

A Stand Against Wikipedia (from [Higher Ed Newsroom](#), 26 Jan. 2007)

As [Wikipedia](#) has become more and more popular with students, some professors have become increasingly concerned about the online, reader-produced encyclopedia.

While plenty of professors have complained about the lack of accuracy or completeness of entries, and some have discouraged or tried to bar students from using it, the history department at Middlebury College is trying to take a stronger, collective stand. It voted this month to bar students from citing the Web site as a source in papers or other academic work. All faculty members will be telling students about the policy and explaining why material on Wikipedia — while convenient — may not be trustworthy.

“As educators, we are in the business of reducing the dissemination of misinformation,” said Don Wyatt, chair of the department. “Even though Wikipedia may have some value, particularly from the value of leading students to citable sources, it is not itself an appropriate source for citation,” he said.

The department made what Wyatt termed a consensus decision on the issue after discussing problems professors were seeing as students cited incorrect information from Wikipedia in papers and on tests. In one instance, Wyatt said, a professor noticed several students offering the same incorrect information, from Wikipedia.

There was some discussion in the department of trying to ban students from using Wikipedia, but Wyatt said that didn’t seem appropriate. Many Wikipedia entries have good bibliographies, Wyatt said. And any absolute ban would just be ignored. “There’s the issue of freedom of access,” he said. “And I’m not in the business of promulgating unenforceable edicts.”

Wyatt said that the department did not specify punishments for citing Wikipedia, and that the primary purpose of the policy was to educate, not to be punitive. He said he doubted that a paper would be rejected for having a single Wikipedia footnote, but that students would be told that they shouldn’t do so, and that multiple violations would result in reduced grades or even a failure. “The important point that we wish to communicate to all students taking courses and submitting work in our department in the future is that they cite Wikipedia at their peril,” he said.

He stressed that the objection of the department to Wikipedia wasn’t its online nature, but its unedited nature, and he said students need to be taught to go for quality information, not just convenience.

The frustrations of Middlebury faculty members are by no means unique. Last year, Alan Liu, a professor of English at the University of California at Santa Barbara, adopted a policy that Wikipedia “is not appropriate as the primary or sole reference for anything that is central to an argument, complex, or controversial.” Liu said that it was too early to tell what impact his policy is having. In explaining his rationale — which [he shared with an e-mail list](#) — he wrote that he had “just read a paper about the relation between structuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism in which every reference was to the Wikipedia articles on those topics with no awareness that there was any need to read a primary work or even a critical work.”

Wikipedia officials agree — in part — with Middlebury’s history department. “That’s a sensible policy,” Sandra Ordonez, a spokeswoman, said in an e-mail interview. “Wikipedia is the ideal place to start your research and get a global picture of a topic, however, it is not an authoritative source. In fact, we recommend that students check the facts they find in Wikipedia against other sources. Additionally, it is generally good research practice to cite an original source when writing a paper, or completing an exam. It’s usually not advisable, particularly at the university level, to cite an encyclopedia.”

Ordonez acknowledged that, given the collaborative nature of Wikipedia writing and editing, “there is no guarantee an article is 100 percent correct,” but she said that the site is shifting its focus from growth to improving quality, and that the site is a great resource for students. “Most articles are continually being edited and improved upon, and most contributors are real lovers of knowledge who have a real desire to improve the quality of a particular article,” she said.

Experts on digital media said that the Middlebury history professors’ reaction was understandable and reflects growing concern among faculty members about the accuracy of what students find online. But some worry that bans on citing Wikipedia may not deal with the underlying issues.

Roy Rosenzweig, director of the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, did an analysis of the accuracy of Wikipedia for *The Journal of American History*, and he found that in many entries, Wikipedia was as accurate or more accurate than more traditional encyclopedias. He said that the quality of material was inconsistent, and that biographical entries were generally well done, while more thematic entries were much less so. Like Ordonez, he said the real problem is one of college students using encyclopedias when they should be using more advanced sources.

“College students shouldn’t be citing encyclopedias in their papers,” he said. “That’s not what college is about. They either should be using primary sources or serious secondary sources.”

In the world of college librarians, a major topic of late has been how to guide students in the right direction for research, when Wikipedia and similar sources are so easy. Some of those who have been involved in these discussions said that the Middlebury history department’s action pointed to the need for more outreach to students.

Lisa Hinchliffe, head of the undergraduate library and coordinator of information literacy at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, said that earlier generations of students were in fact taught when it was appropriate (or not) to consult an encyclopedia and why for many a paper they would never even cite a popular magazine or non-scholarly work. “But it was a relatively constrained landscape,” and students didn’t have easy access to anything equivalent to Wikipedia, she said. “It’s not that students are being lazy today. It’s a much more complex environment.”

When she has taught, and spotted footnotes to sources that aren’t appropriate, she’s considered that “a teachable moment,” Hinchliffe said. She said that she would be interested to see how Middlebury professors react when they get the first violations of their policy, and said she thought there could be positive discussions about why sources are or aren’t good ones. That kind of teaching, she said, is important “and can be challenging.”

Steven Bell, associate librarian for research and instructional services at Temple University, said of the Middlebury approach: “I applaud the effort for wanting to direct students to good quality resources,” but he said he would go about it in a different way.

“I understand what their concerns are. There’s no question that [on Wikipedia and similar sites] some things are great and some things are questionable. Some of the pages could be by eighth graders,” he said. “But to simply say ‘don’t use that one’ might take students in the wrong direction from the perspective of information literacy.”

Students face “an ocean of information” today, much of it of poor quality, so a better approach would be to teach students how to “triangulate” a source like Wikipedia, so they could use other sources to tell whether a given entry could be trusted. “I think our goal should be to equip students with the critical thinking skills to judge.”

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

Comments

Three Cheers for Middlebury!

Wikipedia has its uses but as a source in a term paper is not one of them.

You’re listening to R.E.M.’s “Man on the Moon” and you wonder, “Who in the heck is Mott the Hoople?” Well, Wikipedia is the place to take a quick look and find out! But, now you want to write the definitive paper about Mott the Hoople? Wikipedia is no longer the place for you.

[Christian Anderson](#), Penn State, at 5:55 am EST on January 26, 2007

Why not ban professors who ban indiscriminately?

Kudos to Roy Rosenzweig for rightly pointing out that the core of the problem is not Wikipedia and the quality or integrity of its information. It’s that we haven’t successfully communicated to students that citing any general knowledge encyclopedia—including Britannica—in college-level research is a mistake. Blaming Wikipedia is a red herring. I wish as much attention were devoted to the challenge of teaching effective research practices, including the dubious practice of prescriptions like this one.

[David Blakesley](#), Dr. at Purdue, at 6:05 am EST on January 26, 2007

If a school is admitting students that think that Wikipedia is an acceptable source, the school is essentially admitting that it will admit anyone with a pulse. How can someone get through high school and not know the basics of library research? So, this makes Middlebury look bad.

Unfortunately, the policy is next to unenforceable, since students can simply just NOT cite something.

[Larry](#), at 7:45 am EST on January 26, 2007

Wiki woes

I've contributed to a lot of the American history articles in Wikipedia. The quality of information is usually better than encyclopedias like Britannica and Encarta, and usually Wiki has far more detail. Best of all Wiki has many links internally and to valuable outside web sources. It has many long bibliographies that are much better than students usually find, with links to sources (like JSTOR) that can get student research launched faster than any other source. The problem with the Middlebury "solution" is that it is negative as they provide no alternatives for their students.

Richard Jensen, at 7:45 am EST on January 26, 2007

Nice

I'm very pleased to see that someone found a way to name-drop Mott the Hoople on Inside Higher Ed. Good job, Christian! "Rock and roll's a loser's game, it mesmerizes and I can't explain the reasons for the sights and for the sounds...."

Tom McCool, at 8:01 am EST on January 26, 2007

Mr. Jensen:

You don't know that Middlebury doesn't provide alternatives; you know only that the article doesn't report that they do. The article also points out—correctly—that Wikipedia can be used as an initial source, but students need to check what they find and to find source material wherever possible. Middlebury history faculty may well explain this to students (as I do).

Larry, unfortunately, Middlebury doesn't require portfolios for admission, so they can't check on the quality of research each student has done. Also, I recently took a graduate education course for which Wikipedia was considered an acceptable source for the final research paper. (I managed to condense 5 pages of complaint about the class, including quotations, into 2, which I sent to the director.) If explicit use of Wikipedia is so widespread, Middlebury might be left with no students if they refused to admit anyone who used it.

Judith, Alternatives, at 8:45 am EST on January 26, 2007

What if students judged their professors?

How about educating students to become better judges of what they find on Wikipedia. And, perhaps when they find errors, how to correct them.

When I am using Wikipedia in a field in which I am knowledgeable, I sometimes enjoy discerning who in the field has contributed what part of an article – but if students get to that point, they might become able to make independent judgments about what their professors are telling them – or about the reading they are being assigned by their professors.

John LobellPratt Institute

John Lobell, Professor at Pratt Institute, at 8:45 am EST on January 26, 2007

Wikipedia isn't the issue

Wikipedia is not at issue here. The issues are the ignorant students who think they can cite tertiary sources in an academic paper and the professors who let them get away with it.

Why is this even an article about Wikipedia? Citing "World Book" would be twice as bad.

Dominic Moore, Publicist, at 8:45 am EST on January 26, 2007

Jensen

I agree, Wikipedia has a lot of links to quotable references. so what's the big deal? Just quote the information sources that Wiki sends you to, without citing Wiki as a origin of the information.

Craig C., political pundit at <http://blogresponder.blogspot.com>, at 8:46 am EST on January 26, 2007

You mean there are Profs that accept papers citing Wikipedia?

Wait a minute, this story must be a joke because when I looked up Middlebury University on Wikipedia, it said it said the college went bankrupt and was closed...

For four years it has been my policy to give an F to any student paper that uses Wikipedia as a academic source (students may cite it as a source of folk knowledge). But I go much further than this, sometimes I project wikipedia above me and enter convincing but bogus information into existing entries (change dates, killing spouses, or adding the influence of tidal forces of Visigoths or plagues throughout history) to show students why they shouldn't trust this public graffiti board. Believe me, not even Mott the Hoppie is safe...

Prof. Von Grunt Truck, at 9:00 am EST on January 26, 2007

Teachable Moments

"When she has taught, and spotted footnotes to sources that aren't appropriate, she's considered that 'a teachable moment,' Hinchliffe said."

I agree with Hinchliffe that finding inadequate sources in an academic paper is a teachable moment. The student's mistaken use of a non-peer-reviewed source can be pointed out and she can learn to cite proper academic evidence.

Educators can even take it one step further — use Wikipedia to foster critical thinking skills. Anyone can edit Wikipedia — maybe a good instructional strategy would be to have students look at specific articles, do research in primary and academic sources, and actually fix what is inaccurate.

I'm glad the article pointed out good and bad aspects of Wikipedia. I'm hoping that the negative points do not hinder the use of the technology itself — student created Wikis can be an excellent elearning instructional strategy.

Betzi Bateman, at 9:00 am EST on January 26, 2007

Wikipedia

I just gave a presentation on Wikipedia for students in my historical methods class. I mentioned the study done by the journal Nature that showed both Wikipedia and Encyclopedia Britannica contained factual errors. I then showed them how Wikipedia gets edited, as well as controls against vandalism of websites. My intent was not to necessarily endorse Wikipedia, but to have an honest discussion about its uses and abuses. I would rather students say they used a Wikipedia entry for the bibliographic information than claim they found these citations on their own.

Heather Prescott, Central CT State University, at 9:15 am EST on January 26, 2007

Wikipedia ban

For some time my colleagues and I have cautioned students that Wikipedia must be used cautiously. In my classes I explain how it works and the strengths and weaknesses that arise from this open system. I tell them that it may be a good place to start exploring some topic but that they should not cite it, because of the potential risk. As is true in other cases when instructions are not followed, Wikipedia citations detract from potential grades. It is worthwhile to discuss briefly the ethics of entering bad information. I hope the individual who demonstrates the way such faulty entries can easily be added will also clean up this "graffiti" immediately afterwards. Like Blanche DuBois, Wikipedia depends on the kindness of strangers.

Kathryn Kemp, Is this news?, at 9:30 am EST on January 26, 2007

Why just Wikipedia?

Quote: "College students shouldn't be citing encyclopedias in their papers," he said. "That's not what college is about. They either should be using primary sources or serious secondary sources."

This is the real crux of it... why are we debating the merits of Wikipedia? It's good for some uses and bad for others, but regardless, any secondary source should be treated with some skepticism. Certainly for a term paper one's sources should be something other than *any* kind of encyclopedia. This is not grade school...

Chris, Penn State, at 10:00 am EST on January 26, 2007

Another Option? Marginalizing

Professors could simply ban certain questionable sources.

But maybe it would be better simply to inform students that dubious on line sources cannot be used as primary sources. Maybe not even as secondary sources, but at most a tertiary source. It can be required that the weight of the paper in terms of arguments, expositions, critiques (etc) must depend on primary and secondary sources—all thoroughly documented.

The dubious sources could be marginalized rather than banned.

R. Birt, Dr., at 10:00 am EST on January 26, 2007

Excellent (and Easy) Academic Wiki Alternatives

As a teaching librarian, I appreciated Lisa Hinchliffe's comment on "teachable moments". Wiki has provided me with many such moments, leading to some great class discussions about reliable information sources.

And students DO now have easy access to reliable alternatives. Solid academic encyclopedias abound, both in print and online, and are an excellent and reliable alternative to Wiki. Talk to your local librarian.

Barry Cull, Information Services Librarian at University of New Brunswick, Canada, at 10:05 am EST on January 26, 2007

What's so bad?

Rather than using this as an opportunity for learning about information literacy, the professors, in typical fashion, take a punitive stance towards an instrument that has for the first time in history opened up knowledge to everyone, as opposed to keeping it hidden and locked away in dusty old ivory towers. Specialized knowledge is no excuse for job security.

I agree that Wikipedia is not always the most accurate resource, but it is the most accessible. Where is it written that learning has to be difficult and hard work? Why can't learning be interesting and fun and use tools that engage students, instead of turning them away? Professors may think that being dull and obtuse equates with learning and intelligence, but I disagree...and there is no evidence for it.

If professors do not like Wikipedia, then they should come up with something better. Then again, that would require they actually know something about how people learn, as opposed to extensive knowledge in their subject matter. They know it will never happen, so it is much easier to prohibit the learning tool than engage it. How sad.

PS, at 10:35 am EST on January 26, 2007

Wicked Wiki

Before I got the nice paying job I currently hold, I would tell my students to use mostly Spark Notes...encyclopedias and journals and books are too wordy and confusing. I always had A to A- students at the end of each semester.

nate zukerman, university president at anon, at 10:35 am EST on January 26, 2007

I applaud this policy, particularly the portion of it that involves actually teaching students how to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate sources. However, I do have some concerns: 1. When I explained the limits of Wikipedia to my students, many of them simply shifted to other websites that syndicate Wikipedia content, like answers.com. 2. Telling students not to cite the source could also mean that they continue to use it but simply do not provide citations—perhaps even more problematic than the original use itself.

ML, at 10:50 am EST on January 26, 2007

re citations to Wikipedia

A parallel debate is going on in the legal community. Should people cite to Wikipedia in legal briefs or other court papers where documentation for factual assertions is customary? Similarly, in the law school context, in law review articles, student term papers, or

research exercises? The general standard is to cite a primary source if possible, secondary sources if necessary. Legal opinions and briefs are full of citations to treatises and legal encyclopedias, all of which are, of course, edited works that exist in fixed hard-copy formats. To me, one of the problems of citing to Wikipedia is that the cite has time-limited value. That is, by the time somebody is reading a document and wants to go to a cited source for confirmation or more information, the Wikipedia entry may have changed substantially and the very point for which it was cited may not longer be part of the entry or may state something entirely different. The changeability of Wikipedia makes it a problematic source for me. When I noted this to an info-technology maven on our faculty, she said that Wikipedia entries exist in versions, and one can cite to a particular version (perhaps just as one would cite to a particular edition of a treatise that has gone through multiple editions, such as Williston on Contracts). Clearly, as our information technology evolves, the rules for citation will have to evolve with them. But getting back to a main point made by many above, students writing history papers for a college course should be focusing on primary sources when possible and edited books by reputable authorities when primary sources are not available. I would assume that is part of the instruction in historical methodology that students are supposed to be getting by taking a college-level history course with a research paper requirements....

Art Leonard, Professor at New York Law School, at 11:05 am EST on January 26, 2007

empower students

Effective pedagogy would allow/require students to reject Wikipedia and other encyclopedia as a source. Blanket condemnations are a blunt tool that inhibits the development of student autonomy and encourages the growth of student passivity.

anderson, at 12:35 pm EST on January 26, 2007

I'm teaching a new course right now in which we are building a wiki: the students are doing mostly original research with nineteenth-century materials and are putting their findings up on our course wiki. My hope is that when the course ends, I'll have created some ideal contributors to Wikipedia.

My feeling is that the purpose of citing a source is to enable the reader to judge the authority of the source. I agree that Wikipedia (like the Encyclopedia Britannica), isn't an appropriate source for a college research paper, especially because it's unedited. But banning a single source and expecting that to help create educated students is like banning a single food from your diet and expecting to lose weight.

Amanda French, Assistant Professor at NCSU, at 12:35 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Prof. Grunt von Truck and Online Vandalism

Prof. Von Grunt Truck, please do not pee in my community pool just to demonstrate that people shouldn't drink the water.

When you show your students how easy it is to add junk to Wikipedia, I hope that you push "Show Preview" instead of "Save Page."

Dennis G. Jerz, Assoc. Professor of English — New Media Journalism at Seton Hill University, at 1:00 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Prof Von Grunt Truck, it is Middlebury COLLEGE, not University. The problem with your search was not the encyclopedia, but the searcher. Wikipedia is, like any encyclopedia, a place to begin researching a topic, not a place to end it. If encyclopedias had no role to play in research, they would not be found in university libraries. Every search starts somewhere. The research value of Wikipedia is not to be found in what it tells us about a topic, but rather where it sends us to really learn about it.

Michael, at 1:00 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Hear Hear!

Students need to learn that going to the original source (as much as possible) is always the best way to research. Accuracy is important, and I don't think most students understand how wrong secondary sources can be. Instead, students trust anything in black and white.

I don't think we can fairly draw conclusions about the students' intelligence or Middlebury's standards, as Larry does. Simmer down, Larry. Even in high schools with strong academics, standards for research papers can be lax since test scores are often considered more important. Furthermore, know-it-all students (and I was one of them!) have the tendency to ignore teacher instruction on issues just like this. Hopefully, Middlebury can get students' attention this way.

Meegan B., at 1:21 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Really?

"Should people cite to Wikipedia in legal briefs or other court papers where documentation for factual assertions is customary?"

I cannot even imagine citing Wikipedia in any court filing. Is this question really being entertained by law school instructors? Are people training law students to rely on Wikipedia in legal practice?

JBM, at 1:30 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Authoritative Sources

I think Wiki's modesty is refreshing. I am far more worried about the search for the "real" authority. There is some comfort in genuinely well peer-reviewed materials in a given discipline. But we have to face the fact that, as Henry Bauer notes (Scientific Literacy and the Myth of the Scientific Method), "Science[in any given field] is what scientists say is science." Try the following for a great secondary source: "The Dictionary of Disorder" by Alix Spiegel. An absolute howler of an expose of the almost total unreliability of "authority" in psychotherapy, the various editions of the DSM overseen by Robert Spitzer. It is not the fault of the worthies who put together the DSM that lawyers and social workers, welfare offices and insurance companies treat the DSM as a bible so much as the need of courts, agencies and their actors to have some "authority" to appeal to. An awful lot of current economic theory in this country has elements which have been refuted by nobel prize winning economists. But the need for some "authoritative system" is so great that the discipline simply ignores the counter arguments, appeals to the "robustness" of their theory and proceeds in mental peace. Because of the importance of feeling a peace with abortion, hardly anyone wants to go back and look at the actual studies showing increased risk of cancer. So they cite some NIH white-wash as "The Truth". Original careful research, peer-reviewed

and argued out is no guarantee of respect. And as to sources, consider that Spiegel's piece appeared in The New Yorker, when it should have been enshrined in every office that uses the DSM to determine the destinies of humans.

Stanislaus Dundon, Professor Emeritus at CSU Sacramento, at 2:05 pm EST on January 26, 2007

I don't agree with instructors banning the use of a research tool (correct or incorrect). Part of research is identifying the truths from fiction. If the professors are so concerned about the accuracy of a source they should be active educators and correct the information with their supporting factual data. If it is their stated opinion then it is just that their opinion.

I feel this is another major reason we have an educational problem in our country. We have instructors/professors that will complain but will do little to correct to problem. They sit and wait for others to correct the problem, and criticize if the other gets it wrong based upon bad or flawed data.

SAS, at 2:05 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Pelican Shit

Wikipedia is a leading source of information about pelican shit. Kenneth sits upon the rock.

Billy Bob Bluxo, at 2:55 pm EST on January 26, 2007

require wiki

I turned the wiki issue on its head and required students to read wikipedia sources, to read scholarly literature about how wiki works, and to compare a specific wiki article to at least three other encyclopedias as well as peer-reviewed academic literature—in effect, having each of them duplicate Roy Rosenzweig's study in the JAH. Most students arrived at the fundamental question that wikipedia raises: why do we trust what ANYONE says? Some decided they believed in the "wisdom of the crowd," but many realized that expertise plays a role in shaping knowledge. Virtually every student determined that Wikipedia was only a starting point, and they could articulate why that was true—conclusions that they reached on their own. Prohibition never works.

christopher miller, at 2:55 pm EST on January 26, 2007

'A Stand Against Wikipedia'

Giving students a list of what sources they can or cannot use seems to be of very limited value. We want, I think, to teach them how to evaluate sources and think critically. I tell them that Google/wikipedia/Britannica/textbooks are excellent places to start but that they then need to move on from there. Also, rather than tell them that a particular source is useless I challenge them to get confirmation from one or two other sources. Getting students used to comparing sources on particular topics teaches them about the topic itself and gives them a better chance at getting the facts right. It also teaches them about the different biases and the different ways you can tell the same story. I also give them extra credit for finding errors in the textbook ...

Kate, PhD Candidate, at 2:55 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Perhaps there is an opportunity here. An outright ban of Wikipedia seems extreme, and academically stifling. What would be alternatives that could contribute back to the Global knowledge base?

How about the following? Go ahead and use Wikipedia as a reference, but you are required to cross-reference any facts with other sources. If there are conflicts, do further research to determine fact from inaccuracies. Students would then be required to submit these conflicts to Wikipedia, and hopefully over time, Wikipedia as a resource will become more credible in its accuracy.

The issue isn't "don't use a participatory knowledge-base as a resource". The core issue seems credibility or the resource. Why not be pro-active and contribute to building more accuracy into our collective resources? Embrace the global collective that has emerged from the Internet, rather than shun away from.

Eric Hammond, at 3:15 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Students should be taught that no source of information is absolutely safe. In the sciences even top journals abound with errors. For example if you were to look at articles in the journal nature from the 1980's you would doubtless find many articles claiming things that today we have well established are untrue, this is not reason for despair however, the answer is simply to consult multiple independent sources and consider the evidence. Primary, secondary and tertiary sources all have their place and wikipedia certainly does as well. If instead of complaining about wikipedia we all helped correct errors we found in it, we could make it an even more valuable resource for the world.

PS Prof. Von Grunt Truck, i hope you dont actually publish these inaccuracies...as an educator I would hope that you could appreciate the worlds largest collaborative effort to freely disseminate knowledge. It may not be perfect but I think it can help many people if we let it.

MB, Not even NATURE is safe at UC, at 3:36 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Flexible Wiki

Citing Wiki as a source is problematic for me because of the easy to change nature of the information. It is possible / probable that between the information gathering stage and then original citation and when someone reads the article and reviews the citation that the text in questions can be changed. Regardless of the accuracy of the information its ability to morph over time without some way to "fix" it poses major challenges.

Miklos Gaal, at 3:36 pm EST on January 26, 2007

A Stand For Wikipedia

Call me crazy, but I'm assigning Wikipedia as my textbook in Western Civ this semester. Yikes! you might well say, but before you give up on me as hopelessly deluded, read the post in my blog (cited below) in which I describe the method to my madness.

[Mills Kelly](#), Prof. at George Mason University, at 3:36 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Comment on: 'A Stand Against Wikipedia

Dear Scott,

I read your article on Wikipedia and I'm glad that this information is getting out to students. I am a doctoral student who during my Master's program, constantly used Wikipedia as a source and it affected my grades fiercely but no one directed me away from it or explained that it was not an accurate source.

Students don't realize that even the creator of Wikipedia has issued statement that the site should not be used as a scholarly source as it is written and updated by readers and the content may not be accurate.

If students want to learn a subject correctly, they should go to real sources like books, journal articles, and more and learn the information that they are seeking correctly. With the technology we have today, full academic libraries can be accessed from our homes. Many schools have access to them and they are open for their student's use.

Laurelee Curcione, at 3:55 pm EST on January 26, 2007

"To me, one of the problems of citing to Wikipedia is that the cite has time-limited value."

Wikipedia is far better on this score than almost any other online resource, because it stores a history of old versions of the pages. If you put the date and time of your access in the citation (as you should for online sources), then I can go back and see exactly what the page in question looked like when you cited it. I can also look at any changes made since, and see if they affect what you were citing it for. With any non-wiki website, the page I look at could be totally different from the one you cited, and there wouldn't be any way for me to know.

Chris, at 4:01 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Prof. Von Grunt Truck vandalizing Wikipedia?

Well, Google doesn't know of a professor with that name.

So, we either have a troll, or do we have an insignificant professor who admits of vandalizing Wikipedia, just because he can?

Sam Johnston, at 4:13 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Thank God for Professor Von Grunt Truck

I'm glad that Prof. Von Grunt Truck shows students just how untrustworthy wikipedia is. Those of you who are claiming he is doing something wrong must not understand what a horrible source wikipedia is.

When I teach research methods courses I teach students that people being interviewed will often lie when asked certain questions. I demonstrate this in class and I encourage them to never rely on survey data for any information that can be gathered by other means. And by the way, if you can't find Prof. von Grunt Truck in wikipedia...just wait a few days or weeks and check wikipedia, I am sure you will find a very scholarly and authoritative entry on his life, times and accomplishments.

Elwood, at 4:50 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Prudence

Wouldn't it be more prudent to force the student to collaborate the information on Wikipedia with more sources.

This would really teach a student how to research for information and have that information be valid.

I think learning how to research is as important as the information they are searching for.

TheSol.com

TheSol.com, at 4:50 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Citing Wikipedia (using a particular revision)

Most people recognize the value in having a dynamic encyclopedia. You may not realize that you can cite an article, for example, the featured article today about the [[history of saffron]] (see, e.g., http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_saffron), but also a particular version of the article, by using the "cite this article" link in the toolbox on the left side of the screen. This enables a professor to assign a particular revision of an article for reading, with the confidence it is what the professor was actually reading when they decided to assign it. Also, the "history" tab for the article, which is present for every wiki page, allows a reader to use the "diff" function to see the precise additions and deletions from one version to the next.

Technically, Wikipedia is a massive database of text documents with metadata about versions. This type of version control is often overlooked in favor of the typical manner of reading, by default, the most recent version. Precision is possible for those who care to try.

Thank you for the great comments about Wikipedia!

Brad Patrick, General Counsel at Wikimedia Foundation, at 4:55 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Von Grunt

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Ossman#Trivia

a, at 5:35 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Oh noes!!!!!!

he had "just read a paper about the relation between structuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism in which every reference was to the Wikipedia articles on those topics with no awareness that there was any need to read a primary work or even a critical work."

Oh the humanities! Someone's not going to read a critical work on deconstruction, what are we going to do!?

BlogReader, at 6:55 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Huzzah for Mills Kelly and other professors who are more interested in teaching a new generation of scholars how to think and create knowledge.

Students need to understand that Wikipedia is not a scholarly source, but it is a great place to start looking for information. Every fact in Wikipedia *should* be citable, so Wikipedia need not be the final source for any information. Wikipedia is new technology, much like handheld calculators were a generation ago. Institutions would do well to jump out in front of this technology and teach students acceptable uses for the technology so that it doesn't become a crutch.

Jon K, at 6:55 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Wikiality is for Postmodern Bushite Nitwits

Mills Kelly: OK, you are crazy. Information about your class has been posted on various lists of wikiartists who are slowly infiltrating and transforming wikipedia to a warehouse of intentionally distorted information. They are thrilled to be adding a layer of garbage to your overpriced elite classroom soon to be filled with students learning the "value" of wikiality. Have fun explaining this to your dean and tenure committee.

Sam Johnston: Sure enough, Prof. von Grunt Truck does turn out to be a real person:<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gruntruck>
Prof. David Ossman, Ralph Spoilsport Prof. of Auto Sales at F.S.T., at 9:36 pm EST on January 26, 2007

Instead of banning Wikipedia...

...you could just design assessments that make sources like Wikipedia redundant. If there's any room for an encyclopedic regurgitation of accepted knowledge, then an encyclopedia will always fit the bill...

Meanwhile, banning Wikipedia sounds a bit like intellectual censorship to me.

The article has a link to Alan Liu's discussion of Wikipedia on the Humanist Discussion Group mailing list. Years ago, the same group all but wrote off the idea that any serious scholarship could come out of presses like Peter Lang and Mellen (<http://tinyurl.com/2pqj8w>).

Perhaps Middlebury College will consider banning books from those presses next?

And, while they're at it, perhaps they'll also consider banning those edited collections that *seemed* such a good idea at the time of the conference...

It occurs to me that all scholarship, however well-researched, is provisional and has the potential to contain factual errors or be unreliable: perhaps students should stop reading altogether?

Puplet, at 5:36 am EST on January 27, 2007

missing the point

The goal of undergrad students is NOT to produce the best scholarship they can. It is to produce whatever crap might satisfy the idiot teaching assistant who's going to grade their paper and then get on with their real lives.

Wikipedia suits those requirements most of the time. A good library would, too, but with a great deal more investment of time and effort. And for what? To get an A- instead of a B-? When there are other classes that require attention and maybe even a job, the cost-benefit analysis comes down in favor of Wikipedia.

Produce something online that IS authoritative and that does not cost any money and Wikipedia will become much less attractive.

Otherwise, it is here to stay.

irv, at 1:11 pm EST on January 27, 2007

A B-?

Well, I am an idiot teaching assistant. I suggest you deal with the students who complain after their heartbreaking work nets them a B-. You will find they tend to think they deserved a higher grade no matter what they turned in. As far as wikipedia, I can't believe this is even a subject up for discussion. On my last syllabus I wrote—in capital letters—"any use of an internet source will result in a 10% reduction in the grade. Any use of Wikipedia will result in a 20% reduction." The papers improved dramatically. The internet is a tool for those that can already think critically. Full stop. I once got a paper that had the following in a footnote: google searchwords-"the 60s." I had a student come up to me in the university library and ask if they had books. She then asked me the location of a specific title. Maybe a little more time in the library would benefit them.

This being said, I think it can be taken for granted that our state institutions tend to be baccalaureate mills. And the students think they should be able to order knowledge "their way," like you might order a Big Mac. But more than likely we will not escape the service provider model. But I still believe that we can turn them into critical thinkers. In fact I think there is alot at stake in doing just this and wikipedia is not going to help. It's for knowledge hobbyists. But what do I know? I'm an idiot TA slinging knowledge to the undergraduates. Clearly, the system has problems and that students think they can use wikipedia as a source is merely a symptom.

James, ABD at Stony Brook, at 6:05 pm EST on January 27, 2007

I want to thank the author of the Wikipedia article, the Middlebury history department, and all the readers who posted comments, especially the funny ones, for providing my senior seminar students and me with a very teachable moment.

Walt Nott, at 12:00 am EST on January 28, 2007

As fascinated as I am with wiki culture, I'm shocked at the laissez-faire attitude of some here towards cited sources. It is a moot point whether some expert source or another is redundant, slightly inaccurate or anachronistic; such will be all of our fates someday. But some readily-identifiable person has taken responsibility for the information published.

Although the nature of my own assignments does not typically lead—thank heavens—to the citation of tertiary or internet sources, I require that any reference include all the elements of a proper citation, author first and foremost among them!

drabauer, UC professor, at 5:25 am EST on January 28, 2007

Breathtaking

"I agree that Wikipedia is not always the most accurate resource, but it is the most accessible. Where is it written that learning has to be difficult and hard work?"

Wow. I mean, WOW. If people entrusted with instructional duties actually think like this, the entire education system is doomed. Students are worth more than such breathtaking dismissal.

JBM, at 9:25 am EST on January 28, 2007

JBM

JBM, Wikipedia shouldn't be cited in court filings (except, perhaps as evidence that something appears in Wikipedia). However, there are three instances (two appellate briefs, and one opinion by a judge) in which it was cited, in the past few months. A search of Westlaw reveals about 20 mentions of it. Limiting my search to just CTA (that, is excluding briefs) I found the following startling examples in 2006 and after:

Doing a quick search of the CTA library, I found the following references, by judges to Wikipedia that are not derogatory references. *Phillips v. Pembroke Real Estate, Inc.*, 459 F.3d 128, n. 3 (2006) (Berne convention); *Reuland v. Hynes*, 460 F.3d 409, n. 1 (2006) (long dissenting footnote citing Wikipedia for some crime statistics); *U.S. v. Yazzen*, 187 Fed.Appx. 800 (10th Cir. 2006) (Description of the idiom "Elephant in the room"); *N'Diom v. Gonzales*, 442 F.3d 494, 496 (2006) (coups in Mauritania); *Patel v. Gonzales*, 173 Fed.Appx. 471 (2006) (earthquakes in India).

However, since most of what lawyers do isn't specifically taught at law school I don't fault law schools for these practices.

Otherwise, I agree with the rest of your points.

Larry, at 11:35 am EST on January 28, 2007

Bibliography vs. Works Cited

I was taught that all of our resources be written in our bibliography, but in our works cited we list the works we paraphrase or quote. I don't think that it is right to ban Wikipedia as a bibliography source, however, I do think it is not necessarily a resource that should be directly cited in a paper.

Mary, Student at CTU, at 3:25 pm EST on January 28, 2007

A stand for enhancing Wikipedia

The unprofessional behavior of professors who ban resources and deceive the public only indicates what vicious prigs populate some sordid corners of the academy.

Instead, oh ye purveyors of wisdom, why not focus that same mischievousness and authoritarian behavior in improving the public good? Why not contribute to Wikipedia and other collective editing initiatives? Why not engage the students in this endeavor? (as one professor above is so doing, thank goodness someone understands the challenge and opportunity facing us).

Banning behavior only indicates that the faculty are failing on their own terms, namely that students are not learning how to distinguish more from less legitimate sources, and understand the hierarchy of knowledge creation.

Sigh.

Jeff McNeill, Instructor and PhD Student at University of Hawaii at Manoa, at 8:20 pm EST on January 28, 2007

Contra-Wiki

Having written for, at current count, 8 print encyclopedias including the Britannica, I know precisely what editors are looking for and explicitly aiming and editing towards: with the exception of the Britannica a high school audience! Nothing more! With the exception of the Britannica, complex subjects are limited in length based on a naive editorial guesstimate of "popularity" (how many "might want" to read it – an unknowable, changing with tomorrow's headlines!). Moreover, and again unlike the Britannica in my experience, the usual LIMIT is 1 book (rarely 2) per 500 words. Yes, wikipedia is not quite as limited, but in areas of my expertise it is the worst of the bunch, and don't tell me I should then write for it. I am not about to craft something accurate and significant, and then leave it open for any yahoo (old meaning of a person, not the web company which pirated that name), to revise according to their ignorance or prejudices (let alone what we might call wikipedia's "700 Club"). Money is not the issue, nor is having my name on it; intellectual integrity is. I rarely end up making a dollar an hour for my efforts, let alone, say, five cents a word.

Print encyclopedias are OK for grade school reports, except that they train children to rely upon them later. The Britannica is OK for high school with the same limitation. Encyclopedias are NOT appropriate for college except perhaps as a quick-start for researching real sources.

Prolific Encyclopedist, Professor at SUNY SYstem, at 9:45 pm EST on January 28, 2007

I apologize for not having read all the other comments— I may be repeating.

Still, discrediting/disallowing Wikipedia entirely is just silly. If a student cites Wikipedia and the information is erroneous, the student should be required to update the article.

L.B.Greig, at 5:10 am EST on January 29, 2007

Missing the Point

I find it amusing that a history department banned Wikipedia. In high school, one of my history teachers cautioned us that history books are products of their times. As an example, she mentioned an old textbook that included a statement to the effect of "The slaves didn't mind working for their owners, because they received room and board." History is written by the victors, and whether the source is a book, a journal article, or an encyclopedia, it inevitably has bias. I'm appalled that the only mention of this comes in Prof. Mills Kelly's blog. Obviously, Wikipedia is unreliable, but the bigger educational picture is that students must learn to find multiple corroborating sources and learn what makes sources reliable. (I think Middlebury's policy is quite reasonable in this regard, but some of the above discussion misses the point.)

Wikipedia is an incredibly useful starting point, and it has the ability to be much, much more. Already, most articles contain bibliographies for at least some information. The next step is to require the sources of all facts to be cited. Wikipedia would then provide an initial overview of a topic, and would be a condensed source for further (primary) references where all purported facts could be checked by the individual. Such a powerful resource would complement traditional search methods for scholarly articles, which can be difficult to use. Further, Wikipedia has the added benefits of quick and easy access, as well as millions of independent contributing sources of knowledge. Wikipedia will never be perfectly reliable, but it has the ability to surpass all other encyclopedias in breadth, depth and accuracy.

Ben, Undergraduate Student, at 5:10 am EST on January 29, 2007

Let's make an intelligence test

(I apologize...but English is not my native language)...I just wonder what would happen if those students using Wikipedia just put another invented classical source of information...for example, instead of mentioning Wikipedia...try to mention a fictionary source, let's say... "The Book of World Facts — 2007 of Clayford University Press"...i bet that the 99% of the teachers would not say anything about it just because it is a "recognized classical source" (even if the information was from Wikipedia)

dvd, Intelligence test, at 5:10 am EST on January 29, 2007

Wikipedia

Wikipedia gives opportunity to anybody who disagrees with the accuracy of particular subject to point on errors and give own "accurate" version. Instead of banning Wikipedia as a source I believe it will be more productive to contribute for improvement to the source. If students will see on the same page different points of view on a subject it will stimulate them to use own brain and dig deeper in to other sources before submitting their assignments. Unfortunately some individuals are trying to keep monopoly on sources of information and hostile to any publicly available resources. My field is physics not history and most information on that subject is accurate in Wikipedia.

A., at 1:21 pm EST on January 29, 2007

Wiki-who?

As a secondary science teacher, I'd like to throw in my two cents. Wiki is not a good source of primary information and should not be used as such. Our students who use it as a resource are not wholly to blame. They should be taught to use Wikipedia in much the same manner as Google to get ideas on where to locate the information you need and possibly get a baseline background on the subject matter, but no more than that.

Our students are under a great deal of pressure with busy class schedules, heavy workloads, jobs, and often even families to care for while in school. Its no wonder they look for shortcuts and at first glance without careful consideration of how wiki's work, it would seem to be an absolute goldmine of information.

Take the time to teach them about research; more importantly: teach them how to think for themselves. (Especially the young ones!) Don't bash the wiki's, use them for what they are worth.

T. Price, Teacher at CISD, at 8:55 am EST on January 30, 2007

Colleges can bar students from citing Wikipedia as a source on assignments. That's the professors, and the schools choice. Wikipedia is full of information, but it doesnt mean that it's all realible information. If students choose to use wikipedia on their free time that's their choice, but when it comes down to school assignments then they shouldnt use it. This way they know that whatever information they get from another site such as google.com or ask.com is more realible then that of wikipedia, which would lead the students to have a better grade.

Terri Swannee, Doctor at Professor at UVA, at 4:35 pm EST on January 30, 2007

wikipedia

This is an issue that I deal with when I discuss sources with my students. Although I understand and support the idea of "banning" the use of Wikipedia in student papers, I really cannot condone the banning of any source. The better position is to help students understand what kind of sources they need to use.

Pamela Smith-Irowa, Ph.D., Instructor at St. Xavier University, at 6:20 pm EST on January 30, 2007

What Wiki Really Represents

Being a graduate student at CUNY I am very familiar with this debate since I am required to produce quality research papers in my studies. That being said, I use Wikipedia everyday of my life, because of the wealth of knowledge it represents. I do not, however, cite it in any of my papers because research papers require primary sources and scholarly secondary sources.

What Wikipedia has done for the academic community is nothing short of revolutionary because it is completely free, ever evolving (usually for the better), and a dramatically convenient source for bringing together ideas. I use Wikipedia as almost a virtual desktop upon which I create my papers. By this I mean that while analyzing the British tactics in the War of 1812, I can have up 20 articles that show me the full color maps, the biography of James Monroe, the timeline, the ships names, the battlefields, etc. If this sounds like a traditional encyclopedia it is, but with one important distinction: the speed with which one can pull together any tangential information by way of clicking a link. It is true that one should not cite these resources because they are not primary documents; however, Wikipedia enables one to hold a wider breadth of information at the fingertips. This in turn enables more insightful writing and hopefully better overall papers. Wikipedia represents some vision of the future, and I, for one, think it is grand indeed.

Patrick Richards, Patrick Richards at CUNY, at 10:06 pm EST on January 30, 2007

To those of you who are outraged at the "ban" at Middlebury, PLEASE go back and read the article! Prof Wyatt specifically said a "ban" wasn't appropriate! So chill, lose the inflammatory language, and try and understand the spirit of what Middlebury College is

trying to do, which is, as a department, send a message to students as to the expectations for academic research at the collegiate level. Middlebury College has consistently been in the top ten liberal arts colleges for decades- the students are not idiots. The nature of the information world has changed dramatically since Prof Wyatt and his colleagues were students. Students at all levels are thinking WAY differently about their learning than their teachers ever did. Today's students have more access to more information than ever before, and the cultural shift in the way academic work is carried out is bound to create some conflict and tension.

It sounds like Middlebury College is trying to bridge that by making expectations for original academic work more clear, and through this, educate students on some of the pitfalls that are an intrinsic part of the "New Info Society."

Hollis, at 9:55 am EST on January 31, 2007

As an internet-user, I love Wikipedia. It's fast, informative, and constantly changing.

As a college comp instructor, I believe that the question of the accuracy of Wikipedia is the wrong one to take up.

At this stage of education (college or university), students should be learning that the "experts" tend to disagree (in the humanities & sciences—they do across the board) and that "truth" (or the right or wrong answer) isn't the hard-and-fast thing they tend to believe it is.

Instead, I would question a college-level project that allowed information from any encyclopedia (print or otherwise) as an acceptable source. As I tell my students, an encyclopedia (especially one of the topical ones instead of World Book) is a good general place to start research. At the college level, though, it is time to start using peer-reviewed journals and books as sources for their projects. Any encyclopedia entry would be by definition too short to be specific or rigorous enough at this level.

Teaching information literacy (in all its difficulty and detail) in all disciplines is a better answer than banning sources. As our future teachers are students right now, simply ignoring the question of information literacy will hurt us more in the long run.

Kristi, at 10:57 am EST on January 31, 2007

I do not condone banning any source, but my students are briefed on Wikipedia and how to use it as a "stepping stone" toward other sources. All students should be "reminded" on how to pick sources, especially in this digital age.

Greg Null, Instructor at Pittsburgh Institute of Aeronautics, at 11:25 am EST on January 31, 2007

Wiki

I teach high school English and banned Wikipedia 2 years ago—mainly because the students would rely solely on it and not branch out in their research. I'm glad to know I'm not alone in my objection to Wikipedia!

Kenda Rusevlyan, at 12:20 pm EST on January 31, 2007

Banning research tools such as Wikipedia for students may prove to be counterproductive. In the world students will encounter outside academia there won't be a well meaning, omnipresent professor thinking for them. A college or University will best serve the needs of their students by helping them develop critical thinking skills and discernment. It is these qualities that will allow them to succeed in their academic career and in their future professions. It is wiser perhaps to educate students about the wealth of bad or incomplete information available, teach them to recognize reliable, valid and verifiable sources and then hold them accountable for the end result of their research. It may be easier to categorically ban dubious sources, but what is really being accomplished by doing so? While students may initially produce higher scoring essays, will they be cultivating the quality thinking skills that will carry them through the rest of their lives? Banning research tools such as Wikipedia for students may prove to be counterproductive. In the world students will encounter outside academia there won't be a well meaning, omnipresent professor thinking for them. A college or University will best serve the needs of their students by helping them develop critical thinking skills and discernment. It is these qualities that will allow them to succeed in their academic career and in their future professions. It is wiser perhaps to educate students about the wealth of bad or incomplete information available, teach them to recognize reliable, valid and verifiable sources and then hold them accountable for the end result of their research. It may be easier to categorically ban dubious sources, but what is really being accomplished by doing so? While students may initially produce higher scoring essays, will they be cultivating the quality thinking skills that will carry them through the rest of their lives?

JeanM, at 2:35 pm EST on January 31, 2007