

In the Classroom 85

Why and How You Should Use Wikipedia in the Classroom

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Stan Skrabut: Well, welcome back. Thanks for taking time to listen to my podcast. I really appreciate it. I know you could be doing other things, probably are doing other things, but you're still hanging out with me, and I really do appreciate it.

This episode, we are going to talk about Wikipedia for your classroom. I know, I know, Wikipedia is evil. It should be banned. Well, don't leave the episode because I think Wikipedia has a place for your classroom, and we should discuss ways that you can use it because I think it's going to make it a better place. I've been a fan of open education resources and open educational movement for a long time, and as a natural result, this is also led into Wikipedia because Wikipedia is an open platform. Individuals can go in, create articles, edit articles, change articles. They can do these things. It's a very open environment.

That's probably where educators, they look at it and say, "Well, if you could change it, then it's not reliable." Well, there's some truth to that, but it can also be a very powerful educational tool. I believe it. It really is an essential tool for your classroom, if you know how it works, how you can harness it, and what really are the positive impacts that you can get by using Wikipedia because we all use it. You may be a closet Wikipedia user, but you're probably using it.

If you're doing a search on Google, odds are you are finding a Wikipedia article probably at the top of the left, and odds are, you probably looked at it. If we're doing this, if we're using this for our informal research, shouldn't we also acknowledge the fact that students are using it? I'm going to talk more about this in a few moments, but Wikipedia is a really powerful tool. For some countries, it is a lifeline to education. They don't have the resources to go purchase the textbooks and purchase these proprietary databases. Wikipedia is it. With that Wikipedia, they are improving their quality of life.

Naturally, I'm puzzled and disappointed why there's not more faculty jumping on board for using Wikipedia, and why so many banned Wikipedia from their classroom? I have seen undergraduate students, even graduate students mentioned Wikipedia as like, "Oh, my God, we can't go there. Wikipedia is evil." Far from the truth. Wikipedia, the research around Wikipedia, it is as good as encyclopedias ever were. Now, should you use Wikipedia in the scholarly articles? Probably not. Should you ban it altogether?

Probably not also.

Wikipedia is a great place to start learning about a topic. A lot of foundational knowledge is being put together, but it can be done better. A lot of people are afraid of Wikipedia because they don't understand it. They haven't taken time to really understand how Wikipedia works, and therefore, because they don't understand it, they ban it entirely. My job is to talk a little bit about the myths, offer some reasons why you should use Wikipedia, and give you some ideas for how you could probably do this.

First of all, what is Wikipedia? Well, according to Wikipedia, Wikipedia is a multilingual online encyclopedia created and maintained as open collaboration project by a community of volunteer editors using a Wiki-based editing system. In a nutshell, it's a collection of web pages that are linked together very tightly. There's 1.9 edits per second, almost two edits per second, and this is being done by editors all over the world. The English Wikipedia has over six million article, and it gets 600 new articles a day. There are 1,100 administrators and 127,000, almost 128,000 active registered users, and so far, there is almost one billion page edits done. That's a lot of stuff, and we just can't ignore it.

The big problem with Wikipedia is, well, folks can change it, and therefore, people can vandalize it. Yes, people can, and they have, but it often gets changed right back very rapidly to what it was. Every single article, if you look in the upper right hand corner, has a history button, and you can see what revisions have been made and who made those particular revisions. There are administrators who are assigned to watch, especially highly controversial articles to make sure that they are being edited properly. If something is being vandalized, it gets resorted back to its original format very rapidly.

The other cool thing about Wikipedia is if you have a page out there, you can monitor the status of your page, or if you've made edits to a page, if you want to keep an eye on that topic, you can monitor the status of that page. Anytime it gets updated, you can get alerted to it. This whole collective society is really working to improve the knowledge of the pages. Research has been done. They've compared it to encyclopedias. Wikipedia is comparable. Nothing is perfect. The folks that are actively involved in Wikipedia are proud of what they've contributed and they want to provide the best product possible.

I am pretty confident for using Wikipedia as a starting point for any of my research. I think in the open education movement, Wikipedia is a great place to pull content in order to provide that foundational knowledge. The thing is if the content is wrong and you know it's wrong, you can fix it. In fact, you can have your students fix it, and that's what we're going to be heading off to in a little bit is the fact that if something is not right or it needs to be improved, you have the ability to improve it.

A lot of the other articles that we get on the web using open education resources, that information could be wrong too. Why do we think that that information is right? Peer review articles, there have been many cases where peer review articles are not factually correct, but for some reason, we trust those. Why? It doesn't really matter where your content is coming from. We still have a responsibility to verify that it's

factually correct, regardless of where it comes from. It could come from Wikipedia or a news article.

News articles, they're posting what they know at the time. It may not always be accurate 100%, but it's accurate at least according to the journalist at the moment they post it until they find more accurate information, and then they change it, and they have updates to it. Same thing with Wikipedia. Why should you use Wikipedia in your classroom? Well, the first reason, and I think the absolute most important reason is only a small percentage of your students will continue on in academics and go further, and therefore, they don't have access to the articles that are behind the paywall that we use in academia.

If we want to teach our students to work in the real world, we have to use real world sources, and Wikipedia is it. Wikipedia is a powerful resource. If you do a search on Google, odds are Wikipedia is going to come up number one. We make the assumption that students are going to continue on to go to grad school, that they're going to be professors, that they're going to get their doctorate, that they're going to have access to these journal articles behind the paywall. That is a small percent. We're talking two standard deviations. It is a small percent.

The greatest majority of folks go on to the internet, do a search because they're trying to solve a problem, and the first thing they come up to probably is a Wikipedia article. I think it's absolutely essential that we teach students how to review the articles to ensure that they are accurate and correct, and if we ban them from our classroom, we have failed them. The normal person does not have access to all these library databases. It only happens in our academic world. We need to start looking at what they're actually going to be using in the real world. Another reason is Wikipedia cited daily. All these other articles, all these articles that are being built by journalists, they're going to Wikipedia also.

A matter of fact, you have probably used Wikipedia to start your own informal research project. Just to get a feel for what's out there, you've probably looked at Wikipedia. You're a closet Wikipedia user. I know it. Wikipedia is coming up number one in the search engine. If you're doing a search, you pop something into Google, that's what's coming up. As I noted, we are asking students to use all these other resources. How can we guarantee that those resources are correct? We can't. Some of those other resources we're asking them to look at, have used Wikipedia for his support.

Another reason I think it is important is having students apply what they're learning, apply their research for the betterment of the world. Wikipedia provides a platform where they can do real meaningful work that contributes to the betterment of the world. It is not just a throwaway assignment. It's not one of those things that only your professor looks at and it gets dumped in the trash can three years later. If it gets out on Wikipedia and it's good stuff, it's going to stay there. That's a meaningful assignment. It's not a throwaway assignment.

Highly respected organizations like the APA and the ASA, the American Sociological Association and the American Psychological Association have started encouraging

scholars and educators to develop Wikipedia. We can be part of this. As educators, as students, we can be part of this. You are helping other people. You're helping those individuals that rely on Wikipedia for knowledge. You're helping them develop. Students are writing for a global audience, and that audience notices. They will make critiques on what a student is writing.

Writing for Wikipedia is a lot harder than just to pull together an essay for a class. There are a lot more constraints. There are a lot more eyeballs that will be looking at a real-world writing. Another cool thing is you can represent unrepresented topic. A lot of what has been written has been written from a specific point of view, typically male, and so a lot of voices have been left out, and this is an opportunity to have those voices heard. It also allows you to touch on topics that haven't necessarily been covered. There is still a lot of room for writing in Wikipedia. We'll talk about that.

Where to start? First of all, let's just go to the very basic thing that, if you assign a research topic to your students, they're going to go on the interwebs and do a Google search and Wikipedia is going to come up, and they're going to look at Wikipedia. That's a great place to start. A matter of fact, start making assignments just around that. The important thing is that I agree Wikipedia is probably should not be the sole source or a cited source in a formal paper. I agree with that, but it makes a great starting point. It makes a great place where you can look at it, look at the article, go to the sources that it references to learn more about that particular topic.

At the end of the article, they have a bibliography of where they got their information. This is a great place for students to start jumping off and digging deeper into a particular topic. As an educator, if you know students are using Wikipedia, ask them how are they validating this information and what did they do to go verify that what Wikipedia was saying was in fact true, how did they dig deeper. That's just a basic starting point. Bring those examples up in the class. Put them up on the screen and start talking about this Wikipedia article and start looking for where it's strong and where there's holes, and what could you do to make it better. Maybe that's also something you would want to do is go ahead and make it better.

Wikipedia is also quite accurate. Right now, we are having a lot of tension in Portland, Oregon with a lot of protests, and I am confident that Wikipedia is being updated almost hourly to reflect what's happening in that part of the world. One of the cool exercises is you can take a month in a year, August 2020, pop it into Wikipedia, and you will get a summary of major events that have happened during that particular month, and from there, you can dig deeper. Each one leads to an article that you can dig deeper. You can use it to stay current on different topics.

As an educator, I honestly believe that before you start to go contribute or have your students contribute to Wikipedia, you should become familiar how Wikipedia works by editing some of your own articles. Wikipedia has set up a format for class assignments. They have a special dashboard that your students are registered against, and as they make updates, that shows up on the dashboard, but it's important that you understand how Wikipedia works. They have very specific training for both educators and students on how to use Wikipedia, the technical aspects, how to edit articles of variety of different things.

Definitely do those things. If you're having your class, having your students use Wikipedia, I would say it should be a requirement that they do that training to make sure that they understand how it works and how to do it properly, because otherwise, you do have those volunteer editors that are out there who could undo all the things that the students were working on. That is a very strong possibility that if you don't get it right, it will get rolled back.

Let's not waste time. Let's do it right. Start creating assignments around Wikipedia. In the show notes, I put a lot of resources related to Wikipedia. There's some folks out there who have gone out and shown their different assignments and how those things work and that you can use it as starting off points for your particular assignment. Wikipedia also has a model, a 12-week model that you can weave into your syllabus for how to do these assignments, everything from learning about Wikipedia, how to draft assignments, how to get them published, how to make updates, spends 12 weeks that you can use in your particular classes.

A lot of different places that you can start. Even on Wikipedia articles, if you look at the article, it'll tell you a lot of different things. It may reference that this was not cited well and so that could be a place where you could go help find better citations and contribute to the citations of something that's already written, or it may show you what's called a stub. These are smaller articles, but they have not been created yet. Somebody may reference something, and as you're looking at the Wikipedia article, it'll be red and underlined, indicating that there's no article for it and you have an opportunity to go create something to add clarity to that. Those are great places just to start off this idea of Wikipedia.

It's also important to avoid really contentious pages. Where there's a lot of controversy, I'd stay away from those pages. Just focus on things that are not yet covered by Wikipedia, or where they're asking for help. There's a lot of places where you can just start by providing help. Wikipedia has a list of these things. They can say, "Hey, we need more information on this." This is a good place to start. It could be in terms of translations. It could be in terms of improving grammar, lots of different ways that you could help. It could be finding images that are Creative Commons images, or taking Creative Commons images that you could use in those articles.

There was an article I looked at is called Teaching Wikipedia without Apologies from Amanda Seligman. I thought she had a really nice way of looking at Wikipedia, as far as a class assignment. She had three parts to this. One, find articles, three articles relating to, in her case, historical topics on Wikipedia, you were looking for a good article, a bad article, and an excellent article. Naturally, it's the student's judgment on what the quality of these articles are. Basically, they collect these articles. Next, to go into special encyclopedias that your college may have, and look for the same content, and try to find those articles and print those out.

Then part three is basically compare the articles from Wikipedia to the encyclopedia and do a compare and contrast of what made these articles better or worse than the other articles, how accurate were they, what the factual details, and just write a reflection on what you found. I thought that was an interesting article.

Other classes, they use a system. Wikipedia grades articles as a good article, a featured article. These are for exceptional works. Some instructors will assign a grade based on if you get a good article or a featured article status, an A or an A+. For a good article, that is about one in 800 articles. The featured articles are one in 1,200 articles. Those are pretty tough to get, considering how many articles are on Wikipedia. There's guidance on how the articles are supposed to be crafted. The closer that you adhere to Wikipedia's guidelines, the more likely that you're going to end up with one of these rating.

Other things that you can do is as a class, review Wikipedia articles and determine which ones need to be improved and then break up the class to work on different articles and improve them. You're improving the citation, the information, anything that can enhance the article to make it more useful for someone else.

Another strategy that you can use is if you are, say, working on a foreign language at a certain level, students could provide assistance with translations. For example, if an article is in another language, but it needs to be translated to English, that could be a wonderful assignment for some upper-level language students, or in some cases that you're taking English and translating it into another language. Knowing my experience with languages, that would certainly be a lot harder for me, but at very upper-level students that could be within their realm.

Just fact-checking Wikipedia pages, just simple fact-check, having students as part of your class, you're looking at a page and when you start questioning things, this could be a great place where you can start contributing. This also let students know how to be a citizen in this open world. One, how easy it is to possibly change stuff, but how hard it is not to have it rolled back because it was inaccurate.

Those are ways that you can use Wikipedia. I say, bring it right into your classroom. Start with analyzing Wikipedia articles, look for where they can stand improvement. In some cases, take it to the next level where you are filling gaps that are missing. Definitely, this makes it a lot more real for students and they take a lot of pride in their ownership if they have something out there that they can show off to other people that they created. This could be really powerful stuff. Don't discount Wikipedia. Should you cite it as a formal source in your document? No, but it's out there. With the amount of content, it is an information source.

Academics, I think we have a responsibility to make it better. Go out there, read some good Wikipedia articles, and while you're reading, here's a quick plug for my book.