Students as Creators of Knowledge: When Wikipedia Is the Assignment

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LOOK at the landscape of a typical college classroom shows us how far instructional technologies have helped us advance our pedagogical skills. We embrace these new technologies to appeal to our students’ increasingly diverse ways of thinking and learning. We use technology to communicate in a clear, realistic, and efficient manner. With the advent of new technologies in higher education, we are not only developing new technical competences, we are also defining new teaching approaches that transcend traditional practices. This “how to” article on when Wikipedia is the assignment is an attempt to share new practices we see emerging in academic settings.

Students Google and consult Wikipedia on a regular basis. Unfortunately, they too often cite Wikipedia sources in their research even though an encyclopedia is not a proper reference source for a scholarly paper. Additionally, Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia written collaboratively by thousands of online volunteers. The goal of Wikipedia is to become a research aid that all students can trust, but it is a work in progress with information that needs to be evaluated.

Since its creation in 2001, Wikipedia has grown rapidly into the largest reference tool on the Web with more than 75,000 active contributors working on more than 10 million articles in more than 250 languages. Credited as a free online encyclopedia that has been created, edited, improved, and expanded by thousands of online contributors, Wikipedia is a ground-breaking human achievement. But, it is also controversial! If anyone can edit and delete entries, the question must be asked, “What is the accuracy of Wikipedia?”

Rather than discrediting Wikipedia as a reliable source and abolishing it from the classroom, this report aims to provide a roadmap for incorporating Wikipedia into classes as a learning tool. Assignments are designed to provide students with skills that allow them to navigate, participate, and learn from Wikipedia. Providing students the opportunity to be both consumers and creators of information is very powerful. The assignment can assist students to both understand how a wiki works and how to utilize it as an open content website. Students will learn to contribute and share their knowledge while refining their own research skills. Most importantly, they will discover the mechanisms by which knowledge is created. Working in a collaborative, peer-reviewed environment can also advance their writing and critical thinking skills.

Using wikis within an assignment will engage and challenge students to develop the ability to participate in a global community, negotiating and respecting others’ perspectives. It transforms traditional learning paradigms and opens the door for a more collaborative learning environment where an entire online community can assist to develop Wikipedia articles by editing articles and suggesting and providing new resources.

Wikis appeared a little over a decade ago and soon gained relevance in the online community because of their extremely easy publishing capabilities. In 2007, two of the most widely used course management systems in American higher education, Moodle
and Blackboard, included plug-ins from third-party providers that allowed the creation of wikis within the classroom. These classroom wikis create closed environments of collaboration that can only be accessed by registered students, which assists in security/privacy issues. There are countless opportunities to embrace this emerging technology in athletic training education. Wikis can also be used in the clinical setting.

- Clinical rotation planning. ACI/CI and students can collaboratively develop a clinical plan using a wiki. Schedules and tasks are assigned to students and updated periodically. Wikis serve as a management tool, since the history of track changes can be noted on all pages and provide convenient mechanisms for comparing different versions of the document.
- Fieldwork tracking/progress reports. Students report their progress and improvement achieved during clinical fieldwork. Client logs are created on wikis to record all client and student communications and shared among team members.

The power of the Wikipedia assignment presented below resides in its potential to provide students with an open forum where they are called upon to become experts and develop and share their knowledge through the most widely used online reference tool.

**Steps for Writing a Wikipedia Article**

**Step 1. Plan the Contribution**

- Identify the topic of the article for example: Athletic Training
  From Wikipedia’s Main Page search the subject—if it is a popular subject, chances are it already exists. Make sure it does not exist under a slightly different heading or title.
- Become a Wikipedian: Wikipedia’s writing guidelines can be summarized in the five pillars that define the character of the project:
  1. Wikipedia is an encyclopedia: Students will be writing an encyclopedic article, which requires them to summarize existing and verifiable knowledge of an athletic training topic. It cannot be an essay with personal opinions. Therefore they MUST cite verifiable and authoritative sources and directly support the information presented.

**Tip:** Remember Wikipedia has a community self-policing philosophy, and students’ articles will be mercilessly edited by other Wikipedians who will expand the content and verify that citations directly support the information presented.

2. Wikipedia has a neutral point of view: Students’ articles should not advocate for a single point of view. When a conflict arises regarding neutrality, they should tag the article as disputed and use the “discussion” tab to communicate with other users and work together on a resolution. See Figure 1: Use the discussion tab, enter the Talk page, and resolve the disagreement.

3. Wikipedia is free content. All Wikipedia content is available under the GNU Free Documentation License (GFDL). Students’ contributions will be redistributed and shared openly. Students should not infringe on copyright or submit work licensed in a way incompatible with the GFDL.

4. Wikipedia has a code of conduct: Students should respect fellow Wikipedians even when they may not agree with them. Students should be civil, avoid conflicts of interest, personal attacks, or sweeping generalizations. They should find consensus, act in good faith, never disrupt Wikipedia to illustrate a point, and assume good faith on the part of others. They should be open and welcoming.

5. Wikipedia does not have firm rules besides these five general principles. Students should be bold in editing, moving, and modifying articles. Although it should be aimed for, perfection is not required. Students should not worry about making mistakes. All prior versions of articles are stored, so there is no way articles can be accidentally damaged or irretrievably destroyed. Remember, whatever is written will be preserved for posterity.

**Step 2. Write the Article**

The length of the article should between 200 and 5000 words. It is recommended that a word processor be used (Wikipedia does not have spell check). A common format for Wikipedia articles includes three sections: (a) lead section or introduction, (b) main body, and (c) a set of notes and references that could include special notes, general references, further reading, and external links (refer to Table 1). In addition, students will have to familiarize themselves with a few wiki formatting tags.