

Wikipedia: How it Works and How it Can Work for You

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AS RESPONSIBLE TEACHERS OF HISTORY, we all try to steer our students toward reliable sources. Many of us have been reluctant to authorize students to use Wikipedia in their classwork because we do not fully trust the open source encyclopedia. But as increasing numbers of scholars and teachers work with Wikipedia, its influence becomes undeniable. In the Spring of 2007, Cathy Davidson suggested in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that instead of banning Wikipedia from our classrooms, we history professors “make studying what it does and does not do part of the research-and-methods portion of our courses.”¹ Davidson went on to suggest that we have students submit articles to the site. I did just that in my “Exploring the Past” course at the University of Baltimore (UB) in the Fall of 2007. My students found it to be one of the most stimulating and useful exercises of the entire semester. In fact, the assignment went well beyond evaluating Wikipedia as a research tool and turned into an unexpected opportunity for students to actively construct history.

UB requires all history majors to take “Exploring the Past,” but the course attracts a large percentage of non-majors as well. From the beginning, the sixty students in my two sections understand that they will be “doing” history through the analysis of a variety of primary documents. We work our way through James West Davidson and Mark H. Lytle’s *After the Fact*² to learn methods of dealing with various types of sources, and then students embark on their own research projects centering on a particular era of American history that I pick each year. In the Fall of 2007, the University

of Baltimore was in the midst of a commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the disturbances that broke out in our city following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., so students investigated people and events from 1968. This topic proved to be well-suited to a course that intended to convince students that history was not “what happened in the past” but rather “the act of selecting, analyzing and writing about the past.”³ When we were developing the project, there had been very little scholarly work done on any of the urban riots of 1968. Early in the process, some students said, “Professor, when you Google Baltimore Riots of ’68, nothing comes up, so how can we study it?” They came to see this unexplored topic as an opportunity for them to put the primary sources into a meaningful pattern in order to understand elements of the events. Students started combing the vertical files in the Enoch Pratt Free Library’s Maryland Department and took advantage of UB’s Langsdale Library’s growing collection of oral history testimony about the events of April 1968.

By the end of the process, they were eager to share their findings, because they actually had produced new information. In previous years, students would have turned in only a bibliography and a scrapbook/portfolio of primary sources, and that research would have sat on a shelf in my office. This year, Wikipedia offered a way for them to publish beyond the classroom. Inspired by Cathy Davidson’s article, I added a short writing assignment worth 10% of their total grade: I asked each student to choose a discrete topic that they had come across in their research, write an article of at least three paragraphs that included at least three citations, and submit their research to the on-line encyclopedia. This assignment could easily be adapted to allow students to simply add three new paragraphs to an existing article. In class, I walked them through the very simple step of publishing an article on the site and I asked students to send me the link to their article once it was posted.⁴ I structured this as a straightforward exercise designed to show students the ease of posting to the web-based encyclopedia, and I thought that I would get out of it at least one good class discussion about the pros and cons of using Wikipedia as a source. However, from the beginning, the assignment revealed complexities and benefits I had not foreseen.

Like many professors, I had considered Wikipedia the Wild West of sources. And apparently it once was. Wikipedia was launched January 15, 2001, and it began with a core of scholarly, traditional entries. Jimmy Wales, the site’s founder, imported articles from the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica* and other reference works he found in the public domain and then took the crucial innovative step—he invited the world to contribute. In the Spring of 2008, Nicholson Baker looked back nostalgically on the early days of the not-for-profit encyclopedia:

It was like a giant community leaf-raking project . . . Some brought very fancy professional metal rakes, or even back-mounted leaf-blowing systems, and some were just kids thrashing away with the sides of their feet or stuffing handfuls in the pockets of their sweatshirts, but all the leaves they brought to the pile were appreciated. And the pile grew and everyone jumped up and down in it having a wonderful time. And it grew some more, and it became the biggest leaf pile anyone had ever seen anywhere, a world wonder.⁵

By then end of its first year, the site contained 20,000 entries.⁶ At the close of 2008, it held 2.6 million English-language articles, followed by over 3 million articles in 2009.⁷ Another aspect of the fun was that everyone contributes under on-line pseudonyms. An editor could be a tenured professor on the subject of the entry or a 15-year-old with an active imagination. Or, as Stacy Schiff found out after she published an article about Wikipedia in *The New Yorker*, editors can claim to be tenured professors and actually have no credentials at all. The on-line version of Schiff's 2006 piece contains an editor's note that the Wikipedian whom she interviewed extensively and who claimed both to be both a professor of religion at a private university and to devote fourteen hours a day to editing Wikipedia was in fact a 24-year-old with no advanced degrees and no university job.⁸

The democratic nature of its community is core to the mission of the site. On its welcome page, Wikipedia defines itself “the **free encyclopedia that anyone can edit.**” If you click on “**anyone can edit**”, you are sent to an encouraging prompt: “Don't be afraid to edit—anyone can edit almost any page, and we encourage you to be bold!” This inclusiveness is precisely the ethos that repels most history professors. Baker may celebrate the giddy democracy of the leaf pile, but anyone concerned with scholarly rigor may wince. However, when Wikipedia invites everyone to “edit,” it empowers not only contributors, but also “deletionists.” Baker continues his extended metaphor: “And then some self-promoted leaf-pile guards appeared, doubters and deprecators who would look askance at your proffered handful and shake their heads, saying your leaves were too crumpled or too slimy or too common, throwing them to the side. And that was too bad.” Baker criticizes the new rules that came into play, and I am sure that sociologists are already analyzing the ramifications of the appearance of deletionists in the Wikipedia community, but their presence can work for you as a history teacher as you encourage your students to write effective and responsible history. When your students post their articles, you harness the energies and expertise of thousands of editors, which Wikipedia explains in positive terms: “Many people are constantly improving Wikipedia, making thousands of changes per hour, all of which are recorded on article histories and recent changes.” You and students

may be surprised at the speed in which their new postings are “flagged” by the efficient and tireless Wikipedia volunteers.⁹ Despite the fact that their work may not be edited by experts in the field, student submissions will be edited by people who uphold the standards of a community. This assignment showed me the value of exposing student work to the evaluation of people other than me, the professor. Editors might insert this flag: “This article or section needs to be Wikified to meet Wikipedia’s quality standards.” This flag underlines the fact that, by submitting articles to Wikipedia, students participate in a community with definite standards, and they receive almost immediate feedback on whether they met them or did not. The criteria may not approach those of a peer-reviewed journal, but students swiftly got the message about conventions of a discipline, insiders’ rules and community definitions of quality. All of these would ring true to any historian attempting to be published. Some flags warn “This article or section needs copy editing for grammar, style, cohesion, tone or spelling.” This comment goes a long way to answer the student’s lament, “But why do you count off for my writing?! This isn’t an English class!” The sub-categories emphasize the importance of all these elements in establishing credibility. It is not simply what you say, but how you say it.

Sometimes the comments of the editors introduced students to concepts in history they had not before considered. For example, when students published articles on an obscure local topic, Wikipedia editors would tell them: “This article may not meet the general notability guideline ... If you are familiar with the subject matter, please expand or rewrite the article to establish its notability. The best way to address this concern is to reference published third-party sources about this subject.” With that one message they were plunged into the rich debate about what constitutes history, who determines what is “notable” and what is not. Wikipedia also encourages its participants to familiarize themselves with current scholarship and cite sources from the scholarly conversation. When editors told students “This article does not cite any references or sources,” the observation rang truer than any marking I might have made on a similarly unsourced paper. When their professor requires three sources for a paper, it seems arbitrary and the consequence for ignoring the instruction is a lowered grade. When some Wikipedia editors notice that citations are missing, or language is sloppy, or notability is questionable, they become “deletionists” and remove the article. The student is no longer participating in the construction of knowledge. The consequence is very real.

I have never seen so much activity over any other assignment I have devised. My students were providing friends and family with links to their articles. Some students reported that they became obsessed with the “Wikifying” process, checking their articles on an hourly basis to see how

the volunteer editors had provided new formatting, links to other articles, photographs, and sources.¹⁰ They came to class eager to announce whether their article was still up or whether it had been removed, and were greeted with cheers if they had made the cut. Articles that survived the winnowing included “Oldest Active Baltimore Catholic Parish” and “St. Peter the Apostle Church.” Both of these were well-written and provided ample sources with proper citation and links to other articles in Wikipedia. One included a number of photographs of the church interior. The vast majority of student articles were removed from the site within a week. In fact, my original instruction that students send me a link to their work proved ridiculous. Articles were gone before I could even follow the link.

During the process, students did not even realize that they were doing what every history teacher wants her students to do: construct history. As they posted their articles they were taking a step that even some professional historians are reluctant to take: write about their historical findings and put their discoveries in a public arena for comment. And they were doing it all without self-conscious hesitation, second thoughts, or angst. In fact, they were “doing history” with unbridled enthusiasm. Even better, all of this happened while I basically stood on the virtual sidelines. Once I set the process in motion, the editors of Wikipedia took over, and the students asked and debated their own questions.

While there are numerous benefits to encouraging students to attempt a successful post on their own, some teachers might like to give their students more instruction about ways to write successful entries. Nicholson Baker recommends a chapter in *Wikipedia: The Missing Manual* by John Broughton (Pogue Press, 2008) that gives suggestions on making better articles. The Wikipedia site itself offers tips on editing articles that already exist and creating new articles under its “Learn more about editing” tab. If an objective is to have articles that survive, teachers might want to take this route. However, the editors’ reactions to unpolished articles may prompt more fruitful class discussion.

When I teach this unit again, I will create an intentional process for the aftermath of the Wikipedia assignment. I thought the work would go into the construction of the article, but that assumption highlighted my misunderstanding of the medium. The strength of this exercise comes from having students observe, discuss, and write about what happens to their articles *after* they publish them on the site. Reflection on the Wiki-fying process will help all of us understand what the process of history is becoming. Wikipedia is just one of the Web 2.0 developments that are becoming more and more prevalent on the Internet. These sites that combine social networking with content offer opportunities for students to publish their findings, create historic maps, build digital portfolios, and

generate immediate feedback from a new kind of scholarly community. We should not simply evaluate these new networking communities. We should join them.

Notes

1. Cathy N. Davidson, "We Can't Ignore the Influence of Digital Technologies," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53, no. 29 (23 March 2007), B20.
2. James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2005).
3. *Ibid.*, xix.
4. A helpful tutorial exists at <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Tutorial>>. A librarian or someone from your technology services department would most likely be happy to guide your students through this part of the exercise.
5. Nicholson Baker, "The Charms of Wikipedia," *The New York Review of Books* 55, no. 4, 20 March 2008.
6. Stacy Schiff, "Can Wikipedia Conquer Expertise?" *The New Yorker*, 31 July 2006, <http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/07/31/060731fa_fact>.
7. "Wikipedia Statistics, Article Count (official)," Wikipedia, <<http://stats.wikimedia.org/EN/TablesArticlesTotal.htm>>.
8. Schiff.
9. In November 2008, Wikipedia listed 3,767 of their most prolific editors, all of whom have made more than 5,000 edits to the site. The average number of edits for editors on this list was 16,468. The most recent assessment in October 2009 lists the top 4,000 editors, all of whom have made more than 9,123 edits to the site, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List_of_Wikipedians_by_number_of_edits>.
10. Wikipedia also provides a useful "History" tab that any reader can reference to see the record of every change anyone has made to the article.