

WIKIPEDIA WRITING AS PRACTICE: COMPUTER-MEDIATED SOCIALIZATION OF SECOND-LANGUAGE WRITERS

Brian W. King, City University of Hong Kong

This study explores the writing of Wikipedia articles as a form of authentic writing for learners of English in Hong Kong. Adopting *Second Language Socialization* and *Language Learning & Identity* approaches to language learning inquiry, it responds to an identified shortage of research on computer-mediated language socialization. Focus is placed on the development of participant identities as valid writers of English texts for a perceived mass public. As part of Wikipedia writing praxis, writers are socialized to varying degrees into the community of Wikipedia. This study focuses on Hong Kong university students' reported experiences as legitimate peripheral participants, looking at the early stages of potential community membership. Ethnographic observations serve to provide a description of both the classroom and the Wikipedia site as dynamic social settings. Data sources include field notes, participant-generated written reflections, and transcripts of focus group interviews. Through these various channels it becomes clear that perception of a potentially vast reading public wields a subtle but important influence. Experiences with the Wikipedia community also play a role, motivating some participants to think deeply about their writing and prompting them to invest in writer identities online and in their local context.

Language(s) Learned in Current Study: English

Keywords: Computer-Assisted Language Learning, Computer-Mediated Communication, Discourse Analysis, Literacy, Social Context, Writing

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INTRODUCTION

There is considerable evidence to support the notion that becoming a writer is a long-term process in which identity construction, proficiency, and craft are inseparable, one in which dispositions of self develop within social relationships inside and outside of formal writing instruction (Compton-Lilly, 2014). This study aims to apply these insights to online writing, using discourse analysis to investigate authentic Wikipedia writing experiences of English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) writers in a Hong Kong university. It queries the ways in which Wikipedia writing can socialize learners of English into identities as competent writers of English by providing a context of language socialization beyond the English classroom. The study takes as its focus a first-year university assignment in which students collaboratively write an original Wikipedia article in groups and publish it on the Wikipedia site. Subsequently they monitor its fate, responding to critiques by readers and reflecting on the whole experience in an individual final essay.

Previous studies of computer-mediated language socialization have argued that learners writing online in so-called “Web 2.0” environments (i.e. the read-write web, such as wikis and social media) have demonstrated an enhanced ability to develop identities as competent writers in English in various written genres or styles (Black, 2005; Lam, 2004). One apparent reason is that Web 2.0 technologies add “real-world” (i.e. non-institutional) relevance to the experience by linking learners with fellow writers and

readers beyond the classroom (Sykes, Oskoz, & Thorne, 2008). By interacting with people who are not reading/writing for class, learners can move beyond the conventional institutional roles and identities that are associated with being a language student in their local context (Lam, 2004; Sykes, Oskoz & Thorne, 2008; Thorne & Black, 2007). Learner writers can successfully integrate a sense of authorship into their English writer identities by positioning themselves as communicators within a Web 2.0 interactive world (Ushioda, 2011). They also position themselves in the local English learning context of Hong Kong where English is learned as a foreign language and used primarily for social, economic, and academic upward mobility (Evans, 2013).

The current study responds to recent calls for further investigation of computer-mediated language socialization (Duff & Talmy, 2011; Duff, 2010b, 2014; Norton & McKinney, 2011; Reinhardt & Zander, 2011), particularly Wikipedia writing (Warschauer, 2010), and on socialization into certain subjectivities, or identities (Garrett, 2007). The study draws from two theoretical outlooks on research—*Second Language Socialization* and *Language Learning and Identity*—treating them as fundamentally compatible methodological positions (Duff, 2014; Norton & McKinney, 2011). The language socialization model provides a perspective in which the practices involved in becoming a writer of a second or third language are inseparable from processes of participation in various social groupings (e.g. communities and publics). During participation, aspects of identity develop that are connected to the use of a second language: these second-language identities are inseparable from social identity (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013). Combining these two approaches is fruitful because it enables the analyst to keep both participation and identity in view during analysis.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Authorship and Audience

Under social-constructionist concepts of authorship, an audience is a group of socialized members of some kind of collective (i.e. an aggregate of people who are in some way aligned) and so writing involves entering groupings of various sorts which are often referred to as communities (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007). In comparison with other types of formal writing such as read-only web articles or print media, Web 2.0 writing occurs on a rather different spatio-temporal scale and largely for a different kind of community or grouping. The power of an often mutually co-present and immediately interactive audience which is essentially unlimited in number (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007) is that it introduces modes of belonging and types of community membership which previously tended to be much more difficult for academic writers to access. This access is particularly relevant for those not working in a first language, as is the case with EFL students in Hong Kong (Flowerdew, 2000). For this reason, I will employ *imagined communities* (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Wenger, 1998), *communities of practice* (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1999; Wenger, 1998) and *publics* (Coulmas, 2013; Warner, 2002) as constructs which are most relevant for the examination of formal writing by learners using Wikipedia's read-write interface due to the capacity of these constructs to include a relatively new type of audience.

Communities of Practice and Imagined Communities

A Wikipedia community of practice (CoP) sits behind the public face of the encyclopedia and is made up of core and peripheral members (Bryant, Forte, & Bruckman, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2009). It has its own "culture of use" (i.e. localized practice) which both enables and constrains writing activity and is likely to impact the learning of English writing (Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009, p. 804). A further observation is that online communication tools make available specific semiotic resources for the construction of social identities (Thorne, Black & Sykes, 2009). It is therefore likely that the Wikipedians, with their shared practices and repertoires, have a specific role to play in computer-mediated socialization by presenting support, conflict, disagreement, and challenge as part of a process of socialization (Mills, 2011).

This Wikipedia CoP is not accessed directly by all Wikipedia writers, yet it still exists as a social

imaginary [i.e. a way in which people envision their relations to others (Taylor, 2004)], and this is another powerful manifestation of that community. The notion of investment in imagined communities posits that learners can have in their minds an image of a ‘community’ of target language speakers. They aim to integrate or communicate with these people in some way even though they and most others in that aggregate of people have never met either face-to-face or online. In spite of this lack of interactional co-presence, the members (often far flung individuals) still imagine that they share something in common with each other based on a certain trait or a collection of traits they hold in common (King, 2014). These communities of the imagination (Wenger, 1998) are thus driven by a specific mode of belonging (i.e. the imagination) that is actually quite powerful: driving learner investments in the target language, shaping learning trajectories, and providing the impetus for long-term language learning efforts (Carroll, Motha, & Price, 2008; Kanno, 2008; Kendrick & Jones, 2008; King, 2008; Norton, 2001, 2013; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). In addition to the community of practice of Wikipedia contributors and the imagined community they might constitute, publics are a third audience distinction that is useful for theorizing the role of a global Wikipedia readership in this process.

Publics

Coulmas (2013) refers to such online readers as an online reading and writing public. Similar to an imagined community, a public is a social imaginary that taps into imagination as a mode of belonging and brings with it similar possibilities for identity work. Warner (2002) has described a public as an indefinite, uncountable audience that is transformed by being addressed through circulated discourse. As Warner (2002) explains, “The idea of a public is motivating, not simply instrumental. It is constitutive of a social imaginary” (p. 12). In other words, in writing on Wikipedia for an imagined group of readers somewhere out in the world, students are not just writing for instrumental goals such as assignment completion; they are writing for motivational reasons such as circulating messages and ideas to readers somewhere. They are writing to communicate to a “mass public” (Warner, 2002, p. 13) who will potentially read their writing and perhaps even respond. This type of online activity has been shown to promote discovery and act as a renewing driver of literate activity (McNely, Teston, Cox, Olorunda, & Dunker, 2010). For this case study, publics are a useful conception of a reading audience because students circulate their writing via the Wikipedia platform with its particular Web 2.0 affordances.

The Web 2.0 Context

Contribution to Wikipedia has an anarchic quality because anyone can contribute, creating an unprecedented discourse context (Herring, 2013). Wikipedia’s vastness is both enabling and potentially limiting for language learning purposes. Anecdotally speaking, Wikipedia writing in general is reported to be highly motivating (Tardy, 2010; Warschauer & Grimes, 2007), and this is primarily because it provides access to a more noticeable and potentially enormous mass public than other wikis (Miller, 2014). On the flipside of this motivational and exciting fact is the possibility that learners will find the idea of publishing their second-language writing on a huge public platform like Wikipedia rather unsettling (Tardy, 2010). For this reason, teachers on the course in focus scaffolded elements of the task in order to socialize the students towards being able to write a Wikipedia article and publish it, scaffolding being particularly important in socialization processes (Duff, 2010a). I elaborate more on this scaffolding process under *Participants and Context*.

Second Language Socialization and Identity

Second language socialization assumes that learners are not only language learners; it asks how they lay the foundation for participation in a particular sphere (Duff, 2010a). Thus, it follows that language socialization research does not just examine learning as linguistic development but also examines other forms of knowledge learned in and through overlapping types of socialization (Duff & Talmy, 2011; Duff, 2011). Keeping all of these entwined forms of socialization in sight during research requires an ecological perspective of learning-in-context. Such a perspective entails analysis of learning through praxis—

learning in everyday activities through observation, participation, and performance as members of communities of practice (Duff & Talmy, 2011). In other words, it entails learning by doing and participating, and is inseparable from ongoing development of community membership and identities.

The adoption of a community of practice approach to the investigation of language learning brings with it the notion that social interaction with more proficient members of a particular community drives learning. This interaction is the primary mediational means for attaining not only communicative competence but also some knowledge of the community's "values, practices, identities, ideologies and stances" (Duff & Talmy, 2011, p. 98). This notion implies investigation of how the learner's diverse experiences and affiliations interact to influence how they are socially positioned by members of the CoP (Lam, 2004). Thus learners are viewed as being actively engaged in language practices as well as demonstrating varying levels of competence (Garrett, 2007). In keeping with these basic assumptions, I am interested in the emergence of writer subjectivity in English, with a focus on learners as writing practitioners rather than as exemplars of competence.

Participants and Context

The participants in this study were first-year university students in an English Medium of Instruction university in Hong Kong. They had enrolled as students in the arts (broadly conceived) but had not yet chosen a major and had opted to study English as one of their first-year subjects. The course serves as an introduction to topics that will be encountered by English majors (e.g. literature, applied linguistics, and professional communication). During the two semesters of data collection for the main study, the course numbers were as follows:

- Semester A: 143 students across five classes and five teachers (35 writing groups)
- Semester B: 180 students across five classes and five teachers (45 writing groups)

In both semesters the ratio of females to males was four to one. The vast majority of the students (309) consented in writing to have their essays and articles included in this study. Wikipedia writing comprised one major assignment amongst three in the course.

The Wikipedia writing assignment was written collaboratively by groups of 4–5 students who first drafted and edited an article together on Google Drive before publishing it on the Wikipedia site. Drafts were reviewed by their teacher before the final stage (for a detailed guide on how to use Google Drive in this way, see King, 2015). The writing process required a small amount of coaching and guidance. Scaffolding was provided in relation to choosing a notable topic and noticing the appropriate genre and tone for an encyclopedia article and some support in how to publish it to the site, all of which took about fifteen percent of class time for the course. Students were encouraged to focus on a Hong Kong topic in order to be able to claim a level of "expert" status as writers. By positioning themselves as experts on Hong Kong, considerable confidence was instilled in them. This status as a local expert provided them with more traction during debates with Wikipedians about the notability of their topics. The students also completed an individual reflective essay after monitoring responses to their articles for two weeks, fielding responses from Wikipedians that varied widely from relative silence (i.e. tacit approval) to requests for editing of the article (i.e. language accuracy, quality of sources, genre appropriateness) and even deletion debates. In the end about a third of their articles ended up being deleted within four weeks; the rate dependent upon how determined the group was to defend their article or improve it.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In the context of Wikipedia writing and its interactive read-writing environment, the research questions that frame this study are:

1. What constructions of English writer identity do the students form in relation to Wikipedia

publics, imagined communities, and communities of practice?

2. What practices do they employ to perform these identities?

In order to explore these questions, an ethnographic approach was adopted, with fieldwork in the classroom and on Wikipedia itself. Discourse analysis was used to investigate the students' practices during assignment writing and interviews. It has become common practice in language socialization research to use interviews that engage participants in meta-linguistic reflection (Duff & Talmy, 2011), and this is done to gain access to learners' emic perspectives (i.e. insider meanings and perspectives). Of course, accessing emic perspectives of participants is a primary aim of any ethnographic approach to research, and the present study does incorporate my ethnographic observations of the participants' experiences in Wikipedia and the classroom. However, a reiterative cycle of new students passes through the program each semester, ruling out a longitudinal case study. Thus, interviews and student reflective essays are relied upon for their emic perspective. Ethnographic observations in this instance serve mostly to provide me, as a teacher in the program, with a way to access my own emic perspective (Copland & Creese, 2015) and gain some analytic distance from a familiar setting in order to facilitate observation. This combination of insider knowledge and ethnographic observation permits a "from-inside-outwards trajectory" (Rampton, 2007, p. 591), taking advantage of my historical insight into the local setting while striking a balance between reliance upon insider knowledge and a healthy suspicion of that same knowledge (Johnstone, 2000). Moreover, it has become common practice in language socialization research to conduct work that occurs on a shorter timescale (i.e. not longitudinal) and relies on interviews and other sources of data, as I propose here (Duff & Talmy, 2011). Caveats to such an approach will be addressed in the data analysis section.

The first time the Wikipedia project was included in the course, a pilot study was conducted that comprised a pilot focus group discussion as well as detailed ethnographic observations and the taking of fieldnotes in the classroom and on the Wikipedia site. In this first cohort of students, there were 245 students in the course, with sixty-two groups across five classes and four teachers. After the groups published their articles, a selection of the articles was monitored in order to observe whether edits were requested and whether the students responded. The observations soon expanded to include the Wikipedia article "talk pages" where discussions and debates about the articles take place, and these pages were captured as screenshots with detailed records. The pilot focus group discussion tested questions which were later adapted to be used in the main study.

Wikipedia Writing

Wikipedia "exposes the very *existence* of a reader" (Forte & Bruckman, 2006, p. 187) through its wiki technologies, permitting anyone with an Internet connection to edit Wikipedia articles. Part of being a legitimate peripheral participant on Wikipedia is gaining awareness that there is actually a community of Wikipedians to join and that many roles besides reader, writer, and editor exist (Forte & Bruckman, 2006). Ethnographic observations during the pilot study revealed some evidence for the existence of core membership roles in the community of practice, most of them focused on gate-keeping and quality control. I closely watched what happened to some students' articles after they had published them, and I was able to observe several deletion debates as part of ethnographic observations, sometimes occurring weeks after the pilot study assignment had finished. The emergence of these debates during ethnographic fieldwork revealed a potential learning experience for students. Following their articles after publishing them and responding to the critiques of Wikipedians appeared to hold great potential for increasing student investment in the writing process. This is because it would provide direct evidence to the students that their writing was being read by someone and thereby guide them to a deeper understanding of what constitutes formal, professional writing. Subsequent to this observation, students in the course were asked to track their article's status and respond to requests for editing of its contents. Provided with some basic scaffolding and then sent to the Wikipedia platform to learn the genre and finally publish their work,

students learned about formal writing through praxis by performing it as legitimate peripheral Wikipedia participants.

Writing for an Imagined Wikipedia Community

Although Hong Kong students are very familiar with Wikipedia and generally arrive to the course already convinced that a mass public is likely to read what is written there, few have yet developed an awareness of the role of other Wikipedians in the imminent writing process. Learners were, for that reason, advised to consider that Wikipedians will scrutinize their contributions in a gate-keeping process, and they were provided with examples of the types of criticism commonly directed at new articles (i.e. inadequate notability of topic, inappropriateness of sources either in quality or density, and inappropriate tone). Thus by reminding the learners about this highly critical and powerful Wikipedian community readership, the seeds of an imagined community were planted for participants. The next section addresses how the second language socialization experiences of these learners were investigated in relation to these various modes of belonging and audience and how these experiences related to their formation of writer identities in English; but first a word on the participants' relationship with the intersecting socio-historical contexts of Hong Kong.

English Learning in the Context of Hong Kong

Hong Kong was a crown colony and subsequently a dependent territory of Britain for about 150 years in total, but has officially been part of China since 1997 under what has been called the "one country, two systems" policy. Cantonese is unquestionably the dominant language in most domains for the majority of the population while English is an official language with great symbolic and instrumental value (Lai, Gao, & Wang, 2015). Hong Kong students are therefore required to study English from age six and to pass English public examinations before they can move on to higher education. A recent study in this linguistic setting has demonstrated that Hong Kong students as young as 11 or 12 can be aware of this socioeconomic reality that privileges English. It is therefore woven into their personal identities as speakers of English because second-language identity is tied closely to attendance at English medium of instruction schools (Besser & Chik, 2014). Those without privileged access tell narratives of English learning that are chiefly concerned with proficiency levels, grades, and test scores (Besser & Chik, 2014). It will soon become clear that this Hong-Kong-based ideological position was indirectly referenced by some of the participants in my study as they contrasted their past English writing experiences with their Wikipedia writing experiences, emphasizing a disconnect during secondary school between English and its communicative purposes.

Data

An investigation of second language socialization in this case means asking how learners simultaneously lay foundations as communicative writers, knowledge producers, and as Wikipedians (potential and/or peripheral). It is therefore necessary to identify by what means writer identity socialization progresses on Wikipedia, and in what ways it overlaps with other types of socialization. In a similar fashion to many other second language socialization studies, data has been drawn from a variety of sources (Duff, 2011); in this case from student reflective essays (309 essays were initially coded), focus group interviews (four groups with four students in each focus group), ethnographic field notes, and Wikipedia talk pages (one for each of the 77 articles collected).

In the reflective essays, participants wrote about their Wikipedia writing experiences and those reflections contributed to their socialization into writer identities in English. The focus group interviews also served as a place of dynamic reflection and co-construction and provided a further venue for identity negotiation and performance (although most students did not volunteer to take part in these optional interviews). These two methods also align with a trend in identity and language learning towards acceptance and valuing of participants' own perspectives and portrayals as both important and relevant (Besser & Chik,

2014). The assortment of data sources aims at triangulation and allows for a focus on tensions between the various forms of data collected. Again following best practice in language socialization research, the methods aim to bring to light contradictions and critical incidents or interactions reported by participants or observed by the researcher (Duff, 2014, p. 419) and examine how these interact with learners' identities and practices.

ANALYTICAL METHODS

In the coming analysis I treat interviews as accounts which are performed collaboratively, thus requiring analysts to attend to the interview as a social interaction (Mann, 2011; Richards, 2009; Talmy, 2011). This treatment entails paying particular attention during discourse analysis to how interview talk is occasioned and co-constructed. Data from student reflective essays is also interpreted while keeping in mind that they were writing for credit, and writing for their teacher. After some deliberation I have decided to divide the sections of analysis based not on the type of data source (i.e. deletion debates vs. reflective essays vs. focus group interviews) but rather on what I perceive to be the main force that sits behind the writer identity performances found in those data sources (i.e. imagined community vs. community of practice vs. reading public). Thus, in each section various types of data are drawn upon because their analysis helps to illustrate the development of identities.

In analyzing the students' essays and the focus group transcripts, the first step taken was to use a two-pronged approach. Certain categories identified during ethnographic observation provided a starting point for coding while other categories emerged in a bottom-up fashion during the coding process. As outlined above, the students were obliged to collaboratively write the article, publish it on Wikipedia, and respond to the critiques of Wikipedians (if any). These processes provided broad categories with which to commence coding the reflective essays using NVivo, and a fourth category soon emerged—learners' observations about their affective responses during the Wikipedia writing assignment. Two researchers coded separately in order to maximize inter-coder reliability, with agreement in ninety-five percent of cases. While coding for these four broad categories, it emerged that the learners were writing about these topics in relation to the various perceived reading audiences introduced above: imagined Wikipedians, encountered Wikipedians, and a mass Wikipedia readership. The coding was then split into these more finely tuned categories, which were ultimately labeled *imagined community*, *community of practice*, and *public*. The same coding process was then applied to the focus group transcripts. Data was chosen for inclusion in this paper based on its representativeness of broader patterns in the entire corpus of data.

ANALYSIS

The first interaction has been taken from a focus group discussion recorded in May, 2014. The participants included myself as interviewer and four students appearing here under pseudonyms; Kit (female) and Keung, Ching, and Ting (male). Prior to this excerpt we had been discussing a blogging assignment from a different course. In [Excerpt One](#) the focus group (myself included) begins to co-construct an imagined Wikipedia community and various writer identities. Please refer to the [Appendix](#) for transcription conventions.

Excerpt 1. Focus Group B: Writing for an imagined community is different

- 310 Keung** the assignment requires us to do this
- 311 Brian** yeah so you're doing that, but then (.) how about the actual writing
y'know when you were WRITing it (1.0) do you think you were as CAREful↑
as with the wikipedia article↑ or do you think it's similar↑ or different //or//
- 312 Keung** //uhh// when i write wrote the wikipedia articles
i I↯ (.) had the MINDset that someone would CHECK the wordings

- either the members or robots or something like that
 but when i wrote my blog i didn't have this mindset
- 313 Brian** so what did that (1.0) what was the DIFFerence then
 so if you have the mindset what does it create
 what does it cause you to do
- 314 Keung** i i w- (.) i will be more careful when i write (.) uhhh the wikipedia page
 i need to CHOOSE the best words to write
- 315 Brian** //ok//
- 316 Keung** //but// in writing::: my blog- i just
 O:::H i don't CARE about i:::t yeah (hehe)
- 317 Brian** so that (.) i see you're nodding Kit
 so do you think that is a COMMON thing↑
 or do you agree that you would feel that way↑ or {looking at Kit}
- 318 Kit** well i think um sometimes we have to put up our assignments on to the blogs
 but it's not really writing for the::: uh (.) readers
- 319 Brian** //mhm//
- 320 Kit** //it's// just posted and people can read it
 but people actually don't↑
 so (.) i think it's really um (.) DIFFerent
 if i really want people to read it then i will write for the AUDience
- 321 Brian** //mhm//↑
- 322 Kit** //but// some (.) mmMOST of the time we write for the teacher
 (1.0) and then we POST it on the blog
 and we don't really care about what people will think
 and whether they look at it (.) as long we (.) as our essays are marked

In [line 311](#), I ask Keung to focus on the actual process of writing, asking if he was as careful in his blogwriting as with Wikipedia. Here I refer back to a previous discussion in which the participants positioned Wikipedia writing above blog writing by claiming that Wikipedia writing prompted them to look beyond the assignment rubric for a standard (unlike blogging). However, the comparative construction deployed by me (i.e. “*as careful as*”) has the effect of suggesting that Wikipedia writing might engender more care and attention. Keung then orients to this idea in [line 312](#) and uses the word *mindset* to refer to the presence in his mind of an imagined community of Wikipedia members and of “*robots*” (i.e. automatic text checking software). He asserts that for this imagined community he chooses his words much more carefully, and in [line 316](#) his tone changes to be more dismissive about his blog writing, saying “*O:::H i don't CARE about i:::t.*” This passage results in a sense that the imagined community of Wikipedia prompts him to think more deeply about his writing; therefore, he performs a writer subject position that sits outside of a student subjectivity. Kit then nods and is invited to contribute. In [line 320](#) she says that she will “*write for the audience*” if she feels convinced that people other than the teacher will read it, and in [line 322](#) she states that students “*don't really care*” about other classroom writing. In this sense she is referring to a process of socialization in which she feels more invested in writing for the Wikipedia imagined community and its readers. I would therefore suggest that in this

conversation Keung and Kit co-construct blog writing as an exercise, but Wikipedia writing is constructed as an act of identity.

Numerous learners in their reflective essays also alluded to the Wikipedia community members and the importance of gaining their approval, whether tacit or explicit. Although some groups did not end up interacting directly with Wikipedians, the imagined community members still played an important role as “mentors of socialization” (Duff, 2011, p. 566) in terms of the learners’ writer identities. Lau is one student who revealed in her essay that her group members did not end up interacting directly with any Wikipedians. In [Excerpt 2](#) she reflects on her affective response.

Excerpt 2. Individual Reflective Essay: Lau on satisfaction

- 1 Apart from my attitude towards Wikipedia, this assignment has also influenced my view towards
- 2 writing. I used to say that I hated writing, as it is really an annoying task to me. Nonetheless, after
- 3 writing the Wikipedia article, I realized that writing could be fascinating. During the process of
- 4 writing, I rewrote the sentences several times. But every time I rewrote them, they got better and
- 5 better. And after publishing the article, I felt a great satisfaction that I have never felt before.
- 6 Although we have not earned any honours with our article, to me, not being deleted is already a
- 7 great reward for us. I am really impressed by the experience. In the future, I will put more efforts
- 8 on writing and learn from every experience to make the advancement.


This passage emerged as part of an assignment that Lau wrote for her teacher. However, identity construction is also taking place while she is attempting to address the transactional task of writing an essay. She indicates in [lines 1–2](#) that writing on Wikipedia has “*influenced [her] view*” on writing, suggesting subsequently that her fascination with the process had prompted her to “[*rewrite*] *the sentences several times*” ([line 4](#)). Implicit in these statements is a sense that extra care and attention was given to the writing, and so the imagined community of Wikipedians has in this way contributed to Lau’s socialization into an identity as a writer of English—one in which she is invested in the details of the writing process. She then suggests in [lines 5 and 6](#) that the process has been uniquely satisfying, and the source of this satisfaction lies in “*not being deleted*” ([line 6](#)). Thus, the imagined Wikipedia community has placed its tacit stamp of approval on the article. There is a sense here of an ideal English-writing future self (Dörnyei, 2009) that has been sparked by a socialization experience outside of the formal instructional environment.

Engaging in the Community of Practice

Wikipedia articles are beginnings rather than ends, for they will subsequently be edited by others in the Wikipedia community. As seen in the previous section, learners invest in an imagined community of Wikipedians. However, once they have published their articles, they become legitimate peripheral participants in a community of practice. Students participate in that community of practice as writers, and as part of their socialization into that community a learner can begin to socialize into an identity as a competent writer of English. The Wikipedia community of practice plays a clear role in this process by providing a repertoire of observable community practices and affective stances through which identities can materialize and take shape via language socialization (Garrett, 2007). The following analysis follows a learner in her direct interaction with Wikipedians in order to gain a sense of how this experience contributes to writer identity socialization and how this identity development can link back to a learner’s local identity in the context of Hong Kong.

On the talk page in [Figure 1](#), Lok is arguing against the speedy deletion of her group’s article. I have obscured the article’s topic and the aliases of both Lok and the other community member for ethical

reasons. The topic's notability had been questioned by the Wikipedia community. By responding on the talk page, Lok enters into a direct interaction with the community members.

 **Wikipedia talk:Articles for deletion/** [redacted] From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

< [Wikipedia talk:Articles for deletion](#)

I see that some people think this article should be deleted because this term [redacted] seems to be a made-up term. That is not the reality. The truth is this term is already very popular. Here is one evidence of [redacted] (in Chinese: [redacted]) being widely used: [A Cartoon of \[redacted\] on Internet](#). You can see there are a lot of discussion and "likes". The aim of creating this wikipedia article is NOT to make this term popular.

Adding to that, the page [Princess sickness](#) is also a term describing a cultural phenomenon in Hong Kong, its nature is similar to this page [redacted]. If you remove this page, then you may consider removing their page as well. However, you may want to know that [redacted] is now a more popular term than "Princess sickness" in Hong Kong. [redacted] is a more dominant culture.

Please re-consider before deleting. [redacted] ([talk](#)) 15:20, 19 November 2013 (UTC)

[redacted], I don't believe it is a made up term. I found this^[1] source in English which indicated to me that this page is not a hoax. However, it is not enough to have examples where the term is used. Please read the section that the article is nominated for deletion under (WP:NEO).

The most relevant sentence is: "To support an article about a particular term or concept we must cite what reliable secondary sources, such as books and papers, say *about* the term or concept, not books and papers that *use* the term." I wasn't able to find any pages in English that fit this criteria. Maybe you can find some in Chinese and add them to the article? [redacted] ([talk](#)) 02:28, 20 November 2013 (UTC)

Figure 1. Student article deletion debate.

In paragraphs 1–3 she puts forward some evidence for the topic's notability and asserts firmly that it represents a cultural phenomenon in Hong Kong and so should be permitted to stand. In this way she takes on a subject position as an expert on Hong Kong society. The Wikipedia member is then at pains to explain that s/he believes Lok, but there are specific criteria that need to be satisfied if the article is to remain. In her essay, Lok reflects in some detail on this experience ([Excerpt 3 below](#)).

Excerpt 3. Individual Reflective Essay: Lok on community participation

- 1 It is like changing the role as I was usually the one looking up information on Wikipedia. Now I
- 2 am one of the contributors to this worldwide community. It gave me a sense of achievement.
- 3 These positive feelings motivated me in writing. In the past, nearly all of the articles I wrote were
- 4 read by teachers and peers only. The Wikipedia Project that I just worked on gave me totally
- 5 different feelings. I found that writing could be very meaningful.

In [lines 1 and 2](#), Lok refers to a changing of roles from a Wikipedia reader to a Wikipedia contributor, identifying this reversal as a motivating factor for writing. The phrase “*contributor to this worldwide community*” in [line 2](#) reveals that her experience interacting with real Wikipedians has indeed contributed to her computer-mediated socialization into a sense of writer identity well beyond educational institutions. It is an identity that is likely to continue developing. Writing as a member of the Wikipedia community of

practice is deemed to be more “*meaningful*” than writing for “*teacher and peers only*” (lines 3 and 4). This passage constitutes an exploration of affect in which there is a realization that these classroom experiences have been preparing her for the more authentic experience of communicating with people in English outside of educational institutions. Lok’s essay reflections constitute a performance of English writer identity, one that certainly provides evidence that she might have shifted to a deeper investment in writing in English. But importantly, in terms of language socialization pedagogy, this is also a performance which serves as a further catalyst for that investment. In other words, the essay task and the identity socialization process it highlights cannot be easily separated.

Lok’s net positive experience notwithstanding, it is important to acknowledge that not all students in the course felt so positively about interacting with the Wikipedia core members, as Asmita’s experience demonstrates quite clearly (Excerpt 4 below).

Excerpt 4. Individual Reflective Essay: Asmita on community of practice marginalization

- 1 Fortunately, we managed to keep the article up for 2 weeks which gave us hope that it would not
- 2 have a dead end. However, it has been deleted recently which has put us on edge. We have tried to
- 3 contact the related members but so far have not received any replies. Such a response discourages
- 4 me from publishing further on Wikipedia. We are still trying to negotiate with the community and
- 5 hope to end up with positive result. Although I don’t see myself continuing the practice of
- 6 posting on Wikipedia I would, definitely, publish on other reliable and flexible platforms. After
- 7 the practice, I have become more confident about publishing online. I will continue the practice.

Asmita says in lines 6-7 that she has “*become more confident about publishing online*” and “*will continue the practice*” in spite of being disillusioned with Wikipedia after feeling ignored by those who were criticizing her group’s article. In any community of practice, there is a possibility of marginalization which can lead to non-participation in the community and a lack of investment in its practices (Norton, 2001). However, in Asmita’s case she projects a future writing self, suggesting that the experience has socialized her into a writer identity in English, though perhaps not one that incorporates the Wikipedia community of practice.

Writing to Communicate with a Public

In the following focus group and reflective essay data, learners explore the idea of writing to communicate, and in so doing continue to construct writer identities as Hong Kongers who address a mass public in English. In Excerpt 5, the speakers are the same as in Excerpt 1 but approximately ten minutes has passed in the focus group discussion. In line 365 I focus attention directly on the Wikipedia writing assignment itself, asking what the group members think they might have learned from the experience. With a lengthy pause before and after the word “REALLY”, spoken with emphatic volume and intonation, I am attempting as interview facilitator to stress that I am interested in hearing the truth from their perspective.

Excerpt 5. Focus Group B: Writing to communicate with a public

- 365 Brian** so WHAT do you think (3.0) REALLY Ω
(1.0) what do you think you learned about writing from this experience
if anything
- 366 Kit** maybe we learn about the importance↑ of writing↑ and because (1.0) uh
the main difference between wikipedia writing

- and other writing that we normally do as assignments is that
 wikipedia writing is for the public
 and and::: when it's for the public↑ and they read it for information
 we have to be careful
 so we hav- (.) we will learn about the importance of writing objectively
 and how it affects other people's mindset and perceptions
- 367 Brian** so that sounds to me ∩ ∪ (.) like you feel a responsibility
- 368 Kit** (nodding) YES (.) DEFINITELY
- 369 Brian** (laughs) yeah
 do you agree with that↑ (sweeping hand gesture towards group)
- 370 Ching** (4.0) i want to say (.) i think in the perspective of language
 um::: (.) well this assignment allows us to bring our (.) how do you say
 uh we have learnt English
 in Hong Kong i mean
 for (.) (rapid speech) from primary school or kindergarten↑
- 371 Keung** kindergarten (.) //we start from kindergarten//
- 372 Ching** //kindergarten three years↑// and then (.) nine and then six or seven
 (1.0) around ten to fifteen years↑ of English then
 every time we use English
 most of the time it is on (.) on academic stuff in class
 but after the class w- after SCHOOL we do not speak English actually
 we speak in Cantonese or Mandarin
- 373 Brian** //mhm//
- 374 Ching** //and then// that made us have a very
 (.) i mean stra:::nge feeling about English is only for work or for schooling
 but this assignment allows us to just like
 (.) how to use English as a communicative i mean (.) a TOOL
 it gave the original (.) i mean PURpose of English to students
 it's to communicate
- 375 Brian** so- //yeah//
- 376 Ching** //RATHER// than just writing an academic paper then
 you will NEVER read it again
- 377 Brian** mm=
- 378 Ching** =and you would find it really BORing
 and then challenging on writing a proper academic paper
 and for this assignment it's totally different
- 379 Brian** because of the outside audience↑
- 380 Ching** yes

- 381 **Brian** you are communicating=
 382 **Ching** =YES=
 383 **Brian** =to somebody outside of the //classroom//
 384 **Ching** //yes// yes

In response to my initial question, Kit in [line 366](#) speaks of writing for a *public* as a highly distinctive academic writing experience. She says that writing for a public means that writers “*have to be careful*” and “*write objectively*” and so implies that she has thought more deeply about writing than is habitual. Thinking about “*how [their writing] affects other people*” means that the learners must develop identities as writers, more than students, in order to address this sense of “*responsibility*” (my word, [line 367](#)) that they feel. Thus, during these focus group reflections, Kit is performing an identity as a writer who makes a contribution to knowledge in English—an identity that reaches beyond her identity as a student in a Hong Kong university.

When asked whether or not he agrees with this assessment, Ching then speaks up for an extended turn in [line 370](#), emphasizing that the purpose of Wikipedia writing is to communicate – a crucial distinction from his past English learning experiences in the Hong Kong context. He paints that context as one in which the domain of English use was almost exclusively the classroom (“*i mean str::nge feeling about English is only for work or for schooling*”) and involved just writing “academic papers” which is a “boring” process. He implies in this contribution that writing for a public larger than an educational institution is more authentically communicative than writing an academic paper to be read only by a school-based readership. In this sense he builds on Kit’s previous point that writing for a Wikipedia mass public is a contribution. Communication is its “original purpose”. In co-constructing the Wikipedia writing subject, the members of this focus group construct it as a writer’s identity first while placing student identities in the background.

In the student reflective essays there were also many examples of students framing Wikipedia writing as a contribution to knowledge and to the wider world, and in so reflecting, they constructed themselves as valid writers of English. In [Excerpt 6](#), Yan also links this experience back to Hong Kong’s local context.

Excerpt 6. Individual Reflective Essay: Yan on linking the global and local

- 1 I can imagine the people from different parts of the world reading our article to know more about
- 2 [TOPIC], I am glad that I have contributed to Hong Kong by letting more people understand us. I
- 3 think I will write more articles about Hong Kong later on Wikipedia. Being a Hong Konger, I
- 4 have the responsibility and honour to express for people who are concerned about what is
- 5 happening in Hong Kong, and what makes it a place that we love to live in. Now, it makes me feel
- 6 I am one of the “professional” publishers of Wikipedia.

In [line 1](#), Yan writes “*I can imagine the people from different parts of the world reading our article*” and so makes direct reference to a Wikipedia mass public that exists in her social imaginary. In the next lines, she frames writing for this mass public as a contribution to Hong Kong as much as being a contribution to world knowledge. Her future imagined self is a writer of English who represents Hong Kong beyond its borders. Thus, writing for Wikipedia and reflecting on the process has contributed to Yan’s ongoing socialization into a valid English writing identity. This sense of honour and responsibility for Hong Kong points to further research that is waiting to be done—research on the effects on second-language writer identities of writing for an international public.

DISCUSSION

Because the students are writing for communities and publics that extend far beyond educational institutions, they find themselves writing not as students but instead as writers, pitching their work to an audience of reader-writers “out there” who are reading their work. Importantly, these extra-institutional readers are reading it neither for purposes of grading nor to comment for course credit, but rather to receive its messages and to respond. In practical terms this means that the learners invest in various readerships, whether imagined or immediate, thereby making use of knowledge and language skills to “take on powerful identities as effective communicators” (Thorne, Black & Sykes, 2009, p. 807). The authenticity of the experience seems to have prompted the learners’ socialization as writers of English more than any highly scaffolded activity ever could. Thus, Wikipedia’s perceived authenticity, writing to communicate with a public and a community, is a crucial factor missing from most other wiki writing experiences. The concept of publics is useful in this study because Wikipedia’s so-called “audience” of readers is just such an aggregate of imaginary others. Positioned beyond the imagined community of Wikipedia contributors and outside of the Wikipedia community of practice, the Wikipedia public seems to have a strongly motivating effect on these learners, prompting them in many cases to invest in aspirational selves as writers of English instead of just taking a superficial approach to writing.

Web 2.0 technologies present writing as a means to generate ideas rather than as a means to deliver them (Purdy, 2010, p. 57), and this notion is evident in the student reflections. These learners construct identities for their future selves through which they use English writing to communicate and make a contribution to knowledge. It has been argued that a “reconceptualization of authorship” is taking place through the medium of Web 2.0 technologies (Sykes, Oskoz & Thorne, 2008, p. 531) and that the read/write web provides an unprecedented sense of “authorial purpose” (p. 532). These technologies allow learners to move from being knowledge consumers to also being producers and contributors to knowledge (Bloch, 2007; Purdy, 2010; Sykes Oskoz & Thorne, 2008) and furthermore advance language development (Potts, 2005). Data from the current study demonstrate that there is a great deal of validity to these assertions, for these affordances are salient to the participants in relation to Wikipedia.

CONCLUSION

Wikipedia is a public space for collaborative writing where users can create knowledge rather than just consume it, and this experience helps students to see their role in larger scholarly conversations; that is, “[t]heir voices matter” (Purdy, 2010, p. 56). Wikipedia writing is what Warschauer (2005) has called a “strong purpose activity” (p. 45), and this strong sense of purpose arises from the distinctive affordances of Wikipedia’s modes of belonging. It is a sense of belonging to both a community of the imagination and potentially a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) as well as a sense that one is writing for a worldwide mass public. By focusing on modes of belonging, it has been possible to demonstrate the particular social relevance of Wikipedia-writing for the participants and how this computer-mediated socialization experience can “ignite the vision” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 33) of an ideal English writing self in the future. Wikipedia offers a computer-mediated way for writers to “explore and construct their relation to the language” (Lam, 2004, p. 60) and hopefully transfer this sense-making back to the local Hong Kong context via a newfound identity as someone who can legitimately write and communicate in English.

APPENDIX. Transcription Conventions

//	Slashes indicate overlapping speech.
word-	A hyphen indicates abruptly cut-off speech.
(1.0)	Numbers in parentheses indicate elapsed time of silence in seconds.
(.)	A dot in parentheses indicates a short silence/gap, less than 1 second.
::	Colons indicate prolongation of the immediately prior sound. The length of the row of colons indicates the length of the prolongation.

WORD	Capitals indicate especially emphasized sounds compared to surrounding talk (normally capitalized words are not capitalized in order to fit this convention, including “I”).
()	Single parentheses contain prosodic contributions - e.g. (laughter).
{ }	Curly parentheses contain author’s descriptions rather than transcriptions.
↑	A straight up arrow indicates rising intonation in the preceding syllable.
↷	An upward moving arrow indicates falling and then rising intonation in the preceding syllable.
↶	A downward moving arrow indicates rising and then falling intonation in the preceding syllable.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian King’s primary research interests are in language use in communities, computer-mediated discourse, and language learning and identity. He has published articles in international journals such as *Language in Society*, *Journal of Language Identity and Education*, *Sexualities*, *Gender and Language*, and *Journal of Language and Sexuality*.

E-mail: bwking@cityu.edu.hk

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