A Place for Wikipedia or Putting Wikipedia in its Place

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There have been many articles dissecting, defining, and scrutinizing Wikipedia. Despite its innovations, it’s not a scholarly source. Some articles are poorly written; anyone can edit it; and the list goes on. The fact remains, however, that Wikipedia is entrenched as one of the favorite research tools of today’s college students. Along with the number of entries, the impact of this much debated online encyclopedia will only continue to grow. As a librarian who instructs students on how to do research, to me the choice isn’t whether or not to ban it, annihilate it or ignore it, but how to best teach students about the appropriate and beneficial uses of Wikipedia.

Many librarians see teaching students about Wikipedia as a necessary evil. If students are going to use it, then they should know how to use it knowledgeably and ethically. Librarians tend to use Wikipedia as a teaching tool, a lesson in evaluating resources. (Achterman, 2005, Bennington, 2008, Murley, 2008, Gunnels, 2007). Students also need to understand how Wikipedia compares to other types of resources such as specialized encyclopedias, magazines, newspapers, scholarly articles, and different types of books. Students need to realize that information from different types of resources has different uses.

Many university instructors have a love-hate relationship with Wikipedia—they love to hate it. Faculty in the history department at Middlebury College made headlines when their policy to penalize students for citing Wikipedia and print encyclopedias in their papers and was made public (Waters, 2007). In spite of the fact that faculty don’t allow students to use Wikipedia for class assignments, it is consistently one of the first places students look for information. A recent University of Washington study found that 84% of students surveyed use Wikipedia for information gathering purposes while
doing course-related research. (Head & Eisenberg, 2009, p. 18)

Some faculty members, (Camihort, 2009, Once Shunned, 2008, Nix, 2010, Aycock & Aycock, 2008) have written about their experience turning the tables on Wikipedia use in universities by making it an assignment to write a Wikipedia article or edit an existing one. Whether it is a course in kinesiology, literature, history, anthropology, or computer science, these instructors are using Wikipedia in innovative ways to get their students to think critically, to better understand their research material, and to challenge them to write (or re-write) in a new way-- and maybe get published in the process.

A colleague and I have been looking for ways to use Wikipedia to help students develop the skills they need to critique and use different levels of information. As academic librarians who have been assigned to teach independent sections of our university’s general education course on information literacy, we have a captive audience for teaching students how to select Wikipedia as a research tool and, just as importantly, how to responsibly use the information they find.

Our rationale for using Wikipedia as the framework for this course on information literacy is that it serves as a natural entry point for online research skills by taking students from where they are and helping them branch out to other catalogs, databases, and websites.

To better understand the Wikipedia phenomenon, we asked students to write a Wikipedia article about an event as their semester-long project. Students had to use a variety of resources and present information in an, objective manner. By completing all of the steps to write a well researched and articulate Wikipedia article, and participate in class discussions, students met all of the outcomes required in the Association of College and Research Libraries Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education:

- Standard One: The information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed.
- Standard Two: The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently.
- Standard Three: The information literate student evaluates information
and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.

- Standard Four: The information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose.
- Standard Five: The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally.

(http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/informationliteracyco)

By completing this assignment our students illustrated their ability to find, select, evaluate, and use information. We divided the Wikipedia assignment into manageable weekly modules. The first in-class activities involved different levels of information. This included a discussion of the different stages of creation, publication, and dissemination of various types of information that make up the information cycle—i.e., newspaper articles, blogs, magazine articles, scholarly articles, books, etc. From there, students began brainstorming topics for their articles and appropriate databases and catalogs to find information. More hands-on assignments were based on finding and evaluating type of sources such as books, magazine articles, news articles, and scholarly articles. We also had students evaluate the Web pages and the databases where they found the information. The Web pages were evaluated based on authority, accuracy, coverage, objectivity, currency, and navigation. The databases were evaluated based on the subject of the material covered, type of material included, time period covered, whether they included full text, etc. From there, we had them select 15 different types of resources including encyclopedias, regular books, magazine, newspaper articles, and government documents. Then we asked students to evaluate the sources and to create an annotated bibliography. These resources were eventually used as the core material for their Wikipedia articles. Along with the hands-on research days, we also had discussion days interspersed throughout the curriculum so that we could talk about the life cycle of information, as well as more heated issues like censorship and plagiarism. Finally we had writing days where students began creating headings for their article and where they could ask questions regarding citations and style.

Since it was an information literacy class and not a composition class, the
emphasis in the rubric for the Wikipedia article was placed on variety and quality of resources they gathered, the organization of the article, the format and completeness of their citations and not merely the quality of the writing. Showing that they were able to responsibly use the information they gathered was an important aspect of the assignment.

All in all I think that the assignment worked well as a vehicle for learning the basic concepts of information literacy. One thing I found that students didn’t like about the assignment was the fact that they were spending so much time getting to know a resource that they weren’t able to use in any of their other classes. In the future I would like to change the assignment to have students edit existing Wikipedia articles. Students would still have to find and evaluate a variety of sources for their annotated bibliography but they would then compare those sources against the existing Wikipedia article. In this way they would still benefit from the Wikipedia framework but would also better understand the concept of peer review in the process. I hope this would also help avoid the complaints about having to write a static Wikipedia article.

The broader question remains: Should Wikipedia use be allowed in university courses? When this topic came up in a class discussion in my information literacy course, most of my students said they used it to find introductory information on a topic and that they found the reference list especially useful, although they would not under any circumstances cite it. My students understood that their instructors don’t want them to use Wikipedia but they did not understand precisely why. They understood that anyone can write and/or edit a Wikipedia article so it isn’t necessarily the most reliable resource to use, but when I asked them if it was a scholarly source, they honestly did not know. I found a disconnect when it came to their basic understanding of primary, secondary, and tertiary sources.

When they turned the question around on me, I told them that just as I didn’t agree with the blanket statement made by some instructors that no websites are allowed in their classes (as citations) when government information and educational sites abound, I didn’t feel that Wikipedia should be banned from reference lists everywhere. The information contained within Wikipedia articles should be evaluated against information from other types of resources. Some Wikipedia articles are written and edited by experts in
their respective fields, though this is not true in many cases.

There are plenty of articles and studies done that explain Wikipedia’s standards of inclusion and compare accuracy with print encyclopedias like Britannica, but is this really the point? Is this the problem? Should college students be able to cite encyclopedias in their research papers? Should information be dismissed solely because of where it is published? Instructors need to understand that they have to explain things like the uses and appropriateness of different types of information to their students instead of just requiring them to cite 3 scholarly articles and restricting online resources and reference books without clarification. Wikipedia needs to be put into context in the classroom, not banned or scorned or ignored. I’m not saying that every instructor has to use a Wikipedia article as an assignment in their classes or even that they teach their students how to use it. I am suggesting that teachers tell their students about the appropriateness of different research tools for their assignments. All I am asking is that instructors make a place for Wikipedia in the discussion instead of constantly trying to put it in its place.

References


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