

‘Safe wiki’: Teaching responsible use of Wikipedia

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Wikipedia, the free online encyclopaedia that anyone can edit, has long been criticised by educators and even banned from schools. However, an "abstinence only" technique is bound to fail: even if Wikipedia can successfully be banished from a single classroom, this approach doesn't enable the student to use Wikipedia appropriately later on. As Wikipedia is now one of the top ten most visited websites around the world, it seems safe to say that like sex, avoiding it completely is not realistic.

This paper highlights little-known aspects of Wikipedia that help to understand how it works (and fails), and analytical tools that can be used to evaluate a Wikipedia article's reliability. It also provides an overview of projects around the world that have accepted Wikipedia in the classroom and the lessons learned, with recommendations for future projects.

Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>) usually receives mixed reviews from academic crowds, tending towards the negative. While some educators incorporate the site into their curricula in interesting and provocative ways, many others remain suspicious of the freely editable encyclopedia whose unreviewed articles often appear at the top of web searches. Some educators have banned its use all together (Frean 2008); some have only banned its use as a source (Jaschik 2007). The site itself recommends use of it as a 'starting place for further research' (Wikipedia:FAQ/Schools 2008) rather than a first and only source.

Banning Wikipedia in and of itself does not typically prompt learning about Wikipedia's limitations. Just as it is worth teaching students how to use a printed encyclopedia effectively, it is worth learning and teaching how to use Wikipedia effectively. This paper aims to offer educators the insight of a longterm contributor's hard-earned shortcuts and tips with a minimal learning curve.

A more ambitious project would be to facilitate a writing project within Wikipedia itself: in this way, students learn from the 'inside' about the site's strengths and weaknesses. Such a project can be used to teach information literacy directly or indirectly assess another subject area. This paper also summarises these kinds of existing and ongoing projects.

The first place to start is with the Wikipedia page itself. Each article typically has four tabs, 'article' (selected), 'discussion', 'edit this page' and 'history'. The 'discussion' tab leads to an article's 'talk page', where editors discuss potential inclusion/exclusion of material and editing conflicts. Reading a talk page for a popular article is an excellent way of reviewing how Wikipedia processes have unfolded for that particular topic. What may now be a carefully worded statement supported by citations, may be the result of pages of heated argumentation.

The 'History' tab is also an essential tool for reviewing Wikipedia content. Under it is a list of 'revisions' or 'edits' made to that article. Each row has a linked time and date, a username or IP address and a summary comment in parentheses. The date is the time that the edit was made and the link leads to a copy of the article at that point in time. Every edit ever made is recorded in this way, and remains

accessible (in theory at least) forever. By selecting radio boxes it is possible to see a 'diff', which uses side-by-side text and colour to show specifically what was changed between any pair of revisions for any page.

If one ever does find occasion to cite a Wikipedia article as a source, the citation should actually belong to one of these article revisions, rather than the article title. Clicking on the linked date will lead to a page with 'oldid=...' as part of the URL. If you only wish to cite the most recent version of the article, it is better to follow the link 'Cite this page' under the left menu 'Toolbox'.

Reviewing the History tab is useful to check recent activity on the page, but for frequently edited articles more comprehensive tools are recommended. One is called the 'Wikipedia Page History Statistics' tool (Aka n.d.), which provides a page-specific report with overall statistics (such as total number of revisions) and user statistics (such as who the most frequent editors have been). A tool known as 'WikiBlame' (Flominator n.d.) reports on which revisions contain a particular phrase, which is useful in determining when specific text was added to an article. The UCSC Wikipedia Trust Project (2008) interprets page histories to provide a powerful view of 'trust-coloured' articles. Via a complex algorithm text is marked as various grades between 'trusted' and 'not trusted', and coloured accordingly ('not trusted' is orange). Two factors that lead to trust include the reputation of the author (if their edits tend to be preserved in subsequent edits) and the age of the text (older text is assumed to be more trustworthy). Their website contains a out of date mirror of Wikipedia, so it is best to use after looking up the original article on Wikipedia first.

The article user statistics may prompt questions such as, 'Should an article be more trusted if it is mostly edited by registered users?' The username/IP link for each revision links to that user's 'contributions' – a list of their edits to all pages within Wikipedia. By reviewing a user's contributions it is possible to get a sense of the quality of their edits.

If the user has registered an account at Wikipedia, they will have a username; if not, their edits will be recorded against their IP address and they are said to be editing 'anonymously', although paradoxically this is less private than registering an account. This is most evident with the advent of the tool known as WikiScanner (Griffith n.d.), which combines Wikipedia's IP edits with information about the ownership or geographic distribution of IP ranges. WikiScanner can analyse the contributions of a particular IP range or the edits to a particular page.

Within a specific article there may be many hints to its reliability. One of Wikipedia's core content policies (alongside Neutral Point of View) is Verifiability. (Wikipedia:Verifiability 2008) This leads to the guideline Citing sources, which advises contributors on what constitutes a reliable source and the technical mechanics of citing one. The flipside of citing sources is removing or flagging uncited material, both of which are encouraged. 'Templates' mark either whole articles/sections or specific statements as inappropriately sourced. Article/section templates contain a left orange bar and a note such as 'This does not cite any references or sources.' Statement templates appear inline as superscripts such as '[citation needed]'. To add one of these templates it is as simple as editing the article and adding this after the offending sentence: '{{fact}}'. (Wikipedia:Template messages/Sources of articles 2008) This is a simple and beneficial way to contribute to Wikipedia even as one consumes it.

For dedicated contributors, Wikipedia use usually consists of reading and editing intertwined in this way. It leads to critical thinking, as one is always reading with an 'editor's cap' on. One teacher suggests the idea of asking students to verify each fact in a Wikipedia article, either by following the

sources provided in the article or by checking them in another reference work. (Carvin 2005) At the end of the class the references found can be folded back into Wikipedia. This not only reinforces the importance of sources on both Wikipedia and other works, but also provides gratification for their work – the instant improvement of that article, which can be a powerful motivator.

A more detailed project would be to ask a class to learn Wikipedia's norms and write an article on a topic of their choice. (If they have a registered article their edits can be tracked via their contributions page as described above.) There are many 'WikiProjects' devoted to topic areas which list relevant articles needed improvement, but a good place to start may be their local suburb, or perhaps favourite sports team. Over fifty projects like this have taken place; they are documented along with tips for teachers on Wikipedia. (Wikipedia:School and university projects, 2008)

A step beyond the typical 'learn Wikipedia' project is to assess another topic via Wikipedia contributions. Associate Professor Andrew Collins of the University of NSW did this with his advanced immunology class. The result was that most students 'left with an understanding of Wikipedia's strengths and limitations.' (Moses 2007) As Henry Jenkins puts it, '[Y]oung people ask better questions about the nature of scholarship and research when they contribute to Wikipedia.' Writing on class content encourages a deeper engagement with the material: 'This is no longer about finding the right answer to get a grade on an assignment but producing credible information that others can count upon when they deploy it in some other real world context.' (2007)

Wikipedia should be considered a permanent addition to the information landscape, rather than an aberration. With this in mind, now is the time to begin teaching students the new skills (and reinforcing old ones) required to navigate it. Wikipedians are more than happy to help on this task: for local insight, view the Australian Wikipedians' notice board (2008).

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