



THE WIKI MAN



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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It's the world's largest encyclopedia, and a permanent fixture in the global top ten websites list – but is it really suitable as an educational resource? Absolutely, says **Ollie Bray**, and here are 6 reasons why...

As part of my wider work I came across a school the other day that has banned the use of Wikipedia. The reasons given were that as a source it is unreliable, and a major component in what was described as a 'cut and paste' culture. To me, however, this simply demonstrated that the leadership team behind the decision had no real appreciation of the powerful learning tool that they had just blocked, and a probably an equally poor understanding of the web in general.

It is the job of schools to equip children and young people with the skills and expertise to use the internet responsibly both inside and outside of the confines of the classroom – Wikipedia can hardly be ignored; it's remained in the world's top ten websites for over a decade. Like any reference medium, it should of course be used in association with a variety of other sources. But it certainly *should* be used – and students and staff alike should be taught how to do so in a safe, responsible and critically aware way.

Still not convinced of its value? Well, here are a few things about Wikipedia that you might not know, and could just change your mind:



IT'S ACTUALLY PRETTY ACCURATE

Considering its size (it's the largest encyclopedia and the largest wiki in the world) Wikipedia is actually pretty accurate. In fact, in research conducted by the University of Colorado, 50 experts evaluated Wikipedia articles. 76% agreed or strongly agreed that the article they looked at was accurate and 46% agreed or strongly agreed that it was complete. When members of the same group compared articles on the same topics in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, 66% found Wikipedia to be more or substantially more accurate and 61% found Wikipedia to be more or substantially more complete.

In a nutshell, all encyclopedias have inaccuracies. But the beauty of Wikipedia is that it openly acknowledges this, with messages appearing in prominent orange boxes on many of its pages, saying things like "The factual accuracy is disputed"; "This article contradicts another article"; "This article contradicts itself"; "This article reads like an advertisement" etc.

Young people should be being taught to question everything that they read online and in print. The Wikipedia disclaimers – which are not seen in other factual publications as a rule – help remind us of this. They actually *add* credibility, and should be used by classroom practitioners as a teaching and learning point. Fundamentally, we should be getting young people to use a bit of common sense to decide for themselves if something is reliable or not.

2 IT'S LARGELY UP-TO-DATE

One other advantage of Wikipedia over more traditional, paper-based resources is that it is normally pretty current. When did your school last purchase a new encyclopedia for the library? Probably not within the last 12 months is my guess – and most likely considerably before that.

With Wikipedia, on the other hand, you only have to search for a global event soon after it has happened and you're likely to find hundreds of experts from around the world collaborating in the creation of a new entry. The Washington Post commented in the context of the 2008 presidential election candidate biographies, that despite occasional brief vandalism, "it's hard to find a more up-to-date, detailed, thorough article on Obama than Wikipedia's".

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IT'S EASY TO REFERENCE

Despite rumours to the contrary, Wikipedia is incredibly easy to reference. When viewing an article just select 'Cite this page' from the 'Toolbox' dropdown menu on the left hand side of the screen. This will take you to the citation page for the article, which references the page in a variety of styles such as APA, Harvard and Chicago. Most importantly for a Wiki – and most other digital sources – the reference includes the date and time that the article was accessed.

The necessity of including a date and a time when correctly referencing any digital source is an important learning point. However, it is also worth challenging your students to think about whether they should be referencing Wikipedia at all. Like any encyclopedia, it is a tertiary source and is therefore really just a summary of a variety of sources rather than the original research.

3

IT HAS TABS

Most people who have used Wikipedia will have noticed it has tabs along the top of each page. When you go to a page you automatically land on the 'Article' and 'Read' tabs. This simply means that you are reading the article.

Next to the 'Article' tab is the 'Talk' tab. If you click on this you will see all the (sometimes heated) discussions that are taking place

between the article's authors about what should and should not be included. With the 'View History' tab, you can see all the edits to the article from its conception up to the present day. Both of these are important tools to help make judgements about the reliability of an article; a topic that has no background discussion behind it and only one or two edits is a lot more likely to be inaccurate and biased compared with an entry that has a lengthy discussion thread and has been edited over 10,000 times as the various collaborators work to reach a neutral and finished piece.

The final tab that you need to be aware of is the 'Edit' tab. Wikipedia (with the exception of a handful of articles) can be edited by anyone. The word 'wiki' actually derives from the Hawaiian word 'quick' and is used in the context of 'to quickly edit'.

This can provide a wonderful audience for young people's work. In fact a great cross-curricular project is for students to work collaboratively to write a Wikipedia article about their school. It is very empowering for pupils to realise that what they are doing will be published in the largest encyclopedia in the world!

4 IT'S AVAILABLE IN MULTIPLE LANGUAGES

Wikipedia is available in over 282 languages, although the English version remains the largest edition by a significant margin. Teams of volunteers from around the world work tirelessly to translate content for different groups of people. The collaborative and humanitarian nature of how Wikipedia is put together makes for an interesting teaching point in itself.

The most translated article is the one on gold (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gold), which has been transcribed in over 150 different languages. Why do your students think this might be?

Perhaps one of Wikipedia's best kept secrets is its 'Simple English' version (simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page), where articles are written as much as possible using simple English vocabulary and grammar. It is ideal for younger pupils and also students with English as an additional language.

You can access all of the translations of Wikipedia, including the 'Simple English' version, from the menu that appears on the left hand side of each page.

6 IT HAS SIBLINGS

Finally, don't forget that Wikipedia is run by the

Wikimedia Foundation, which also operates a number of other websites licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike license. Creative Commons licences can be a little complicated to get your head around but essentially, as long as you are using the materials for non-profit, educational reasons (and you cite your source), you are free to use them in the classroom.

Why not take a look at Commons: a free media repository (including lots of images); Wiktionary: a dictionary and thesaurus; and Wikibooks: a collection of free textbooks and manuals? A full list of all of the WikiMedia Foundation projects can be found on the organisation's website: wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/Our_projects.

PS It's just a thought, but if you truly believe that resources like Wikipedia are creating a 'cut-and-paste' homework culture, then perhaps it's time to start setting more imaginative home learning activities...

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

WIKIPEDIA.ORG
WIKIPEDIA

WIKIMEDIAFOUNDATION.ORG
WIKIMEDIA FOUNDATION

CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG
ORG CREATIVE COMMONS