

Wikipedia: Friend, Not Foe

A teacher educator and middle school teacher collaborate on successful ways to build Wikipedia assignments into English classes.

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Wikipedia is blocked on all computers in the Warren Hills Regional School District. Some teachers at Easton Area High School discourage its use, as do officials at Centenary College and Lehigh University.

—“*School Officials Unite in Banning Wikipedia*,” *Times-Express (Easton, PA)*, Nov. 21, 2007

As online research has become an increasingly standard activity for middle school and high school students, Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org>) has simultaneously emerged as the bane of many teachers who include research-focused assignments in their courses. An online encyclopedia that allows anyone to edit its entries, Wikipedia has educators fed up with students using the site as a primary resource and citing its content in their essays. For some the site seems to represent the worst of how the Internet has dumbed down the research process, with its easily accessible but unsubstantiated (if not downright false) information on almost any topic, a student’s citation of which amounts to a mockery of legitimate inquiry. After all, how can a site that allows *anyone* to add, change, or remove information be credible? While extreme, the reaction described in the news article above—which mentions a school librarian who has created posters encouraging students to “Just Say ‘No’ to Wikipedia”—is not rare. Better to make such a site off-limits to students, goes the reasoning, if it will get them to rely on more authentic research sources for their writing.

Are there ways, however, that teachers can address the Wikipedia phenomenon that don’t include banning students from using the site? Seen in a different light, Wikipedia provides a unique opportunity to get students involved in ongoing conversations

about writing for a real audience, meeting genre expectations, establishing credibility, revising for clarity and purpose, and entering public discussions about the nature of truth, accuracy, and neutrality.

Some Background: Concepts and Criticism

Launched in 2001, Wikipedia represents a radical step in information access and availability. As writer and educator Will Richardson has noted, Wikipedia’s goal is nothing less than “collecting the sum of human knowledge” in a vast, constantly growing digital repository (60). Such an enormous mission is made at least partly possible by allowing anyone in the world to edit the site’s entries and thus make their own contribution to the overall pool of knowledge (the site derives its name partly from “wiki,” a term for any website that allows multiple users to easily add or change content). Wikipedia currently features active encyclopedias in more than 90 languages with plans for the development of many more (“Wikipedia: Embassy”).

As in conventional encyclopedias, Wikipedia’s English language encyclopedia contains articles about topics traditionally considered important, but it also includes entries on all manner of contemporary popular culture and current events. New articles are created daily, often as topics become

newsworthy; existing articles are improved on by thousands of volunteer contributors (known as “Wikipedians”) to reflect the most up-to-date and accurate knowledge (“Wikipedia: About”). Its constantly evolving nature has allowed Wikipedia to function in ways that print-based, expert-written reference sources cannot, such as establishing an instantaneous record of events as they happen. A good example is the entry detailing the Virginia Tech tragedy of 2007. The initial article was created at 10:16 a.m. EST on the day of the shootings and was composed of only two sentences: “The Virigina [sic] Tech shooting incident occurred on April 16th, 2007. One person has been reported to be slain” (“Virginia”). As more information became available the entry grew more detailed, cross-referenced, documented, and fact-checked; as of this writing, the article runs to more than 5,000 words and contains 127 cited sources. (A fascinating time-lapse video of the initial changes made to this entry is available on YouTube at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=zrCQ9dUsfqU>.)

Critics of Wikipedia point to the site’s universal editorial access as its most egregious flaw. For many, that no mechanism exists to prevent someone from posting bogus material either intentionally or through ignorance dooms Wikipedia as a credible and useful information source. Several highly publicized cases of incorrect information, such as satirist Stephen Colbert’s call to falsify entries to exploit their “wikiality,” have added to the sense of unreliability (“Wikipedia: Criticism”). By way of response, Wikipedia administrators note this potential drawback of the open access policy—users may indeed find articles “in a bad state,” incomplete, un-sourced, or recently vandalized—but in general most articles are in a process of improvement toward an ideal that is “balanced, neutral, and encyclopedic, containing notable verifiable knowledge” (“Wikipedia: Researching with Wikipedia”). In “Creating, Destroying, and Restoring Value in Wikipedia,” researchers suggest that despite the site’s open editing policy, “there is an intense, ongoing review of articles” by “a community of deeply committed edi-

Wikipedia’s transparent and participatory nature invites visitors to question what they’re reading in ways that static, expert-driven reference texts do not.

tors” whose work is aided by built-in features that allow vandalism and abuse to be quickly corrected (Reid et al. 259). Our experience is that Wikipedia is less an unregulated free-for-all of misinformation than an open collaborative in various stages of development, depth, and sophistication depending on where one looks. Tutorials instruct prospective editors on structure, format, and style; discussion forums for each article encourage debate about editorial choices; a complete history of all edits accompanies articles; and thousands of Wikipedians monitor additions and changes for accuracy and appropriateness.

None of these elements, however, guarantees the sort of unquestioned credibility that traditional encyclopedias enjoy, as the site freely admits. Consider this analogy from the onsite article “Researching with Wikipedia”:

Wikipedia is more like a library (or like the World Wide Web itself) than like a typical reference work. The mere fact that a book is in the library is no guarantee against bias or misinformation. The same can be said of Wikipedia articles. This does not make them useless, it just means that they should be approached differently than one approaches a typical reference work.

The article elaborates on what is meant by “approached differently.” Articles should be examined for their documentation, and these sources should in turn be scrutinized; readers should review the discussion page and the history of changes to the article to gain insight into recent edits; related topics can be explored via hyperlinks within the article; questions or concerns can be posed to Wikipedians on the talk page. Above all, visitors should recognize the malleable nature of the site and so exercise critical judgment about the information they encounter—a skill we know most English teachers want their students to develop. Wikipedia’s transparent and participatory nature invites visitors to question what they’re reading in ways that static, expert-driven reference texts do not.

We recommend that any classroom use of Wikipedia be first grounded in this kind of “meta-awareness” of the site regarding its strengths and limitations. Talking with students about how the site operates is essential in helping them move from passive acceptors of information to practicing analyz-

ers and evaluators. In what follows we explore several possible approaches for using Wikipedia and suggest others, but all are dependent on students developing and applying a critical consciousness toward the information they encounter in any context.

Wikipedia as a Platform for Research

After introducing students to Wikipedia, teachers might begin by using the site as an entry point into deeper and more creative research than typical assignments require. In working with both middle school students and experienced English teachers, Scott begins this process with a well-known subject as a focus: Abraham Lincoln. He first asks the class to call out everything they know about Lincoln; as they do so, he records these details on the board. It soon becomes apparent that as a group, most people (students included) know more than they think they do about the 16th president. The board quickly fills with assorted facts and historical tidbits: *born in Kentucky*, *“Honest Abe,” freed the slaves*, *Civil War president*, *assassinated by John Wilkes Booth*, *on the penny*, and so on. Next, Scott asks students to browse through the rather lengthy Wikipedia entry on Lincoln, including sections detailing his childhood, his election as president in 1860, his leadership during the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and his assassination, among others. These are topics that most people have encountered in some form before—as the class brainstorming session has just demonstrated—and they are the minimum of what we might expect in an overview of Lincoln. In the sense that they supply basic information about a particular well-established topic, these kinds of Wikipedia entries are quite similar to the static encyclopedia articles of yore.

At this point, Scott asks students to think about what legitimate research entails. Since we’ve just seen from our brainstorming session that most of us already have a basic understanding of Lincoln and his life, there’s little value in writing a redundant “report” that restates these same topics. Instead, the point of real research is the same as it was in pre-Internet days—to explore something new about a subject that we don’t already know (or that we don’t have easy access to), or to seek answers to puzzling questions. With this understanding, a prospective student researcher might start by look-

ing for *gaps* in an encyclopedia entry where fresh research might be possible.

For example, in reading through the current (as of this writing) Wikipedia entry on Lincoln, we find a gap in the account of Lincoln’s dealings with a lead general, George McClellan. We read that McClellan was insubordinate, that Lincoln’s view of strategy differed from the general’s thinking, and that after two years Lincoln finally removed McClellan from command (“Abraham”). But why did Lincoln wait so long to fire the general? In the midst of war, why did Lincoln delay his decision for so long? The article gives no hints. There is an allusion to letters by both men about each other, but these documents are not quoted. Suddenly we have questions that we can’t easily answer, and we’ve uncovered a possible space for follow-up research. In locating and reviewing primary and secondary documents, a student might seek to provide an informed argument as to Lincoln’s rationale in dealing with McClellan, having used the Wikipedia entry not as a source of truth but as a springboard to further inquiry. The site becomes a “stepping stone” for deeper research, as Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales has argued it should be used (Coleman).

Reviewing the life story of Lincoln on Wikipedia, Scott’s classes of students and teachers have derived research questions based on what is *not* in the entry. How did a self-taught prairie outsider learn to be an effective leader (and for that matter, did he indeed lead effectively)? Was he well-respected during his presidency? How did he handle the stress of his position in a time of civil war? What personal convictions led him to oppose slavery, and were these taught to him or learned through experience? Simply recognizing that there is room for such questions is a major achievement for students in the research process. Typical research writing assignments often do not expect much more of students than fact-reporting, and so questions of *Why?* or *So what?* or *How could this relate to my own experience?* do not become part of the research picture.

Because Wikipedia is constantly evolving, its entries often include unconventional sections that might never have been included in a traditional encyclopedia. Such topics—often hyperlinked to outside websites and sources—offer further potential for student investigation and personal engagement.

Lincoln's religious beliefs, the evolution of his image from his era to the present, his poetry, and even his presence in several video games are some of the options available to readers ("Abraham"). (For the purpose of this article, Scott accessed Wikipedia on November 19, 2007. Naturally, the entry may have changed by the time you read this.)

In a broader sense, the Wikipedia article on Lincoln—like many similar entries on established topics on the site—models other essential practices of responsible research often obscured in traditional encyclopedias. Hyperlinked footnotes after each quotation and each debatable point provide for instant reference. Many of the footnotes provide contextual commentary along with citations; sometimes they provide a link to an opposing view. In certain cases, statements in need of further verification are followed by the hyperlinked phrase "citation needed," which leads to the following explanation:

Because Wikipedia is constantly evolving, its entries often include unconventional sections that might never have been included in a traditional encyclopedia.

The "citation needed" link you just followed is there because another editor felt that the preceding statement was dubious or sufficiently controversial as to demand citation. If you can provide a source to back up the statement, please add it. If not, please exercise extra caution when using the flagged information. If the statement is about a living person, delete the statement. ("Wikipedia: Citation")

These editorial elements model real-world expectations for scholarship and directly challenge students to meet authentic, public needs. With a little effort, students can locate needed documentation and edit the entry to reflect their research, thus increasing the credibility of the site while directly improving a resource accessible to billions of people. A more immediate, global audience for a student's writing and research is hard to imagine.

Lincoln's Wikipedia entry, like others on the site, is not flawless. At times it reads like what it is: an article written by committee, inconsistent in focus, structure, and elaboration. Certainly a single scholar with a professional editor could craft a more unified piece. But even in their faults, such entries

offer possibilities for student projects. Clicking the "Discussion" tab at the top of the page, we find that the Lincoln article "was a *good article* nominee, but did not meet the *good article criteria* at the time" ("Talk: Abraham"). Hyperlinks connect readers to "good article" criteria and examples of such articles. (Even more superlative entries can be nominated as *featured articles*, the site's highest honor—less than 2,000 articles currently carry this status.) Questions naturally arise: What qualities in the Lincoln article prevent it from meeting the *good article criteria*? What differentiates it from articles currently in this category? Students might propose necessary changes to a specific *good article* (as current entries for "Graphic Novel," "Banquo," and "J. D. Salinger" are currently classified) to move it to the *featured article* level. Such topics speak to the socially constructed and often unsettled nature of information that, on first glance, may seem firmly established and thus above critique. Evaluating entries based on criteria naturally leads students to a new challenge: actually contributing content to Wikipedia to improve existing entries or add new ones.

Editing Wikipedia: Assignment Advice

The ease with which one can edit a Wikipedia entry (by simply clicking "edit this page" at the top of any article) tends to deemphasize the underlying protocols for making effective contributions. Making basic edits to an article can be quite simple, but making comprehensive changes or creating an entirely new article from scratch is more of a challenge. There's a learning curve to working with the site, and with this in mind, we offer several suggestions for secondary teachers interested in including Wikipedia-integrated assignments in their classrooms. Much of the following is derived from our personal experiences implementing such projects with a variety of students and is adaptable for many different classroom contexts.

1. Familiarize Yourself with the Site

Firsthand knowledge about Wikipedia's content, structure, contributor guidelines, and editing protocol is essential. We recommend that interested teachers begin by reading the "Wikipedia: About" page, which functions as both a site overview and a

link hub for related topics. From here, teachers can move directly into the Tutorial, a step-by-step guide for editing procedures that includes many “sandbox” areas for experimentation (“Wikipedia: Tutorial”). Editing requires basic text codes to achieve certain effects (boldface, headings, etc.), and the site provides a cheat sheet for easy reference. Finally, teachers should experiment with the process of changing a “live” article. Browsing entries of personal interest will inevitably turn up opportunities for correction or improvement, and going through this process oneself will make guiding students much easier.

2. Discuss the Wiki Concept with Students

One of the most intriguing concepts raised by Wikipedia (and wikis in general) is the transformation of reader/writer roles and responsibilities. By their nature, traditional encyclopedias imply ultimate authority and a fixed sense of knowledge; communication is unidirectional, privileging an expert writer over a reader needing to be informed. Such texts generally do not invite questions, alternative perspectives, critique, or debate. Wikis, meanwhile, often invoke a more synthesized relationship. Readers (who may also be writers) are expected to act critically by evaluating assumptions, evidence, and context in order to measure worth and (possibly) respond. Writers (who are likewise readers) must in turn expect to justify, support, and document their statements, as well as to engage with the questions and critique of readers.

To this end, we recommend that teachers engage in frequent and in-depth discussion with students about the roles of readers and writers in digital environments. Do students believe everything they come across online? How do they know the difference between legitimate and bogus information on the Internet? What criteria do they use? How does one establish *credibility* in everyday and professional contexts? In what subject areas might students themselves serve as credible sources? Certainly many will already be familiar with wikis—some may have even edited Wikipedia entries previously. Just as many students, however, are likely to be unfamiliar with the active responsibilities that face readers engaging such texts. Before editing or improving a text, students must know how to evaluate ideas, di-

agnose problems, articulate a strategy for improvement, and then be prepared to justify their work in an ongoing conversation.

3. Start Small

Just as teachers do, students need time to get familiar with Wikipedia as a site, including the editing process. We recommend that teachers introduce Wikipedia in a class forum that invites general opinions and insight before proceeding to a particular entry to demonstrate the ease of simple edits. Bud Hunt has described an exercise in which student groups revise (on paper) a subpar entry, eventually leading to a teacher-assisted consensus on an overhead transparency before an official edit is made (Hunt and Hunt 91). For more formal projects, sufficient time can be built into assignment plans for students to complete the editing tutorial.

What assignments might students tackle? Wikipedia itself provides a substantial list—including specific entries in need of attention—that can help get teachers started. Students can “wikify” existing articles by adding relevant hyperlinks to other entries; verify information by researching and adding links to credible sources; make updates on or expand existing articles; or simply copyedit for grammar and punctuation (“Wikipedia: Contributing”). Teachers might begin by asking student groups to seek out and improve a specific entry of interest; documenting their progress can be a simple matter of providing “before” and “after” screenshots. As students become more confident with the process, more substantial projects are possible. For example, Darren’s classes of preservice English teachers have improved on entries for Sharon Draper, Katherine Paterson, Chris Crutcher’s young adult novel *Ironman*, and the National Council of Teachers of English, and created two entirely new entries from scratch (for Kurt Vonnegut’s short story “EPICAC” and the Bentley Rare Book Gallery). Secondary students might investigate entries for authors they’ve encountered in their coursework or through personal reading (such

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as Christopher Paul Curtis, Lois Lowry, Gordon Korman, and so on), looking for areas in which they might contribute. In processing information from a primary source and deciding as a group about how and what data should be included in an encyclopedic entry, students practice the kind of procedures that real researchers must undertake in the gathering and presentation of ideas. Similar assignments—in which students improve on or create entries about characters, concepts, or important places in their community—are easily adaptable for the secondary classroom. Not surprisingly, Wikipedia also features a page providing specific project guidance and suggestions for teachers (“Wikipedia: School”).

4. Prepare for Challenges

Aside from learning the conventions of editing, other trickier challenges await students, beginning with genre conventions and content expectations. Students accustomed to personal or persuasive writing may have trouble adopting the more formal, neutral voice appropriate for an encyclopedia (i.e., objective, expository, and nonpromotional). Modeling the style and structure of other entries can help students practice this genre-specific trait.

What “counts” as appropriate information for inclusion in Wikipedia may also present a challenge. Contrary to common perception, new edits

and entries usually undergo immediate scrutiny by more experienced Wikipedians, who may challenge students to revise or re-envision information that advocates or argues rather than informs. We’ve found that emphasizing the “What Wikipedia Is Not” guidelines helps to address these issues (“Wikipedia: What”). Similarly, student work may

quickly be flagged by Wikipedians as needing revision for citation of sources, bias, and “wikification” (i.e., including embedded links to other relevant Wikipedia entries). We ask students to view these instances as possibilities rather than obstacles. Using the “talk” function atop every entry, students can enter into a dialogue with readers who may disagree with content, structure, or presentation. In

these cases, notions of accurate paraphrasing, genre appropriateness, and communication etiquette—sometimes dealt with in abstract or rote form in the classroom—become real issues to be grappled with as students make their case.

Conclusion

What makes Wikipedia seem so dangerous to some teachers—its inherent malleability—is also what makes the site a dynamic and authentic demonstration of the research process itself. Granted, if students use Wikipedia as just another reference source (or their *only* source), then they will get no more from it (and possibly less) than a traditional encyclopedia in the school’s library. But if they can learn about how entries on the site change and how each change is debated in arguments open to anyone’s inspection, then Wikipedia can demonstrate to students the process, importance, and excitement of real scholarship. Here is an authentic demonstration that knowledge isn’t settled, that there are always more questions to ask and always differing perspectives on the answers. Students can see that opinions and facts aren’t always easily differentiated and that uncontested facts can be used to support opposing conclusions. And they can learn that no piece of knowledge can be understood separate from its connections to other topics in a multifaceted web that, on Wikipedia, is accessible at the click of a mouse.

As is probably obvious, we’ve used Wikipedia as a primary source in various ways throughout the evolution of this article. In what may strike some as a gross violation of conventional research procedures, we’ve cited a number of Wikipedia’s pages directly in our discussion of the sites policies, criticisms, and strengths. These reference pages in turn helped guide us to other useful sources, often through the documented information in their “Notes” sections. How do we know the information on any of these pages was and is now accurate? In short, we assumed the responsibility of active readers by following the same process of textual evaluation we describe above, examining the information for its sourcing and considering its validity so as not to harm our credibility or do our readers a disservice.

Any teacher interested in exploring Wikipedia as a potential base for assignments—rather than summarily rejecting the site as a slough of misin-

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formation—must likewise become familiar with the site’s guidelines, structure, strengths, and drawbacks. We invite readers to investigate the Wikipedia pages referenced in this article as a means of reaching their own conclusions about the site’s potential in their classrooms. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Traci Gardner, RWT

Build on Wikipedia’s ability to serve as a “stepping stone” to further research with “Connecting Past and Present: A Local Research Project.” Students become active archivists, gathering photos, artifacts, and stories for a museum exhibit that highlights one decade in their school’s history, but don’t stop with that exhibit. Have students use their local knowledge to revise and add relevant information to Wikipedia entries. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=1027