type of exercise and for society to gain accurate knowledge.

Students are also likely to need greater supervision, guidance, and reassurance as they write their Wikipedia articles. These articles must fit within the format and stylistic parameters expected by Wikipedia's editors, and the nature of a Wikipedia-based assignment is likely to be unique for students. Students may be daunted by the novelty of the platform and the initial learning curve with respect to navigating Wikipedia's editing process. Clear guidance resources, exemplar articles, and periodic editing sessions can go a long way to addressing student concerns and highlighting the long-term benefits to be gained from this type of exercise.

Finally, it is essential that any educator using Wikipedia article writing in class gains familiarity with the rules, practices, and nuances of uploading and editing on Wikipedia prior to undertaking any such in-class exercise. Pre-semester preparation must be undertaken to minimise the risk of articles being deleted almost immediately upon publication. Once this pre-semester preparation has been undertaken, the educator is then well placed (both in terms of their own skills and from the perspective of the Wikipedia community) to adapt Wikipedia-based assignments in future classes without needing to front-end preparatory work each time.

Conclusion

The accessibility of Wikipedia as a knowledge resource highlights the importance of, and opportunity for, contributions by academics and their

students to a broader public knowledge pool beyond our classes or peer-reviewed journals. The North American bias of WikiEdu's assistance and Wikipedia's content shows the importance of using Wikipedia in the university classroom outside of the U.S. and Canada.[106] As educators, we should embrace the opportunity to expand Wikipedia outwards beyond its existing scope, to add information that is relevant to smaller jurisdictions, to ensure that any relevant information in our field that is available is accurate and accessible. We and our students can improve both the quality and scope of Wikipedia's content in our field. In doing so, we can provide the public with access to accurate information that may not otherwise be available while also giving students valuable research and writing experience.

Prior to the work of our students as part of our Wikipedia writing exercise, there was only the scantest of information about Irish Supreme Court cases on Wikipedia. Our Wikipedia articles have been viewed over a hundred thousand times since publication[107] and our wider research confirms the impact of these articles on judicial decisions in Ireland.[108] By adding articles to Wikipedia we gave a presence to Irish caselaw both on Wikipedia and, as a result of the integration between Wikipedia and search engines, in the global internet knowledge base.

Yet, without prior understanding of Wikipedia, our work most likely would have ended when the first faculty article was nominated for deletion. With that, an entire category of Irish legal knowledge would have had limited public accessibility. Our experience editing Wikipedia offers a guide for educators on how to overcome the obstacles that exist for adding information that is relevant to smaller jurisdictions, or more niche topics. It is clear that familiarity with Wikipedia's complex bureaucracy and policies is the *sine qua non* for educational engagement with the encyclopaedia. The challenges that authors face range from the epistemological – what sources Wikipedia editors recognise as conferring notability – to the procedural. In order for a Wikipedia-based assignment to be successful, educators must understand how authority is

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[106] Caroline Ball, 'Using Wikipedia to explore issues of systemic bias and symbolic annihilation in information sources' in Elizabeth Brookbank and Jess Haigh (eds) *Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice* (Innovative Libraries, 2021) 194.
[107] Massviews, 'Analysis of category Supreme Court of Ireland cases' <https://pageviews.wmcloud.org/massviews/> accessed 26 February 2023.
[108] Thompson and others, (n 33).

constructed on Wikipedia, not only in content, but also as authors and members of the community.