

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: May 7, 2010

COMMENTARY

Embracing Wikipedia

By Matthew Shapiro

As a teacher, you become accustomed to hearing your students say some pretty outlandish things. Still, when a student told me, "Mr. Freder doesn't let us use Wikipedia," I was rocked with incredulity. Like any encyclopedia, the online resource Wikipedia is not a perfect reference guide; however, it is an excellent place for students to start the research process and has immense pedagogical value for teachers.

Mr. Freder's concerns are by no means unfounded. Since Wikipedia entries are written and edited by the general public, they are bound to be riddled with errors. At best, these errors are made from ignorance, and at worst, they are made from a malicious contributor intending to pass off his or her opinion as fact. Who could contribute an entry about a polarizing figure like Ronald Reagan without including latent feelings of adulation or abhorrence? Probably no one.

Full disclosure: I use Wikipedia to answer all those nagging questions that pop into my head. We science teachers are curious creatures, and I cannot rest until I know how an MRI machine affects proton spin, or how many passes Tom Brady completed in the 2004 Super Bowl. In seconds, I get the answers to my questions, along with copious hyperlinks that probably connect Tom Brady to proton spin in six cross-references or less.

When I worry about the accuracy of the information, I can check the citations (which are also hyperlinked) to separate fact from fiction. But in general, I don't worry. After all, if people volunteer their free time to share their passions—whether it is for football or physics—chances are they know their stuff. Take the example of Vaughan Bell, a neuropsychologist at London's Institute of Psychiatry. He has continually reworked the Wikipedia entry on schizophrenia, not because he is paid to do so, but rather because he is passionate about the topic.

Maybe you are thinking that Wikipedia is fine for answering a few pesky questions, but for classroom research it cannot compare to the gold standard of encyclopedic wisdom: the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Actually, it can. A recent study, published in *Nature*, showed that for every four errors found in Wikipedia, there were three errors found in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Yet that study was conducted in 2005, and since then those same Wikipedia entries have been subjected to intense online scrutiny. Each entry is assigned a discussion board to resolve disputes, and particularly contentious battles can be resolved by "admins." These online arguments can actually improve the quality of the information.

While Vaughan Bell lamented that some people edited the schizophrenia entry with the mind-set that all schizophrenics should be locked up, he also said that "It did stimulate me to look up literature on schizophrenia and violence," and that "people who are a pain in the arse can stimulate new thinking." Even the Britannica cannot deny the value of online contributors, since its editors recently allowed their online encyclopedia to be modified by readers (although reader edits must go through a review board).

If teachers ban Wikipedia from their bibliographies, they must face the fact that their students will almost certainly still use the website. Alexa.com, a website-ranking service, claims that Wikipedia is the sixth-most-accessed site on the World Wide Web. Sixth! A 2010 University of Washington study found that 82 percent of students use Wikipedia in their course-related research. Perhaps even more troubling for Wikipedia opponents is the large majority of students who say they start the research process with Wikipedia, even when their teachers specifically questioned the site's veracity.

Rather than simply warning students about Wikipedia's perils, teachers should model a healthy Wikipedia relationship. For instance, ask students to read the Ronald Reagan entry for authorial bias, identifying passages where contributors discredit Reaganomics or gush over the Gipper's Cold War policy. Better yet, teachers could have their classes improve an entry's accuracy through an editing assignment. Students could read a Wikipedia article, followed by a Britannica article, in search of discrepancies between the two. Once a disagreement was found, the students could use a third source to uncover the truth (remember there is a 43 percent chance that the error will appear in the Britannica), and then correct the error. This assignment imparts a clear and invaluable lesson: We must be critical consumers of information. One source is never enough.

The digital age presents our students with new challenges that were unimaginable even a decade ago. When I was a high school freshman using the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature to investigate nuclear engineering, I was presented with at most 20 sources per edition. If today's students perform a Google search on nuclear engineering, they are bombarded with over 10 million hits (the first one is the Wikipedia entry). With terabytes of information now a point and a click away, the research landscape has drastically changed. Accessing information has never been easier, but sifting through it has never been harder. Our students are constantly bombarded by spurious information from a 21st-century arsenal composed of 24-hour news networks, blogs, online newspapers, and even YouTube. As teachers, we can vainly attempt to shield our students from an ever-growing information storm, or we can help them acquire the skills to navigate through it.

Matthew Shapiro expects to graduate with an M.Ed. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education this month. Before earning his degree, he taught science at the middle and high school levels.

Vol. 29, Issue 31

 Back to Story

ACCESS DI

Internet access to the requested website has b
DoDDS-E Intern:
[Click here for the procedures I](#)

User/Machine: EUDSDODEA\Domain Users\laure
IP: 10.7.16.34
Category: DoDDS-E Block
Blocked URL: http://ad.doubleclick.net/ad/ew/print
08822957

For further opti