

Are Wikis Worth the Time?

Collaborative, anonymous collections of online information, such as Wikipedia, hold promise and peril for young researchers.

Yes

Wikipedia might be the best example of how teaching and learning is changing. Wikipedia is the encyclopedia created by you and me. Anyone can add to it, edit it, and even vandalize it. Seems like a crazy idea and not very valuable ... until you look further.

Wikipedia is a wonderful representation of how our understanding of knowledge is changing. Dave Weinberger refers to the “multi-subjectivity” of a Wikipedia article: Multiple viewpoints coming together to create a conversation. Notice it’s not to establish knowledge. The days of one truth, one perspective are coming to an end. We saw libraries as a place to consume knowledge. Wikipedia provides a place to contribute as well as consume.



By Dean Shareski

The obvious comparison is to printed encyclopedias. These are limited as a container of information. Restricted by physical size, an encyclopedia holds roughly 80,000 articles. Because Wikipedia is digital, its topics and size are infinite. Wikipedia

No

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, is no bargain for schools. Its content is the ongoing aggregate of a radical authorship policy: anyone at any time can write anything in Wikipedia. The result is a cheap imitation of a scholarly traditional resource.

Civilization scorns bad information because it is dangerous. It results in bad decision making, which undermines society. Insisting that an author take responsibility with his name for what he writes is society’s time-tested deterrent to the distribution of bad information. Authors



By Carol Ann K. Winkler

expand their knowledge and perfect their writing to heighten their reputations. Then, society rewards them by according increased value to what information they provide. But if they provide the wrong information, they have to accept the responsibility as well. Wikipedia, on the other hand, is entirely anonymous. There is

has more than 750,000 entries in English and more than 1,000,000 in other languages.

Sheer volume isn't the only advantage. Wikipedia embodies Thomas Friedman's idea of the flat world. Silos of information are being replaced by horizontal connections. We expect to be able to contribute. A Wikipedia article represents many more ideas than an encyclopedia entry. Jimbo Wales, the founder of Wikipedia said this:

Wikipedia invites critical dialogue with the text in a way that Britannica never could. I mean this not only in the metaphorical sense of "dialogue"—in that you can review the history of a Wikipedia article, and the discussion page, and thus come to a more informed understanding of the editorial choices that were made. But I also mean this in a literal sense: with Wikipedia, you can

simply click to ask the authors a question, and they will actually answer you. You can leave a note on individual author pages, or on the talk page of the article, or you can even edit the article itself.

What encyclopedia in history ever supported the notion of critical analysis so thoroughly?

This is huge. Few would say that Wikipedia is acceptable as a single source. What teacher would allow any student to use one source in research? Wikipedia provides a great starting point not only for the reasons mentioned but also the wealth of links within most articles. These links provide depth and detail to an already substantial amount of information. Commercial sites are not interested in this type of generosity.

Are there errors in Wikipedia? Yes. Are there errors in Britannica? Yes. In

fact, there's a Wikipedia article dedicated to this topic.

Teachers will need to decide how they use Wikipedia in the research process. Whether they allow students to include them in their citations is up for debate. Time needs to be spent showing students how to deconstruct articles and understand the process of their creation. This should be a major part of our students' education. But to disregard Wikipedia as a valuable resource is a mistake. Teachers need to understand that for better or worse the world is changing. Wikipedia is indeed a model of how information will be managed in the 21st century.

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no responsibility. There is no deterrent to publishing bad information. And so by intentional design, the information in Wikipedia is never authoritative.

Because of Wikipedia's authorship policy, the content is endlessly morphing. Bad information is always present. Proponents of Wikipedia believe most readers are willing to compare its information with what they already know and will rewrite articles to restore quality. Young students do not have a knowledge base for such comparison. If their research is done in the moments when the article is bad, they will not recognize the poor quality. They will make decisions based on what they've read and will suffer the consequences. In addition, they will have a hard time forgetting the bad information with which they began, even after seeing their errors. Encour-

aging children to use a source of bad information is no way for schools to help their pupils develop a sound knowledge base and a lifelong enthusiasm for learning new things. Wikipedia proponents argue that students should never accept just one source of information anyway. They say that when a student finds other sources contradicting what he finds in Wikipedia, it is a valuable lesson in information literacy. For older students, capable of critical thinking, that could be the case. After enough run-ins with bad information, the ultimate lesson is the folly of wasting time with an unreliable source like Wikipedia. For those in a hurry, it's better to just skip Wikipedia and go straight to the stable authoritative resources.

Like most knock-offs that tempt the unwary, Wikipedia does have some

flashy characteristics to heighten its appeal. But quality competition possessing the same characteristics does exist. The Internet versions of scholarly traditional encyclopedia provide the online access, the hyperlinking, the keyword searching, and the continual updating. Students experience free online access to this reliable information after a simple login process. But that's only if schools show the wisdom of investing in their libraries so they can provide the resources students need. Authoritative information does not come cheap.

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