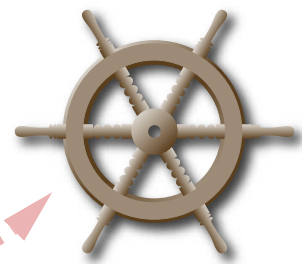


Charting Your Course FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Wikipedia in the Classroom: Teaching students about information authentication

by Matthew Johnson, Media Education Specialist, Media Awareness Network

Discussions with teachers about the Internet in the classroom often come back to a particular refrain: “Students just don’t know how to do research anymore; all they use is *Google* and *Wikipedia*.”

It’s certainly true that students need to learn better research skills: in my own time as a teacher, I was frequently amazed to see supposed “digital natives” who did not have the slightest clue how to do a Boolean search, how to judge the likely usefulness of a *Google* hit before clicking on it, or even how to open links in a new page so they wouldn’t have to navigate back to *Google* if it didn’t pan out.

Forbidding students from using *Wikipedia*, though, is a bit like telling them not to use the library. In fact, *Wikipedia* is a lot like a library: it has a lot of different things in it, assembled by a variety of people from a variety of sources; some of them are useful, some less so. We don’t forbid students from using the library; instead we teach them how to find what they need there, and to judge whether a source is useful and reliable.

Henry Jenkins, Head of Comparative Media Studies at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), suggests that learning to use *Wikipedia* is a good way for students to acquire what he calls *New Media Literacies*, particularly those termed Collective Intelligence (collaborating with others in creating, obtaining and judging information), Judgment (assessing the reliability and usefulness of information), Networking (finding, synthesizing and spreading information) and Negotiation (moving between different contexts, formats and communities).¹

The main concern teachers have with *Wikipedia*, of course, is its reliability. It’s true that because of its open structure, *Wikipedia* is susceptible to error—but in practice it seems to be less so than one might expect. In fact, a well-known article in the magazine *Nature* found it to be on a

par with the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in its science articles. Roy Rosenzweig, Professor of History and New Media at George Mason University, found it was about as accurate as Microsoft’s professionally-developed *Encarta* encyclopedia and compared well to the prestigious *American National Biography Online*.² More importantly, the problems Rosenzweig finds with *Wikipedia*—its articles often favour lively detail over historical significance, they adopt a post of neutral objectivity rather than reflecting the ongoing debates among historians—are common to all tertiary texts such as encyclopedia. In effect, Rosenzweig is saying that *Wikipedia* is no worse as a source than a high school history textbook, most of which share similar flaws.

While the problem of reliability should not be ignored, *Wikipedia* can be used to teach students to be critical readers. As a consequence of its openness, *Wikipedia* offers many ways to judge the reliability of its articles. To begin with, any *Wikipedia* user who is concerned about the quality of an article can place a cleanup banner, for instance, that the tone of the piece may not be fully neutral, that it may lack corroborating sources, or that the author or a contributor to the article may have a conflict of interest with its subject. In this way *Wikipedia* is no different from any other source (particularly any online source), in that it must be approached critically and skeptically.

Wikipedia has a number of other features for judging the reliability of an article, though they are less obvious than the cleanup ban-

ners. For instance, almost every *Wikipedia* article is rated based on its accuracy, completeness and style. These ratings follow a somewhat eccentric scale from Stub (a basic description, meant to be expanded) to Start (more developed than a stub, but lacking in outside sources) and ascending to C, B, GA (“good article”) status to A; *Wikipedia* recommends that only articles with a GA status or better be used in serious research. Articles can also be nominated for “Featured Article” status on the grounds of being “professional, outstanding, and thorough; a definitive source for encyclopedic information.” (A guide to this rating scale can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Version_1.0_Editorial_Team/Assessment.) These ratings are found on the article’s Discussion page, accessible through one of the tabs at the top of the page.

Another useful tab for verifying reliability is the one leading to the History page. This page summarizes all of the edits that have been made, allowing a reader to see the changes that have been made to the article since its creation.

Aside from teaching students to check the reliability of articles, teachers can introduce students to the idea that knowledge is not a fixed body of facts but rather is constantly evolving—and students can be part of that evolution. Using the Edit tab, which is the source of *Wikipedia*’s fame, teachers can have students edit an article with the aim of raising its rating.

Using *Wikipedia* in the classroom has its challenges and it, like any encyclopedia, should never be a student’s only source. Its flaws, though, highlight issues that students will encounter with even the most authoritative sources, and provide a unique opportunity to teach students to view all sources of information critically.

Media Awareness Network has recently created a resource aimed at helping teachers integrating *Wikipedia* into the classroom. *Taming the Wild Wiki*, a lesson for students in Grades 7-9, helps teachers incorporate *Wikipedia* into their classrooms and teaches students how to use it in an effective and responsible way. For more information on this and other great media literacy resources, visit www.media-awareness.ca.

Media Awareness Network (MNet) and the Canadian Teachers’ Federation (CTF) are hosting the fourth annual Media Literacy Week, November 2-6, 2009.

Together, MNet and CTF are encouraging Canadians across the country to get involved in media literacy activities in their communities. This year’s theme *Media Literacy in the Digital Age* emphasizes the multiple literacy skills needed by today’s youth for accessing, evaluating, repurposing, creating and distributing digital media content.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Jenkins, Henry. *What Wikipedia can Teach us About the new Media Literacies* (part one). June 26, 2007. <http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/06/what_wikipedia_can_teach_us_ab.html>

² Rosenzweig, Roy, *Can History be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past*. Center for history and new media. 1999. <<http://chnm.gmu.edu/essays-on-history-new-media/essays/?essayid=42>>

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