

Academic Use of Wikipedia

A short musical intro plays

Welcome back to another episode of the Porterville College Educational Technology Podcast. Today I'm going to talk about Wikipedia. I can almost hear you cringing right now. High on the pet-peeve list for many instructors sits Wikipedia. At best it's considered a distraction to students trying to do scholarly research and at worst Wikipedia is condemned for being a wasteland of misinformation.

For those of you who may have never heard of Wikipedia, I should probably give you a quick description. Think of the Encyclopedia Britannica posted as a bulletin board on the Web, where anyone and everyone can go and edit encyclopedia entries. Yes, that's right, I could go to the Wikipedia entry on nuclear fission and change it, even though I don't know fusion from fission—but at least I can pronounce nuclear. Wikipedia currently has over 2 million articles in English and over 9 million articles total in over 250 languages all of them completely free to access. Britannica online is comprised of 75,000 articles and you must pay to read the full articles.

Now back to the accusation that Wikipedia is full of misinformation. Take this case as an example--At one point, if you had read Tony Blair's Wikipedia entry you would have been informed that as a youth he had posters of Hitler decorating his bedroom. The accusation was false, but there it was at the hugely popular site for the entire world to see. As soon as this false accusation was taken down a new one would pop up. During the worst bout of sabotage, Blair's entry was being changed up to 25 times a day. Now his article is protected, and only a select few have access to edit it.

But just after a story like this comes out, another will follow on its heels that refutes the notion that Wikipedia is unreliable. One of the most well publicized studies was conducted by the journal *Nature*, in which they compared randomly selected science articles in Encyclopedia Britannica with the same Wikipedia articles. The study found that there was very little difference in the level of accuracy between the two sources. Both sources contained erroneous information, with Wikipedia having slightly more inaccuracies out of the 42 articles that were compared.

Alongside the many critics of Wikipedia, there are just as many proponents. In fact, champions of Wikipedia often cite its open publishing model, the very thing that critics abhor, as a major asset. Wikipedia supporters claim that because anyone can edit articles, this in fact strengthens the entries, producing articles that have been refined, discussed, and researched until they are perfected. In addition to this, all revisions are recorded, so that at any point in time you can see who edited an article and when. You can even see the article in all of its incarnations as it was being refined, and perfected. Another often praised feature of Wikipedia is that nearly every article contains a fairly

extensive list of source documents both internal as well as external primary sources. And finally the proponents will assert that many of the criticisms against Wikipedia can be leveled against most every print source of information as well. For example, regarding the claims that Wikipedia articles are biased or that they include errors, they would ask "How many newspapers, magazines or even books have been printed without errors?" and "how quickly are they corrected?" In Wikipedia, errors usually do not linger long. And in terms of bias, print sources have long been accused of favoritism, obstruction, and even propaganda.

Now what are we to do, as we wrestle with trying to steer students towards useful sources for their research? Students today will inevitably do a Google search. Often it's the first thing that they do when they start out researching a topic. And there is a very good chance that the Google search will bring up a Wikipedia article, often one of the top hits of a search. It is very likely, then, that students will visit Wikipedia as they are researching a topic, and some will even cite that as a source of their research.

So that leaves us with some perplexing questions. Is Wikipedia reliable? Should it be allowed to be used as a research tool? If so, can students use it as one of the sources cited in a research paper? What sources are reliable and citable? Are there any Internet sources that can be trusted?

These are all excellent questions, and I'm sure you can come up with more. If you're waiting for me to answer these questions, I'm sorry to have to disappoint you. I'm not sure there is a single correct answer for every situation. One thing I will say is, if you don't allow students to use encyclopedias or Websites as a source, then obviously Wikipedia would not be allowed. Those are pretty clear guidelines, but occasionally the guidelines aren't that clear and this does nothing to answer the questions about using Wikipedia as a research tool. How many times in your career as a student did you begin your investigation of a topic by reading the encyclopedia entry? Encyclopedias are a great place to begin exploring many subjects. If you do decide to allow students to cite Wikipedia articles, make sure they understand proper citation of Wikipedia. They can see examples and get help by clicking on the "Cite this page" link that is located on the left-hand side of every Wikipedia article, in the toolbox located below the search box.

What I would suggest is for you to do a little research on your own. Start out by becoming familiar with the modern sources of information that are out there. Yes, there's Wikipedia but there is also Scholarpedia, Citizendium, Veropedia, Open Site, and of course blogs. You might want to start at Wikipedia, since it is the most popular. Look at the articles available in your own subject. Scan them for accuracy, but also take a look at the links to related articles, and look at the list of external sources. If you find them favorable, you may even decide that you could recommend them to students

as a place to start their research. If you find errors or gaps in information you could take the opportunity to either correct them yourself, or perhaps go so far as to create an assignment for students to edit the articles. Instructors are finding this activity to be a rewarding one for students. They get a chance to write something for the real-world, or virtual-world in this case. Instructors often discover that during this exercise, they find that their students suddenly take great interest in the subject and also great care in their writing, because they know it will be viewed by thousands of people.

If you decide to assign a Wikipedia writing project, I recommend first getting to know how the process of editing Wikipedia pages works. Create a Wikipedia account, go through the introduction pages and try some editing for yourself. It's a little more involved than simply going to a Wikipedia article clicking the Edit link and typing. You may also want to take a look at some of the projects that other instructors are assigning, by looking at the Wikipedia School and University Projects. It might help you generate some ideas for your own assignments. To get there, go the Wikipedia homepage, Wikipedia.org, and in the search box enter `wp:sup` and click search.

Some examples of past class assignments include a Soil Use and Management class that assigned a research paper, and then required the students to go to the Wikipedia entries on the topic of their paper and determine if there were gaps in this topic on Wikipedia.

In a Women and Gender Studies class Wikipedia articles were surveyed and it was found that women's history was lacking, and general history made scant mention of women's contributions. So students were assigned to do an initial critique of an existing article. They then worked up drafts of their proposed revisions. Those went through two rewrites for brevity, accuracy and balance. The students then inserted their final revisions onto the Wikipedia site.

These are just some of the projects you can read about, and I'm sure you can come up with some very creative assignments of your own. Perhaps look at some of the other sites mentioned, such as Scholarpedia or Citizendium. You could even use the subject of Wikipedia to start a dialogue with your students regarding reliability of information and how to evaluate sources. These topics apply to all types of sources, not just Web sources. How reliable are journal articles? Do the publishers, authors, or the reviewers have agendas of their own that influence what articles are published? What are the agendas of those who contribute information to Wikipedia or other open publishing sites? How does the ease with which Websites can be put up and edited, affect the information found on them, or does it? Ask students what they think about the information that is all around us, does the information you find from one source conflict with that found from another source? How do you handle those conflicts? Does information change as new data emerges? which sources of information might be

better suited to responding quickly to evolving information? What sources might do a better job at providing differing views or reconciling conflicting information? Our own library has some wonderful information regarding evaluating sources. Check out the PC Library Website or contact the Librarians for more information.

So it could be that Wikipedia does have a place somewhere in the research process. Check it out and see what you think. It may not be quite as scary as the fantastic stories you've heard about, and you may even uncover a class project just waiting to be assigned.