

Wikipedia or Wickedpedia?

Assessing the online encyclopedia's impact on K–12 education

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Mention Wikipedia within the ivy-covered walls of the academy and you'll find no shortage of opinions, ranging from wildly enthusiastic to mildly apocalyptic. That's no surprise: the web site, available for free and developed by an army of volunteers, raises questions that lie at the heart of scholarship and inquiry. What is the value of expertise? Who owns knowledge? Should we trust the "wisdom of crowds" or fear the mob?

In the workaday world of elementary and secondary education, however, these philosophical musings seem less to the point. The questions are simpler: Can an online encyclopedia that's edited by anyone, and thus no one, be trusted as a credible information source? Should students be encouraged to tap this tool as a supplement to their textbooks? And is it even *possible* to discourage its use?

To find out, my research intern and I performed a simple experiment. We selected 100 terms from prominent U.S. and world history textbooks (Prentice Hall's *America: Pathways to the Present* and *World History: Connections to Today—The Modern Era*). We chose a mix of items that students might be asked to research for a test or paper, from the Mayflower Compact to the War Powers Act, from the Protestant Reformation to Anwar Sadat. And we entered each term into Google to find out which web sites the ubiquitous search engine suggests as the most useful links.

The results are astounding. Google listed Wikipedia as the number-one hit a remarkable 87 times out of 100. The encyclopedia came in second 12 times and third once. In other words, the Wikipedia site was listed among the top three Google hits *100 percent* of the time.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this finding. First, people searching for information about these historical terms are finding the entries from Wikipedia helpful; that's why Google is listing them so prominently. As a result, even if students do not seek out Wikipedia, Wikipedia will find them. Second, "banning" the use of Wikipedia appears hopelessly naive. As Jimmy Wales, Wikipedia's co-founder, told the *New York Times*, "They might as well say don't listen to rock 'n' roll either." (Blocking Wikipedia isn't so hard; some older "child-safe" Internet filters block the entire site because of its occasional objectionable pages.)

But are students likely to find good information once they reach the site? We randomly selected 10 of our 100 terms and compared the treatment given to them by Wikipedia, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and the textbooks themselves. The entries from Wikipedia sure are comprehensive, or at least verbose. At more than 3,000 words, the Wikipedia write-ups are more than twice as long, on average, as those of *Britannica*, and almost eight times as long as the passages from the textbooks.

And, to our admittedly untrained eyes, the information from Wikipedia appeared just as reliable. (A 2006 *Nature* article found roughly the same number of errors in entries from the two encyclopedias on various scientific topics, so our "findings" are consistent.) We certainly didn't notice any discrepancies. (See our web site for a list of the ten terms if you'd like to test them yourself.)

The reason the content is relatively reliable is probably because these terms are fairly mainstream. "The high-traffic areas are going to be the cleanest," Wiki expert Alexander M. C. Halavais told the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Thus high-school level content is likely to be less error-prone than arcane subjects studied in graduate school.

As a K–12 educational tool, then, Wikipedia appears to pass the test, at least to the limited degree that any encyclopedia assists the learning process. Still, that doesn't mean the site is perfect. As a resource about hot-button political issues, Wikipedia is notoriously subject to manipulation and spin. This is apparent in its treatment of education policy issues.

For example, its entry on "school voucher" (which comes up first on Google) gives twice as much ink to opponents as supporters. Furthermore, it includes spurious and unsupported claims such as this: "Opponents also claim that the vouchers are tantamount to providing taxpayer-subsidized 'white flight' from urban public schools." (The vast majority of students receiving taxpayer-subsidized vouchers in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and the District of Columbia are, of course, nonwhite.)

So here's a rule of thumb: When elementary and secondary students are researching history, Wikipedia is a decent place to start. When they or others are researching education policy, though, tapping another resource is in order. May I suggest *educationnext.org*?