Wikipedia: Benefits & Challenges

Wikipedia (http://www.wikipedia.org), “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit” is an open-source online encyclopedia. Wikipedia gets its name from the Hawaiian word for quick, “wiki.” Wiki refers to programs that allow anyone to access and edit material online. Contributions to the site are anonymous.

Wikipedia creator, Jimmy Wales, founded the site in 2001, envisioning a repository of human knowledge. It has been a tremendous success. There are over 3.7 million articles in 200 languages and it is the 37th most visited site on the Internet.¹ In December, 2005 the site received 2.5 billion page views.²

For some, Wikipedia is a brilliant and useful site, a fully democratic medium. For others, it is a minefield of potentially false or misleading information. Wales himself encourages everyone to take the entries, “With a grain of salt.” He was encouraged when a recent study by the scientific journal Nature, based on 42 random Wikipedia articles, revealed that, as a rule, Wikipedia articles in the sciences were about as accurate as the peer-reviewed Encyclopedia Britannica.³ At the same time, by its very nature as an open-source site, it has been and remains vulnerable to vandalism.

The problem, however, is that many who use the site assume it is an encyclopedia, like any other. For this reason, Wikipedia poses a particularly thorny problem for educators. Should we allow our students to use Wikipedia in our classes? While it is easier to simply say to our classes, “don’t use Wikipedia,” shouldn’t we teach them why it is a problematic source?

Wikipedia Activities: Using Wikipedia as a Teaching Tool

Individual Assignment: Write or Edit a Wikipedia Article
Students choose and research or edit a narrow topic and post it to Wikipedia, the online, open-source encyclopedia. Students see first-hand the possibilities as well as the pitfalls of online research. Alternatively, this could be a class project where students divide a long article that is related to your discipline or course into manageable chunks and then check the reliability of the document. These activities provide students with the opportunity to participate in the production of knowledge.

Group Assignments: Edit a Wikipedia Article
If you don’t want to assign students the extensive task of writing or editing a Wikipedia article on their own, you might try this group activity.

For the whole class:
Find a short Wikipedia article on a topic your students are studying in class.
Give students time to read the article and write a response to the following questions:
1. What are the strengths of the article?
2. What are the weaknesses of the article?
Follow-up with a class discussion about their answers.

In Small Groups:
Break the Wikipedia article into manageable segments for fact-checking, and then assign each to a small group. Reconvene the class and edit the article together.