A Call for Wikipedia in the Classroom

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Not long ago, I made a list of ten topics that I have taught in my social studies classes: John Brown, atomic bomb, supply and demand, Gandhi, World Cup, Cambodian Genocide, XYZ affair, Jane Addams, geography, and checks and balances. Then, using Google, I searched for each term. What I found was not surprising: a Wikipedia website was the first link listed for eight of the ten searches.[1]

As teachers and students increasingly dwell in a digital world, Wikipedia is a powerful presence. To what degree, though, do we recognize and teach about Wikipedia in our classrooms? To what degree do we discuss Wikipedia *with* our students (aside from declaring that we do not want it cited as a source)? While it is wise to plan and teach cautiously with respect to Wikipedia, I believe that teachers need to acknowledge its stronghold in our students' lives (and in our own lives) and teach correspondingly. That is, social studies teachers must provide opportunities for their students to learn to critically read Wikipedia, while at the same time helping them understand how it is created, how it defines and positions knowledge, and what it makes possible and fails to do. Creating experiences like these—that "provide for the study of relationships among science, technology, and society" (**NCSS Curricular Theme ⑧**)—is central to our mission.[2] In this article, I take up my initial experiences with Wikipedia, describing how I came to embrace it in my classroom. I consider how the attention devoted to Wikipedia in the pages of *Social Education* has presented a mixed message of trouble and usefulness. In examining both troubles

and uses of Wikipedia, I describe one central purpose I have in teaching with it: teaching about knowledge construction. I conclude by briefly expanding my focus to think about how teaching with a wiki can enhance my purpose for teaching with Wikipedia.

"No Wikipedia!"… "Do not *cite* Wikipedia!"

On its "About Wikipedia" page, Wikipedia is described as "a multilingual, web-based, free-content encyclopedia project based on an openly editable model."[3] Founded in 2001, Wikipedia is accessible in over 50 languages, is solely online, and is free. The "pedia" of its name refers to an extensive network of websites, each related to a specific topic (and the equivalent of one encyclopedia entry). Although there is a fundamental structure to Wikipedia—some users have special permissions as "administrators," "bureaucrats," and "stewards"—anyone with Internet access can contribute, even anonymously, to its content.[4] This online openness to the public, and pliability by the public, is what makes Wikipedia a "wiki."

I first began using Wikipedia about six years ago when I wanted quick informa-

tion. Sometimes a question arose while reading; sometimes, while preparing a lesson; sometimes my students referenced people, objects, or trends in popular culture with whom or which I was not familiar. Wikipedia was a fast and easy way to find out *just* a bit more.

I ran into problems, though, when my high school students started citing Wikipedia in their various research projects. Didn't they know that the information presented there could be posted by anyone? I had taught a number of lessons throughout the school year about perspective and bias in textbooks and other resources. I had stressed the need to critique, or "critically read," all informational texts; that is, to consider who created a text, when, where, how, and why. We had analyzed primary and secondary sources to better understand the motivation behind the creation and use (or recreation) of texts like the *Declaration of Independence* or Bartolomé de Las Casas' writings about life in the Americas during Spanish conquests. I was concerned that students were blindly using the ideas of unknown others, whose authorship could not be investigated and whose information could not be verified immediately (if ever). On top of this, I felt that they were using Wikipedia because it was simply the easiest thing to do. Like my searches to learn about what is unfamiliar to me, my students could find out plenty of information (accurate or not) in a matter of seconds.

I began to write into assignments and rubrics a requirement that stipulated "no Wikipedia!" But over time, especially as students pushed back on my demand, I altered this requirement to "do not *cite* Wikipedia!" My message was that Wikipedia might be a good starting place—in fact, it is a great starting place—but it is not a good ending place. What I did not consider much at that time, is the way in which a Wikipedia entry is constructed and how it could be used for teaching about knowledge construction, historiography, bias, and other important social studies ideas.

Wikipedia in *Social Education*

Each April since 1997 and, before that, periodically since 1983, *Social Education* has published technology-themed issues for social studies teaching. A survey of all of these issues up through 2005 concluded that "these articles … reflect the larger trends in social studies education towards a changing role of the teacher and learner, one that depends on constructivism and student-centered learning."[5] Recognizing the turn toward technology in the teaching of social studies (and everyday living), this now-annual focus has been quite helpful to my teaching. However, despite numerous articles on a variety of technologies and technological uses, Wikipedia has received limited attention in this journal. Given its ubiquity, I wonder why?

The first mention of "the free encyclopedia" in *Social Education* was in 2005 with the suggestion that "teachers and students will find answers (and more questions) on just about any topic in the universe."[6] Since then, Wikipedia has surfaced mostly in the form of useful teaching website links provided by C. Frederick Risinger (in his "Surfing the Net" column) or as supplementary resource links in connection to articles.[7]

In response to one of Risinger's Wikipedia link suggestions, a letter to the editor questioned the appropriateness of Wikipedia as a resource in a secondary classroom. The author wrote,

"The defining principle that anyone can edit its contents … does, I think, limit its usefulness to students who are not experts in the fields covered and very well might not recognize a mistake."[8] In subsequent articles, Risinger echoed this concern.[9] However, more recently, Risinger has stated that he has begun to view Wikipedia more positively.[10]

Despite Wikipedia's commonplace status among Internet users,[11] there has not been an article in *Social Education* explicitly devoted to teaching about or with Wikipedia. Therefore, what has been printed in the journal amounts to a mixed message: Wikipedia is a potentially troubling, potentially useful teaching resource. I agree on both accounts; however, these are great reasons for social studies teachers to teach about Wikipedia.

Wikipedia's Troubles

As has been noted in *Social Education* and many other publishing outlets, anyone with Internet access can create an account with Wikipedia and immediately begin editing entries.[12] This, Andrew Keen argues, leads to a "cult of the amateur," a situation in which the knowledge of experts is cast aside by the sometimes-unfounded assertions of a mob of non-experts.[13] What results, the thinking goes, is a fertile landscape for the spread of misinformation, and Keen documents several sizable examples of this problem.

Jaron Lanier argues that Wikipedia does more than spread misinformation. Credited with coining the term "virtual reality" in the 1980s, Lanier recently published *You Are Not A Gadget*, a book critical of the impact of "Web 2.0" technology like Wikipedia.[14] Although Lanier is a champion of technology, he does not endorse it at the cost of dehumanizing people, that which he sees Wikipedia doing. For Lanier, Wikipedia detaches authors from their texts, creating an illusion that the text "mash-up" is true and,
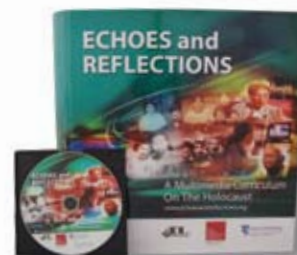
thus, uncontestable. With its commitment to "neutral point of view," Lanier asserts that "Wikipedia seeks to erase point of view entirely."[15]

The warnings about Wikipedia from Keen, Lanier, and others are not easily dismissed. And for this very reason, teachers need to address them. Indeed, directing students away from Wikipedia is a denial of the real landscape of our students' lives. Social studies education centers on teaching students about living in the(ir) world(s), and like it or not, Wikipedia has a strong foundation there.

Wikipedia's Usefulness

While not advocating for Wikipedia to become the new library or the new textbook, I am advocating that it can become an important resource for good social studies teaching. There are many uses for Wikipedia in the classroom—I present some in Table 1—and the first and most important, I believe, is to use Wikipedia to question the nature of knowledge. I want students to explore and wrestle with a variety of questions: What is knowledge? Who makes, authorizes, and presents it, and how? What happens when it changes or when it conflicts with other knowledge? How does it relate to power and who benefits/suffers from this relationship?

The primary founder of Wikipedia, Jimmy Wales, asserts that Wikipedia is an enterprise for bringing together the "sum of all human knowledge."[16] But is that how knowledge construction works— do we simply add it together? What happens when there are competing knowledge claims? How is knowledge from communities that do not have access to the Internet, or to computers, represented? What limitations are raised when knowledge is detached from a speaker or a writer? Questions like these focus on exploring what it means to live responsibly in a social world.

Students can learn about the complexity and tension embedded in knowledge construction by examining and critiquing Wikipedia, by asking who stands to gain and who is hindered by the information that is presented as well as why and how. One possible sequence for teaching students to critique, or critically read, Wikipedia is:

1. Students can create a list of topics (as I describe at the onset of this article) that they have studied in school. Next, they can search online for the topics, noting the large presence of Wikipedia.[17]

2. It is necessary, then, for students to understand what Wikipedia is and how it works. With access to an online computer and a projector, a teacher can easily demonstrate what goes into editing a Wikipedia page.[18] From this demonstration, students can see that any person can edit an entry and do so easily.

3. A good next step is for students to brainstorm a list of all the ways in which Wikipedia might be used in general Internet usage, research, and so on.

4. Students can read Wikipedia's own public statements about the site—e.g. its history, its intentions, its purposes[19]—and compare these claims to the various brainstormed uses. They can consider questions such as: How do these uses and claims overlap? In what ways are there disconnects? How might we reconcile the various disconnects (particularly those that stem from the "troubles" that I raise above)?

As an example of this sequence, let's imagine that you're teaching about an upcoming local political election. After your students recognize the ubiquity of Wikipedia and how it operates (Steps 1 and 2), they can consider (Step 3) how a voter might use Wikipedia. One possibility is that the voter will gather information about the candidates running for office from the candidates' Wikipedia pages and then use this information to cast a vote. As students come across Wikipedia's commitment to "neutral point of view" (Step 4), they can consider how a Wikipedia posting written by one candidate's team might differ from a posting by the other's team.[20] At this point, there are tough questions to answer, and these center around the idea

Table 1: **Teaching Strategies Using Wikipedia**

Within the social studies curriculum, students can…
- learn how Wikipedia works in order to learn how to critically read any (social studies) source
- compare and contrast a Wikipedia page with other class texts (like a textbook, argumentative essay, counter-narrative, etc.)
- create or edit a Wikipedia entry using work and research from class (and track what happens to these entries over time)
- debate:
  - whether Wikipedia is an acceptable source for a research project
  - Wikipedia's legal relationship with various forms of intellectual property
  - the benefits and drawbacks of the democratization of the Internet, particularly focusing on the opposition between experts (who is an expert?) and the masses (can many voices yield a better idea than one?)
- analyze Wikipedia's "neutral point of view" claim and then explore how Wikipedia handles and presents information about highly controversial topics (e.g. *Roe v. Wade*, the death penalty, universal health care)
- write persuasively for a particular public audience about the role of Wikipedia in everyday Internet usage
- examine Wikipedia's operating structure as a system of government

that knowledge is constructed, not static: What is meant by neutral? Can a person be neutral? Can a Wikipedia page have a neutral point of view?

Will Richardson, in his accessible book *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*, offers a thoughtful discussion of Wikipedia and its uses in schools.[21] Richardson's book is important for any teacher considering what it means to use technology in the classroom. But he avoids the topic of Wikipedia and knowledge construction. There is an assumption that students already critically read Wikipedia. I echo many of Richardson's sentiments, but students first need to possess a solid understanding of what is at play within a Wikipedia entry.

Social studies teachers teach critical reading skills all the time as a function of teaching civic competence;[22] we need to make sure, though, that we extend our focus beyond the classroom with its textbooks and traditional resources to the most common places in our students' lives. When students have a deeper understanding of its workings, Wikipedia becomes a tool they can utilize effectively; no longer is it "the" place to find out information online, but it is "a" place to consider. With over 10 million articles, it becomes a vast learning ground to find knowledge, but also to examine how knowledge has been and continues to be constructed.[23]

Teaching with a Wiki

One way to help students understand how to critically read Wikipedia is by having them contribute to a class wiki.[24] In 2008, *Social Education* published an article detailing how wikis can be used to facilitate historical inquiry.[25] The article, about "wikinquiry," not only offers an example of how a wiki can be used in teaching, it highlights the role-change in social studies education toward constructivism and student-centered learning.

From my perspective, one of the best reasons to teach with a wiki is that students will engage in their own construction of knowledge through its use. While the teacher serves as the "organizer" of the wiki, students (or "members") can contribute freely, writing text, posting pictures, embedding videos, making new pages, dialoging with their peers, etc.[26] This ability allows students to present their knowledge and wrestle with the inherent problems of constructing knowledge *with* others.

I recently taught a unit in which my class read Elie Wiesel's *Night*. As a companion to their reading, I created two different pages on our class wiki. On the first page, I asked students to share their immediate reactions to the book. We discussed how they might "post" in a variety of forms: reflections, salient quotes, pictures, poetry, web links to supplementary information or resources, etc. They could also dialogue with their peers under the "Discussion Tab." On the second page, I asked students to collaborate, in the same manner as Wikipedia, to write an "entry" that ana-

lyzes *Night* as a primary source.[27] This task required them to construct and reconstruct their own and their peers' knowledge, but to do so from a "neutral" stance (including a requirement, like Wikipedia, to write in the third person).

The first wiki page provided a welcoming medium for students to share their individual reactions. The various texts, links, and ideas were exceedingly divergent, representing their unique readings and reactions. The diversity of postings (in content and form) showcased that knowledge is constructed, not pre-determined or uniform. After the students and I had read through each contribution to the wiki page, we had a rich foundation for discussing the book in class and synthesizing our ideas.

While the first wiki page facilitated student expression, the second page stunted it. Discussing in class the collaborative task of detailing *Night* as a primary source, students reflected on how they found the neutrality requirement challenging, especially working with the words of their peers. While the goal was to produce a constructed and reconstructed text, they found difficulty with anything other than tacking on their additional thoughts to what was already posted. They discussed a few reasons for this: first, the difficult content of *Night* made analysis of it tough to negotiate; second, they were wary of altering their peers' ideas and words; and third, they sometimes disagreed with what their peers had written, but hesitated to broach this conflict without the ability to dialogue.

While my primary goal of the unit was not to teach overtly about knowledge construction and Wikipedia, our use of the wiki provided a concrete experience of the complexity of knowledge construction, especially through a medium like Wikipedia.

Conclusion

When I first discovered Wikipedia, it was an interesting idea and a useful personal resource, but I did not recognize its inherent teaching possibilities. I began to realize that any Internet search by a student (particularly when researching a social studies topic) yielded at least one link from Wikipedia. Although there was much literature on the pitfalls of Wikipedia, students did not know or fully understand them. Instead of simply banning Wikipedia for class-related work, teachers should strongly consider teaching students how to use it. In the process of teaching about Wikipedia, as well as teaching with a class wiki, students can wrestle with some of the largest questions central to social studies education, particularly those related to the construction of knowledge. 🔲

Notes

1. For "World Cup," a Wikipedia website was second, directly behind a link for FIFA, the organization that runs the World Cup. For "Cambodian Genocide," a Wikipedia website was third, although a subsequent search for "Khmer Rouge" turned up a Wikipedia website first. I also searched for each topic on my list using Bing. The results were quite similar.
2. *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010): 21.
3. For histories of Wikipedia, see "Wikipedia: About," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About; and Andrew Keen's The Cult of the Amateur (New York: Doubleday, 2007). The former is an official stance from Wikipedia; the latter offers a strong critique of Wikipedia.
4. See Section 3.3 ("Editorial administration, oversight, and management") of the "About Wikipedia" page for an explanation of user permissions. In some instances, general users cannot add content to a page that is deemed overly controversial or has had an "edit war."
5. Cheryl Mason Bolick, Meghan M. McGlinn, and Kari Lee Siko, "Twenty Years of Technology: A Retrospective View of *Social Education's* Technology Themed Issues," *Social Education* 69, no. 4 (2005): 160.
6. C. Frederick Risinger, "Surfing the Net: An Internet Guide to Teaching the Constitution," *Social Education* 69, no. 5 (2005): 248-50.
7. In one article, Wikipedia is a topic in a story about Internet censorship battles in China. See Shawn Healy, "Looking at the Law: The Great Firewall of China," *Social Education* 71, no. 3 (2007): 158-162.
8. Deanna Buhr, "The Drawbacks of Wikipedia," letter to the editor, *Social Education* 70, no. 2 (2006): 61.
9. Risinger, "How to Teach about 'Aligning Elections' Using the Internet," *Social Education* 71, no. 6 (2007): 293; Risinger, "Teaching Historical Analysis and Thinking Using the Internet," *Social Education* 72, no. 1 (2008): 32.
10. Risinger, "Teaching about Comparative Government," *Social Education* 73, no. 5 (2009): 217.
11. Risinger noted in 2008 that Wikipedia had become "one of the top 10 visited sites on the World Wide Web." See "Teaching and Learning about Skills for the 21st Century Using the Internet," *Social Education* 72, no. 7 (2008): 382.
12. For example, it took me less than 10 minutes to create an account and edit the entry for one of my favorite historical figures, Woody Guthrie.
13. Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).
14. Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010). "Web 2.0" is a catch phrase that is often invoked in literature about the Internet but seldom defined. For a detailed discussion, see the website of Tim O'Reilly, who coined the term: "What is Web 2.0," http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html.
15. See Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., "Wikipedia: Neutral point of view," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NPOV; Lanier, 48.
16. Jimmy Wales, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., (Wikiquote, 2010) http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Jimmy_Wales.
17. A wrinkle for this is that students can create a list of topics relevant to their lives. While this might expand the focus more than is desired, I think it is important for students to see Wikipedia's connection to the topics in which they are most interested and embedded.
18. See Houman Harouni's description of his demonstration to his students about how Wikipedia works in "High School Research and Critical Literacy: Social Studies With and Despite Wikipedia," *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (2009): 473-493.
19. I recommend the "Help:About" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:About) and "What Wikipedia is Not" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:What_Wikipedia_is_not) pages as online texts to be read, discussed, and questioned.
20. As an extension of this step, students can compare a candidate's Wikipedia page to the candidate's official website and consider what accounts for similarities and differences.
21. Will Richardson, *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2006).
22. See "What Is Social Studies and Why Is It Important?" in *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010): 9.
23. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., "Wikipedia," http://www.wikipedia.org.
24. A major difference between Wikipedia and a class wiki is that a class wiki can be made private so that only teachers and students can post on it. The wikis that I use in my teaching have been created through www.wikispaces.com, which offers K-12 educators the opportunity to create private, ad-free wikis for no cost.
25. Jeremy D. Stoddard, Mark J. Hofer, and Molly G. Buchanan, "The 'Starving Time' Wikinquiry: Using a Wiki to Foster Historical Inquiry," *Social Education* 72, no. 3 (2008): 144-6, 158-60.
26. There are several *Social Education* articles about the benefits of online discussion in social studies classes. For example, see Whitney Blankenship, "Making Connections: Using Online Discussion Forums to Engage Students in Historical Inquiry," *Social Education* 73, no. 3 (2009): 127-130.
27. I supplied writing prompts such as: What can we tell about the author from the text? What can we tell about the time period under study from the text? What can we tell about the time period of publication from the text?

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