

WikiEducation: fear it or love it?

Nicola Davies provides guidance on embracing Wikipedia as an educational tool

Wikipedia – the word and the virtual repository of the wisdom it contains, is both feared and loved with equal voracity in the teaching community. Those who don't trust the information Wikipedia provides may dismiss the online encyclopaedia as no more than a collection of unfounded and unsubstantiated opinions. After all, the information can be posted by any anonymous member of the public who feels they have something to contribute, whether it is true or not.

Some teachers will cringe at the very thought of using this medium as an educational tool or research base for their students. On the other side of the debate are those who believe that Wikipedia is an easily accessible source of information for themselves and their students, which forms a valuable part of the education system. According to Wikipedia's policies, sources must be verifiable and reliable. This gives those who make use of Wikipedia in their teaching assurance that all articles are reviewed for accuracy before publication, and the information found on Wikipedia can therefore be trusted.

Most teachers will fall somewhere in-between these two extremes. Regardless of where you stand, the fact remains – Wikipedia is here to stay. Students will inevitably make use of it and, rather than forbid it or shy away from it, it is better to learn how to make the most of the resource – and teach your students to do the same.

How does Wikipedia benefit teachers?

Wikipedia is an online encyclopaedia whose content is contributed by volunteers among the public. As such, education was not the main focus at the inception of Wikipedia in January 2001. However, Wikipedia has risen to the challenge that the education sector has set, and had this very debate in mind when they developed the Wikipedia Education Program. The program was developed in 2010 for the purpose of providing teachers with instruction and guidance on how to use Wikipedia as a teaching tool.

Through the Wikipedia Education Program, teachers can structure an online course for their students – providing them with resources such as online training in how the Wikipedia Education Program works, instructional videos, handouts, brochures, and advice. A voluntary Wikipedia Ambassador can also be contacted to help students and teachers with any questions or problems they may encounter over the duration of their planned online course. Ambassadors will even help teachers to design and structure their assignments in such a way as to make the most of the course content and fulfil the course objectives. 'The Syllabus: A 12-week Assignment to Write a Wikipedia Article' is a comprehensive document that provides teachers with week-by-week instructions on how to incorporate an assignment on writing a Wikipedia article into their school curriculum and class structure. The document also provides milestones to help make students' Wikipedia edits and suggestions more successful.

Nikki Chamberlain teaches Years 10, 11 and 12 at Living Waters Lutheran College in Western Australia. Until recently, she was unaware of the Wikipedia Education Program and 'The Syllabus' 12-week assignment. Upon learning of it, her response was positive. She says, "Imagine the possibilities if we all knew about this tool for staff and students? Perhaps it would disseminate some of the criticism of Wikipedia that teachers hold."

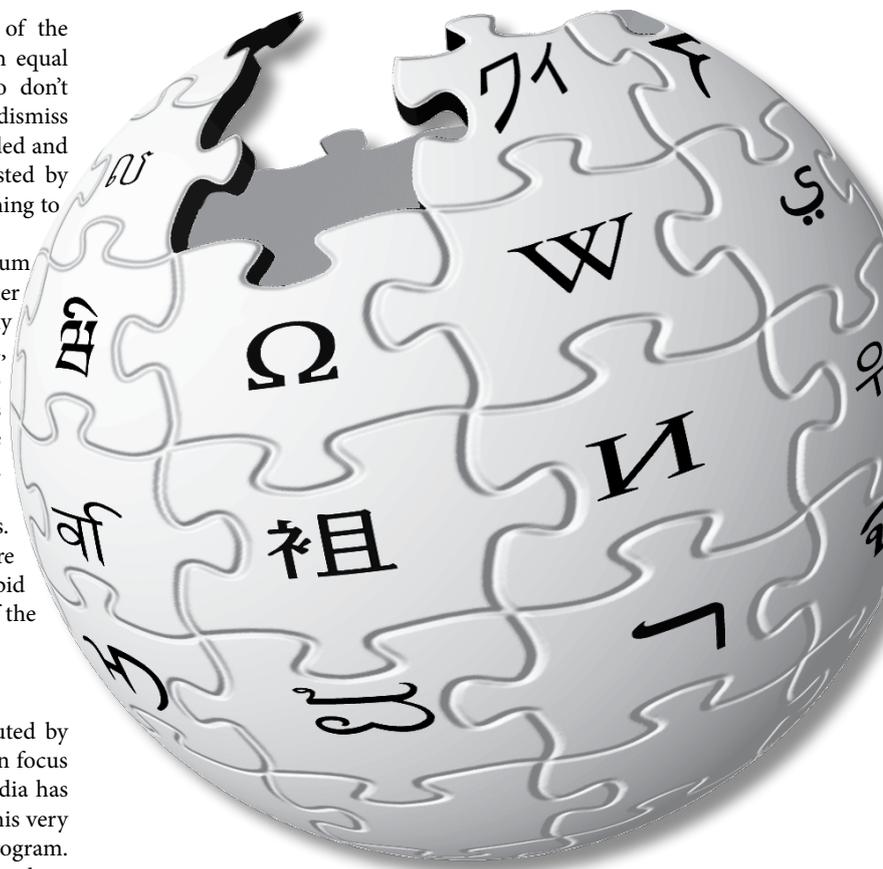
Once a course page has been set up on the Wikipedia Education Program, students can enrol online, complete their orientation and begin working towards their milestones and objectives for the course. For practice in writing and research, students can be asked to create their own

articles. If editing, fact checking and research are the focus, numerous articles are available for editing or expansion. Furthermore, translating an entry from one language to another on Wikipedia will help to expand Wikipedia's coverage and accessibility while providing students with the practice they need to develop their own language and communication skills.

Wikipedia's requirements with regard to syntax are also quite stringent, specifying the various symbols and techniques required to make headings and subheadings, as well as internal and external links and reference lists. Students can get to know this syntax and its applications by experimenting in their 'Sandbox' – an arena designed for this purpose and not for public viewing. This can help students transition into a programming mindset, which can act as a basis for learning how to write different kinds of computer code – another valuable skill in the age of technology.

Once students have enrolled in their course, they are required to complete student orientation before tackling their course material. This orientation includes four modules: introduction, core, editing, and advanced. The introduction is a welcome message and advice on navigation. The core gives students an overview of Wikipedia's core policies and guidelines, as well as explanations of verifiability, notability, copyright and plagiarism, and their policy of not allowing any original research to be presented on the Wikipedia platform.

The editing module gives students instructions on how to edit pages on Wikipedia using the correct syntax, communicate with others in Talk pages, and cite sources. Students are also introduced to the concept of the Sandbox, and when and how to use it. Finally, the advanced module



exposes students to more refined editing techniques, instructions on how to include pictures and photos, and tips on how to write articles for Wikipedia with the aim of acceptance and publication.

After this initial orientation students should be familiar with Wikipedia, and can then proceed to the content laid out for them within the course outline. Having students create their own articles is usually not encouraged within the general course outline, mainly because the approval process can be lengthy and exceed the duration of the course. Additionally, students may become discouraged if their articles are rejected. However, if writing an article for Wikipedia is the goal of the course, it is best to make use of 'The Syllabus,' which has been designed for just this purpose.

Since the beginning of the Wikipedia Education Program in 2010, a number of successful courses have been completed, some of which can be found in the Education Program's case studies. These successful case studies usually include projects and exercises such as extending a stub (a short article) that didn't contain enough information to be considered a full article; writing a feature article as a group assignment; copyediting Wikipedia articles; translating Wikipedia articles into different languages; and, many more.

Wikipedia also helps students to think independently and analyse all the information available to them

How does Wikipedia benefit students?

Wikipedia has gained a reputation for unreliable information on the basis that any anonymous member of the public who claims to be an expert on a topic can write an entry and have it published on Wikipedia. While Chamberlain doesn't completely trust the validity of all the information that can be found on Wikipedia, she still encourages students to use the resource as a starting point for their own independent research on an assignment topic. She says, "Often it gives students a pretty accurate overview and sometimes provides references or links for students to find more accurate or reputable information."

Students who write or edit Wikipedia entries have the opportunity to gain the experience and skills they need to find reliable and trustworthy sources that will provide up-to-date, accurate and verifiable information. They will learn to differentiate between sites, organisations and 'experts' that can be trusted and those that cannot. In this way, it is plausible to assume that they will develop into a generation of discerning

researchers, capable of extracting the truth on any given subject.

Wikipedia also helps students to think independently and analyse all the information available to them. This allows them to develop their critical thinking and become less inclined to believe everything they read just because it is on the Internet. They will realise that while there is a lot of information freely available on the Internet, most of it is unreliable or even completely wrong. This knowledge and critical thinking can be applied to their personal lives, their education, and later on, their careers.

Chamberlain believes that students who analyse the structure and referencing within Wikipedia will ultimately be aided in their endeavours to write their own articles or blogs. This is a foundation that many professionals worldwide could benefit from. The ability to write articles and use appropriate referencing systems is essential in academia, while many other careers also benefit from well-structured and well-written documents or blogs.

Students must learn the syntax used in the creation and editing of Wikipedia articles and stubs. This is mandatory for completing their course material or writing an article for Wikipedia according to the standard layout and format that is expected from published articles. While this syntax is not the same as the

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coding used for HTML, DOS or any of the other various platforms available, it does provide students with a different mindset that they can adapt and apply in other contexts. It also gives students a chance to peek behind the Wikipedia 'curtain' that is presented to the internet world, and see for themselves what goes on backstage to ultimately make a Wikipedia article possible.

Wikipedia's Education Program and 'The Syllabus' provide students in developed countries with excellent opportunities to develop their writing, research and internet skills. However, Wikipedia has not neglected students in developing countries. Wikipedia recognises that information, while open to improvement by the public, is also open to vandalism. SOS Children's Villages, the world's largest orphan charity, has attempted to safeguard certain articles and topics by creating 'Wikipedia for Schools' – a collection of checked and corrected articles sourced from Wikipedia that have been arranged by school subject according to the UK school curriculum.

Using Wikipedia for Schools, teachers in both developed and developing countries from all over the world can have access to reliable and relevant teaching material. In turn, they can be confident that the information contained in the articles has been tested for accuracy, relevance to school subjects, and appropriate content for school-aged children. This program is not

exclusive to developing countries; schools all over the world can benefit from the collection, which is available not only online but also offline via download or on a memory stick. Therefore, if giving students access to an Internet connection is a safety or security concern, students can complete the necessary research using reliable Wikipedia entries even in the absence of an Internet connection.

How is Wikipedia being used in Education (and how else can it help)?

There is so much more to Wikipedia than educators might realise. At present, it is mainly used as a starting point for all other research conducted on a topic. This is a valid and pertinent application since Wikipedia articles in general tend to provide a broad, easy-to-understand overview on a great variety of topics. If more detailed information is required for a particular project, it can be sought using links and references to different websites that are, more often than not, provided in the reference or citations list.

By creating awareness of Wikipedia's Education Program and 'The Syllabus,' we are taking the first step towards fully realising the potential for education that Wikipedia provides. While the education program will not replace conventional course content, it will

supplement learning and develop life skills that might otherwise be neglected in the increasingly digital world.

Wikipedia has become widely recognised and utilised – there can be no doubt that it is here to stay. Rather than shun the resources and education opportunities it provides, educators would be wise to embrace the medium and the new avenues of teaching it provides. Of course, caution should still be exercised when using Wikipedia as a research tool, as with any online source, but this caution can be taught in a controlled environment rather than forbidden, thereby reducing the allure of easily accessible information. Such an approach forms a solid foundation for further online learning, as well as development of research skills that will benefit students throughout their personal and professional lives.

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Dr Nicola Davies is a psychologist and writer with a specialist interest in education. You can follow her on Twitter @healthpsychuk or sign up to her free blog at <http://healthpsychologyconsultancy.wordpress.com/>

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