Why Wikipedia? Applications for Evaluating Information
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Overview and Definition
Wikipedia turned twenty-two this year, and since its inception has played an integral role in our information seeking behavior. It has come a long way from its infancy and remains the largest encyclopedia in the world, offered in 329 language editions, and the seventh most popular website in 2022 with over 5.1 billion unique global visitors (Wikipedia 2023; Bianchi 2023). A typical Google search yields Wikipedia articles high within the results list and as such it is no wonder people rely on this platform for information. After twenty-two years, librarians, instructors, and professionals alike are still asking the question: Should Wikipedia be discounted entirely? Or is it a reliable source of information? Perhaps a more nuanced conversation can be had about the benefits of Wikipedia and when it can be trusted.

Why Do You Need to Know?
When freshman college students are asked if past instructors have told them that Wikipedia is an unreliable source and should never be used, a majority of hands will be raised in agreement. Yet despite this being instilled in young minds for over two decades, Wikipedia persists. Instead of dismissing it out of hand or pretending it does not exist, we should be harnessing the benefits of Wikipedia as a way to engage students in meaningful conversations about credibility, authority, and the complexity of evaluating how information is gathered and presented. Library instruction will often integrate conversations surrounding credibility and evaluating sources. This article will dive deeper into resources and tools that can be used to bridge these conversations in using Wikipedia as an evaluation tool and resource.

Current Applications in Libraries and Higher Education
Over the last two decades, librarians have used Wikipedia in a myriad of ways to demonstrate the good, the bad, and the in-between of using crowdsourced information. In traditional one-shot library instruction, the benefits of using Wikipedia have primarily centered around providing contextual background information, generating keywords on topics, and providing citations or references to other potential credible sources. Drawbacks include that the material can be edited at any time by anyone, is not scholarly, and is considered by many as an unreliable source for student research.

The main argument against Wikipedia stems from the reliability and credibility of soliciting information from a large online community. However, it has become clear that the quality of the sources is acceptable and that well-written Wikipedia pages are backed up with references and facts. Pages that are inadequate are clearly labeled with a warning at the top stating the issues and how it can be improved. Articles are edited by a community of volunteers, administrators, and bots updating entries in live time. The modifications to each page are archived in the “history” tab and disputes about the content can be found in the “talk” portion, giving a deeper glimpse into the editors’ disputes about the information. Assessing
the credibility of a Wikipedia page can effectively be demonstrated through analyzing the history, talk, and references for any given entry.

One tool that speaks to the rapid pace at which Wikipedia is updated is Hatnote: Listen to Wikipedia. Through this site, you can listen to and view live Wikipedia edits as they generate a soundscape and visualization of this activity. Each sound represents a recent Wikipedia entry edit as a dot forms on the page. Pitches change according to the size of the edit and the size of the dot. The larger the edit, the deeper the sound and the greater the size of the circle. Each dot is also color-coded: green are edits from registered users, gray unregistered users, and purple are Wiki bots. The dots are also clickable links to the Wikipedia entry with a side-by-side view of the previous version to the most recent. This is an effective way to demonstrate to students the speed at which edits are made, who makes the changes, and how much content was updated. It can also be a soothing background noise while students are conducting independent work. Once the group reconvenes, instructors can explain what they have been listening to.

Let’s dive deeper into how to leverage Wikipedia as an evaluative tool to assess information/web literacy using curriculum through the Civic Online Reasoning (COR) project. COR provides a wealth of lessons and assessment tools to help educators teach students how to evaluate information. COR is an educational initiative through the Stanford History Education Group that develops effective evaluative content and assessments that instruct students on how to judge credibility (COR, 2023). In addition to providing the tools, worksheets, activities, and content, they also develop rubrics to assess student performance. This content can easily be incorporated and customized for library instruction.

A simple but effective way to check the legitimacy of the organization, business, or person’s credibility is to read through their Wikipedia page. COR has developed a lesson plan and activity: Intro to Lateral Reading: Who is behind the information? that explicitly links using Wikipedia as a source for lateral reading and a tool for evaluating websites. For example, during a library session students may be provided a website or news source and asked if it should be trusted. There have been many tools and acronyms used by librarians to evaluate information. Whether it be the CRAAP test, the 5 W’s, RADAR, or CARS, most are designed to evaluate based solely on the source itself to determine the reliability or validity of the information provided. Instead of staying within the source itself, skilled web searchers and professional fact checkers are trained to search outside the source as a means to verify the information, also known as “lateral reading.” One way to achieve this is to open a new tab and check the organization’s Wikipedia page to investigate if the source should be trusted.

In addition, there are two highly effective videos, Online Verification Skills Video 1 and Online Verification Skills Video 2, that can be used in conjunction with the activity to help demonstrate these skills. The activity includes a complete lesson plan, links to articles to evaluate, guided questions and practice, and time to share out with sample discussion findings. The sources used in the activity, MinimumWage.com and TheOdessyOnline.com, have interesting Wikipedia pages for students to evaluate to determine their credibility. The activities are thorough and offer a great support for librarians trying to teach these skills.

Potential Hurdles

As with any one-shot session, there are a few obstacles that should be considered including student considerations, faculty buy-in, and time. If using the lateral reading activity with a freshman seminar course, consider their abilities to identify key attributes of websites, reading time, and looking beyond the headlines. Freshman are accustomed to being skeptical of Wikipedia, while nonetheless trusting other websites without much merit. Faculty who are also skeptical of Wikipedia may not understand the benefits of using it in conjunction with lateral reading until after the full activity is demonstrated. Lastly, time is an important factor. There may not be enough time to include this information depending on the duration of the session and competing priorities about what to cover.
Conclusion

Using Wikipedia as an example of how information is gathered, constructed, edited, and reviewed is beneficial for freshman college students. In addition, the process of identifying the positive attributes of Wikipedia as a tool for lateral reading and fact-checking the legitimacy of organizations, builds evaluative skills that go beyond the classroom setting and can help students in all aspects of internet searching. If the past 22 years have taught us anything, Wikipedia is here to stay and we must teach students how and when to use it.

Tools Discussed

- COR: Civic Online Reasoning
- Hatnote: Listen to Wikipedia
- Online Verification Skills Video 1
- Online Verification Skills Video 2

References


Further Readings
