

Stop Source-Shaming

Acknowledge Wikipedia
in the research process

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Instructors across disciplines have long warned students not to put too much stock in Wikipedia, framing the platform as a flawed free-for-all rather than a dynamic, collaborative reference tool with expansive scope. As Wikipedia reaches maturity, turning 21 in January 2022, it has achieved new relevance as a hub for emerging research on COVID-19 (bit.ly/Wiki-COVID) and boosted its authority with live links to source texts that users can check out via Controlled Digital Lending (bit.ly/Wiki-CDL). It's time to reconsider our estimation of this resource as a student research tool.

Our investigation of student habits used a simulated set of Google search results to identify how 175 students, from 4th grade through graduate school, selected and judged resources for a research project. We found that, while students have been generally discouraged from using Wikipedia as a source, it remains a popular starting point. We also found that experienced scholars use Wikipedia more than those with less experience, though they're hesitant to cite or talk about it.

Anecdotally, we found established professionals commonly started with Wikipedia to get their bearings on a topic before diving headfirst into the literature. Indeed, few of us jump into scholarly articles when exploring a new area of knowledge. We need context and vocabulary before we enter academic conversations. In the old days, before the internet, we would advise students not to cite general encyclopedias, but we enthusiastically encouraged their use for background knowledge as part of the workflow of inquiry. Why is Wikipedia different?

Wikipedia isn't perfect; its crowdsourced authorship and continual "under construction" status has ignited debates around authority, though many Wikipedia authors are topic experts. But the same flux that makes it subject to hacking and bias leaves it open to revision, fact-checking, real-time updates, and constant improvement from its well-established system of editorial oversight and quality control.

OCLC's "Wikipedia + Libraries: Better Together" program produced detailed training on how librarians can teach users to create, edit, and evaluate Wikipedia articles (bit.ly/AL-Wiki-training). Some teachers incorporate Wikipedia into their curriculum, introducing assignments that require students to create and edit articles (bit.ly/AL-Wiki-teaching). This allows students to see how the open contribution model of Wikipedia works in practice and in turn promotes evaluation of other articles based on authentic experience with the process.

The Digital Visitors and Residents framework, a 2017 OCLC research project (coauthored by Connaway), breaks web users into two groups:

Visitors see parts of the web as a collection of tools, while residents see it as a place to live and leave digital traces (bit.ly/AL-digital-res).

Many Wikipedia users—including most of our respondents—act as visitors, reading articles to get information, while others act as residents, taking an active role in the editing process. This provides a useful starting point for education on the nuances of Wikipedia's editing model. If more students and teachers engaged with Wikipedia as residents, we could see broader

understanding and acceptance of the site's authorship and editing process.

Perhaps the argument should not be about whether to use Wikipedia, but instead about when and how to use it as part of our big-picture scaffolding of knowledge practices.

As information professionals, we recognize the value of a variety of reference resources at various stages in the inquiry process, and we're well positioned to share strategies for using this vetted, crowdsourced tool in appropriate ways.

Given Wikipedia's ubiquity—and utility—librarians and educators would do well to offer students a nuanced view of its benefits and drawbacks and encourage them to properly incorporate it into a broader research workflow.

The research team also included Brittany Brannon, Amy Buhler, Tara T. Cataldo, Christopher Cyr, Rachael Elrod, Ixchel M. Faniel, and Samuel R. Putnam. 

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