

Assignment:
Public Intellectual Contribution (*Ancillary/Rejoinder*)

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Course: MGT 360

Title: Management and Organizational Behavior (3 units)

“The early taxonomy began with knowledge, understanding, and application as lower level skills and cast higher level skills as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.”

---Benjamin Bloom (1913-1999)

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to articulate the instructor’s view on the potential value of this assignment. The details of the assignment as provided to the students are located under separate cover. To the extent that this document addresses questions from students, this document is a useful ancillary. To the extent that this document addresses questions from faculty and other stakeholders, this document is an anticipatory rejoinder.

Potential Questions / Potential Responses

| # | Potential Question or Issue | Potential Response or Explanation |
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| 1. | Why public writing? | Students already write in a private context on numerous occasions. I would argue it’s a little “too private.” An audience of one is interesting, but not compelling. There are several value propositions inherent in public writing, including applying the principles of information competency, emphasizing due diligence, focusing on composition, prose, and rhetoric, obtaining deliberative, immediate, and collaborative feedback, and perhaps most important, promoting visceral engagement. As with a great number of liberal pursuits, the process of crafting a public, written artifact may be simply enjoyable and rewarding; nothing more, nothing less. From a learning perspective, I suppose the pivotal question is “Does this activity contribute to one or more of the student learning objectives?” (a question that is, arguably, directed to and evaluated by multiple stakeholders.) |
| 2. | Is it really a contribution? | To the extent that a student provides an addition (that is, “fills in a gap” in the explicit knowledge base contained on a public web page), the answer is a conditioned yes. I |

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| | | suppose some might argue that <i>impact</i> is the best, or only, true measure of a contribution. The measurement and management of future access and impact is an important, albeit difficult, question. To wit, do the possible weaknesses regarding the definition of a “contribution” outweigh the possible strengths of the other aspects of this specific learning activity? |
| 3. | Is it really intellectual? | This might depend on who you ask—Richard Dawkins might have one response, Howard Gardner another. Recall that a publisher thought enough of the content to publish the book and the library thought enough of the book to procure it and place it on the open stacks for circulation. Recall also that instructor purposely restricted the starting and ending call numbers on the library open stack in order to align book themes with course themes. For a matriculating, undergraduate student enrolled in a survey course at a large, urban University focused on liberal education, an idea sourced or paraphrased from a Library book surely is a sufficient source (however incomplete) of intellectual acumen. In cases where it isn’t, might that be less indicative of the student’s learning ability, <i>per se</i> , and more indicative of potential gaps in either a librarian’s stewardship of the collection or the faculty member’s pedagogical approach? |
| 4. | Are the students “good enough” to attempt, much less complete, this activity? | Perspectives such as these are naïve at best and ostensibly condescending at worst. Clearly, faculty don’t generally tell students “you aren’t good enough to make a contribution.” What we do do, however, is not say anything at all. Or put differently, we imply (or the student’s infer, it really doesn’t matter which) that a student cannot make a brief, targeted contribution on a subject on which the student has engaged in focus study. At worse, this activity is a “stretch goal” for a student; that is, this activity is exactly the type of goal that student professionals need to identify for themselves in the short-run and for others, as managers and executives, in the long-run. |
| 5. | My observation is that students don’t write well enough to make a “public intellectual contribution.” | This class-section of MGT 360 has rigorous enactment and enforcement of business writing standards. This includes serious reductions in writing scores for errors in composition or logic. Students receive individualized, quality feedback early and often. The “public intellectual contribution” is made at the end of full semester-long course after which the communications standards and protocols have been both articulated and implemented, and students |

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| | | have had ample time to acquire feedback that has led to tangible, visible continuous improvement. Surely, the vetting of a student's writing ability by a qualified professor in a required, core course at a University accredited by WASC and a College accredited by AACSB meets the minimum requirements for public writing. Again, if the writing is not minimally adequate, then the curriculum or concomitant pedagogy, including in upstream courses, are more likely the culprits than the relative capacities of the students. |
| 6. | What happens if the "contribution" is deleted (maybe even with the same day)? | From a practical perspective, I tell the students to print out their contribution immediately. So the students don't lose any points; the students have completed the assignment as designed. There are many subsequent actions students can take. One, students can find a different web page, make the same or slightly different contribution, and check back later to see if the web page persists (this idea was suggested by a student). Two, students can make an alternate contribution—a 150-200 word book review posted on the appropriate Amazon.com web page (this idea was suggested by a faculty colleague in my Dept.) |
| 7. | Is this assignment just another activity that provides a social (and not economic) good? | Strict altruism is more likely aligned with University-level goals than with College-level goals, although curricular alignment through assignments such as this seems prudent. Also, these MGT 360 students have studied topics such as business ethics, corporate social responsibility, and sustainability. Motivated and talented students are indeed free to make their own judgments on such matters, including the role and value of their individual contribution. |
| 8. | Well then, how is the assignment aligned with "management?" | For one, this subject is a controversial one. And this means this subject is, therefore, a concern of management. Some might even argue that the history of management is the history of conflict management. Surely active avoidance of controversy and conflict is not management in general and not organizational behavior specifically. For another, the students will soon have a Bachelor's degree, a degree held by approximately 30% of the individuals their age or higher in the country. The students want to contribute knowledge, because more likely than not, the students will be supervising some fraction of the 70% (100% - 30%) of the population that doesn't have a Bachelor's degree. In fact, it could be that a Wikipedia entry (or other "public intellectual contribution) is what the non-degreed individuals use to |

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| | | evaluate knowledge and learn. The students also want to contribute knowledge in order to demonstrate their own learning capacity in tangible, visible fashion; in other words, they are “marketing themselves” in a way that makes their worth more attractive to managers and executives in that the students can handle cognitive and technical tasks. |
| 9. | Is this a required assignment? | Currently, no. Students volunteer to make a contribution. A small amount of points are provided to students who successfully complete the assignment. The reality is that the intrinsic motivation required to complete the assignment ameliorates a range of potential logistics and follow-up questions, such as “How do I use the HTML codes in WikiPedia?” Suitably modified (in ways I don’t know yet), I have little doubt this activity can be a required assignment. |
| 10. | If this assignment is different and new, won’t the students’ context be difficult to gauge? | Contemporary students thrive in a participatory culture [5]. The students’ context is already collaborative in nature; in fact, it may be that technologies such as Facebook and text messaging are indistinguishable from their psyche). In general, the students have a deep understanding of social networking, a working skillset in technological basics, and a passion for societal engagements. All this assignment does is to align those inherent abilities to a normative, traditional learning objective. Note that the public intellectual contribution is a <i>complement</i> to a traditional book report, not a <i>substitute</i> . Or put differently, the students concentrate not on the social technology (which they already know, for the most part), but rather on the research-based ideas of evaluating material, finding “just the right spot” to make a small contribution, and avoiding inadvertent biases in writing (which they don’t already know, for the most part). |
| 11. | Won’t the students make mistakes, not the least of which is not knowing what “counts” as “intellectual?” | Yes, students of all kinds (including, or especially, faculty!) make mistakes. It is not clear to me that this is enough of a reason to not attempt the activity. On a relative basis, the larger “mistake” might be to not scaffold, empower, and trust motivated learners to make an intellectual contribution. Note the use of the term “motivated learners.” A disciplined student of management understands not just how learning occurs in a static and contrived classroom, but also how learning occurs in a dynamic and organic organization. In fact, I <i>expect</i> my students to be highly cognizant of such learning (or lack of learning) in organizations, and I <i>expect</i> them to take a leadership role, at some point in their career, to craft a “learning organization.” |

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| 12. | Even if the student hasn't made a mistake, might the reference be incorrect or incomplete? | Yes, it might. But the existing set of Wikipedia editors will most likely address the issue, potentially with a merciless deletion. Finally, it strikes me that one or more ideas in the "A" peer-reviewed journals might be incorrect or incomplete; perhaps not now, but at some point in the future. Keep in the mind the key objective is student learning; not perfection in the public world (or acquiescence to the perils and politics of Wikipedia authoring norms). |
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| 13. | How do we know that the contribution is authentic? | If by "authentic" one means originates with the student, then this authenticity is verified by a print-based deliverable that the student author submits upon successful completion of the assignment. If by "authentic" one means sourced or cited correctly, there is a requirement in the assignment to add both a citation for the content and a reference for the content to the page. This requirement also supports the merit of the contribution and helps the content persist in the face of adversarial others. |
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| 14. | Professor Smith, if you explicitly encourage students to <i>contribute</i> to Wikipedia, then aren't implicitly encouraging students to <i>cite and reference</i> Wikipedia in subsequent courses? | Again, I am unsure that the downside risk of future action by a student is a suitable reason to ignore the upside benefits of taking ownership over a small piece of public intellectual content. This assignment is not about <i>referencing</i> Wikipedia; it's about <i>contributing</i> to it (and I make that clear to the student). This assignment is also not about submitting original research; it's about learning how to evaluate sources and make an incremental contribution. It seems to me that students who have contributed to Wikipedia as part of a formal process are in a better position to judge the value of a Wikipedia entry in a future context. A student of management has presumably learned how to "How to manage their boss." This includes the twin pillars of supporting requirements and initiatives from superiors and challenging authority where necessary to avoid "groupthink." If anything, learning to do this well in an academic context prepares the student well for a professional, managerial, or executive context. |
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| 15. | If this activity is successful, won't the potential for future students to contribute shrink? | It is true that the number of books in the "organizational behavior" section of the library is relatively fixed. But it is also true that different students will "experience" the same book differently. To the extent that the experience of a book leads to creative and learner-centered expression, it seems hard for me to believe that Wikipedia will "run out of places" for a student to contribute. Further, as Wikipedia |

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| | | improves, so too do the students who need to now find a unique and distinctive web page to make their contribution. |
| 16. | What other experience do I (the instructor) have with alternative student-learner arrangements? | I have experimented with student-generated quiz and exam questions for approximately two years. I have found that with some structure and guidance, students can write quality multiple-choice and open-ended questions. It is true that the questions need to be vetted, altered in various ways to be more appropriate (at least enough to be scored fairly), and occasionally re-written (mostly to remove duplication). From an academic perspective, the primary reason students learn to write questions is to foster effective communication, genuine content relevance, and overall critical thinking. From a business professional perspective, the primary reason students learn to write questions is to help foster supervisory, management and leadership skills. This idea has worked out splendidly; I expect similar results with the “public intellectual contribution” learning activity. |
| 17. | What are other possible “arrangements” for public writing? | Faculty could organize an entire class writing project at Eduzendium [2], a component of Citzendium [1]. One could envision a locally-managed wiki at the Instructor-, Course-, Program-, Department-, College-, University-, or (CSU) System-level. I don’t know of any wikis at any of these organizational levels, especially ones that support student learning. I, as a long-time academic technology administrator, have the skills to instantiate such a wiki; however, what’s the point? Why not simply aim as high as possible by using Wikipedia, and then rectify learning and process mistakes along the way? Organizationally, one approach might be to make create and support a wiki at an intermediate organizational level that is privately-writable, but publicly-readable. Technologically, one approach might be to use, for example, “pbwiki” [6]. This web-hosted solution minimizes the support needed all around. I suppose it depends on which learning outcomes we are attempting to achieve. |
| 17. | What have other CSUN faculty members tried? | I have been at CSUN in one fashion or another since 1981. I know many individuals, however, I don’t know of any faculty member who has attempted a similar project. I suppose the prudent thing to do is to assume that someone indeed has a similar project underway (or is thinking about it), but just hasn’t found a way to enmesh it with students in a formal course offering. |

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| 18. | What have other non-CSUN faculty members tried? | There is little peer-reviewed research on the topic as of yet. MSNBC ran story in 2007 regarding some work chiefly done by Prof. Groom at University of Washington-Bothell [3]. Prof. Groom has had generally positive results, and continues her efforts [4]. For my MGT 360 class, I have tried to leverage the strengths of her pioneering efforts, while avoiding the relatively few weaknesses she has identified. |
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Notes

- [1] <http://www.citizendium.org>
- [2] <http://en.citizendium.org/wiki/CZ:Eduzendium>
- [3] <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21574841/>
- [4] <http://connect.educause.edu/eprofile/163872>
- [5] <http://www.educause.edu/ers0808/135156>
- [6] <http://www.pbwiki.com>