

Article for BISA newsletter:

Using Wikipedia in Assessing Student Learning

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These days, lecturers and tutors often bemoan the fact that students increasingly quote from Wikipedia—‘the on-line encyclopaedia that anyone can edit’— in their essays. One particular scholar recently criticised Wikipedia (along with Google) for helping to create a generation of “intellectual sluggards”.¹ Yet, Wikipedia has also been hailed as an effective learning tool for encouraging students to develop critical thinking and research and writing skills, as well as enabling collaboration.² It was these contrasting opinions about the academic utility of Wikipedia that I set out to test in 2007, thanks to a UEA teaching fellowship.

Postgraduate students studying my unit, ‘Issues in the Contemporary Politics of the Middle East’, were the guinea pigs for this pilot project. The 11 students taking this option came from a variety of backgrounds—some having studied in the UK, others overseas; some with a first degree in politics/international relations, whilst others had previously studied areas as diverse as literature, development studies and law. The one unifying factor was that they all wanted to learn more about politics in the Middle East, from the current conflict in Iraq to the prospects for democratisation.

In order to fulfil the assessment requirements for the unit, they were required to edit existing Wikipedia articles as well as to write and post a new article.³ In the first part of the assessment, students edited articles on a weekly basis, over 8 weeks. They were free to choose the articles but these had to be connected with the topic of the seminar that week. In this way, the editing process was also a way to encourage student preparation for the weekly seminars.

The second part of the assessment consisted of students writing their own article for Wikipedia. They could choose the topic of their article as long as it linked to a topic that we had studied on the unit. They also had to meet the Wikipedia requirements for starting a new article.

In order to assess particular student contributions, each student had to create a log-in name and tell me the name of the article edited/written. Through the ‘history’ page attached to each Wikipedia article, I was able to see each student’s particular contributions. I was also able to see where other ‘Wikipedians’ had amended or deleted a student’s contributions. This happened on three or four occasions and the most common reason was that text added did not meet Wikipedia’s requirement of ‘Neutral Point of View’ or NPOV. In other words, material was presented as though it constituted a consensus on the subject, rather than one particular viewpoint.

¹ Michael Gorman, former head of the Office of Bibliographic Standards in the British Library, cited in, Chloe Stothart, ‘Web threatens learning ethos’, *THES*, 22 June 2007, p. 2.

² For example, see Washington State University, Using Wikis for Learning, http://wiki.wsu.edu/wsuwiki/Using_Wikis_For_Learning, accessed 25/10/06).

³ N.B. Similar projects to this have been piloted in the US but none that I know of in the UK.

Occasions where student material was deleted provided opportunities for discussing epistemological issues concerning the contested terrain of knowledge production.

As part of the pilot, I produced instructions for using Wikipedia and also a set of marking criteria. The instructions for using Wikipedia were based on guidelines that are already available on the Wikipedia site at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:School_and_university_projects/Indiana_CM_CL. The marking criteria were based on the degree to which students improved the rigour and scope of an article, thereby strengthening it as a source of reference for other people. To get good marks, the students had to engage with the academic literature on the relevant topic to a level at which they were able to judge where an article needed improvement. Encouraging good scholarship was central to the exercise and Wikipedia itself emphasises the importance of good referencing practices and the citing of credible sources.

The students found the assessment exercises challenging but beneficial. They were all in agreement that the weekly editing of articles represented a larger workload than other units on the MA, whilst there was a steep learning curve at the beginning to get to grips with the technology. However, the learning benefits were also more noticeable in comparison to other units. As one student reported, ‘when I edit an article I learn more in depth about the subject, not only because I have to read lots of books and articles but because you are editing to a large audience’. So, even though, for the most part, students did not succeed in completely revamping the quality of an existing article, they developed subject knowledge, critical thinking and writing skills.

Through engaging with the production of knowledge in a public context and in light of Wikipedia’s own guidelines about what is permissible, students were motivated to ‘up their game’—although some managed this better than others. Students edited a range of articles. Amongst these, there were some interesting contributions to the article on Islamism (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamism>) in the week beginning 5 March, as well as the creation of some excellent articles, such as *Taliban treatment of women*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taliban_treatment_of_women and *Secularism in the Middle East* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secularism_in_the_Middle_East. Indeed, almost all the newly written articles displayed impressive depth of research and constitute very useful starting points for further research on Middle East politics.

The pilot project also increased my own weekly workload. However, the results greatly compensated for that drawback. Providing weekly feedback appeared to help the students to improve their performance over the course of the unit. In addition, the weekly editing task contributed to well-informed weekly seminar discussions. Overall, the students were more engaged in and motivated by the issues covered in the unit compared to previous years. Nevertheless, next year I will reduce the workload in line with other units by limiting the editing exercise.

The pilot project demonstrated that Wikipedia can be a tool for improving the critical thinking, research and writing skills necessary at postgraduate level—despite what you may think of the content of Wikipedia itself. Getting students involved with producing Wikipedia helped to transform them from consumers of knowledge to more self-aware producers of knowledge—which can only be a good thing. It also opened

my eyes to other possibilities of Wikipedia, as well as other so-called Web 2.0 technology, for generating new ways of assessing students.

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